

They Were There First: Election Denialism, the Democratic Way

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*The scene is memorable enough. November 2016. The Twin Peaks Tavern, Castro District. Men gathered, beside themselves. “It’s shocking how those people voted him in,” splutters one over a Martini. “Yes,” says a companion, bristling in anger at the election of **Donald J. Trump**, sex pest, dubious businessman, orange-haired monster and reality television star. “Why were they ever given the vote?” History had come full circle, the claim now being that tens of millions of voters in the 2016 US presidential election should have been disenfranchised. In their mind, this bloc was to be abominated as **Hillary Clinton’s** designated “deplorables”, a monstrous collective needing to be pushed into the sea.*

In November 2024, we see similar tremors of doubt and consternation, though the official stance, as [expressed](#) by **President Joe Biden**, is to “accept the choice the country made.” In the vast, noisy hinterland of social media speculation lie unproven [claims](#) that some 20 million votes have gone missing, necessitating a recount. Ditto [problems](#) with failing voting machines. In a [statement](#) of cool dismissive confidence, Jen Easterly, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, is adamant:

“we have no evidence of any malicious activity that had a material impact on the security and integrity of our election infrastructure.”

2016 might have given the Democrats meditative pause as to why Trump was elected. Even more significantly, why Trump’s election was more apotheosis rather than gnarly distortion. Instead of vanishing as aberrant over the Biden years, Trumpism has come home to roost in winning, not only the Electoral College but the majority vote by convincing margins.



Much is made of Trump’s pathological campaign against the legitimacy of his loss in 2020, as well as it might. Less is made, certainly from the centre left and Democratic quarters, of

the conspiratorial webbing that served to excuse an appalling electoral performance on behalf of the donkey party and their chosen candidate, Hillary Clinton. Doing so shifted any coherent analysis about loss and misjudgement to plot and the sorcery of disruption – the very sorts of things that Trump would use to such effect after 2020. Indeed, the seeds of election denialism were already sown in 2016 by the Democrats. Trump would draw on this shoddy model with vengeful enthusiasm in 2020.

In [Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign](#), journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes make the point that the Clinton team took a matter of hours to concoct “the case that the election wasn’t entirely on the up-and-up... Already, Russian hacking was the centrepiece of the argument.”

In declassified notes [provided](#) in September 2020 by the then Director of National Intelligence **John Ratcliffe** to the Senate Judiciary Committee, the picture of pre-emptive delegitimization becomes vivid. Clinton, in late July 2016, “had approved a campaign plan to stir a scandal against US Presidential candidate Donald Trump by tying him to Putin and the Russians’ hacking of the Democratic National Committee.” Then Central Intelligence Agency Director **John Brennan** “subsequently briefed President Obama and other senior national security officials on the intelligence, including the ‘alleged approval by Hillary Clinton July 26, 2016 of a proposal from one of her foreign policy advisors to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by Russian security services.’”

Since her loss, Clinton has been impervious to the notion that she lacked sufficient appeal in the electoral race. Trump was, she has [continued to insist](#), never a legitimate president to begin with.

Other Democrat worthies never deviated from the narrative. The late Californian **Senator Dianne Feinstein** [was certain](#) in January 2017 that the change in fortunes in the Clinton camp had much to do with the announcement the previous October that the FBI would be investigating Clinton’s private email server. Typically, the issue of what was exposed was less relevant than the fact of exposure. The former was irrelevant; the latter, Russian, unpardonable, causal and fundamental.

In June 2019, **former President Jimmy Carter** went even further, showing that the Democrats would remain indifferent to Trump as a serious electoral phenomenon.

“I think a full investigation would show that Trump didn’t actually win the election in 2016,” [he stated](#) on a panel hosted by the Carter Center at Leesburg, Virginia. “He lost the election, and he was put into office because the Russians interfered on his behalf.”

This execrable nonsense was fanned, fed and nurtured by media servitors, to such a degree as to prompt Gerard Baker, currently editor-at-large for the *Wall Street Journal*, [to remark](#) that it was mostly “among the most disturbing, dishonest, and tendentious I’ve ever seen.”

An [odd analysis](#) in *Politico* by David Faris about the latest election suggests that Democrats “have the advantage of introspection” while the Republicans, after losing in 2020, “chose not to look inward and instead descended into a conspiratorial morass of denial and rage that prevented them, at least publicly, from addressing the sources of their defeat.”

Faris misses the mark in one fundamental respect. The Democrats were, fascinatingly enough, the proto-election denialists. They did not storm the Capitol in patriotic, costumed

moodiness, but they did try to eliminate Trump as an electoral force. In doing so, they failed to see Trumpland take root under their noses. His stunning and conclusive return to office demands something far more substantive in response than the amateurish, foamy undergraduate rage that has become the hallmark of a distinct monomania.

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***Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: bkampmark@gmail.com*

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