

The Mueller Investigation

by Bill Herbst

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Little in American life these days provokes so much divergent sentiment as the Mueller Investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 Presidential election. Opinions are all over the map, from the ridiculous to the sublime, but they tend to cluster into one of three camps:

A meaningful percentage of the American public believes President Trump's oft-stated assertions in comments to the press and via Twitter, that the Investigation is essentially a witch hunt or hoax intended to invalidate Trump's victory in the election, and, if possible, spark his removal from office by impeachment, either for "collusion" with the Russians or obstruction of justice by Trump's attempts to hide dirty deeds or to impede and even derail the Investigation. This segment of the population, which is, in large part, Trump's "base" of support, holds that the mainstream media — CNN, MSNBC, ABC, and many other presumably left-leaning media organizations — are engaged in a de facto conspiracy created by the Democrats and corporate powers-that-be that amounts to a bogus war on the Trump presidency.

Another percentage of the population believes that the Mueller Investigation is valid and worthwhile. These people tend to hold the attitude that possible revelations of wrong-doing by the Russians and perhaps from within the Trump administration are likely to have been significant, and that their revelation and possible prosecution is important to safeguard American democracy.

A third and sizable segment of the public simply doesn't care about the Mueller Investigation one way or another. These people aren't following the news about the Investigation. Even if they watch, hear, or read reports of the progress of Mr. Mueller and his team of crack investigative lawyers, they are essentially uninvolved and have no strong or definite opinions.

Many smaller percentages exist throughout the political spectrum, with views that are more extreme and typically divided along partisan lines: Republicans tend to be skeptical and dismissive, while Democrats invest hope that the Investigation will reveal substantial results.

I need not comment on the stances listed above. My concern here is solely to offer my own admittedly conflicted thoughts about the Investigation and all the turmoil and innuendo that surrounds it at this point.

Given 21st-century technology, cyber-crime is the new asymmetrical warfare. It's cheap (relatively speaking), easy to mount attacks (especially on American targets, such as computer networks and social media platforms), and remarkably effective at probing an adversary's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Yes, warfare still occurs in all the more established forms — guns, bombs, and military forces; airplanes, rockets, and drones, and even spies on the ground. But cyber-warfare has opened up a whole new range of nefarious possibilities for disruption, whether between nation-states or by individual rogue actors.

Do I believe that the Russians mounted a cyber-campaign of hacking and disinformation with the purpose of fomenting division among Americans and perhaps influencing the outcome of the 2016 election? Of course I do. Russia's having done so is unquestionable, as far as I'm concerned. This is what nations do to further their own interests and undermine their adversaries. It is standard operating procedure in this century. What I find most astonishing about this is not that it occurred, but the arrogance of our double-standard, encapsulated by an apparently fervent belief among many in this country in "American Exceptionalism." Since America has always considered itself "the good guys," we can do whatever we want around the world, but our response to other nations turning the tables on us is: *How dare they?*

America has been meddling in the politics, economies, and cultures of other nations since the empire geared up at the end of the 19th century, throughout the entire 20th century, and into the 21st. We have done so unabashedly and without shame, although more often covertly than overtly. What has been done in the name of the American people (usually without our knowledge at the time) is truly breathtaking, and too frequently chilling. Those in power — both up front and behind the scenes — do not ask the American public for our approval. The assumption seems to be that the public doesn't know what's good for us, but those in charge do. So, they "protect" us in whatever ways they choose, which are too often anti-democratic and violent.

I'm neither shocked nor surprised by this, since it's yet another instance of flawed human nature prevailing over wisdom, but it's dangerous nonetheless. Since World War II, America has created — step by step — a monumental national security apparatus, now well-entrenched and ultra-powerful. Perhaps our country never belonged to "the people," but it sure as hell doesn't belong to us now. We live in it, but we don't run it.

Maybe America was a democracy at some point in the distant past, but not anymore. We are an oligarchy and a plutocracy, not as crude perhaps as Putin's Russia, but much more longstanding and entrenched. America is run by and for

the wealthy through gargantuan institutions that have their own cultures, perspectives, and group-think. Politicians don't run the country, institutions do (both overt and covert). And those institutions don't care about regular Americans.

The Mueller investigation has caused reversals of long-held perspectives in the body politic. Republicans, once the party of Law-and-Order and staunch supporters of the American security state, have followed President Trump's lead and magically morphed into their historical opposites by assuming widespread corruption in the FBI, CIA, and other national security agencies. Conversely, Democrats who were typically skeptical about the overreach of the FBI and CIA are suddenly Defenders of the Faith.

