

Hillary Clinton's Sordid Election Campaign, WikiLeaks and the Russian "Connection"

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What was the New York Times thinking in making the suggestion? Evidently, its patriotic sense has been affronted by the disclosures from WikiLeaks that have sprinkled more than a bit of dust on Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. In doing so, Julian Assange and the organisation, so claimed the paper, had wangled its way into the Kremlin's agenda.

Easy to ignore is the fact that the Clinton campaign remains sordidly compromised, a derelict reminder of political atrophy in an already miserable desert of options. When reality television populism starts looking good, we know how cruelly empty that desert has become.

This fearful Grey Lady of the fourth estate, self proclaimed paper of record, has tended to bungle at crucial points in its long history. While it has to be credited with a role in the fall of President Richard Nixon and Watergate, it has also moved into the realm of chest beating (at or least patting) and judgment, when deemed necessary.

Two forces have featured in this chest thumping, though neither can be said to be equivalent. Russia and WikiLeaks have both been mentioned in the context of US politics, supposedly keeping company. The analysis of this connection firstly makes the rather trite assumption that Russia might be involved in manipulating the scene, which then follows with questions about the WikiLeaks "connection".

This connection was supposedly consecrated by the release of 20,000 emails belonging to the Democratic National Committee timed to perfection. The DNC Chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, tendered her resignation in light of its revelations. "To say that this is an unflattering portrayal of Team Clinton," observed John R. Schindler, "is like saying the Titanic had issues with ice" (*Observer*, Jul 25).

What Schindler went on to assume was that the source of those leaks had been Russian intelligence. "[I]ndependent cybersecurity experts easily assessed [this] as being the work of Russian intelligence through previous known cutouts." Callouts were given to COZY BEAR or APT 29, and FANCY BEAR or APT 28, hacking groups assumed to have a Kremlin connection, if not drive. Schindler makes the rather silly point that signing off a hack with a Russian name in Cyrillic suggests anything at all. How shallow the monolingual world is, by nature.

Schindler's analytical imagination then falters in attempting to link the dots. In releasing material that has a provenance to Russian hackers, "WikiLeaks is doing Moscow's bidding and has placed itself in bed with Vladimir Putin."

The language is a neat libel assuming that an organisation that releases material provided

to it by an individual, or entity, is then doing that body's bidding, all body and consciousness, as a subservient political instrument. WikiLeaks has, in fact, shown itself to be very much independent, much to the irritation of governments and in certain instances its supporters. The devil's work is often trying.

At the *New York Times*, the strategy and outlook adopted by Schindler is replicated. The first is demonising Russia as a disinformation giant, weaponising information to weaken opponents. Neil MacFarquhar is certainly one captivated with the notion that Russia has that "powerful weapon" which he calls "the spread of false stories." (How frightfully original.)

One particular suggestion, pitched on Aug 28, was that the Swedish debate about whether it should join NATO was corrupted by Moscow-driven disinformation, among them suggestions that the state might become custodian of nuclear weapons; or that Russia might be attacked from Swedish soil "without government approval".[1] These contentions are never *directly* addressed.

Even MacFarquhar had to accepting that finding the provenance in the rich undergrowth of networks and information over such claims was nigh impossible. The Swedish defence minister had not made an official statement about it, but that did not stop the remark that "numerous analysts and experts in American and European intelligence point to Russia as the prime suspect".

Imbuing networks of information with personality, notably of the negative sort, has become something of a pastime. Alex Gibney personifies this pattern. Not that he is entirely being the mad hatter towards Wikileaks. His relationship, like many with Julian Assange, is thorny. And it shows.

While conceding that much was appropriate in leaking the documents on the DNC, he finds imputing darker aims to Assange irresistible. Incapable of accepting that the salient criterion here should be what the material reveals, he has to go to motive, imputing the sinister and the calculating. When it came to the dance of manipulations taking place in the DNC, Gibney could only obsess about why WikiLeaks did it.

Rather than worrying about the US as sick patient, bacterially infected by an environment that has produced a Clinton-Trump race, he ponders the motives of Assange. Was the Australian national in bed with Russian intelligence?

"We still don't know who leaked the DNC archive, but given Mr. Assange's past association with Russia, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that it was a Russian agent or an intermediary." [2] What we don't know can always be a nice precursor to pure, post-factoid speculation. Slander comes easily to Gibney, as it does to the other coterie of analysts who have attempted to understand Assange's world.

All doubts about the *New York Times* on this interpretation were alleviated by a piece (Aug 31) authored by Jo Becker, Steven Erlanger and Eric Schmitt, that suggested that "Russia often benefits when Julian Assange reveals the West's secrets."

Here, the slander is drawn that converts Assange into an anti-Western force, with an agenda that dovetails with that of the Kremlin. Forget how rotten the state of the union is - focus on Assange and his motives, that he does not criticise other powers - such as Russia. As

WikiLeaks retorted, the organisation “has published more than 650,000 documents about Russian [sic] & president Putin, most of which is critical.”

Perhaps it might be better to keep referring back to the content of the material released, with all its onerous implications, rather than the imaginary motivations of the man releasing it. The proof lies in the released, rather hot pudding, not the individual who released the recipe.

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Notes

[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html?_r=0

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/08/opinion/can-we-trust-julian-assange-and-wikileaks.html>

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