How the Press Serves the Deep State

Exclusive: Mainstream U.S. media is proud to be the Deep State’s tip of the spear pinning President Trump to the wall over unproven allegations about Russia and his calls for detente, a rare point where he makes sense, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

The New York Times has made it official. In a Sunday front-page article entitled “Trump Ruled the Tabloid Media. Washington Is a Different Story,” the paper gloats that Donald Trump has proved powerless to stop a flood of leaks threatening to capsize his administration.

As reporters Glenn Thrush and Michael M. Grynbaum put it: “This New York-iest of politicians, now an idiosyncratic, write-your-own-rules president, has stumbled into the most conventional of Washington traps: believing he can master an entrenched political press corps with far deeper connections to the permanent government of federal law enforcement and executive department officials than he has.”

Thrush and Grynbaum add a few paragraphs later that Trump “is being force-fed lessons all presidents eventually learn – that the iron triangle of the Washington press corps, West Wing staff and federal bureaucracy is simply too powerful to bully.”

Iron triangle? Permanent government? In its tale of how Trump went from being a favorite of the New York Post and Daily News to fodder for the big-time Washington news media, the Times seems to be going out of its way to confirm dark paranoid fears of a “deep state” lurking behind the scenes and dictating what political leaders can and cannot do. “Too powerful to bully” by a “write-your-own-rules president” is another way of saying that the permanent government wants to do things its way and will not put up with a president telling it to take a different approach.

Entrenched interests are nothing new, of course. But a major news outlet bragging about collaborating with such elements in order to cripple a legally established government is. The Times was beside itself with outrage when top White House adviser Steve Bannon described the media as “the opposition party.” But one can’t help but wonder what all the fuss is about since an alliance aimed at hamstringing a presidency is nothing if not oppositional.

If so, a few things are worth keeping in mind. One is that Trump was elected, even if only by an Eighteenth-Century relic known as the Electoral College,
whereas the deep state, permanent government, or whatever else you want to call it was not. Where Trump gave speeches, kissed babies, and otherwise sought out the vote, the deep state did nothing. To the degree this country is still a democracy, that must count for something. So if the conflict between president and the deep state ever comes down to a question of legitimacy, there is no doubt who will come out ahead: The Donald.

A second thing worth keeping in mind is that if ever there was a case of the unspeakable versus the inedible (to quote Oscar Wilde), the contest between a billionaire president and billionaire-owned press is it.

Both sides are more or less correct in what they say about the other. Trump really is a strongman at war with basic democratic norms just as innumerable Times op-ed articles say he is. And giant press organization like the Times and the Washington Post are every bit as biased and one-sided as Trump maintains – and no less willfully gullible, one might add, than in 2002 or 2003 when they happily swallowed every lie put out by the George W. Bush administration regarding Iraqi WMDs or Saddam Hussein’s support for Al Qaeda.

**Riveting TV**

Trump’s *Feb. 16 press conference* – surely the most riveting TV since Jerry Springer was in his prime – is a case in point. The President bobbed, weaved, and hurled abuse like a Catskills insult comic. He threw out pseudo-facts, describing his victory, for instance, as “the biggest Electoral College win since Ronald Reagan” when in fact George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama all got more votes. But commentators who panned the display as a “freak show” or simply “batshit crazy” didn’t get it. It wasn’t Trump who bombed that afternoon, but the press.

Why? Because reporters behaved with all the intelligence of a pack of Jack Russell terriers barking at a cat up a tree. Basically, they’ve been seized by the idée fixe that Russia is a predator state that hacks elections, threatens U.S. national security, and has now accomplished the neat trick of planting a Kremlin puppet in the Oval Office. It doesn’t matter that evidence is lacking or that the thesis defies common sense. It’s what they believe, what their editors believe, and what the deep state believes too (or at least pretends to). So the purpose of the Feb. 16 press conference was to pin Trump down as to whether he also believes the Russia-did-it thesis and pillory him for deviating from the party line.

More than half the questions that reporters threw out were thus about Russia, about Mike Flynn, the ex-national security adviser who got into trouble for talking to the Russian ambassador before the new administration formally took
office, or about reputed contacts between the Trump campaign staff and Moscow. One reporter thus demanded to know if anyone from Trump’s campaign staff had ever spoken with the Russian government or Russian intelligence. Another asked if Trump had requested FBI telephone intercepts before determining that Flynn had not broken the law.

“I just want to get you to clarify this very important point,” said a third. “Can you say definitively that nobody on your campaign had any contacts with the Russians during the campaign?” A fourth wanted to get the President’s reaction to such “provocations” as a Russian communications vessel floating 30 miles off the coast of Connecticut (in international waters). “Is Putin testing you, do you believe, sir?” the reporter asked as if he had just uncovered a Russian agent in the Lincoln Bedroom. “...But do they damage the relationship? Do they undermine this country’s ability to work with Russia?”

