

Strange Bedfellows

by Bill Herbst

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Some people feel that the traditional division of politics and culture into Right and Left — which, in its crudest definition, is equated to Individualism/Capitalism versus Collectivism/Socialism — is no longer relevant. I think that judgment is probably premature, but I acknowledge that the alliances and allegiances that once marked that bi-polar orientation are getting very weird.

In our political duopoly, Republicans have been historically the pro-business party of smaller government, fiscal conservatism, and deficit reduction. To some extent, of course, that's more myth than reality. Yes, Republicans seem to live for the chance to gut social welfare programs, for which they use the pejorative term "entitlements." They would love nothing better than to kill Social Security, not to mention Medicare for all. Over the past 40 years, however, the federal deficit has always increased more under Republican than Democratic administrations, and often dramatically more. Nevertheless, Republicans continue to prattle on about "freedom," by which they mean total permission to amass obscene amounts of personal wealth through unlimited predatory capitalism.

Now, however, the Republicans seem to have abandoned even the pretense of fiscal responsibility in government. The tax bill passed in 2017 tossed a bone to regular Americans while giving billions to ultra-wealthy corporations and individuals, increasing the "official" national debt to over \$22 trillion (which doesn't account for off-book secret expenditures).

On the other side, those on the Left have been suspicious for many decades (with good reason) about America's National Security Agencies, in particular the FBI and the CIA. The FBI, especially during the long reign of J. Edgar Hoover, was obviously ultra-conservative in its fervent protection of the status quo. The CIA — descendant of World War II's OSS and brainchild of the Dulles brothers — has a long, inglorious history of immoral and illegal black ops involving foreign nations, specifically in the Mideast, Central America, and South America. These subversive activities include government coups and overthrows, assassinations, and general mayhem, all in support of American power and hegemony, typically with no regard for democracy or the welfare of the countries subjected to their meddling. Many of America's current problems in geopolitics can be traced directly to the unintended consequences of CIA hijinks.

Some people believe that the CIA masterminded JFK's assassination. That's probably the most widespread conspiracy theory in America and qualifies as the grand-daddy of presumed Deep State False Flags. Whether or not that's true (I don't have an opinion one way or the other), it shows the profound level of public mistrust in the CIA.

And yet, since Trump's election to the Presidency, the FBI and CIA have undergone a near-miraculous rehabilitation in the minds of many liberals, who now seem to regard both agencies as paragons of goodness, the rule of law, and moral rectitude. This harkens back, I think, to the age-old aphorism, "*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*" Donald Trump's complete disdain for his own government's sources of information has galvanized much of the anti-Trump Resistance to embrace the FBI and CIA.

The "expert panels" of mainstream media networks, most notably MSNBC, are now chock full of former national security officials and operatives. Former CIA Director John Brennan and former NSA Director James Clapper make frequent appearances, and their flagrant lies in testimony to Congress during the Obama administration seem to have vanished into the void. What lies? The false reassurances that Americans' privacy was secure, that the public was not subject to surveillance by their own government, when in fact massive surveillance and data-mining operations were already in place. It's not just Amazon, Google, and Facebook that are tracking everything we do. What to make of Brennan's and Clapper's newfound respectability among liberals?

Consider the Mueller Investigation, a.k.a. "RussiaGate," led by another ex-FBI Director whose tenure at the Bureau was not quite as squeaky-clean as the Boy Scout image presented by CNN, MSNBC, and PBS (Mueller began his tenure as FBI Director in 2001 four days before 9/11 and participated in setting up the subsequent War on Terror). Week after week, month after month, the Investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 Presidential campaign and election grinds on in relative secrecy. Some Americans have pinned their hopes on one of two quite different outcomes — either condemning or exonerating President Trump. Other Americans believe the Mueller Investigation to be political Kabuki theatre, while still others are tired of the whole thing and don't give a damn about the eventual report.

Recently the mainstream media breathlessly reported that the Mueller Investigation was close to "wrapping up," and that Mr. Mueller's report to new Attorney General Bill Barr would soon be forthcoming. That has since been retracted. No one outside Mueller's team knows when his report will be forthcoming nor what will be revealed in the report. Also, we don't know how much will be released to the general public. My best guess (admittedly uninformed) is that both strongly-opinionated camps — Pro-Investigation and Anti-Investigation — will probably be disappointed with whatever is revealed to the public by the findings.

I have no doubt that the Presidential campaign of 2016 was tainted by skullduggery and the abuse of truth through social media, but I believe that Russian meddling was way less a factor than meddling by Americans. If we know anything about the cesspool of politics, it's that disinformation and manipulation have always been part of that disreputable game. As much as I loathe Donald Trump and would love to see him get his comeuppance for an entire life of lies and fraud, my concerns are not really about Trump *per se*, since he's merely a symptom of what ails us, but rather about America as a whole.

A certain segment of the population — not a large percentage probably, but still numbering in the millions — believes that the whole RussiaGate Investigation is proof that the Deep State is intent on removing Trump from office, and was from the start. The weird part of that, again, the strange bedfellows. The view that the Deep State controls everything from the shadows, that the “regular” government is merely a puppet, that both of the dominant political parties are effectively the same, and that elections are therefore a meaningless sham, is espoused by various elements of both the left and right.

I don't know (or pretend to know) the truth in all this, whether such beliefs are crazy as hell or incisively sane. The further we go toward the end of the polarizing and disruptive 2010s and the probable maelstrom of the 2020s — where accelerating and unavoidable feedback loops of abrupt and potentially catastrophic climate change could render tribal politics and all other conflicts irrelevant — the less certain I am that anyone else does either.

The upshot of all this is that knowing what to believe, who to trust, and where to stand, is getting harder and harder. Be careful, folks. It's a Tower of Babel out there.