

Mutually Assured Contempt at 2018 Munich Security Conference

The 2018 Munich Security Conference continued the trend of promoting a New Cold War while diplomats openly disparaged Russia and fretted over the Trump presidency, Gilbert Doctorow reports.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The annual Munich Security Conference is to geopolitics what Davos is to global economics: a forum for public discussion of challenges and trends, as well as a venue for side meetings off the official schedule by Very Important People that are at times even more intriguing than the formal events. By the latter I have in mind, for example, the tête-à-tête behind closed doors between former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the Russian ambassador to Germany that set tongues wagging back in Kiev and Moscow, even if it was passed up in the Euronews coverage.

The very biggest names in global politics make their appearances at Munich and occasionally catch the imagination of all with substantive as opposed to merely clever remarks. No one familiar with the venue can forget Vladimir Putin's speech there of February 2007. It set in motion the open challenge to US global mastery that has evolved into the deep cracks in the world order which were the main theme of Munich a year ago, and which presented themselves again for consideration in the latest, 2018 edition, which took place 16-18 February.



Last year the biggest name in Munich was Chinese President Xi, who did not disappoint and stole the show by his robust defense of free trade, global cooperation to combat climate change and other leading issues of the day from which Donald Trump's America seemed to be retreating. This year there was no one leader who commanded the attention of the audience and media. What special meaning the gathering had could be found in the Report of the organizers, which highlights the issues and guided the discussion in the various sessions over three days.

Parsing an 88-page text like the Report might be a step too far. But a word about its style is in order since that takes us directly to analysis of its

content.

The Munich Security Conference takes place in Germany. Its website and promotional literature are bilingual, German-English. However, the Report is in English, and in very special English at that. No British spelling or turns of speech here, unlike so many documents of think tanks generated on the Continent. No this is the American English of the U.S establishment in the self-satisfied and coy style of *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Where else would you find section headings entitled "Russia: Bearly Strong?" or "United States: Home Alone?"

And while the texts in the Report allude to interviews in the press by former German Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier, and a side column quotes from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speech to the Conference last year, there is more than a sprinkling of references to leading personalities in America's Council on Foreign Relations, starting with its president, Richard Haass. And what is surely the most remarkable quote in the Report (see below) comes from Council member and long-time book reviewer for *Foreign Affairs*, Princeton University professor G. John Ikenberry.

To cut to the quick, the American input to the agenda and posture of the Munich Security Conference is of decisive weight when you look at the recommended reading ("Food for Thought") and special reports sections at the back. In the Acknowledgements section at the very end, we find the heavyweights RAND Corporation, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence listed together with the lightweight but very voluble Freedom House.

This Establishment is Atlanticist, a promoter of the liberal institutional order that it helped to create over the past 60 plus years in the knowledge that the biggest financial and political beneficiary of an order based on rules written in Washington has been the United States. To a man, they are anti-Trump.

Indeed, the text of the Munich Report drips with anti-Trump innuendo and a good dose of despair over the ongoing triumph of the anti-Christ who is currently the U.S. President.

The introductory chapter of the Report bears the ominous title: "Present at the Erosion: International Order on the Brink?" The most striking remark on its first page is by G. John Ikenberry: "The world's most powerful state has begun to sabotage the order it created. A hostile revisionist power has indeed arrived on the scene, but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world."

Let us remember that over the course of his career Ikenberry has been a

penetrating and at times courageous analyst. Back in 1992, he co-authored with Daniel Deudney a splendid article entitled "Who Won the Cold War" (*Foreign Policy*) explaining why it was a draw, ended by mutual agreement. He thereby went directly against the rising tide of neoconservatism and American hubris built on falsification of modern history.

American Establishment biases, willful ignorance of realities and fake news are given free rein in the page of the 2018 Report devoted to Russia. Here we read about the Kremlin's "disinformation campaign" during the French presidential election of 2017 and about the "efforts to influence the U.S. presidential election in 2016" that have "paid dividends." Unproven allegations of meddling and illogical conclusions about dividends, considering the track record of the Trump administration in its first year in office: the dispatch of lethal military equipment to Ukraine that even Obama hesitated to approve, the extension of sanctions and a number of other measures raising the tensions with Russia in the Baltics and in Syria.

Here we find the stubborn refusal to accept the true scale and breadth of Russia's might. We are reminded that the country's GDP is the size of Spain, a proposition that is distorted and misleading depending as it does on exchange rates rather than purchasing power parity. At last report, Spain was not supplying one-third of all the natural gas consumed in Europe; Russia was. At last report, Spain did not have a military budget that is second only to the United States; Russia has.

