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R.I.P. Russiagate. Here's What We Learned

Looking for external enemies is counterproductive for both Russia and the U.S.

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One doesn't need the full text of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report on Russian interference into the 2016 U.S. presidential election to know that Russiagate, perhaps the most powerful anti-Donald Trump narrative of the last three years, is dead. But it wasn't completely pointless: We can learn important things about both Russia and the U.S. from it.

People who pushed the conspiracy theory are already busy telling their audiences that Trump still isn't out of legal trouble. None of the legalistic niggling, however, will change the basic fact: A thorough, hard-hitting two-year investigation by a team that can't be accused of being Trump sympathizers has found no proof of a conspiracy that has dominated U.S. airwaves

since before Trump got elected. After this, any further political use of Russiagate can, and will, be deflected with an eye-roll.

The millions of words written about the conspiracy that wasn't will interfere with a meaningful post-mortem. I find it unnecessary to recall, as my one-time Moscow Times colleague Matt Taibbi did, the lurid details of the dot-connecting orgy; I haven't kept links to the hundreds of tweets in which I was accused of being a shill for Russian President Vladimir Putin when I consistently doubted the narrative.

It's important now to be clear-eyed, no matter if you bought the conspiracy theory or not.

One thing that's important to realize is that regional expertise matters. For example, it was obvious to people with some understanding of Moscow's inner workings that looking into the famous Trump Tower meeting on June 9, 2016, wasn't going to yield evidence of Trump-Putin collusion because, at the Russian end, the people involved weren't credible as Kremlin emissaries.

That these signs were largely ignored is evidence that the level of Russia expertise in the U.S. media and intelligence community is lower than it should be. Investing in raising it, both through educational programs and through making more knowledgeable voices heard, should prevent embarrassing mistakes in the future.

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Another lesson here is that while spies, former and current, make titillating sources, their thinking can suffer from professional distortions; their training also makes them good at disinformation, so it may not be a great idea to trust them without fully understanding their agenda.

Meanwhile, the Mueller investigation has provided a valuable collection of facts on what Putin's Russia can and cannot do against the U.S.

It can, as Mueller's indictments lay out in great detail, run a mean trolling operation on the social networks. The U.S. political discourse lends itself so easily to abuse that a troll farm in St. Petersburg, linked to an opportunistic caterer and Putin ally, could spread propaganda which fits into this discourse.

So could some cash-hungry youths in Macedonia, who turned the town of Veles into U.S. campaign disinformation central in 2016. Given the U.S. social networks' lobbying power and their disingenuous efforts to police themselves since 2016, anyone can still do what these trolls, motivated by malice or financial gain, did that year.

Putin's Russia, apparently, can also hack U.S. political organizations.

Mueller's indictment of a Russian military intelligence hacking group — names, ranks and all — was for me the high point of the special counsel's investigation. It's also perfectly believable as part of a chain of Russian military intelligence failures, which have revealed the agency's swashbuckling, brute-force style and lack of sophistication.

The hack described in the Mueller indictment wasn't a particularly sophisticated one either, and neither were the subsequent efforts to launder the stolen information so the U.S. media would pick it up; they did so, anyway, in the understandable campaign fever, and I don't doubt they would do so again.

The Kremlin, in other words, picked some low-hanging fruit. But Mueller's inability to find collusion despite leaving no stone unturned shows the limited reach of Kremlin networks in the U.S.

Even with the Trump team, full of political novices and adventurers, even despite the Trump organization's business ties with wealthy and shady Russians, Russian intelligence couldn't get the kind of cooperation that would have led to pro-Russian policies after Trump's victory — or to the giant embarrassment of having Trump revealed as a Russian asset.

Related article: No Evidence of Trump-Russia Collusion, Mueller Report Says

I have an unproven theory about this: Putin himself didn't really want to collude with Trump; it's not in the Kremlin's interest to risk something like this blowing up, leading to harsher sanctions and political victories for much tougher Russian hawks than even Trump has been.

But I'm also willing to allow that Russian intelligence lacked the skills and access needed for a conspiracy. Like other Russian institutions under Putin, it has lost the subtlety and the skill to pull off such a gamble.

The third possibility, of course, is that even Trump and his people are either true American patriots or smart enough to be cautious, and they rejected Russian overtures because they didn't want to cooperate with Putin.

I wouldn't give them too much credit on either front — but that judgment is up to Americans to make.

Under any of these scenarios or a combination thereof, Mueller's failure to find collusion confirms an old rule of thumb known as Hanlon's razor: Human bungling is usually a better explanation for anything than malice or conspiracy.

But the most important learning I draw from Russiagate is about the search for external enemies as a political method beloved of both Russian and U.S. politicians.

Russiagate fueled that love in both countries.

It allowed the domestic Russian propaganda to portray the U.S. as inherently Russophobic and willing to disregard or twist facts in fits of McCarthyism. The excesses of Russiagate reporting made easy targets for state-owned Russian media. Even anti-Putin Russians like myself often had to shake our heads in disbelief over what we read.

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On the other hand, it distracted many Americans from the real causes of Hillary Clinton's defeat and Trump's victory. Those causes, at the forefront of media attention for a short while after the election, were about the Democrats' failure to engage certain poor and middle-class voters. Russiagate, however, made Putin's evil trickery the issue. It worked in the short term, but failed in the longer-run — also in both countries.

It should be obvious to any thinking Russian that due process still exists, and matters, in the U.S. if Mueller could resist the political fever and reach his uncomfortable conclusion. His investigation wasn't about Russophobia but about the search for truth. That kind of thing makes the U.S. political system, with all its failings, superior to the Russian one, which mocks due process.

And in the U.S., the Democrats have clearly shot themselves in the foot. Instead of wasting their time on Russiagate, they could have focused more clearly on issues such as inequality, health care, the opioid epidemic, climate change. They have a chance to run a more meaningful campaign now that Mueller's done — but the mistake will hang over them just as the Iraq war still hangs over the Republicans.

Both countries' biggest enemies, of course, are inside, not outside: Corruption in various forms, and policy failures. Tackling them simultaneously would probably turn the U.S. and Russia from adversaries into allies. That, however, can only happen with different presidents; the natural collusion of two wrong-headed leaders is worse than a legally provable conspiracy would have been.

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