

EDITOR'S NOTE

Hobson's Choice

Donald Trump embodies a rogues' gallery of cartoonish figures: the confidence man, the master of misdirection, the buffoonish big shot, the demonic clown. But he is a clown with a semiautomatic assault weapon. In pursuing terrorists, his predecessors in the White House have provided this president with the tools to pursue executive tyranny. Trump is up to the job; his temperament is oligarchic rather than managerial. His explosive mix of appetite and impulse makes him an embodiment of license. He gives a green light to eruptions of anger that menace the least powerful groups in our society. There are innumerable reasons to challenge his reign, but what seems most menacing to me is Trump's eagerness to strengthen and deploy the militarized police state that has been emerging alongside the "war on terror."

While previous administrations have sought to conceal or legitimate their abuses of power, Trump boasts openly of his bullying intentions—down to and including his eagerness to torture suspected terrorists. The targets of Trump's emerging police state include our most vulnerable populations—Muslims, undocumented immigrants, and African Americans. But its shadow falls on everyone. As surveillance spreads and acquires legality, we all fall under suspicion. This is the atmosphere of permanent emergency that allows demonic clowns to flourish.

The institutional sources of opposition to Trump are various, and some are more promising than others. Since the rise of Reagan, Congress has been a rubber stamp for the expansion of executive power, especially when proposed as a response to imagined foreign threats. While not much is liable to change on that front, it is possible that Trump's flagrant violations of the emoluments clause in the Constitution will provoke a successful attempt to impeach him. The judiciary is a little more promising. As of this writing, several federal judges have shown admirable independence in striking down Trump's travel ban. Yet on Fourth Amendment (search and seizure) issues, the prospects are problematic, especially given the likelihood that a Trump

Supreme Court will prove even more zealous than its predecessors in validating expansion of police power. State and local officials are also blocking Trump policies, including (to take a nearby example) Mayor Bill DeBlasio's determination to continue prohibiting "stop and frisk" procedures by New York City police. Perhaps most important is the resistance of targeted populations themselves—indigenous people protecting their water rights, for example. The republican tradition of popular protest—"the people out of doors," as they said in 1776—is more crucial than ever, especially given the failure of the Democratic Party and the press to pose any coherent alternative to Trump.

There was a historical moment, during the Vietnam War and the Watergate investigation, when the Democratic Party challenged the accumulation and abuse of concentrated executive power. Among the consequences were Nixon's resignation and Senator Frank Church's investigation into the crimes of the Central Intelligence Agency. These included the overthrow of democratically elected foreign governments, the actual and attempted assassination of foreign leaders, and the spread of "disinformation" in media at home and abroad. Disinformation, the planting of false narratives by anonymous officials to promote particular policy aims, was an earlier form of "fake news." It remains the most insidious and influential, as reputable news organizations continue to endow unidentified government sources (unlike rumors on social media) with enduring legitimacy. Yet for a moment, the Church Committee helped to create an informed citizenry: its revelations may have marked a high point in public skepticism toward the national security state.

How times have changed. The Democratic Party has recoiled from Trump by embracing the CIA. Rather than re-examining the neoliberal economic policies that contributed to their defeat in Rust Belt states, rather than ousting their corrupt and self-satisfied leadership, the Democrats have retreated to a single rallying cry: the Russians, led by the villainous Vladimir Putin, hacked the election and stole it for Trump. The charge is based on a confused and largely fact-free "assessment," produced by the CIA, the FBI, and the National Security Agency (the last with only "moderate" confidence)

in early January. The major media have accepted the charge uncritically and repeated it gravely, in effect serving as mouthpieces for the Deep State—a familiar role, to be sure. One need only recall the *New York Times*'s key part in legitimating CIA “assessments” of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

There is no need to dissect the slim-to-nonexistent basis of the “Russian hacking” report. Masha Gessen, no friend of Putin, has already shredded it in the *New York Review of Books*. The problem is that the report and related news stories have done their work. The Big Lies have been accepted as truth, repeated almost daily as fact by the established press—indeed, in the new advertising campaigns of the *New York Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “Truth” and “Fact” have become buzzwords (though they lack the self-dramatizing melodrama of the *Washington Post*'s new slogan: “Democracy Dies in Darkness”). As unfounded accusations expand into ever-wider allegations of entanglements between the Trump and Putin administrations, it soon becomes apparent that what is at stake here is an attempt to discredit unacceptable thought.

