The Strangelovian Russia-gate Myth

The Strangelovian palaver of Russia-gate is embraced by many liberals as some totem to ward off the vile Donald Trump, but this dishonest process only further the cause of American Empire and risks global destruction, says poet Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

The effects of humankind created climate chaos are proving to be more devastating than even the grimmest predictions. Today’s wealth inequity is worse than in the Gilded Age. Around the world, the U.S. empire wages perpetual war, hot and cold, overt and covert, including military brinksmanship with the nuclear power, the Russian Federation.

Speaking of the latter, the U.S. media retails a storyline that would be considered risible if it was not so dangerously inflammatory i.e., L’affaire du Russia-gate, wherein, according to the lurid tale, the sinister Vladimir Putin, applying techniques from the Russian handbook for international intrigue, Rasputin Mind Control For Dummies, has wrested control of the U.S. Executive Branch of government and bends its policies to his diabolical will.

Ridiculous, huh? Yet the mainstream press promulgates and a large section of the general public believes what is clearly a reality-bereft tale, as all the while, ignoring circumstances crucial for their own economic well-being; their safety, insofar as a catastrophic nuclear exchange; and the steps required to maintain the ecological criteria crucial for allowing the continued viability of human beings on planet earth.

A socio-cultural-political structure is in place wherein the individual is bombarded, to the point of psychical saturation, with self-serving, elitist manufactured media content. Decades back, news and entertainment merged thus freedom of choice amounts to psychical wanderings in a wilderness of empty, consumer cravings and unquenchable longings. Moreover, personas are forged upon the simulacrum smithy of pop/consumer culture, in which, image is reality, salesmanship trumps (yes, Trumps) substance. Among the repercussions: A reality television con man gains the cultural capital to mount a successful bid for the U.S. presidency.

Trump’s ascendency should not come as a shock. Nor should desperate Democrats’ embrace of Russia-gate/The Russians Are Coming mythos. In essence, U.S. citizens/consumers are the most successfully psychologically colonized people on planet earth. In the realm of the political, Democratic and Republican partisans
alike, on cue, are prone to parrot the self-serving lies of their party’s cynical elite, who, it is evident, by the utter disregard they hold towards the prerogatives of their constituency, view the influence-bereft hoi polloi with abiding distain ... that is, in the rare event they regard them at all.

The crucial question is: Whose and what agenda does the Russia-gate yarn serve? The answer is hidden in plain sight: the profiteers of U.S. economic and militarist hegemony. The demonization and diminution of Russian power and influence is essential in order to maintain and expand U.S. dominance and the attendant maintenance and expansion of the already obscene wealth of capitalism’s ruling elite.

While it might seem we are mired in an (un-drainable) swamp of complexity, in reality, the political landscape is a bone-dry wasteland, wrought by a single factor – the addictive nature of greed.

Moreover, the reality of Beginning Stage Human Extinction crouches just beyond the line of the horizon. All signs auger, we lost souls of the Anthropocene must alter our course. Yet, we, stranded in the mind-parching wasteland of late-stage capitalism, collectively, continue to stagger, mesmerized, towards mass media mirages leading us further and further into the hostile-to-life terrain.

Yet the wasteland’s Establishment media outlets are doing a dead-on, although straight faced, impression, right out of Stanley Kubrick’s satirical film of Cold War era madness, “Dr. Strangelove,” of Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper’s roiling with paranoia ranting about a Russian “conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids.”

A sphincter-clinching tale of woe and warning promulgated by the same governmental entities and their corporate media stenographers who waxed apocalyptic about Iraq possessing weapon’s of mass destruction; that an immediate NATO bombing campaign must be launched against the government of Muammar Gaddafi or else a mass slaughter of the innocent would be imminent; and regime change in Syria must proceed because Assad is gassing his own people.

Just what sort of an embittered cynic would call into question the credibility of and mistrust the motives of such paragons of probity? Yet, somehow, in regard to Russia-gate, liberals display scant-to-zip skepticism towards the stories peddled by this unelected, unaccountable clutch of hyper-authoritarian prevaricators. In fact, they are, in a cringe-worthy spectacle,
allowing themselves to be played like Dollar Store kazoos.

**Terror of Tweet-Town**

Although, I get it. The tangerine-tinged Terror Of Tweet-town represents a hideous affront to common sense and common decency. But the same applies to his antagonists in the anti-democratic institutions of the U.S. National Security State and Intelligence Community. While the mission statements of the bureaucracies in question declare they exists to protect the nation from all manner of threats to the safety of the citizenry, a study of their history and present-day operations reveals, their modus operandi serves to ensure obscene amounts of wealth continue sluicing into the already bloated coffers of the profiteers of global-wide operations of capitalist plunder.