OK, I realize that people's orientations change according to their goals. If you think that the Mueller investigation is bogus and the Russia-Russia-Russia chant nothing more than a thinly-veiled effort to oust Trump (perhaps even supported by the Deep State), then the credentials of the FBI and CIA begin to look seriously tarnished. And, in the opposite case, if Mueller is today's version of George Reeves as SuperMan — fighting for freedom, justice, and the American way --then the FBI and CIA must be defended as loyal patriots getting a bad rap from an administration that's trying desperately to cover its own ass.

For me, the fact that Donald Trump seems to have a boy-crush on Vladimir Putin and invariably gives Putin a free pass is a little odd. Not that I feel that Russia is the Big, Bad Boogeyman of our worst nightmares. I don't, although their stockpile of nuclear weapons is part of the extreme insanity of our times. But Russia is only one factor in that terrifying equation; America is far and away the world's most dangerous nuclear threat. I'll go further than that and suggest that America cares damned little for "democracy" here or elsewhere. What the powers-that-be care about is protecting our position as the fat cats of global capitalism, and the rest of the world is less fooled than some Americans by the constant drum-beat of rhetoric about freedom and democracy.

As a result, I find myself struggling with conflicted opinions. First, I believe that the Russians attempted — with some success — to mess with our minds in the 2016 election, but that Russian "meddling" was relatively minor, as is Russia itself. Russia didn't create the serious divisions now so very obvious that polarize the public into tribal camps. America did that.

On the other hand, I can't give the FBI and CIA a free pass (which includes Mr. Mueller, himself a past Director of the FBI, whose "Boy-Scout" aura of incorruptibility seems to me lathered on a bit too thick by certain talking heads). America has a long history of tragically bad intelligence — think Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 or Yellow-Cake/Iraqi WMD in 2003. Even when intelligence is accurate, policy-makers often reject it until they get a revised version they want that justifies what they had already decided to do.

I believe also that corruption and criminality are likely wherever too much power is concentrated and massive financial shenanigans occur. Donald Trump has done shady business deals throughout his entire career. He surrounds himself with characters driven by the pursuit of wealth who are less than morally upstanding, to say the least. When candidate Trump promised to fill his administration with "the very best people," what I heard was "big-time crooks, liars, and cheats in Armani suits." Given the track record of the administration so far, I feel that my interpretation was correct.

So, one thing Mueller and his team are doing is "following the money." And boy, do they have fertile ground in which to dig for buried treasure and ill-gotten gains. Early on in the Investigation, I decided that "collusion" with the Russians was not likely to be sorted out, one way or the other. My best hope was that Trump and many of his smarmy crew might be called to account for dirty deals, criminal transactions, and money laundering. Given the indictments Mueller has filed thus far, that motherlode has already been opened, and the stench is considerable.

In the recent indictment against 13 Russians — none of whom, of course, will ever see the inside of an American courtroom — Mueller has resurrected the Russia angle to make the Investigation harder to dismiss out of hand and protect himself from being fired. So, perhaps collusion is still on the table.

While I don't share President Trump's continuing obsession with Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, I was not (and am not) a fan of either of them. I've been thoroughly fed up with the Democrats for the past two decades, and the 2016 election hit low ebb for me. The Democratic Party is as drenched in corruption and beholden to big money as their Republican counterparts. Sadly, I doubt that the Mueller Investigation will do anything to remedy that situation.

Comparisons to Watergate are inevitable, but iffy. People tend to forget that the Watergate inquiry was stalled after a year (with half of Americans still dismissing the idea of a cover-up), and that Nixon ended up resigning only because of an extraordinary sequence of screw-ups on his part late in the game. Trump, of course, has already survived every outrage of his despicable history, including those of the past two years. It's as if Trump enjoys the protection of Lucifer, having sold his soul to the Devil early on in his life. Then there is the virtual certainty — no matter what rotten carcasses Mueller digs up — that a Republican-controlled Congress will not impeach Trump. Not a snowball's chance in hell.

OK, what if a "blue wave" of new, activist Democratic candidates sweeps the mid-terms to flip both the House and Senate? That would mean game on for impeachment, but I find little solace there, since it would mean President Pence. If Trump is the Devil's toy, then Pence is the Anti-Christ. Limiting Trump to playing golf at Mar-a-Lago, watching TV and eating Big Macs in the White House,

then defeating him in the 2020 election might be a better option (although his losing in 2020 is by no means guaranteed).

At this point, I have no idea what the eventual outcome of the Mueller Investigation might be. I think we're still a long way from that point, but I see no light yet at the end of the tunnel. What I imagine is that Mueller's evidence is mounting up.

For me, the Mueller Investigation is not so much about Russians or bringing our own criminals to justice. It's more about clinging by my fingertips to the desperate hope that America has not descended fully into complete moral bankruptcy.

I wish I didn't feel that way, but I do.