The task is made easier by associating that thought with Trump, who is so understandably frightening to so many people. As Jeffrey H. Smith, a former general counsel to the CIA, has said: “The bigger issue here is why Trump and people around him take such a radically different view of Russia than has been the case for decades. We don't know the answer to that.” This position assumes falsely that the very idea of cooperation with Russia is the exclusive property of Trump and his crew—so the thought can be demonized along with the thinkers. In fact some Americans who are appalled by Trump are equally appalled by the Russophobic alternative. I am one of them. Yet advocacy of détente—whether by Trump or anyone else—has become what Winston Smith's captors, in 1984, called “thoughtcrime.” Orwell, you should be living at this hour.

The obsession with Russia has left us confronted by an inter-elite quarrel in Washington—Trump's assemblage of oligarchs versus

the secretive bureaucracies of the Deep State, their bipartisan supporters in Congress, and the Democratic Party leadership. Rather than a genuine debate over policy alternatives, we are faced with a power struggle that imperils democracy whichever side wins. Rather than focusing sustained critical attention on the many actual dangers posed by Trump—the expansion of the police state, for example, or the ravaging of the environment—Democrats and major media are returning obsessively to the imaginary threat posed by his desire for rapprochement with Russia.

So if we stay within the confines of conventional wisdom, we confront a Hobson's choice. Neither Trump nor the Deep State holds out much hope for the future of the republic. Hope lies in the possibility that the American people will inform themselves and act politically despite the claims of rival autocracies—that some of them at least will transcend their institutions, revealing public servants in the CIA and good cops everywhere.

Meanwhile the obsession with Kremlin misdeeds accelerates the revival of a Cold War (and perhaps eventually a hot one) with Russia. As Andrew Cockburn argued in a recent *Harper's* article, the resurgent Russophobia is a classic instance of the old Pentagon game of threat-inflation. Despite the rants of Max Boot, John McCain, Rachel Maddow, and other Russophobes, contemporary Russia poses no serious threat to the United States. On the contrary: Russia has been pushed into a threatened, defensive posture by the eastward advance of NATO. (One can only imagine the American response if the Warsaw Pact had been preserved and expanded into South America, Mexico, and Canada.) As Anatol Lieven observed in a *Times* op-ed, "A child with a map can look at where the strategic frontier between the West and Russia was in 1988 and where it is today, and work out which side has advanced in which direction. So it is necessary to recognize that over the past generation, Russia's actions—though sometimes wrong and even criminal—have been overwhelmingly reactive to what the West has done." Recognizing this does not exonerate Russian behavior

but does help explain it, and also reminds us of what the historian Stephen Cohen is urging: we need to negotiate with our rivals and even potential enemies, not just our friends. This is diplomacy.

In the US-Russian case, the goal of diplomacy is survival. Russia is the world's only other nuclear superpower. To be sure, the other nuclear powers pose serious risks as well: an exchange between India and Pakistan, for example, would contaminate the entire planet. But we have to start somewhere in recommitting ourselves to ending the threat of nuclear war. Somehow, in our preoccupation with global warming, we have forgotten the other apocalyptic prospect we face, the one posed by a continuing nuclear arms race.

The urgency of this situation has led me to depart from *Raritan* tradition and publish a cogent op-ed piece by the historian David S. Foglesong, which concludes this issue. Commenting on current affairs is always a risk for quarterlies, which move at a stately pace and can easily be overtaken by events. We comment on the climate, not the weather—but in this case the climate and the weather are equally threatening. The immediate provocation of Foglesong's piece, the media reaction to Trump's interview with Bill O'Reilly, is already old news; but the dangers revealed by that reaction will continue to pervade our public life. Faith in America's invincible innocence will continue to cloud judgment and foster arrogance.

It is a grave mistake to insist on maintaining clean hands by not associating with Putin. In great power politics, as Foglesong reminds us, no one has clean hands. Refusing this humility, the architects of a new Cold War yearn for the moral clarity of the old one. No one seems to remember the cost of that supposed clarity—not only in dollars but also in the constant risk of cataclysm. It would be a tragic irony if the recurring American desire for redemptive struggle led us back, once again, to the nuclear brink.

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