When yet another journalist asked yet again “whether you are aware that anyone who advised your campaign had contacts with Russia during the course of the election,” Trump cried out in frustration: “How many times do I have to answer this question?” It was the most intelligent query of the day.

The press played straight into Trump’s hands, all but providing him with his best lines. “Well, I guess one of the reasons I’m here today is to tell you the whole Russian thing, that’s a ruse,” he responded at one point. “That’s a ruse. And by the way, it would be great if we could get along with Russia, just so you understand that. Now tomorrow, you’ll say, ‘Donald Trump wants to get along with Russia, this is terrible.’ It’s not terrible. It’s good.”

The prose may not be very polished, but the sentiments are unassailable. Ditto Trump’s statement a few minutes later that “false reporting by the media, by you people, the false, horrible, fake reporting makes it much harder to make a deal with Russia. ... And that’s a shame because if we could get along with Russia — and by the way, China and Japan and everyone — if we could get along, it would be a positive thing, not a negative thing.”

If the Washington Post and the Times do not agree that bogus assertions about unauthorized contacts with Russia are not poisoning the atmosphere, they should explain very clearly why not. They should also explain what they hope to accomplish with a showdown with Russia and why it will not be a step toward World War III.

But they won’t, of course. The media (with encouragement from parts of the U.S. government) are working themselves into a fit of outrage against Vladimir Putin just as, in past years, they did against Daniel Ortega, Manuel Noriega, Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein (again), Muammar Gaddafi, Bashar al-
Assad, and Viktor Yanukovych. In each instance, the outcome has been war, and so far the present episode shows all signs of heading in the same direction as well.

Reporters may be clueless, but working-class Americans aren’t. They don’t want a war because they’re the ones who would have to fight it. So they’re not unsympathetic to Trump and all the more inclined to give the yapping media short shrift.

This is a classic pattern in which strongmen advance on the basis of a liberal opposition that proves to be weak and feckless. Today’s liberal media are obliging Trump by behaving in a way that is even sillier than usual and well ahead of schedule to boot.

A Fragile Meme

The anti-Russia meme, meanwhile, rests on the thinnest of foundations. The argument that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and thereby tipped the election to Trump is based on a single report by CrowdStrike, the California-based cyber-security firm hired by the DNC to look into the mass email leak. The document is festooned with head-spinning techno-jargon.

It says of Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, the hackers who allegedly penetrated the DNC in behalf of Russian intelligence: “Their tradecraft is superb, operational security second to none, and the extensive usage of ‘living-off-the-land’ techniques enables them to easily bypass many security solutions they encounter. In particular, we identified advanced methods consistent with nation-state level capabilities including deliberate targeting and ‘access management’ tradecraft – both groups were constantly going back into the environment to change out their implants, modify persistent methods, move to new Command & Control channels, and perform other tasks to try to stay ahead of being detected. Both adversaries engage in extensive political and economic espionage for the benefit of the government of the Russian Federation and are believed to be closely linked to the Russian government’s powerful and highly capable intelligence services.”

Impressive? Not to independent tech experts who have already begun taking potshots. Sam Biddle, The Intercept’s extremely smart tech writer, notes that CrowdStrike claims to have proved that Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear are Russian because they left behind Cyrillic comments in their “metadata” along with the name “Felix Edmundovich,” also in Cyrillic, an obvious reference to Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka, as the Soviet political police were originally known.

But, Biddle observes, there’s an obvious contradiction: “Would a group whose
‘tradecraft is superb’ with ‘operational security second to none’ really leave behind the name of a Soviet spy chief imprinted on a document it sent to American journalists? Would these groups really be dumb enough to leave Cyrillic comments on these documents? ... It’s very hard to buy the argument that the Democrats were hacked by one of the most sophisticated, diabolical foreign intelligence services in history, and that we know this because they screwed up over and over again.”

Indeed, John McAfee, founder of McAfee Associates and developer of the first commercial anti-virus software, casts doubt on the entire enterprise, wondering whether it is possible to identify a hacker at all. “If I were the Chinese,” he told TV interviewer Larry King in late December, “and I wanted to make it look like the Russians did it, I would use Russian language within the code, I would use Russian techniques of breaking into organizations. ... If it looks like the Russians did it, then I can guarantee you: it was not the Russians.” (Quote starts at 4:30.)

This may be too sweeping. Nonetheless, if the press really wanted to get to the bottom of what the Russians are doing, they would not begin with the question of what Trump knew and when he knew it. They would begin, rather, with the question of what we know and how we can be sure. It’s the question that the press should have asked during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but failed to. But it’s the question that reporters should be asking now before the conflict with Russia spins out of control, with consequences that are potentially even more horrendous.

It’s not easy making Donald Trump seem like a peacenik, but that’s what the billionaire’s press has done.

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