

Mocking Trump Doesn't Prove Russia's Guilt

Exclusive: President Trump is getting mocked for “trusting” Vladimir Putin’s denial about “meddling” in U.S. politics – and not accepting Official Washington’s groupthink – but ridicule isn’t evidence, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

If the bloody debacle in Iraq should have taught Americans anything, it is that endorsements by lots of important people who think something is true don’t amount to evidence that it actually is true. If endorsements were the same as evidence, U.S. troops would have found tons of WMD in Iraq, rather than come up empty.

So, when it comes to whether or not Russia “hacked” Democratic emails last year and slipped them to WikiLeaks, just because a bunch of people with fancy titles think the Russians are guilty doesn’t compensate for the lack of evidence so far evinced to support this core charge.

But the reaction of Official Washington and the U.S. mainstream media to President Trump saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed sincere in denying Russian “meddling” was sputtering outrage: How could Trump doubt what so many important people think is true?

Yet, if the case were all that strong that Russia did “hack” the emails, you would have expected a straightforward explication of the evidence rather than a demonstration of a full-blown groupthink, but what we got this weekend was all groupthink and no evidence.

For instance, on Saturday, CNN responded to Trump’s comment that Putin seems to “mean it” when he denied meddling by running a list of important Americans who had endorsed the Russian-guilt verdict. Other U.S. news outlets and politicians followed the same pattern.

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and a big promoter of the Russia-gate allegations, scoffed at what Trump said: “You believe a foreign adversary over your own intelligence agencies?”

The Washington Post’s headline sitting atop Sunday’s lede article read: “Trump says Putin sincere in denial of Russian meddling: Critics call that

‘unconscionable.’”

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and another Russia-gate sparkplug, said he was left “completely speechless” by Trump’s willingness to take Putin’s word “over the conclusions of our own combined intelligence community.”

Which gets us back to the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” and its stunning lack of evidence in support of its Russian guilty verdict. The ICA even admitted as much, that it wasn’t asserting Russian guilt as fact but rather as opinion:

“Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Even The New York Times, which has led the media groupthink on Russian guilt, initially published the surprised reaction from correspondent Scott Shane who wrote: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

In other words, the ICA was not a disposition of fact; it was guesswork, possibly understandable guesswork, but guesswork nonetheless. And guesswork should be open to debate.

Shutting Down Debate

But the debate was shut down earlier this year by the oft-repeated claim that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the assessment and how could anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies concluded!

However, that canard was finally knocked down by President Obama’s own Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who acknowledged in sworn congressional testimony that the ICA was the product of “handpicked” analysts from only three agencies – the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

In other words, not only did the full intelligence community not participate in the ICA but only analysts “handpicked” by Obama’s intelligence chiefs conducted the analysis – and as we intelligence veterans know well, if you handpick the analysts, you are handpicking the conclusions.

For instance, put a group of analysts known for their hardline views on Russia in a room for a few weeks, prevent analysts with dissenting viewpoints from

weighing in, don't require any actual evidence, and you are pretty sure to get the Russia-bashing result that you wanted.

So why do you think Clapper and Obama's CIA Director John Brennan put up the no-entry sign that kept out analysts from the State Department and Defense Intelligence Agency, two entities that might have significant insights into Russian intentions? By all rights, they should have been included. But, clearly, no dissenting footnotes or wider-perspective views were desired.

If you remember back to the Iraq WMD intelligence estimate, analysts from the State Department's intelligence bureau, known as INR, offered unwelcome dissenting views about the pace of Iraq's supposed nuclear program, inserting a footnote saying they found it too difficult to predict the fruition of a program when there was no reliable evidence as to when – not to mention if – it had started.

DIA also was demonstrating an unusually independent streak, displaying a willingness to give due consideration to Russia's perspective. Here's the heterodox line DIA took in a major report published in December 2015:

“The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia, a conviction further reinforced by the events in Ukraine. Moscow views the United States as the critical driver behind the crisis in Ukraine and the Arab Spring and believes that the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich is the latest move in a long-established pattern of U.S.-orchestrated regime change efforts.”

So, not only did the Jan. 6 report exclude input from INR and DIA and the other dozen or so intelligence agencies but it even avoided a fully diverse set of opinions from inside the CIA, FBI and NSA. The assessment – or guesswork – came only from those “hand-picked” analysts.

It's also worth noting that not only does Putin deny that Russia was behind the publication of the Democratic emails but so too does WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange who has insisted repeatedly that the material did not come from the Russians. He and others around WikiLeaks have strongly suggested that the emails came as leaks from Democratic insiders.

Seeking Real Answers

In the face of Official Washington's evidence-free groupthink, what some of us former U.S. intelligence analysts have been trying to do is provide both a fuller understanding of Russian behavior and whatever scientific analysis can be applied to the alleged “hacks.”

