

# Fresh Doubts about Russian ‘Hacking’

**Exclusive:** The gauzy allegations of Russia “hacking” the Democrats to elect Donald Trump just got hazier with WikiLeaks’ new revelations about CIA cyber-spying and the capability to pin the blame on others, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

WikiLeaks’ disclosure of documents revealing CIA cyber-spying capabilities underscores why much more skepticism should have been applied to the U.S. intelligence community’s allegations about Russia “hacking” last year’s American presidential election. It turns out that the CIA maintains a library of foreign malware that could be used to pin the blame for a “hack” on another intelligence service.

That revelation emerged from documents that WikiLeaks published on Tuesday from a CIA archive that WikiLeaks said had apparently been passed around within a community of former U.S. government hackers and contractors before one of them gave WikiLeaks some of the material.

The documents revealed that the CIA can capture the content of encrypted Internet and cell-phone messages by grabbing the material in the fraction of a second before the words are put through encryption.

Another program called “Weeping Angel” can hack Samsung “smart” TVs with built-in Internet connections, allowing the CIA and British intelligence to covertly use the TVs as listening devices even when they appear to be turned off.

Besides the 1984-ish aspects of these reported capabilities – Orwell’s dystopia also envisioned TVs being used to spy on people in their homes – the WikiLeaks’ disclosures add a new layer of mystery to whether the Russians were behind the “hacks” of the Democratic Party or whether Moscow was framed.

For instance, the widely cited Russian fingerprints on the “hacking” attacks – such as malware associated with the suspected Russian cyber-attackers APT 28 (also known as “Fancy Bear”); some Cyrillic letters: and the phrase “Felix Edmundovich,” a reference to Dzerzhinsky, the founder of a Bolsheviks’ secret police – look less like proof of Russian guilt than they did earlier.

Or put differently – based on the newly available CIA material – the possibility that these telltale signs were planted to incriminate Moscow doesn’t sound as farfetched as it might have earlier.

A former U.S. intelligence officer, cited by The Wall Street Journal on

Wednesday, acknowledged that the CIA's "Umbrage" library of foreign hacking tools could "be used to mask a U.S. operation and make it appear that it was carried out by another country... That could be accomplished by inserting malware components from, say, a known Chinese, Russian or Iranian hacking operation into a U.S. one."

While that possibility in no way clears Moscow in the case of the Democratic "hack," it does inject new uncertainty into the "high confidence" that President Obama's intelligence community expressed in its assessment of Russian culpability. If the CIA had this capability to plant false leads in the data, so too would other actors, both government and private, to cover their own tracks.

### **Dubious Forensics**

Another problem with the U.S. intelligence community's assessment is that the forensics were left to private contractors working for the Democrats, not conducted independently by U.S. government experts.

That gap in the evidentiary trail widens when one notes that CrowdStrike, the Democratic Party's consultant, offered contradictory commentary about the skills of the hackers.

CrowdStrike praised the hackers' tradecraft as "superb, operational security second to none" and added: "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."

In other words, CrowdStrike cited the sophistication of the tradecraft as proof of a state-sponsored cyber-attack, yet it was the sloppiness of the tradecraft that supposedly revealed the Russian links, i.e. the old malware connections, the Cyrillic letters and the Dzerzhinsky reference.

As Sam Biddle wrote for The Intercept, "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? Would these groups that 'constantly [go] back into the environment to change out their implants, modify persistent methods, move to new Command & Control channels' get caught because they precisely *didn't* make sure not to use IP addresses they'd been associated [with] before?"

"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.”

## Sources and Methods

The WikiLeaks’ disclosures on Tuesday also demonstrate that the pro-transparency Web site has a well-placed source with access to sensitive U.S. intelligence data.

That reinforces the suggestion from WikiLeaks’ associate, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, that the emails purloined from Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta originated from U.S. intelligence intercepts and were then leaked by an American insider to WikiLeaks, not obtained via a “hack” directed by the Russian government.

Podesta’s association with the international lobbying firm, the Podesta Group, could justify U.S. intelligence monitoring his communications as a way to glean information about the strategies of Saudi Arabia and other foreign clients.

Murray suggested that the earlier WikiLeaks’ release of Democratic National Committee emails came from a Democratic insider, not from Russia. In addition, WikiLeaks’ founder Julian Assange has denied that Russia was the source of either batch of Democratic emails, although he refused to say who was.

Of course, it would be possible that Russia used American cutouts to launder the emails without WikiLeaks knowing where the material originated. And some cyber-experts, who were cited in press reports about the new WikiLeaks’ disclosures on Tuesday, speculated, without evidence, that perhaps Russia was the source of them, too.

