

The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died

Exclusive: The FBI's Russia indictments last week have whipped Democrats and the mainstream media into a frenzy but the "scandal" may be collapsing under its own weight, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Fads and scandals often follow a set trajectory. They grow big, bigger, and then, finally, too big, at which point they topple over and collapse under the weight of their own internal contradictions. This was the fate of the "Me too" campaign, which started out as an exposé of serial abuser Harvey Weinstein but then went too far when Babe.net published a story about one woman's bad date with comedian Aziz Ansari. Suddenly, it became clear that different types of behavior were being lumped together in a dangerous way, and a once-explosive movement began to fizzle.

So, too, with Russiagate. After dominating the news for more than a year, the scandal may have at last reached a tipping point with last week's indictment of thirteen Russian individuals and three Russian corporations on charges of illegal interference in the 2016 presidential campaign. But the indictment landed with a decided thud for three reasons:

- It failed to connect the Internet Research Agency (IRA), the alleged St. Petersburg troll factory accused of political meddling, with Vladimir Putin, the all-purpose evil-doer who the corporate media say is out to destroy American democracy.
- It similarly failed to establish a connection with the Trump campaign and indeed went out of its way to describe contacts with the Russians as "unwitting."
- It described the meddling itself as even more inept and amateurish than many had suspected.

After nine months of labor, Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller thus brought forth a mouse. Even if all the charges are true – something we'll probably never know since it's unlikely that any of the accused will be brought to trial – the indictment tells us virtually nothing that's new.

Yes, IRA staffers purchased \$100,000 worth of Facebook ads, 56 percent of which ran *after* Election Day. Yes, they persuaded someone in Florida to dress up as

Hillary Clinton in a prison uniform and stand inside a cage mounted on a flatbed truck. And, yes, they also got another “real U.S. person,” as the indictment terms it, to stand in front of the White House with a sign saying, “Happy 55th Birthday Dear Boss,” a tribute, apparently, to IRA founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the convicted robber turned caterer whose birthday was three days away. Instead of a super-sophisticated spying operation, the indictment depicts a bumbling freelance operation that is still giving Putin heartburn months after the fact.

Not that this has stopped the media from whipping itself into a frenzy. “Russia is at war with our democracy,” screamed a headline in the Washington Post.

“Trump is ignoring the worst attack on America since 9/11,” blared another.

“...Russia is engaged in a virtual war against the United States through 21st-century tools of disinformation and propaganda,” declared the New York Times, while Daily Beast columnist Jonathan Alter tweeted that the IRA’s activities amounted to nothing less than a “tech Pearl Harbor.”

All of which merely demonstrates, in proper backhanded fashion, how grievously Mueller has fallen short. Proof that the scandal had at last overstayed its welcome came five days later when the Guardian, a website that had previously flogged Russiagate even more vigorously than the Post, the Times, or CNN, published a news analysis by Cas Mudde, an associate professor at the University of Georgia, admitting that it was all a farce – and a particularly self-defeating one at that.

Mudde’s article made short work of hollow pieties about a neutral and objective investigation. Rather than an effort to get at the truth, Russiagate was a thinly-veiled effort at regime change. “[I]n the end,” he wrote, “the only question everyone really seems to care about is whether Donald Trump was involved – and can therefore be impeached for treason.

With last week’s indictment, the article went on, “Democratic party leaders once again reassured their followers that this was the next logical step in the inevitable downfall of Trump.” The more Democrats play the Russiagate card, in other words, the nearer they will come to their goal of riding the Orange-Haired One out of town on a rail.

This makes the Dems seem crass, unscrupulous, and none too democratic. But then Mudde gave the knife a twist. The real trouble with the strategy, he said, is that it isn’t working:

“While there is no doubt that the Trump camp was, and still is, filled with amoral and fraudulent people, and was very happy to take the Russians help during the elections, even encouraging it on the campaign, I do not think Mueller will be able to find conclusive evidence that Donald Trump himself

colluded with Putin's Russia to win the elections. And that is the only thing that will lead to his impeachment as the Republican party is not risking political suicide for anything less."

