

Electoral Interference, Are ‘The Proud Boys’ Attempting to Scare Voters’?

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Global Research, October 23, 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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Iran, Russia and electoral interference. It is all part of the delicious mess that any observer of US politics has come to expect. Were the US body politic capable of being examined on the clinician's couch, historical fears, psychic disturbances, and a range of unsettling syndromes would be identified. The issue of electoral interference would certainly be at the fore; it would also be fitting that a state so indifferent to the electoral sovereignty of others would now find itself constantly fearing large return servings.

On some level, this standards to reason. In 1948, the United States, still flushed with victory, made a punchy bid to interfere with the outcome of the Italian elections. It was the Central Intelligence Agency's first covert operation, and it was ignominiously undemocratic. As Walter Dowling, Italian desk officer at the US State Department [urged in a memorandum](#) in November 1946, the US had to become increasingly involved with Italian affairs, making itself "so pro-damned Italian that even the dumbest wop would sense the drift." Being so damnably pro-Italian naturally meant being anti-communist. US intelligence officials got to work ensuring that the Italian Communist Party (PCI), allied with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) were kept out of office in favour of Alcide De Gasperi. Contingency plans were laid for the prospect of US military intervention in the event of civil strife. After De Gasperi's victory, covert US aid to Italy's centrist parties [continued](#) into the 1960s.

Hair splitting in these sorts of things is the order of the day. Chat in the land of political inference, especially when appraising the US role, focuses on how considerably different the meddling tends to be. "Unlike Russian electoral interference," [suggests](#) Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "US democracy promotion does not ... favour particular candidates, or undercut the technical integrity of elections. On the whole, it seeks to help citizens exercise their basic political and civil rights." Carothers had obviously forgotten Chile in all of this, along with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's infamous remarks about correcting the democratic choice of Chile's voters.

Post-Cold War history has not been freed from the meddling hand of Washington. In 1996, President Bill Clinton had to admit to efforts assisting Shimon Peres as the preferred candidate in Israel's general elections. Benjamin Netanyahu prevailed, and Clinton [conceded](#) on Israel's Channel 10 news that he "tried to do it in a way that didn't overtly involve me." When Netanyahu visited the White House as Israel's prime minister, he "wanted me to know that he knew I wasn't for him and he beat us anyway."

Such behaviour shows that allies are not exempt from the practice. The CIA did its bit in the lead-up to the [French elections in 2012](#), though the effort was modest. Available in the WikiLeaks CIA Vault 7 Series, a number of "tasking orders" were executed in an effort to

infiltrate French political parties and conduct surveillance. As WikiLeaks [describes](#) it, “All major French political parties were targeted for infiltration by the CIA’s human (‘HUMINT’) and electronic (‘SIGINT’) spies in the seven months leading up to France’s 2012 presidential election.” Despite being seen as pro-American, President Nicolas Sarkozy was not exempt from Washington’s prying eyes.

With such a glorious record, it is little wonder that Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, when asked about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, had little time for the fuss. In [an interview](#) with CNN’s Jack Tapper, Paul suggested that the electoral interference game was a buffet of reciprocal options: “they’re going to interfere in our elections. We also do the same ... We all do it. What we need to do is make sure our electoral process is protected.” The investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into the Trump campaign and Russian interference was a needless “witch hunt”.

With only a brief interval now to the presidential elections next month, it would have been odd not to have another set of allegations of interference. This latest round of claims has even been a bit neurotic. It began as [accusations of interference](#) from a domestic source: the far-right Proud Boys group. Emails, supposedly sent from “info@officialproudboys.com,” warned registered Democratic voters in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Florida, and Alaska to “vote for Trump on Election Day or we will come after you.”

Enrique Tarrio, chairman of the Proud Boys and Florida state director of Latinos for Trump, denied that the group had a hand in the effort. “We don’t do mass emails,” [he told](#) Fresh Take Florida, a news service of the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications. “This is definitely, definitely not us.”

With little care for caution and corroboration, a good stable of mainstream media outlets jumped on the narrative, accepting the premise that the Proud Boys had orchestrated a domestic campaign of electoral intimidation. It seemed to tally with image and reputation. Some group members have promised to keep an eye on polling stations across the country in a show of political heft. The Lincoln Project was furious, [claiming](#) that “the Proud Boys are attempting to scare voters away from the polls.” Such an act was “punishable by up to a year in jail and a blatant attempt to prevent people from voting. Let’s find them and make them famous.”

Then came the [press conference](#) of October 21, convened by the FBI and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. FBI director Christopher Wray and the Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe were present. According to Ratcliffe, Iran and Russia “have taken specific actions to influence public opinion relating to our elections.” Voter registration information had been obtained by both countries.

“This data can be used by foreign actors to attempt to communicate false information to registered voters that they hope will cause confusion, sow chaos, and undermine your confidence in American democracy.”

Reference was made to the intimidating emails, which would not have comforted the anti-Trump camp.

“We have already seen Iran sending spoofed emails designed to intimidate voters, incite social unrest, and damage President Trump,” [stated](#) Ratcliffe.

“You may have seen some reporting on this in the last 24 hours or you have been one of the recipients.” Iran was also “distributing other content,” including a video implying “that individuals could cast fraudulent votes, even from overseas. This video – and any claims about such allegedly fraudulent ballots – are not true.”

Rachel Maddow of MSNBC, never one to be entirely balanced when viewing material on the White House Ogre, [questioned](#) the assertions made during the press conference. Interference in US elections over the last four years had always been taken to be against the Democrats and favourable to Trump. Could it actually be designed to sabotage the US president? Good of Ratcliffe, claimed Maddow, to be having the gathering (there was “drama” in holding a “short-notice press conference on election security”). “But when it comes to what he actually communicated, frankly nobody actually knows what he was talking about.”

It should have been clear from the context, but clarity was not dawning on Maddow. “We assume what he’s talking about here is these intimidating ‘vote Trump or else’ emails that were sent to Democratic registered voters in Florida and in numerous other states, but maybe that’s not what he’s talking about.”

For the devotees of Russia gate, any reverse angle was hard to stomach. Ideology must shape reality. Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer, in an effort to move the focus away from any specific targeting of Trump, [claimed](#) to have a different account of the security briefing he had been given. “From the briefing, I had the strong impression it was much rather to undermine confidence in elections and not aimed at any particular figure”.

A passable knowledge of recent Iran-US relations would surely make Ratcliffe’s assertions credible, not least Trump’s effort to sink the Iran nuclear deal and the ordered killing of Quds leader Major General Qasem Soleimani. But partisanship has been the order of the day for four years. Even in matters of electoral inference, trusted demonologies cannot be disturbed.

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