Still, there are now fresh reasons to doubt the Official Narrative that Russia “hacked” into Democratic emails in a covert operation intended to throw the U.S. election to Donald Trump.

Those doubts already existed – or should have – because the U.S. intelligence community refused to release any hard proof that the Russians were responsible for the purloined Democratic emails.

On Jan. 6, just one day after Director of National Intelligence James Clapper vowed to go to the greatest possible lengths to supply the public with the evidence behind the accusations, his office released a 25-page report that contained no direct evidence that Russia delivered hacked emails from the DNC and Podesta to WikiLeaks.

The DNI report amounted to a compendium of reasons to suspect that Russia was

the source of the information – built largely on the argument that Russia had a motive for doing so because of its disdain for Democratic nominee Clinton and the potential for friendlier relations with Republican nominee Trump.

### **A Big Risk**

But the DNI's case, as presented, was one-sided, ignoring other reasons why the Russians would not have taken the risk.

For instance, while it is true that many Russian officials, including President Putin, considered Clinton to be a threat to worsen the already frayed relationship between the two nuclear superpowers, the report ignores the downside for Russia trying to interfere with the U.S. election campaign and then failing to stop Clinton, which looked like the most likely outcome until Election Night.

If Russia had accessed the DNC and Podesta emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication, Putin would have to think that the National Security Agency, with its exceptional ability to track electronic communications around the world, might well have detected the maneuver and would have informed Clinton.

So, on top of Clinton's well-known hawkishness, Putin would have risked handing the expected incoming president a personal reason to take revenge on him and his country. Historically, Russia has been very careful in such situations, holding its intelligence collections for internal purposes only and not sharing them with the public.

While it is conceivable that Putin decided to take this extraordinary risk in this case – despite the widely held view that Clinton was a shoo-in to defeat Trump – an objective report would have examined this counter argument for him not doing so.

But the DNI report was not driven by a desire to be evenhanded; it was, in effect, a prosecutor's brief, albeit one that lacked any real evidence that the accused is guilty.

Though it's impossible for an average U.S. citizen to know precisely what the U.S. intelligence community may have in its secret files, some former NSA officials who are familiar with the agency's eavesdropping capabilities say Washington's lack of certainty suggests that the NSA does not possess such evidence.

That's the view of William Binney, who retired as NSA's technical director of world military and geopolitical analysis and who created many of the collection systems still used by NSA.

Binney, in [an article](#) co-written with former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, said, “With respect to the alleged interference by Russia and WikiLeaks in the U.S. election, it is a major mystery why U.S. intelligence feels it must rely on ‘circumstantial evidence,’ when it has NSA’s vacuum cleaner sucking up hard evidence galore. What we know of NSA’s capabilities shows that the email disclosures were from leaking, not hacking.”

Released last summer – around the time of the Democratic National Convention – the DNC emails revealed senior party officials showing a preference for former Secretary of State Clinton over Sen. Bernie Sanders although the DNC was supposed to remain neutral.

Later in the campaign, the Podesta leak exposed the contents of speeches that Clinton gave to Wall Street banks, which she wanted to keep secret from the American voters, and the existence of pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

News articles based on the WikiLeaks’ material embarrassed the DNC and the Clinton campaign, but the rupture of secrets was not considered a very important factor in Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump. Clinton herself blamed that surprising outcome on FBI Director James Comey’s last-minute decision to briefly reopen the investigation into her improper use of a private server for her emails as Secretary of State.

After Comey’s move, Clinton’s poll numbers cratered and she seemed incapable of reversing the trend. More generally, Clinton faced criticism for running an inept campaign that included her insulting many Trump supporters by calling them “deplorables” and failing to articulate a clear, hopeful vision for the future.

However, after the shock of Trump’s stunning victory began to wear off, the outgoing Obama administration and angry Democrats began singling out Putin as a chief culprit in Clinton’s defeat.

Despite the appearance that they were scapegoating America’s old adversary – the Russkies – liberals and Democrats have used the allegations to energize their base and put the young Trump administration on the defensive, even though hard evidence to support the accusations is still lacking.