Yet, the Munich Security Conference differs in an important way from the American establishment, which is today not very welcoming of "adversaries" or "competitors" who may conceptualize the world order in their own way. Whatever its home grounds philosophically, the Munich Security Conference does try to be inclusive and brings even troublemaker countries and personalities into the tent. Moreover, the Security Conference, like Davos, has substantial continuity in the attendees. You heard from the Iranian Foreign Minister last year, and you will hear from him again this year, and probably next year as well. This does not smooth out all the rough edges in these encounters, but it keeps them somewhat in check.

One of the "regulars," and perhaps the most remarkable performer at the 2018 Munich Security Conference was Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. I call him remarkable because of his ability to rise above his detractors in the hall through superior command of the facts, wit and daring.

At last year's Munich Conference, a number of Lavrov's pronouncements were met by derisive laughter from the Americans in the front rows, picked up by other Western diplomats and politicians. Yet, Lavrov took it in stride, remarking

acidly that he had also found some statements by representatives of other countries to be laughable but had shown greater restraint than members of his audience.

Heckling also took place during Lavrov's speech this year, though on a markedly lower scale. And once again, Lavrov took the upper hand, chided his detractors for their incivility and joked that it did not matter: "after all, they say laughter helps us live longer."

Lavrov's speech itself was a masterpiece of argumentation against the exclusion of Russia from the common European home, the descent of a divisive "us/them" thinking in Western Europe to justify the New Cold War. He specifically called out for condemnation the ongoing rewriting of history in the Baltic States, in Poland, and in Ukraine that airbrushes Russia out of the victory over Nazi Germany, encourages destruction of monuments to Soviet liberators and makes heroes of home-grown fascist movements as in Ukraine.

It bears mention that back home in Moscow, there are voices of strident nationalists like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who explain on national television day after day why it is time for Lavrov to go, because he is too soft, too easy going with the nation's enemies in the West.

However, the skill at debate, nerves of steel and icy reserve that Lavrov displayed in Munich show yet again that he is the right man in the right place to defend Putin's Russia.

The problem that comes out of the Report and the body language we saw in the conference proceedings is the following: whether the opposing sides of East and West were more or less restrained in their gestures and words, there lies on each side a poisonous contempt for the other that could lead to miscalculations and rash actions in the event of some incident, some mishap between our respective armed forces in any of the theaters where they are now operating in close proximity in support of opposing sides.

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Ignorance and Prejudice in Laura

Ingraham's Tiff With LeBron James

Laura Ingraham's complaints over LeBron James' political commentary – focusing on the grammar of his statements rather than their substance – reflects a general elitism in the pundit class, Andrew Spannaus observes.

By Andrew Spannaus

Is LeBron James ignorant? Laura Ingraham seems to think so. In response to a video of the NBA superstar offering harsh criticism of President Donald Trump on Feb. 16, the Fox News host had this to say on her show:

“LeBron James is talking politics again, and this time it's R-rated. Here's his unintelligible, not to mention ungrammatical take on President Trump...”

Next came a clip with James saying: “The number one job in America, the appointed person, is someone who doesn't understand the people. And really don't give a f*** about the people.” James then continued his criticism of Trump in a discussion that aired on The Uninterrupted (a media platform founded by James).

Ingraham clearly didn't like James' comments. First, she said: “Must they run their mouths like that? Unfortunately a lot of kids, and some adults, take these ignorant comments seriously.”

She then went on to say that getting paid millions to play basketball doesn't mean you can talk politics, and closed with a zinger inviting James and fellow NBA star Kevin Durant, also present in the video, to stick to what they do best – basketball – rather than attempt to provide political commentary: “As someone once said: shut up and dribble.”

What's striking about Ingraham's reaction is that she went well beyond simply drawing a political contrast. She suggested that James' poor grammar disqualifies him; he may be good at basketball, but given that he can barely speak in an intelligible manner – according to Ingraham – he shouldn't be addressing a subject outside of his own area of competence.

Whether you like what LeBron says or not, there's no doubt his sentences contain grammatical errors. Ingraham uses this to attempt to discredit James entirely. Ignore for a moment the fact that the President himself isn't exactly a paragon of grammar, to focus on the bigger issue raised by the Fox News host: can we take someone seriously who doesn't have a certain minimum level of academic skills as we understand them in our society today? Should LeBron James, or any other professional athlete or celebrity who isn't “well-spoken” recognize his cultural inferiority and just shut his trap?