I understand the desperate need for hope. To crave the quality is inherently human. Even to the point of being whipped into a tizzy by the Russia-gate imbroglio. Yet: All and all, an obsessive focus on Trump, the Orange Scylla,buffets one into the maw of the Washington Establishment’s Charybdis.

Again, I understand the sense of desperation: Trump’s smug, bloated face, the grandiose squawk of his voice, and his crass, mean-spirited, petty-minded pronouncements and middle-school bully taunts deserve to be resoundingly rebuked. His hubristic posturing simply begs for comeuppance. One is prone to grow plangent with magical thinking. One longs to witness the bully smirk smacked from his face as he is dispatched in disgrace, Richard Nixon-style, to his parvenu palace at Mar a Lago.

But the effect of banishing Nixon was cosmetic. The accepted Watergate storyline, of probing, political inquest and Constitutional redemption, served as a palliative administered to the U.S. public in the rare case the slumbering masses might have desired to delve deeper into the heart of darkness of U.S. empire thus might begin to question the mythos of American Exceptionalism and doubt the uplifting denouement cobbled onto the scandal by the political and media elite, e.g., the system of checks and balances functioned as the nation’s Founders intended. Granted, the system did work as designed, only not in the cliched manner portrayed by its apologists; it worked in the manner in which it was rigged, to wit, to preserve the secrets of state. The long national nightmare was far from over. In fact, it has been normalized.

When the unthinkable becomes quotidian, by means of the normalization and systemic codification of crimes against the greater good of humanity, there is a good chance the dynamics of empire-building are in play. Empires are not only inherently entropic but they are anathema to the democratic processes crucial to maintaining a republic.
The vast amounts of wealth acquired by means of plunder render a nation’s elite not only craven with cupidity but prone to become so disarmingly shortsighted, even, judging by the evidence of their reckless actions and crackbrain casuistry, bughouse mad. The present U.S. nuclear saber-rattling at North Korea and the economic aggression and militarist posturing deployed against the Russian Federation are proof of the declaration. A military empire’s unchecked, monomaniacal, more often than not self-destructive, impulse for domination are monstrous traits. The death and carnage strewn in the wake of the imperial monster’s presence in Libya and Syria illustrate a grim testament to the fact.

History reveals, overreach and the passage of time renders the aspirations of imperium a nimbus of dust; its grandiose pronouncements a cacophony of strutting clowns; its belief in its inviolable nature and its trumpeted tales of vaunted exceptionalism the stuff of asylum-dweller gibbering. On the contrary, a sense of perspective imparts the knowledge, late empire is a fool’s inferno played out on a landscape ridden with exponentially increasing decay.

The storylines of the beneficiaries and operatives of vast systems of runaway power concoct are, more often than not, self-justifying fictions. Cover stories and flat-out prevarications, rolled out for the purpose of hiding the prevailing order’s actions and motives, come to dominate the socio-cultural-political sphere. Views running counter to reigning narratives are apt to be marginalized and/or met with scorn, rage and revulsion. A dangerous one-sidedness prevails.

Analogous to the laws governing thermodynamic equilibrium, when a governor (or speed limiter or controller) switch has been rendered inoperative, a state of thermic runaway comes into play. We are talking the stuff of runaway trains, flaming out super novas, nervous breakdowns, and overreaching empires. By suppressing countervailing views, empires create chaos and carnage and will, in the end, meet their demise by self-annihilation. The rage for total dominance and attendant overreach of capitalist/U.S. militarist hegemony has wrought the phenomenon on a global-wide basis.

The governor switch within the greed and power crazed minds of the corporate, military, and governing elite, by all indications, is inoperable. Impervious to the consequences of their recklessness, ranting about Russians, they careen through the Anthropocene. At present, the whole of humankind is held in the thrall of a trajectory of doom. Yet their power is hinged on the ability to dominate the storyline. Withal, complicity translates to destiny usurped. Conversely, the first measure towards a restoration of equilibrium is to call out a lie.