The liberals and Democrats also don’t seem to care that they are using these dubious allegations to ratchet up tensions between the world’s two nuclear superpowers, thus putting the future of the world at risk.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#)**

## North Korea Fears ‘Regime Change’ Strike

**Exclusive:** Tensions keep rising on the Korean peninsula with North Korea test-firing missiles and the U.S. dispatching a naval task force, but no sign of President Trump’s proposed negotiations, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Japanese citizens had every reason to be flustered on Monday when North Korea fired four missiles into the Sea of Japan as a show of strength. But they – and every American who cares about the risk of getting dragged into a nuclear war to defend Japan and South Korea – need to think harder about how to end the cycle of military provocations that are escalating in the region to a potentially deadly end.

Declaring that he stands “100 percent” behind Japan, President Trump blasted North Korea’s demonstration as “a clear challenge to the region and the international community,” and a “new phase” of Pyongyang’s threat to America’s allies. His ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, declared that the world “won’t allow” North Korea to continue following its “destructive path.”

Meanwhile, the head of the U.S. Pacific Command announced that “continued provocative actions” by North Korea, including its missile launches, confirmed the wisdom of Washington’s decision to begin this week deploying a long-awaited missile defense system to South Korea.

Instead of contributing to regional peace, however, that deployment decision only inflamed regional tensions with two major powers that share Washington’s dismay over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Furious China officials immediately threatened unspecified countermeasures, and Russian officials condemned the deployment as well, noting that it could be expanded to neutralize their own military capabilities.

### Provoking Pyongyang

Mentioned only in passing – if at all – in most news stories was the context for the latest of Pyongyang’s seemingly random acts of aggressive militarism.

Korea experts had in fact long predicted that the North would – as it does every year – undertake “military provocations” to protest the start of the latest

annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises on March 1. The same day those exercises began, the *Wall Street Journal* reported ominously that “an internal White House review of strategy on North Korea includes the possibility of military force or regime change to blunt the country’s nuclear-weapons threat.”

A North Korean diplomat condemned the latest joint exercises as “massive” and “unprecedented in size,” saying, “It will certainly jeopardize peace and stability in the region and drive the situation in the Korean peninsula to the brink of nuclear war.”

His rhetoric had more than a little factual basis. South Korea’s defense minister confirmed that the exercises are similar in scale to those held last year. With more than 300,000 South Korea and 17,000 American troops, 2016’s war games were the largest in the region’s history.

Although officials in Washington and Seoul invariably characterize the maneuvers and simulations as “defensive” and “non-provocative,” last year’s exercises reportedly included “rehearsals of surgical strikes on North Korea’s main nuclear and missile facilities and ‘decapitation raids’ by special forces targeting the North’s leadership.”

Taking part in the exercises was a naval strike group led by the nuclear-powered supercarrier USS *John C. Stennis*, along with the nuclear-powered attack submarine USS *North Carolina*, stealth F-22 fighter aircraft, nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers, and Marine special forces who practiced amphibious landings.

Those forces represent exactly the capabilities that informed military analysts say would be used if Washington decided to unleash a preemptive, surprise “surgical strike” against North Korea’s nuclear forces and command and control centers.

### **Dangerous Precedents**

Viewing that array of forces in the light of past “U.S. attacks on Libya and Iraq and Serbia,” leaders in Pyongyang last year understandably saw “the potential for a U.S. attack,” remarked Bruce Klingner, a Korea analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, at the time.

“They know the history of the Marine Corps,” he added, “so they would see a large presence of Marines on the peninsula as possibly a prelude to an attack or an invasion – especially when it’s coupled with the presence of B-52s and nuke-capable submarines.”

On both sides of the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel, opponents are operating by the same familiar

logic – summed up by one Marine Corps general as “peace through strength.” Ignoring military threats is certainly not an option. But responding to them only with military force leads to a dangerously *illogical* cycle of escalation, bluffs, threats, and counter-escalation.

We should take seriously the warning of North Korea’s ambassador to the U.N. that “the situation on the Korean Peninsula is again inching to the brink of a nuclear war.” That risk makes it more imperative than ever that Washington and its allies stop threatening “regime change” and start exploring negotiations, and even a meeting of leaders, to end the state of war between the two Koreas that has lasted ever since the armistice in 1953.

Before it’s too late, indeed, someone should remind President Trump of his professed willingness to talk to Kim Jong Un over a hamburger in the cause of peace. “I’ll speak to anybody,” he told a campaign rally last June. “Who knows? There’s a 10 percent or a 20 percent chance that I can talk him out of those damn nukes because who the hell wants him to have nukes?”