Education is essential to our society, and correct grammar contributes to effective communication. Yet automatically considering someone ignorant because his grammar is imperfect is more than a little bit arrogant; it's essentially class prejudice.

Laura Ingraham is claiming that only "educated" people should talk politics. She insists that race has nothing to do with it, which is buttressed by the fact that she has used the same criticism towards others in the past. Yet this doesn't hide the reality that her reaction is stunningly anti-democratic, especially coming from someone who has championed the "regular" people against the establishment.

Ingraham is a defender of populism, what she defines as returning power to the people. The clear contrast is to elitism, i.e. a society where experts and insiders make all the decisions. One of the most important takeaways from the 2016 election is that the judgments of "serious people" in the institutions, academia and the media, don't hold much sway with the population if they are perceived as detached from people's everyday problems.

How often have we heard that Donald Trump was elected due to uneducated sectors of the population, who are swayed more by prejudice than information? This self-serving narrative ignores the key failure of both Hillary Clinton and establishment Republicans, that of not recognizing the widespread opposition to the economic policies that have weakened the middle class and left power in the hands of the financial elites. In this case it took the vote of the "dumb" people to bring the problem to the fore, since the mainstream media and political institutions refused to effectively address it.

Ingraham's denigration of LeBron James is even more ironic if you consider who he is. Apart from generally being recognized as the best basketball player in the world, what he has done beyond the court, in terms of the relationship between players and franchises, is unequalled.

James can arguably be considered "the most powerful man in the history of professional basketball." He has completely changed the dynamic between the players and the teams that "own" them, by using free agency as a tool of power.

In 2010 James left the Cleveland Cavaliers, where he hadn't succeeded in winning a championship, to team up with two other all-star players, Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh, and create a super-team in Miami. Rather than allowing owners and general managers to decide the fate of players, he exploited the rules to give athletes more power over where they go.

After winning two championships with the Heat, he shocked everyone again when in

2014 he decided to return to Cleveland. Despite the fact that fans had burned his jersey and the team owner had called him a coward, he knew the franchise would jump at the chance to get him back. In 2016 he ended up bringing a championship to a city that hadn't seen one for over 50 years.

James continues to implement his strategy of 'power to the players' in the way he signs his contracts as well. Each year he inks a one-year deal with a player option for a second year. That way the team has to pay him the maximum amount available under league rules, but with no guarantee he'll be staying put for more than one season. Thus management is forced to do everything it can to put good players around their star to guarantee a winner, while other teams jockey for position just to have a chance to sign the biggest names.

James' stature is reinforced by his business acumen as well, as his non-basketball ventures have proved quite lucrative – an outcome not guaranteed just by having lots of money.

Are these the actions of a stupid man?

LeBron James makes grammatical mistakes, but when Laura Ingraham suggests he doesn't have the capacity to go beyond bouncing a ball, she is obviously mistaken.

LeBron certainly isn't a political pundit, yet he has clearly decided that he has an obligation and a desire to speak out on cultural and political issues.

He expressed this just a few days ago in responding to Ingraham, telling the press: "We will definitely not shut up and dribble. I mean too much to society, I mean too much to the youth, I mean too much to so many kids who feel like they don't have a way out and they need someone to help lead them out of the situation they're in."

And it's worth noting that these aren't just words. James expends a great deal of energy on helping disadvantaged kids, for example through a program that will make college free for children from his home town of Akron who maintain good grades in school.

People can decide for themselves whether to listen to LeBron James' views or not; but every American has the right to express his or her opinion. This is essential in a democracy, as there's no guarantee that the experts will get it right, or look out for the interests of the entire population.

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Trump” (Why Trump is Winning – June 2016) and “La rivolta degli elettori” (The Revolt of the Voters – July 2017).

Nunes: FBI and DOJ Perps Could Be Put on Trial

House Intelligence Committee Chair Devin Nunes has stated that “DOJ and FBI are not above the law,” and could face legal consequences for alleged abuses of the FISA court, reports Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Throwing down the gauntlet on alleged abuse of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) by the Department of Justice and the FBI, House Intelligence Committee Chair Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) stated that there could be legal consequences for officials who may have misled the FISA court. “If they need to be put on trial, we will put them on trial,” he said. “The reason Congress exists is to oversee these agencies that we created.”

Nunes took this highly unusual, no-holds-barred stance during an interview with Emmy-award winning investigative journalist Sharyl Attkisson, which aired on Sunday.