Forensic investigations and testing of relevant download speeds, reported by members of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), have undermined the Russia-did-it groupthink. But this attempt to engage in actual evaluation of evidence has been either ignored or mocked by mainstream news outlets.

Still, the suggestion in our July 24 VIPS memo that President Trump ask current CIA Director Mike Pompeo to take a fresh look at the issue recently had some consequence when Pompeo contacted VIPS member William Binney, a former NSA Technical Director, and invited him to explain his latest research on the impossibility of the Russians extracting the Democratic emails via an Internet hack based on known download speeds.

In typically candid terms, Binney explained to Pompeo why VIPS had concluded that the intelligence analysts behind the Jan. 6 report had been making stuff up about Russian “hacking.”

When news of the Binney-Pompeo meeting broke last week, the U.S. mainstream media again rejected the opportunity to rethink the Russia-did-it groupthink and instead treated Binney as some sort of “conspiracy theorist” with a “disputed” theory, while attacking Pompeo’s willingness to discuss Binney’s findings as “politicizing intelligence.”

Despite the smearing of Binney, President Trump appears to have taken some of this new evidence to heart, explaining his dispute with open-mouthed White House reporters on Air Force One who baited Trump with various forms of the same question: “Do you believe Putin?” amid the new jeering about Trump “getting played” by Putin.

Trump’s demeanor, however, suggested increased confidence that the Russian “hacking” allegations were the “witch hunt” that he has decried for months.

Trump also jabbed the press over its earlier false claims that “all 17 intelligence agencies” concurred on the Russian “hack.” And Trump introduced the idea of a different kind of “hack,” i.e., Obama’s political appointees at the heads of the agencies behind the Jan. 6 report.

Trump said, “You hear it’s 17 agencies. Well it’s three. And one is Brennan ... give me a break. They’re political hacks. ... I mean, you have Brennan, you have Clapper, you have [FBI Director James] Comey. Comey is proven to be a liar and he’s proven to be a leaker.”

Later, in deference to those still at work in intelligence, Trump said, “I’m with our [intelligence] agencies as currently constituted.”

While Trump surely has a dismal record of his own regarding truth-telling, he’s

not wrong about the checkered record of the triumvirate of Clapper, Brennan and Comey.

Clapper played a key role in the bogus Iraq-WMD intelligence when he was head of the National Geo-spatial Agency and hid the fact that there was zero evidence in satellite imagery of any weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq invasion. When no WMDs were found, Clapper told the media that he thought they were shipped off to Syria.

In 2013, Clapper perjured himself before Congress by denying NSA's unconstitutional blanket surveillance of Americans. After evidence emerged revealing the falsity of Clapper's testimony, he wrote a letter to Congress admitting, "My response was clearly erroneous – for which I apologize." Despite the deception, he was allowed to stay as Obama's most senior intelligence officer for almost four more years.

Clapper also has demonstrated an ugly bias about Russians. On May 28, as a former DNI, Clapper explained Russian "interference" in the U.S. election to NBC's Chuck Todd on May 28 with a tutorial on what everyone should know about "the historical practices of the Russians." Clapper said, "the Russians, typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique."

Brennan, who had previously defended torture as having been an effective way to gain intelligence, was CIA director when agency operatives broke into the computers of the Senate Intelligence Committee when it was investigating CIA torture.

Former FBI Director Comey is infamous for letting the Democratic National Committee arrange its own investigation of the "hacking" that was then blamed on Russia, a development that led some members of Congress to call the supposed "hack" an "act of war." Despite the risk of nuclear conflagration, the FBI didn't bother to do its own forensics.

And, by his own admission, Comey arranged a leak to The New York Times that was specifically designed to get a Special Prosecutor appointed to investigate Russia-gate, a job that fell to his old friend Robert Mueller, who has had his own mixed record as the previous FBI director in mishandling the 9/11 investigation.

There are plenty of reasons to want Trump out of the White House, but there also should be respect for facts and due process. So far, the powers-that-be in Washington – in politics, the media and other dominant institutions, what some call the Deep State – have shown little regard for fairness in the Russia-gate

“scandal.”

The goal seems to be to remove the President or at least emasculate him on a bum rap, giving him the bum’s rush, so to speak, while also further demonizing Russia and exacerbating an already dangerous New Cold War.

The truth should still count for something. No one’s character should be assassinated, as Bill Binney’s is being now, for running afoul of the conventional wisdom that Trump – like bête noire Putin – never tells the truth, and that to believe either is, well, “unconscionable,” as The Washington Post warns.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was a CIA intelligence analyst for 27 years and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.