**Jonathan Marshall previously authored “Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis” and “The Negotiation Option With North Korea.”**

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## America’s Homegrown Assault on Democracy

WikiLeaks’ new dump of CIA documents reveals that when it comes to undermining the Constitution and democracy, U.S. intelligence agencies and their political “overseers” are doing the jump quite nicely, thanks, says Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

For months now, our country has endured the tacit denigration of American ingenuity. Countless statements – from elected officials, activist groups, journalists and many others – have ignored our nation’s superb blend of dazzling high-tech capacities and statecraft mendacities.

Fortunately, this week the news about release of illuminating CIA documents by WikiLeaks has begun to give adequate credit where due. And not a moment too soon. For way too long, Russia has been credited with prodigious hacking and undermining of democracy in the United States.

Many Americans have overlooked the U.S. government’s fantastic hacking achievements. This is most unfair and disrespectful to the dedicated men and women of intelligence services like the CIA and NSA. Far from the limelight,

they've been working diligently to undermine democracy not just overseas but also here at home.

Today, the massive new trove of CIA documents can help to put things in perspective. Maybe now people will grasp that our nation's undermining of democracy is home-grown and self-actualized. It's an insult to the ingenious capacities of the United States of America to think that we can't do it ourselves.

Contrary to all the public relations work that U.S. intelligence agencies have generously done for them, the Russians don't even rank as peripheral to the obstacles and prospects for American democracy. Rest assured, throughout the long history of the United States, we haven't needed foreigners to get the job done.

In our current era, can Vladimir Putin take any credit for purging huge numbers of African-Americans, Latinos and other minority citizens from the voter rolls? Of course not.

Did Putin create and maintain the barriers that prevented many low-income people from voting on Nov. 8? Only in his dreams. Can the Kremlin hold a candle to the corporate-owned cable TV channels that gave Donald Trump umpteen free hours of uninterrupted air time for speeches at his campaign rallies? Absolutely not.

Could any Russian operation claim more than a tiny sliver of impact compared to the handiwork of FBI Director James Comey as he boosted Donald Trump's prospects with a pair of gratuitous announcements about a gratuitously re-opened probe of Hillary Clinton's emails during the last days of the 2016 campaign? No way. Is Putin anything but a miniscule lightweight in any efforts to manipulate the U.S. electorate compared to "dark money" American billionaires like the Koch brothers? Give us a break.

And how about the Fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution? The Kremlin can only marvel at the way that the CIA, the NSA and the bipartisan leadership in Washington have shredded the Fourth Amendment while claiming to uphold it. To sum up: The CIA's efforts to tout Russia add up to jaw-dropping false modesty! The humility of "deep state" leaders in Langley is truly awesome.

Let's get a grip. Overwhelmingly, the achievements of thwarting democracy in America have been do-it-yourself operations. It's about time that we give adequate credit to the forces perpetuating this country's self-inflicted wounds to American democracy.

To loosely paraphrase the beloved comic-strip character Pogo, when the subject is grievous damage to democracy at home, "We have met the ingenuity and it is

U.S.” But we’re having a terrible time recognizing ourselves.

Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group [RootsAction.org](http://RootsAction.org) and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.

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## America’s Deadly New ‘National Bird’

Officially, America’s “national bird” is the eagle, but it is fast becoming the hovering, deadly drone that kills with missiles fired from half a world away, reports Dennis J Bernstein about Sonia Kennebeck’s documentary, “National Bird.”

By Dennis J Bernstein

In the new anti-drone film, *National Bird*, you meet courageous military drone resisters speaking out against America’s forward-fighting drone program and the civilian killing and devastation it is causing all over the Middle East and North Africa.

*National Bird* “gives rare insight into the U.S. drone program through the eyes of veterans and survivors,” says its director, Sonia Kennebeck, “connecting their stories as never before in a documentary. Its images haunt the audience and bring a faraway issue close to home.”

You see these soldier technicians struggling to balance their secret lives as long distance assassins with their everyday lives as parents and spouses. Talk of suicide is rampant among these drone workers. And several have already taken their own lives.

Dennis Bernstein: Welcome Sonia Kennebeck. ... Why did you decide to do this film?

Sonia Kennebeck: Well, when I started out with my research, and that was in early 2013, there was really not much public information out there. And there were a lot of people commenting about the drone war, you know, pundits, experts, journalists. But we didn’t have a lot of information and that’s what I wanted to provide with the film.

I wanted to bring information out about the drone war, transparency, accountability. But, also, really bring the humanity back into this technological war. My film is really about the people, the people who... the veterans ... who had been fighting this war. But also the people in the target

countries, who are most affected by the drones.

DB: Was [there a] moment in this process where you decided, “Wow, this is definitely the right film at the right time”? Talk a little bit about that process of discovery.

