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## Interfering In Democratic Elections: Russia Against The U.S., But U.S. Against The World

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The Cold War finally and dramatically ended almost 30 years ago when the Berlin Wall fell, soon followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. But despite the election of Donald Trump, the U.S. and Russia have descended into what increasingly looks like a Little Cold War with Moscow's decision to expel 755 U.S. diplomats.

Indeed, paranoia seems more intense in Washington than Moscow. Democrats and Republicans alike have convinced themselves that Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation, a shadow of the old U.S.S.R., threaten the combined colossus of America and Europe.

Both parties also are angry over Moscow's apparent interference with the 2016 election. By an almost unanimous vote frenzied legislators voted to tighten sanctions and end the president's discretion to relax the penalties. Yet Russia's most rabid critics, such as Senators Lindsey Graham and John McCain, also are among the most enthusiastic supporters of American intervention overseas, including meddling *in other nations' elections*.

Russia behaved badly, but hacking emails which put a candidate in a poor light is much different than manipulating election results. The latter would be extremely serious, threatening a genuinely vital American interest, in free and fair elections. For that reason the controversy should act as Thomas Jefferson's famous "fire bell in the night" and force states in particular to improve election security. Imagine the constitutional crisis if Moscow had changed the election outcome.

Of course, hacking the campaign still was illegal and improper. Nevertheless, it didn't undermine the election process. After all, revealing hidden truths about one of the candidates actually increased voter knowledge. The method was wrong, but the result was positive. In fact, Ukraine engaged in a more limited and less intrusive effort on behalf of Hillary Clinton, mostly researching and disseminating embarrassing information about the Trump campaign.

In any case, Russia's presumed Clinton hack seems minor compared to attempts by foreign governments to influence U.S. policy. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recently invested heavily to win Washington's support against Qatar, creating the spectacle of countries which have financed terrorism accusing a neighbor of financing terrorism.

Israel's political influence is legendary. There may be no more powerful lobby, domestic or foreign, with a greater stranglehold over policy. Simply attempting to debate the issue is politically dangerous for Israel's critics. Turkey and Greece routinely battle each other. Other countries hire lobbyists, some permanently. That's no surprise: the U.S. imposes itself on other nations, which understandably seek to turn that power to their advantage or forestall its use against them.

Most striking about the ongoing controversy is how U.S. policymakers appear oblivious to the fact that America has routinely interfered in other nations' elections. Washington is understandably outraged that someone else would interfere with Americans' sacred right to choose their own government. However, the same officials believe that they have a sacred right to interfere with the right of others to choose their own governments. Sadly, Russia's efforts really were not "unprecedented," as claimed by Susan Rice, Barack Obama's National Security Adviser.

Some of America's foreign interventions have been dramatic and violent. Washington backed the 1973 ouster of Chilean President Salvador Allende. Thankfully years of brutal repression passed into history as the country returned to democracy. But the U.S. continues to pay the price of its support for the coup which overthrew Iran's elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953. The victorious Shah ruled for a quarter century, but then was overthrown by an Islamic revolution, the consequences of which continue to roil the Middle East and U.S. policy.

More common has been more mundane electoral interference—closer to the Russian model. Indeed, Dov Levin of Carnegie Mellon University identified 81 instances between 1946 and 2000 in which Washington attempted to influence other nations' elections. (In contrast, the Soviet Union did so less than half as often, 36 times.) Levin does not include in this number coups and other post-election "remedies," such as in Chile and Iran.

During the Cold War America's focus was containing communism. Explained Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment: "The U.S. didn't want to see left-wing governments elected and so it did engage fairly often in trying to influence elections in other countries." However, attitudes in Washington haven't changed much. In 2014 the U.S. backed a street putsch against the elected Ukrainian president and then American officials shamelessly plotted to get their favored candidate appointed prime minister.

The U.S. uses numerous tools to advance its interests. Explained Nina Agrawal of the *Los Angeles Times*: "These acts, carried out in secret two-thirds of the time, include funding the election campaigns of specific parties, disseminating misinformation or propaganda, training locals of only one side in various campaigning or get-out-the-vote techniques, helping one side design their campaign materials, making public pronouncements or threats in favor of or against a candidate, and providing or withdrawing foreign aid."

It's not clear how much impact Washington's efforts had: Levin figured the vote increase for U.S.-backed candidates averaged three percent. The consequences often didn't seem to satisfy

Washington; in almost half of the cases America intervened at least a second time in the same country's electoral affairs.

