

Is America a Failing State?

Our country is at a crossroads, and the right path forward must not include Donald Trump as president.

BY DAVID ROTHKOPF

MAY 10, 2017

We have the tin-pot leader whose vanity knows no bounds. We have the rapacious family feathering their nests without regard for the law or common decency. We have utter disregard for values at home and abroad, the disdain for democracy, the hunger for constraining a free press, the admiration for thugs and strongmen worldwide.

We have all the makings of a banana republic. But worse, we are showing the telltale signs of a failing state. Our government has ceased to function. Party politics and gross self-interest has rendered the majority party oblivious to its responsibilities to its constituents and the Constitution of the United States. On a daily basis, Republicans watch their leader violate not only the traditions and standards of the high office he occupies, but through inaction they enable him to personally profit from the presidency, promote policies that benefit his cronies and his class to the detriment of the majority of the American people, and serially attack the principles on which the country was founded — from freedom of religion to the separation of powers.

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Recent events have taken this grim situation and turned it dire. We now know that Donald Trump chose a man as his top national security advisor whom the prior president had both fired and warned him against hiring. We know that Trump's White House failed to vet this man who would be entrusted with some of America's most sensitive secrets and decisions. We know they did not get him the security clearances his position required, yet allowed him to operate freely in that position. We know that this man, Gen. Michael Flynn, took significant cash payments from an enemy, Russia, and from a nominal ally with which we have precarious relations, Turkey. We know Flynn failed to disclose those payments in violation of the law.

Indeed, we know that the only thing likely to keep Flynn from serving time for felonies is if he strikes a bargain with the prosecutors who are now investigating his behavior. As a consequence of revelations associated with those investigations, we know that Flynn, had on-going contact with Russians officials during the campaign and, after he was named national security advisor, had conversations with the Russian ambassador about which he lied to the American people and, ostensibly, to the vice president of the United States. We know these conversations were likely illegal as well.

We do not know when the president became aware of Flynn's Russia ties or whether he approved or disapproved of them. We do know that other members of his campaign team — including his **campaign chairman** and a named **foreign policy advisor** — also had ties to Moscow that were close enough that they were compelled to resign during the campaign. We also believe they may be at the center of a federal investigation that began during last year's campaign into the nature of the relationships between the Trump campaign and a Russian government that was actively trying to undermine U.S. democracy. We also know that another Trump campaign advisor, Roger Stone, **admitted** to contact with known Russian agents including contact that might be seen to suggest collusion regarding the timing of releases of hacked documents damaging to the Hillary Clinton campaign.

Trump has been aware of the controversy surrounding these ties even before the GOP Convention last year. He has obviously been aware of the investigations into these ties since his victory. Not only has this apparently not colored his public actions, but, on the contrary, he has repeatedly expressed admiration for Vladimir Putin, support for Moscow's attack on U.S. democracy, support for policies that would benefit the Russians, and as recently as the past week has espoused a view that the Russians were not behind these attacks — despite the unanimous view of the entire U.S. intelligence community.

When on January 24, Trump was **told** by the acting attorney general of the United States, Sally Yates, that there was compelling evidence that Flynn had lied and that he might be compromised by the Russians, Trump did nothing. For three weeks, Flynn continued to serve as national security advisor, take classified briefings, sit in on sensitive calls, appoint personnel, and oversee the national security activities of the Trump administration. It was not until a newspaper report revealed the investigation into Flynn that Trump was forced to reluctantly let him go. Before that, ostensibly for other reasons but that also showed his contempt for the independent operations of the Justice Department, Trump **fired** the woman who had brought him the news about Flynn.

Now, days after that woman's testimony before Congress and prior testimony by the director of the FBI made it clear that there was an ongoing, serious investigation of the Trump team's ties to Russia, the president has chosen to fire the head of the FBI. In the middle of an investigation into the possibility that some of his closest advisors committed extraordinarily serious crimes — and before anyone could know what Trump's role in or knowledge of those crimes might have been — Trump has fired the man heading the investigation into his team. When one includes the dismissal of former U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara, this makes the third high-profile firing of someone playing a pivotal role into the investigation of the Trump administration in the brief time since the president took office.

We don't know what crimes may or may not have been committed — but we do see several patterns of behavior. All are deeply worrisome. Trump has repeatedly shown a reckless disregard for U.S. national security and national interests. He has shown a contempt for the law and for the American legal system. And when challenges to the legality of the behavior of his associates have arisen, Trump has repeatedly acted in ways that appear intended to prevent or impede the ability of those who would seek the truth. (Perhaps worse, he regularly takes to Twitter and other media to do to them what he never does to the Russians who attacked our democracy: denigrate and discredit those individuals for doing their jobs and upholding their sworn duties.)

This deeply disturbing behavior is only made more worrisome by the fact that in other circumstances, as when the legality of immigration policies were repeatedly struck down by the courts, he has attacked judges and shown no appreciation for their independent and equivalent status to the executive branch in our system of government. In other words, he has repeatedly shown a desire to attack the system, laws, and Constitution he swore an oath to uphold. He has done so using all the tools of a demagogue and some of those more commonly associated with authoritarian regimes.