SK: Well, the more access I got to people, to the veterans who worked in the drone program, the more I realized how important this film was, and is. One of my first characters, or actually the first protagonist, who I found for my film was my subject Heather. In our very first talk, in our very first conversation (and she had just left the military), she told me that she lost three of her fellow airmen—three of her friends—to suicide. And that was something that I had not heard before. The people who worked in the drone war, or part of the drone program, would be so distressed by their experiences that they would commit suicide. So, this was really one of the first things... one of the first information that I heard about that.

DB: ... And are you sure ... that these suicides occurred in the context of the drone program? Were they talking with these soldiers who ended up committing suicide? How do they know it's that direct link?

SK: Well, Heather, one of the subjects of my film, she actually talks about how she herself was on a suicide watch list. And how her psychologist at that time recommended that she should do a different job. And [the psychologist] said something that did not involve seeing people die all the time. And she was kept in her job because they were undermanned. Heather was really good in her position. And so she actually had that experience herself. She had it and she's sharing it with us.

And so, let me just explain what she was doing. Heather was an imagery analyst, meaning that she was analyzing the live video feed coming from the drones. And she had to make a call, judging the video feed and saying, “What I see on this video is this person is either a terrorist or a civilian”... and that is a very responsible position. And ... a decision that could eventually lead to the killing of a group of people. And that experience, for her, was very traumatizing.

DB: And ... does Lisa [another subject of the film] or Heather know if they actually killed people? Do they have any idea what people they might have helped to murder?

SK: They all participated in killing people. The problem is that it's not exactly clear how many. And that's what all of the three whistleblowers, in my film, are criticizing. They rarely got any feedback. And also, when you drop a bomb... and these military drones, they are large enough to carry 300 – 500 pound

bombs.

And so, when you drop a bomb on a building, do you really know who's inside? And that's one of the things they are all criticizing about the program, that it's not exactly clear who is being killed, and how many people are being killed.

DB: And, in that same vein, is that what makes this an especially sort of troubling experience, that you are engaged, you are killing people, and then all of a sudden you are done with the day and you are out at the mall with your kids? Is there something specific about this kind of way of being, if you will, a bombardier?

SK: Yes. Yes. I think you're mentioning a very important point. And no one wants to compare the experience people have fighting the drone war to the experience of combat soldiers. And, it's a very different experience.

But I think what the people are doing in the drone program is traumatizing in its own way. One of the things is what you were just mentioning, going into this secret environment, fighting a war, being part of a war, and being part of killing people.

And then, after your 12 hour shift, leaving this secret environment, going home to your kids, going home to your families, not being able to share your experiences, the traumatizing experiences that you had with anyone, because of the secrecy surrounding this program.

And, also, Lisa is talking about this, just living your normal life, here in the United States, going to Starbucks or Walmart, and people are talking about T.V. shows. And ... people like Lisa, people like Heather and Danielle, they just came from fighting a war. So, there's something very schizophrenic about this experience.

And, another thing Lisa has been talking about ... and Lisa had an over-20 year career in the U.S. military and she actually had been deployed to combat zones, so she can compare the experience. And she says the problem that she had with working a drone program was that you were actually not under threat. So you're never really defending yourself, or the people left and right of you. And that's what she was struggling with. You are still killing without actually being in danger yourself.

DB: And so, they really can't talk to their kids about their day job. So, this is a huge wall between this kind of killer pilot and everyday life.

SK: Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

DB: I wonder if the powers-that-be... they must be reading this, in terms of the people running these programs, they must be very clear about what's happening here. Are they taking precautions? Whether they're counseling or threatening... has that become a part of the drone program? ... The way in which they have to keep people in line?

SK: I think there's more awareness for the trauma caused by working the drone program now than when I started my research, my work, 3, 4 years ago. But I think it's still developing. We still need a lot more research. I think research in this area is important.

This is a new weapon. It's a fairly new technology. And it hasn't been used for such a long time, just over ten years. I think the first armed... the first military drone strike that has been reported was in October in 2001. So, I think it's still developing. We need more research, we need more transparency, and we definitely need more help for the pilots and the analysts. But there's more awareness. People are leaving the program, too.

DB: ... We don't know about Trump yet, but do we know how many innocents Obama murdered?

SK: That is really the problem.

DB: We don't know.

SK: This information is missing. We don't know how many civilians are being killed. We don't know how many people have been killed by drones over all. And so, it's really difficult for us to judge and compare, also, this weapon: unmanned aircraft to conventional aircraft.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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