Ironically, given the outrage directed at Moscow today, in 1996 Washington did what it could to ensure the reelection of Boris Yeltsin over the communist opposition. The U.S. backed a \$10.2 billion IMF loan, an ill-disguised bribe were used by the Yeltsin government for social spending before the election. Americans also went over to Russia to help. *Timemagazine* placed Boris Yeltsin on the cover holding an American flag; the article was entitled "Yanks to the Rescue: The Secret Story of How American Advisers Helped Yeltsin Win."

However, America's election interventions started decades before. Levin pointed to the 1948 Italian poll, into which the U.S. "threw everything, including the kitchen sink." The U.S. provided money for pork barrel projects, experts to run the campaign, and cash for campaign expenses, as well as threatened to cut aid if the Communists triumphed. CIA case officer F. Mark Wyatt remembered: "We had bags of money that we delivered to selected politicians, to defray their political expenses, their campaign expenses, for posters, for pamphlets." Washington didn't stop then: it intervened in seven subsequent Italian elections. Japan came in second with five separate interventions. Israel, Laos, and Sri Lanka shared third place at four times.

Not all meddling was tied to the Cold War. After the overthrow of Haitian dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the U.S. supported opponents, including military officers, against popular (and elected) demagogue Jean-Bertrande Aristide. Ironically, President Bill Clinton later threatened to invade if the military did not yield control back to Aristide.

In 1990 the U.S. mimicked Russia's apparent efforts last year by leaking information on alleged corruption by Sandinista leader (and again now president) Daniel Ortega to German newspapers. The winning opposition candidate used the information to her advantage. Also in 1990 Washington provided aid, money and training to Vaclav Havel's party in that nation's first free election since the takeover by Nazi Germany decades before.

Two years ago Benjamin Netanyahu attempted to influence the debate over the Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran. But the U.S. preceded his meddling by a couple of decades. In 1996 the Clinton Administration supported Shimon Peres against Netanyahu, hosting a peace conference and White House summit in advance of Israel's vote. Three years later Clinton administration political strategists decamped to Israel to assist Ehud Barak against Netanyahu.

In 2000 Washington backed opposition presidential candidate Vojislav Kostunica against Slobodan Milosevic, America's beta noire in the Balkans. The U.S. provided money and communications equipment to the opposition, which Levin figured was critical for Kostunica's victory. The U.S. subsequently turned against Kostunica for being too independent, and used "pro-democracy" financial aid to help his opponents.

There's no authoritative list of countries in which Washington intervened in elections, since the form of involvement varied widely. However, according to Levin and Michael Brenner of the University of Pittsburgh, countries suffering from America's malign attention included:

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, Bosnia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Congo, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lebanon, Macedonia, Malta, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Palestinian Authority, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, and Yugoslavia.

When Washington admits to its role, it claims to be nonpartisan. For instance, in Russia the U.S. would did nothing wrong, wrote Tom Malinowski, former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, since Washington would merely “help fund some of the country’s leading nongovernmental organizations.” However, groups backed by the West typically lean toward the West and rarely look disinterested to the governments they criticize.

In fact, U.S.-backed organizations participated in the “color revolutions” and Arab Spring. Joseph Thomas of the Thai journal *The New Atlas* said of their activities: such groups “as well as myriad fronts around the world ... fund, support and direct, are openly dedicated to manipulating foreign elections, creating U.S.-friendly opposition movements and even overthrowing governments that impede U.S. interests worldwide.”

Washington’s objective is clear, and it is not democracy in the abstract. American groups such as the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute choose who and how to help. Complained my colleague Ted Galen Carpenter: “The reality is that they fund and help train political factions that are deemed friendly to the United States, and specifically to Washington’s foreign policy.” In one Balkan nation a friend informed me that the ambassador forbade officials from even meeting with democratically elected parliamentarians deemed too nationalist and insufficiently pro-EU. America was never very interested in supporting “color revolutions” against its allies, irrespective of how tyrannical.

At least Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) acknowledged the appearance problem caused by promiscuous American election interference: “we live in a big glass house and there are a lot of rocks to throw.”

Of course, there is an obvious logic to U.S. behavior. American officials want to secure the U.S. from foreign interference while helping advance Washington’s international interests by supporting friendly politicians, movements, and parties in as many foreign states as possible. However, such dramatic inconsistency has become even more embarrassing with all the sanctimonious rhetoric regarding Russia's conduct emanating from Washington.

The Trump administration should make the security of America’s elections a priority. Russia should know that any future attempt to interfere in U.S. elections would result in serious retaliation. However, Washington should begin with a pledge to *stay out of other nations’ elections*. Let people in a democracy make their own choices and select their own leaders. After all, if that policy is appropriate for America, it should be right for the world’s other democracies as well.

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