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How Trump got his party to love Russia

James Kirchick

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For decades, anti-communism united conservatives behind the Republican Party. An otherwise disparate collection of national security hawks, free-market enthusiasts and social traditionalists rallied to the GOP, resolutely committed to checking Soviet influence around the world. All of these constituencies had reason to despise godless, revolution-exporting Bolsheviks. Although Russia no longer subscribes to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, it still presents a threat to the United States, its allies and the liberal world order. Witness its aggression against Ukraine, its intervention in Syria and its support for extremists across Europe.

In Donald Trump, the GOP nominated the most pro-Russian U.S. presidential candidate since Henry Wallace, whose 1948 bid on the Progressive Party ticket was largely run by communists. Throughout last year's campaign, Trump lavished praise on Russian President (and career KGB agent) Vladimir Putin, attacked NATO and encouraged the Kremlin to hack his Democratic opponent's emails. He even proposed recognizing Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula — the first violent European land grab since World War II — a move that would put the United States in the company of Cuba and North Korea. Since the election, he has openly contradicted the intelligence community's finding that Moscow tampered in our democracy, calling such claims a "political witch-hunt."

In his victory, Trump is bringing other Republicans along with him. GOP attitudes toward Russia began improving dramatically after Trump announced his candidacy: In July 2014, four months after Putin annexed Crimea, only 10 percent of Republicans held a favorable opinion of Russia's president, according to an Economist/YouGov poll. Today, that figure is 37 percent. A recent poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that, while 65 percent of Americans support a congressional inquiry into Russian election interference, a narrow majority (51 percent) of Republicans oppose it. And a survey released this past week by HuffPost/YouGov showed that 82 percent of Hillary Clinton voters want to maintain sanctions imposed on Moscow in response to its meddling, while only 16 percent of Trump voters do. Now that Russia has dropped its official atheism and anti-capitalism, claiming to be the protector of traditional values and Christendom, a growing number of American conservatives are receptive to Trump's Russian rapprochement.

Pro-Russian converts on the American right appear to take two forms. The opportunists simply want power and are willing to sacrifice principles in pursuit of it. The ideologues, meanwhile, see Russia as nothing worse than an occasional nuisance, if not a potential ally in the fight against Islamic extremism.

Perhaps the most prominent opportunist is former House speaker Newt Gingrich. In 1994, Gingrich included NATO expansion to Eastern Europe in his “Contract With America.” Yet last summer, while rationalizing Trump’s unprecedented vow not to defend NATO allies unless they “pay us,” Gingrich said of tiny, vulnerable Estonia (one of the few NATO members to meet the alliance’s recommended defense budget threshold) that he was “not sure I would risk a nuclear war over some place which is the suburbs of St. Petersburg.” This past week, Fox News host Tucker Carlson echoed Gingrich’s contempt for U.S. treaty obligations, asking Russian dissident Garry Kasparov why Carlson’s military-age son should have to “defend the Baltics.” (Perhaps because the sons and daughters of Baltic nations have stood with the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq?)

The need to defend Trump’s victory at any cost has induced conservatives to praise a virulently anti-American anarchist, who is probably in cahoots with Russian intelligence, and whose head they once called for. When WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange published emails stolen from the Clinton campaign by Russian hackers last fall, a few patriotic Republicans such as Marco Rubio said the party should ignore the blatant attempt to subvert our democracy. But most seized on the correspondence, and earlier hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee, as a political cudgel. Typical of the reaction was Fox Business host Lou Dobbs, who, after Twitter suspended an account acting as a front for Russian dissemination of the documents, decried “leftist fascism.” Trump, who had suggested the “death penalty or something” for Assange in 2010 after he released secret U.S. Army logs, now sides with Assange over the U.S. “intelligence” community, as he derisively referred to it on Twitter.

That same year, Fox News host Sean Hannity spoke for most conservatives when he condemned Assange for “waging war against the U.S.” On Tuesday, Hannity aired a fawning interview with the Australian in which he credulously nodded along while Assange denied that he had received the stolen Democratic documents from Russia. Former Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, whose emails WikiLeaks published in 2008, even apologized to Assange this past week for speaking ill of him at that time. And Republican Rep. Trent Franks (Ariz.) told an interviewer that Russian hackers “merely did what the media should have done” in stealing and exposing Democratic Party communications. Break the law?

Though the opportunists outnumber the ideologues, it’s the true believers who could pose the greatest damage to U.S. foreign policy over the long term. Their proposed strategic realignment with Moscow, predicated upon shared opposition to vaguely defined “Islamic terrorism,” is seductive but wrong: Far from being a potential partner in the fight against Islamic terrorism, Russia does much to stoke it.

A representative bellwether is former American Conservative Union chairman David Keene, who, writing in the Washington Times, cast doubt on the intelligence community’s assessments regarding Russian hacking and favorably quoted right-wing former Czech president Vaclav Klaus (who lost a sinecure at the libertarian Cato Institute for his pro-Putin views) to the effect that “a nation and its leaders may be detestable without being dangerous.” (Like secretary of state nominee Rex Tillerson, Klaus has received a state prize from Putin.) “There are new monsters out there and we need to focus on the threats they pose rather than wishing for the return of those already slain,” Keene advised, sounding like a Cold War-era leftist accusing conservatives of “red-baiting.”

Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (Calif.) is the perfect embodiment of this ideological makeover. In the late 1980s, he was a rock-ribbed Orange County Republican speechwriter for Ronald Reagan who actually fought the Russians alongside the mujahideen in Afghanistan. Today, Rohrabacher (who praised Russian hacking as “terrific”) is Capitol Hill’s greatest defender of Putin, whom he portrays as an opponent of radical Islamic terrorism.

Incoming national security adviser Mike Flynn published a book last year listing Russia as a charter member in “an international alliance of evil countries.” But he also infamously sat next to Putin at a 2015 Moscow gala for RT, the Kremlin’s global disinformation network, a curious invitation for the former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency to accept. “We have to begin to understand that this is not an East-West world, folks,” he told the audience at the dinner. It’s “actually more of a North-South world.”

Trump’s supporters in the white-nationalist alt-right also venerate Russia as a reactionary regime standing athwart a liberal, cosmopolitan West that promotes feminism and homosexuality. When I interviewed him last year, alt-right leader Richard Spencer gushed about how the “Trump-Putin understanding” presented “a vision of a white world that is not at war.”

Some Republicans, such as Sens. John McCain (Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (S.C.), are putting principle before party by protesting Trump’s coziness with a regime that the GOP’s previous nominee, Mitt Romney, rightly labeled America’s “number one geopolitical foe.” Yet they appear to be losing. This past week, facing pressure from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.), the two backed down from their bipartisan push to establish a select committee charged with investigating Russian election interference.

In an interview recorded more than 30 years ago, Russian defector Yuri Bezmenov revealed the KGB’s counterintuitive approach to recruiting. “This was my instruction: Try to get into large-circulation, established conservative media. Reach . . . cynical, egocentric people who can look into your eyes with angelic expression and tell you a lie. These are the most recruit-able people, people who lack moral principles, who are either too greedy or suffer from self-importance.” Say this for Bezmenov: He knew his mark.