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Trump's Surreal Phone Call With Vladimir Putin

David A. Graham

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On June 13, 2018, Special Counsel Robert Mueller charged 12 officers of the GRU, the Russian intelligence agency, with committing “large-scale cyber operations to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” Three days later, President Donald Trump met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, Finland. Speaking at a press conference beside Putin, Trump absolved Russia of any hacking.

“He just said it’s not Russia. I will say this: I don’t see any reason why it would be,” Trump said. “So I have great confidence in my intelligence people, but I will tell you that President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial today. And what he did is an incredible offer. He offered to have the people working on the case come and work with their investigators, with respect to the 12 people. I think that’s an incredible offer.”

The remarks forced Trump’s approval rating, politicians’ pretenses, and jaws to drop. Republicans who’d been reluctant to criticize the president were horrified to see him taking the Kremlin’s word over that of his own aides and the U.S. intelligence community.

Trump repeated the sin in an hour-long phone call with Putin on Friday. Two weeks after Mueller’s report laid out even more detail about the dimensions of Russian interference in the election, Trump didn’t bother to condemn Putin or complain about the interference. He didn’t even bring it up. But don’t expect this reprise to elicit the same reaction as Helsinki. Whereas Trump’s refusal to defend U.S. elections against foreign interference was once shocking, it’s now become expected.

In brief remarks during a visit with the Slovakian prime minister, reporters asked Trump about the call. Had he discussed Russian meddling with Putin?

Trump: He sort of smiled when he said something to the effect that it started off as a mountain and it ended up being a mouse. But he knew that, because you knew there was no collusion whatsoever. So that is pretty much what it was—

Reporter: Did you tell him not to meddle in the next election?

Trump: Excuse me. I’m talking. I’m answering this question. You are very rude. So we had a good conversation about many different things. Okay.

Reporter: Did you tell him not to meddle in the next election?

Trump: We didn’t discuss that. Really, we didn’t discuss it. We discussed five or six things.

It's not hard to believe that he didn't discuss it, since the president has repeatedly shown great hesitation in discussing the hacking—or “the Russian hoax,” as he called it Friday.

The problem is not that Trump is willing to speak to Putin. It's important and useful for the United States to maintain diplomatic channels even with adversaries, and working with Russia can serve U.S. purposes in Syria, Venezuela, and elsewhere. “Getting along with Russia and China is a good thing; it is not a bad thing. And getting along with countries ... it is a good thing, and we want to have good relationships with every country,” Trump said.

All well and good. The problem is that Trump is unwilling to simultaneously hold Russia to account for its brazen interference in the election. No one in government other than Trump denies the Russian attack. During Attorney General William Barr's testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee this week, he, Democrats, and Republicans all agreed on the attacks and the serious threat to American elections—a consensus that was all the more impressive since there was practically nothing else on which all three parties agreed.

One reason Trump can't bring up the hacks is that he is a terrible negotiator. Because he is bad at one-on-one discussions and eager for Putin's approval, he is unable to discuss other issues with Putin while also holding a firm line on election interference.

Another is that he has fiercely resisted any suggestion that his electoral victory was the fruit of anything other than his own genius. Whenever the subject of Russia's interference—its social-media campaigns, its hacking and dissemination of private emails—has surfaced, Trump has responded angrily, as if acknowledging what Russia did would call into question the legitimacy of his victory. (And not without reason; many Democrats believe that it does.)

The other big reason for Trump's silence is that he remains incapable of separating himself from Putin for the purposes of the investigation. Trump insists that the Mueller report found “No Collusion—No Obstruction”—in fact, it made neither of those conclusions—but cannot make the distinction that even as the special counsel's probe did not charge him with any crimes or find a criminal conspiracy by his campaign, it unequivocally did conclude that there was Russian interference. It is as though Trump believes that because he was (supposedly) vindicated, everyone else was also vindicated.

Trump's failure to bring up the interference is also terribly hypocritical. During an interview with Fox News on Thursday, he criticized former President Barack Obama for not doing more to push back on Russia during the election. “He could have called out the troops and he could have said, ‘Let's look at this very closely.’ He did absolutely nothing, because he thought that ‘Crooked Hillary’ was going to win the election,” Trump said then. On Friday, Trump spoke to Putin and, by his own account, did absolutely nothing.

It's Helsinki all over again. In this case, at least, Trump didn't offer to allow Russian intelligence agents to take part in the investigation, or to submit a former American diplomat to Russian interrogation, and he didn't do it while standing next to Putin on a dais. But in substance, Trump's call essentially reprised his earlier performance. He still refuses to acknowledge Russian interference or do anything else about it—even though there's now even more evidence to back it up.

Yet as Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, notes, Trump's denial of reality seems to be working for him politically. In July 2018, right after the GRU indictment and the

Helsinki summit, about half of Republicans said Russia had interfered in the election. By February, that was down to a quarter. Why should Trump acknowledge reality and do the hard work of pushing back on Putin when it's easier to just convince his supporters of a fiction?