We have reached a moment of crisis in the history of American democracy. One has to go back to Richard Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre to find an effort equivalent to the Slow Motion Massacre of Yates, Bharara, and Comey as they carried forward their investigative responsibilities. But the pressure on others in government will grow. CNN has reported that grand jury subpoenas **have been issued** for Flynn associates with regard to the Russia matter. They have also reported that the Senate Finance Committee is seeking financial records of the Trump team (which must necessarily include Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, given the history of their business dealings with Russians) as part of their investigation.

But while this investigation is gaining momentum, Trump is acting more brazenly and desperately (as illustrated not just by the Comey action or his tweets seeking to intimidate Sally Yates prior to her testimony, but also by his bizarre behavior including, for example, the weird, distorted, and **misleading interpretation** of the testimony of former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper). Trump's **dismissal letter** of Comey also strangely referenced "three separate occasions" on which the FBI director informed the president that he was not "under investigation" before going on to say, that he "nevertheless" agreed with the Department of Justice that Comey should be fired.

What does that “nevertheless” mean? It seems to suggest that had Comey not allegedly said Trump wasn’t under investigation, he would have had grounds to dismiss him.

Trump is acting like a desperate man, not to mention a guilty one. That his team, [in particular Kellyanne Conway](#), has gone on television to argue that somehow the Comey firing was okay because Trump is not personally under investigation is the defense of a narcissist who does not understand the responsibilities he has as president. It is lie after lie after deception after misstatement to protect their man. With every syllable they utter, they make him look more guilty.

This activity is not lost on the rest of the world. They see an America unlike any they can recall and a leader who is clearly not fit for office. Said one diplomat from a close ally in this hemisphere, “We often have discussions at home as to whether Trump is crazy. We think he is. We have had experience with leaders like this in South America. But I never expected to see it in Washington.” It is a sentiment I have heard in one form or another often in the past few weeks.

America looks like a country it has never been. Trump is a laughingstock in the best of circumstances, a disgrace based on his known behavior to date, and a threat to global order and security with each action he takes. He discredits the office he holds and the government he leads.

But for every depredation or attack on our system by Trump and his team, for every act of complicity by the invertebrates who lead the GOP on Capitol Hill, there has been some portion of the U.S. government and system to counterbalance it. Judges have stayed bad executive orders. The FBI has investigated — personal career consequences for the investigators be damned.

The brazen firing of Comey is an escalation. If Trump is allowed to get away with this and appoint a lackey as chief investigator into his team's alleged wrong-doing, the world will see the United States as a failing state, one that is turning its back on the core ideas on which it was founded — that no individual is above the law and that those in the government, at every level including the president, work for the people. Only if an independent prosecutor is appointed will America be seen as being the nation of laws it has long represented itself to be. Only if a thorough investigation takes place that includes an examination of Trump family ties in Russia (and elsewhere) and how these may have compromised the United States will the message be sent that America is the nation that has for so long been seen as an example to the world.

It will require a bipartisan commitment to truth and justice. Ultimately, and the sooner the better, it will require our system and people to reject Trump and those surrounding him — who have already done so much to disgrace the offices they hold undermine America's standing in the world.

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Russiagate: Trump Is Trying to Put Out a Fire With More Smoke

If Republicans have a shred of intellectual integrity, they'll ignore the president's flailing, and follow the evidence wherever it leads.

BY MAX BOOT

MAY 8, 2017

There's a lot we know — and even more we don't know — regarding the Kremlin interference in the U.S. election last year. The most important thing we know is that there *was* interference. This is the consensus, "high confidence" **assessment** of the U.S. intelligence community, which further concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin was trying to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump. That in and of itself is scandalous enough. What we don't know — and need to find out — is whether the Trump campaign actively colluded with this Russian operation and, more broadly, what links if any exist between the U.S. president and the dictator in the Kremlin.

Much remains unexplained. Why, for instance, did Trump associates repeatedly communicate and meet with Russians close to Putin during the campaign? American and European intelligence agencies reportedly have found copious **evidence** of such conversations, but so far there is no indication of what transpired. If there was an innocent explanation, why did former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn and Attorney General Jeff Sessions **lie** about their conversations with the Russian ambassador?

More questions concern Trump confidante Roger Stone. Was he truthful in **saying** that he talked last year with Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks (**described** by Trump's own CIA director as a "hostile intelligence service"), and with the hacker persona Guccifer 2.0, which U.S. intelligence has **determined** was simply a front for Russian intelligence? What did they discuss? And how is it that Stone seemed to know in advance of Russian-orchestrated leaks of documents such as the emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta?

Yet another question mark concerns the financial dealings that Trump may have had over the years with wealthy Russians closely linked to the Putin regime. The former MI6 chief, Sir Richard Dearlove, has **said** that Trump's views on Russia may have been influenced by the "deals... he did after the financial crisis of 2008 to borrow Russian money when others in the West apparently would not lend to him."