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Why Loss of Net Neutrality Hurts Democracy

The principle of every person having equal access to the Internet represented a strong pillar of modern democracy — and its removal represents another victory for profit-dominated plutocracy, as Dennis J Bernstein explains.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Despite its importance to a functioning democracy in the Twenty-first Century, many people’s eyes still glaze over at the uttering of the term Net Neutrality. However, whenever there is a clear explanation available, people — Republicans and Democrats alike — overwhelmingly support the concept and understand that, once again, it will be big business and corporations that will benefit greatly from the purging of the concept of Net Neutrality, and poor and working-class people and their families who will suffer from the recent decision to end it.

For an in-depth primer on the subject, I spoke with Professor Victor Pickard about the implications of the recent actions taken by the Republican-led Federal Communication Commission. Pickard is associate professor at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the book America’s Battle for Media Democracy.

Victor Pickard: In a way, it is an unfortunate term. We can thank Timothy Woo for coining it, but I think we’re stuck with it at this point. Essentially, it means an open Internet. Net neutrality is the safeguard that prevents Internet service providers such as Verizon and Comcast from interfering with your online content. It prevents them from slowing down or blocking content or offering what is known as “paid prioritization.” This is where they set up slow and fast lanes and a kind of payola system where they try to shake down content creators and force them to “pay to play” in order to load and stream more quickly. This changes the underlying logic of the Internet, which was meant to be an open
medium with all voices created equal.

Bernstein: And it was hoped that net neutrality would be an equalizer, making it possible for people to have a voice who hadn’t had one before and be able to access content that would not have been available before. Isn’t this essentially a question of democracy?

Pickard: Yes, the Internet has always had significant democratic potential. At least in theory, it can level power hierarchies. It can be used to give the voiceless more access to the public sphere. Of course, it never quite panned out this way. There have always been barriers to entry and there is still a major digital divide in this country. Nonetheless, the channels through which we access the Internet were meant to be kept equal and open, and without net neutrality that is no longer going to be the case.

As soon as you remove the basic safeguards, Internet service providers not only have the ability, they have a perverse incentive to make more money by charging us more for access to various types of content or charging content creators more to access the Internet. Of course, large corporations like Amazon and Netflix can afford to pay up. Those who will be hurt will be the activists and journalists, the people without the resources to pay to play.

That is what is so deeply troubling about this: It is going to hurt us as consumers—it is going to hurt us economically—but more importantly, it is going to hurt us democratically.

Bernstein: It is interesting, one of the consequences of the disappearance of newspapers, particularly investigative reporting, was the emergence of various independent investigative organizations online who have been doing an incredibly good job. They will suffer from this, won’t they?

Pickard: Yes, they will suffer disproportionately from this. Traditional newspapers and smaller independent news outlets depend on the Internet to reach broader audiences. They couldn’t afford to do this otherwise. Without having the resources to pay up, it is going to create a stranglehold on those kinds of investigative outlets. This is especially troubling now, at this perilous political moment.

Bernstein: What is problematic about the claim of [FCC] Chairman Ajit Pai that he “would hate to side with the Democrats, but this was Bill Clinton’s vision for the Internet”?

Pickard: Such a claim is disingenuous and ahistorical. While it is possible to argue that the Internet has traditionally been lightly regulated, in many cases this has simply not been true. In fact, we wouldn’t even have the Internet if
not for massive public subsidies and regulations.

You have to go back to 2002, when then FCC chairman Michael Powell re-categorized Internet services. Instead of considering it a telecommunications service—which had always been heavily regulated—the category description became one of an “information service,” which is only lightly regulated. That is what really started this whole ongoing debate and policy battle. So you can’t say that this was a democratic position. That’s simply not true.

Pickard: Again, the Internet was created through massive public subsidies. The Pentagon’s Advanced Research Project Agency designed what was then called the Arpanet and which was based on the net neutrality principle that all online content should be treated equally. The pipes through which the Internet would flow were meant to be “dumb” in the sense that they were not discriminating against particular types of content.

Into the Seventies and Eighties, this system was developed often through research institutes, so again, public subsidies helped expand the Internet. You had various public interest regulations that maintained a common carrier status. To give one example, you might remember the bad old days of dial-up Internet. One of the reasons we had such an explosion of dial-up Internet services was that the telephone companies who owned the wires had to share those wires with competitors.

These various public service protections helped expand the Internet, which really cuts against the FCC Chairman’s narrative that the Internet is simply a creation of the free market. First of all, we haven’t really had a free market when it comes to the Internet. But to try to argue that the government is not involved in the Internet is a libertarian mythology. The government is always involved and the question should be how the government should be involved.