Other Objectives of "Russiagate"

No collusion means no impeachment and hence no anti-Trump "color revolution" of the sort that was so effective in Georgia or the Ukraine. Moreover, while 53 percent of Americans believe that investigating Russiagate should be a top or at least an important priority according to a recent poll, figures for a half-dozen other issues ranging from Medicare and Social Security reform to tax policy, healthcare, infrastructure, and immigration are actually a good deal higher – 67 percent, 72 percent, or even more.

Summed up Mudde: "...the Russia-Trump collusion story might be the talk of the town in Washington, but this is not the case in much of the rest of the country." Out in flyover country, rather, Americans can't figure out why the political elite is more concerned with a nonexistent scandal than with things that really count, i.e. de-industrialization, infrastructure decay, the opioid epidemic, and school shootings. As society disintegrates, the only thing Democrats have accomplished with all their blathering about Russkis under the bed is to demonstrate just how cut off from the real world they are.

But Russiagate is not just about regime change, but other things as well. One is repression. Where once Democrats would have laughed off Russian trolls and the like, they're now obsessed with making a mountain out of a molehill in order to enforce mainstream opinion and marginalize ideas and opinions suspected of being un-American and hence pro-Russian. If the RT (Russia Today) news network is now suspect – the Times described it not long ago as "the slickly produced heart of a broad, often covert disinformation campaign designed to sow doubt about democratic institutions and destabilize the West" – then why not the BBC or Agence France-Presse? How long until foreign books are banned or foreign musicians?

"I'm actually surprised I haven't been indicted," tweets Bloomberg columnist Leonid Bershidsky. "I'm Russian, I was in the U.S. in 2016 and I published columns critical of both Clinton and Trump w/o registering as a foreign agent." When the Times complains that Facebook "still sees itself as the bank that got robbed, rather than the architect who designed a bank with no safes, and no alarms or locks on the doors, and then acted surprised when burglars struck," then it's clear that the goal is to force Facebook to rein in its activities or stand by and watch as others do so instead.

Add to this the classic moral panic promoted by #MeToo – to believe charges of

sexual harassment and assault without first demanding evidence “is to disbelieve, and deny due process to, the accused,” notes Judith Levine in the Boston Review – and it’s clear that a powerful wave of cultural conservatism is crashing down on the United States, much of it originating in a classic neoliberal-Hillaryite milieu. Formerly the liberal alternative, the Democratic Party is now passing the Republicans on the right.

But Russiagate is about something else as well: war. As National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster warns that the “time is now” to act against Iran, the New York Times slams Trump for not imposing sanctions on Moscow, and a spooky “Nuclear Posture Review” suggests that the US might someday respond to a cyber attack with atomic weapons, it’s plain that Washington is itching for a showdown that will somehow undo the mistakes of the previous administration. The more Trump drags his feet, the more Democrats conclude that a war drive is the best way to bring him to his knees.

Thus, low-grade political interference is elevated into a *casus belli* while Vladimir Putin is portrayed as a supernatural villain straight out of *Harry Potter*. But where does it stop? Libya has been set back decades, Syria, the subject of yet another US regime-change effort, has been all but destroyed, while Yemen – which America helps Saudi Arabia bomb virtually around the clock – is now a disaster area with some 9,000 people killed, 50,000 injured, a million-plus cholera cases, and more than half of all hospitals and clinics destroyed.

The more Democrats pound the war drums, the more death and destruction will ensue. The process is well underway in Syria, the victim of Israeli bombings and a US-Turkish invasion, and it will undoubtedly spread as Dems turn up the heat. If the pathetic pseudo-scandal known as Russiagate really is collapsing under its own weight, then it’s not a moment too soon.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).