In a similar vein, golf writer James Dodson says that in 2014 he asked Eric Trump how the Trump Organization was able to spend so much money building so many golf courses. He **recalls** the reply: "Well, we don't rely on American banks. We have all the funding we need out of Russia.... We've got some guys that really, really love golf, and they're really invested in our programs. We just go there all the time." Eric Trump now **denies** saying this. If this claim is in fact false, why doesn't the president reveal his tax returns and those of the Trump Organization so the American people find out what his actual sources of financing were?

But of course President Trump has repeatedly shown he has no interest in the truth getting out. He has impeded the inquiry at every step. For many months, he refused to even accept that Russian hackers had been responsible for stealing the Democratic Party documents he loved to quote on the campaign trail. He now grudgingly concedes that Russia was *probably* responsible but still adds disingenuously “could’ve been China, could’ve been a lot of different groups.”

Rather than aiding the inquiry now being undertaken by the FBI and multiple congressional committees, Trump is leveling cockamamie countercharges at the Democrats designed to obfuscate and obstruct. He did this most notoriously by **claiming** that President Obama illegally wiretapped him — which soon morphed into an accusation that Britain’s GCHQ had done the dirty work at Obama’s behest. No evidence has emerged to support these wild theories, and indeed both Trump’s own FBI and NSA directors have flatly contradicted them.

Even as his accusations against Obama were being dispelled, Trump expanded his smear campaign to Obama’s national security advisor, Susan Rice, **accusing her** of illegally “unmasking” the names of Trump associates in surveillance reports. This theory was most avidly pushed by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes, a former member of Trump’s transition team.

Now this conspiracy theory, too, has imploded, with both the **New Yorker** and **NBC News** reporting that, as NBC put it, “A review of the surveillance material flagged by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes shows no inappropriate action by Susan Rice or any other Obama administration official, Republican and Democratic Congressional aides who have been briefed on the matter told NBC News.” As former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said in his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday, there is a difference between requesting an unmasking through appropriate channels, which Rice seems to have done, and illegally leaking classified information to the public. The only person who may have done something inappropriate here is Nunes, who has had to recuse himself and is now under **investigation** by the House Ethics Committee for improper handling of classified materials.

But wait! Trump’s PR campaign isn’t done. He **told** John Dickerson of CBS News on April 30: “You have Podesta, who, by the way, I understand has a company with his brother in Russia. Hillary’s husband makes speeches in Russia. Hillary did a uranium deal with Russia. Nobody ever talks about that.”

Trump talks about these allegations all the time (he [tweeted](#) about them again on May 7), even though none are remotely relevant. Leave aside the fact that he is twisting the facts. PolitiFact has the [full story](#). Hillary Clinton, for example, did not do a “uranium deal with Russia”; she was one of multiple federal officials who signed off on a Russian firm buying a controlling stake in a Canadian company that owns some uranium mines in the United States, none of whose production can be exported to Russia. Even if Trump were telling the whole truth, it’s hard to see how Russian attempts to influence Democrats in any way excuses Russian interference in the U.S. election on his behalf — much less possible collusion between his campaign and the Russians. These are hardly comparable offenses and even if they were, the existence of one would not excuse the other.

Only marginally more convincing is the latest alibi from the Trump camp. Eric Trump claims that his father’s cruise-missile strike against Russia’s Syrian ally, Bashar al-Assad, on April 7 [proves](#) “that there is no Russia tie.” That’s a stretch, especially given that there has been no follow-up to this one strike and the administration gives every indication that it is content with Assad remaining in power.

More broadly, Trump defenders claim that he is hardly pursuing the kind of foreign policy Putin would want; he is not, for example, withdrawing from NATO or lifting sanctions. There is some truth to this, although Trump is also not sending arms to Ukraine or ramping up sanctions to punish Russia for its interference in our election. Moreover, part of the reason why Trump has not doing a deal with Putin, as he repeatedly [vowed](#) to do, may be the fallout from Kremligate: The president knows he cannot afford to be seen as selling out to Moscow.

But ultimately it doesn’t matter what Trump does in office. What matters is what happened last year: The Kremlin intervened in our election. It would still matter even if the Russian operation had no impact at all; the Watergate burglary was significant even though it didn’t swing the 1972 election. But in fact, there is considerable evidence to indicate that the Russian operation, which generated a series of WikiLeaks revelations in the month before the vote, did have a real impact. The polling website FiveThirtyEight [notes](#) that “the timeline of Clinton’s fall in the polls roughly matches the emails’ publishing schedule.” It’s hard to see why Trump would talk about WikiLeaks [164 times](#) in the last month of the campaign if it was inconsequential.

None of Trump's evasions or counteraccusations can change the fact that a grave crime was committed against our democracy, and that we need to get the full story if only to prevent the Russians from doing it again. Republicans may disagree, but imagine how they would feel if the situation were reversed and President Hillary Clinton were accused of conniving with a hostile foreign power? They would be demanding answers. If they have a shred of intellectual integrity or sheer patriotism, they should do the same now even when the allegations concern a member of their own party.

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