Bernstein: Let’s talk a little more about the politics behind the Internet. We saw the Internet play a key role in liberation movements like the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. Is this shutting down of net neutrality an attempt to undermine such movements?

Pickard: Corporate libertarians like Chairman Pai who are opposed to even the lightest public service regulation are driven by a kind of market libertarian ideology that is really meant to accumulate more wealth within a corporation. In other words, I think this is more an economic agenda as opposed to a political agenda—not that the two can always be separated.
Nevertheless, I think that it creates the potential for political misuse. To give an example, if you had an activist group that was launching a campaign against internet service monopolies, you can imagine that Comcast would want to shut down that website. Without net neutrality protections, they would have the power to block or “throttle” online content. We have seen cases like this before and they could very well happen again.

Bernstein: We’re seeing now that you can pay extra and get in the fast lanes of various freeways (not to push the highway analogy too far). Can that be a way for people to think about it? You pay a little more and get there faster but what’s the rush, you’re going to get there anyway?

Pickard: That sounds fairly innocuous. There are a couple other analogies we could use. For example, setting up tollbooths all along the highway. I read an even better analogy in The Washington Post which likened it to the hellscape of airport security lines where, if you pay up and go through some kind of process, you might get TSA clearance, but otherwise you are stuck in line and may get hassled because of how you look or the language you speak. I think the dystopian outlook is probably more apt than this idea that we are all going to get to our final destination anyway so it’s not a big deal if we have to pay a little more for faster service.

Bernstein: Will this have an impact on the way people view television and access Hollywood productions and other entertainment? Will people be paying a lot more for these services?

Pickard: Mostly likely, yes. I think it is fair to say that what will happen to the Internet without net neutrality protections is that it will become more like cable television, where consumers pay for premium content. Overall, consumers will have to pay more. When a company like Netflix has to pay more to its Internet service provider, they will then offset their increased costs to consumers.

Bernstein: People have been paying a lot of attention to this and these decisions being made now are not very popular, are they?

Pickard: Not at all. In fact, polling data is showing that even the vast majority of Republicans want to keep net neutrality protections. This has been a deeply unpopular and undemocratic position. People are engaged and they realize that without net neutrality their daily lives will be impacted.

Bernstein: Has there been a lot of money thrown around on Capitol Hill by those who stand to gain from the elimination of net neutrality? Do you think we should worry about that?
Pickard: I think we should. I mean, it is rarely very overt. People are not walking into congressional offices with hundred dollar bills in their hands. But you do see tremendous amounts being spent on lobbying, you do see campaign contributions.

The FCC is a little more subtle because they are not elected in the same way, but you do see what is referred to as “regulatory capture,” where, over time, a regulatory agency begins to harmonize its actions with the industry it purportedly regulates. Ajit Pai’s FCC is a textbook case. Basically, he has been granting the long-standing wish lists of the industries he is supposed to be overseeing.

Bernstein: Could you talk about the potential benefits of a more neutral Internet available to everybody? How can it contribute to a better society?

Pickard: Especially in the activist realm, you see various groups who have organized and leveraged the democratic potential of the Internet to really amplify their voices. We have seen this play out with many older forms of media, such as radio. When radio first started, it was similarly used by various activist groups and was hailed as a new democratizing force that was going to revolutionize the way that we communicate with each other, the way we govern ourselves. But it quickly became captured by a handful of corporations and I am worried that this is what we are seeing with the Internet today.

Bernstein: That brings me to my last question. What are the chances of this decision being flipped, if there is support for that among the various communities across the country? Do you have any hope that this can be turned around?

Pickard: Actually, I am cautiously optimistic that in the long run net neutrality will be upheld. In the short term, there will be challenges in the courts, where there is at least a fifty-fifty chance that net neutrality will prevail. The other crucial front is going to be in Congress, where there will be pressure to pass what is known as a Congressional Review Act, enabling Congress to put forward a resolution of disapproval. It is very important for all of us to be pressuring Congress to overturn the FCC decision. But I also think that all of this public engagement is showing that there will be continued activism around this issue. Even if we win in the courts, there is going to be an ongoing battle. But as long as the public remains engaged, I really believe that in the long term we will have net neutrality.

Bernstein: Has legal action been taken already?

Pickard: Absolutely. We have already seen a number of state attorneys general
challenging this decision in court. Various activist groups like Battle for the Net.com, Fight for the Future, Free Press, and Free Disclosure will continue to focus on this issue for months and years to come.

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