Attkisson said she had invited both Nunes and House Intelligence Committee Ranking Member Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) but that only Nunes agreed. She asked him about Schiff’s charge that Nunes’ goal was “to put the FBI and DOJ on trial.” What followed was very atypical bluntness – candor normally considered quite unacceptable in polite circles of the Washington Establishment.

Rather than play the diplomat and disavow what Schiff contended was Nunes’ goal, Nunes said, in effect, let the chips fall where they may. He unapologetically averred that, yes, a criminal trial might well be the outcome. “DOJ and FBI are not above the law,” he stated emphatically. “If they are committing abuse before a secret court getting warrants on American citizens, you’re darn right that we’re going to put them on trial.”

Die Is Cast

The stakes are very high. Current and former senior officials – and not only from DOJ and FBI, but from other agencies like the CIA and NSA, whom documents and testimony show were involved in providing faulty information to justify a

FISA warrant to monitor former Trump campaign official Carter Page – may suddenly find themselves in considerable legal jeopardy. Like, felony territory.

This was not supposed to happen. Mrs. Clinton was a shoo-in, remember? Back when the FISA surveillance warrant of Page was obtained, just weeks before the November 2016 election, there seemed to be no need to hide tracks, because, even if these extracurricular activities were discovered, the perps would have looked forward to award certificates rather than legal problems under a Trump presidency.

Thus, the knives will be coming out. Mostly because the mainstream media will make a major effort – together with Schiff-mates in the Democratic Party – to marginalize Nunes, those who find themselves in jeopardy can be expected to push back strongly.

If past is precedent, they will be confident that, with their powerful allies within the FBI/DOJ/CIA “Deep State” they will be able to counter Nunes and show him and the other congressional investigation committee chairs, where the power lies. The conventional wisdom is that Nunes and the others have bit off far more than they can chew. And the odds do not favor folks, including oversight committee chairs, who buck the system.

Staying Power

On the other hand, the presumptive perps have not run into a chairman like Nunes in four decades, since Congressmen Lucien Nedzi (D-Mich.), Otis Pike (D-NY), and Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) ran tough, explosive hearings on the abuses of a previous generation deep state, including massive domestic spying revealed by quintessential investigative reporter Seymour Hersh in December 1974. (Actually, this is largely why the congressional intelligence oversight committees were later established, and why the FISA law was passed in 1978.)

At this point, one is tempted to say *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* – or the more things change, the more they stay the same – but that would be only half correct in this context. Yes, scoundrels will always take liberties with the law to spy on others. But the huge difference today is that mainstream media have no room for those who uncover government crimes and abuse. And this will be a major impediment to efforts by Nunes and other committee chairs to inform the public.

One glaring sign of the media's unwillingness to displease corporate masters and Official Washington is the harsh reality that Hersh's most recent explosive investigations, using his large array of government sources to explore front-burner issues, have not been able to find a home in any English-speaking

newspaper or journal. In a sense, this provides what might be called a “confidence-building” factor, giving some assurance to deep-state perps that they will be able to ride this out, and that congressional committee chairs will once again learn to know their (subservient) place.

Much will depend on whether top DOJ and FBI officials can bring themselves to reverse course and give priority to the oath they took to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. This should not be too much to hope for, but it will require uncommon courage in facing up honestly to the major misdeeds appear to have occurred – and letting the chips fall where they may. Besides, it would be the right thing to do.

Nunes is projecting calm confidence that once he and Trey Gowdy (R-Tenn.), chair of the House Oversight Committee, release documentary evidence showing what their investigations have turned up, it will be hard for DOJ and FBI officials to dissimulate.

In Other News ...

In the interview with Attkisson, Nunes covered a number of other significant issues:

- The committee is closing down its investigation into possible collusion between Moscow and the Trump campaign; no evidence of collusion was found.
- The apparently widespread practice of “unmasking” the identities of Americans under surveillance. On this point, Nunes said, “In the last administration they were unmasking hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of Americans’ names. They were unmasking for what I would say, for lack of a better definition, were for political purposes.”
- Asked about Schiff’s criticism that Nunes behaved improperly on what he called the “midnight run to the White House,” Nunes responded that the stories were untrue. “Well, most of the time I ignore political nonsense in this town,” he said. “What I will say is that all of those stories were totally fake from the beginning.”

Not since Watergate has there been so high a degree of political tension here in Washington but the stakes for our Republic are even higher this time. Assuming abuse of FISA court procedures is documented and those responsible for playing fast and loose with the required justification for legal warrants are not held to account, the division of powers enshrined in the Constitution will be in peril.

A denouement of some kind can be expected in the coming months. Stay tuned.

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