

Washington Trembles: The Charge of the Invisible Army of Kremlin Trolls

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Featured image: Alice Donovan's Twitter profile image

Diana Johnstone explains that President Trump can be excused from being prosecuted as a Russian agent if he will give up his intention of normalizing relations with the necessary enemy of the US military/security complex and join in the orchestrated demonization of Russia.

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There is no holiday truce in the propaganda war. On this Christmas day, The Washington Post offered its readers a scare story entitled ["Kremlin trolls burned across the Internet as Washington debated options"](#).

The article is long - nearly 4000 words. The only part that is sure to be read in these busy times of short attention spans is the headline, whose two themes are rich in subliminal messages.

First, a slash and burn operation by an army of Kremlin trolls is laying waste to the Internet. Second, official Washington in its benevolent innocence is having trouble facing up to this nefarious threat.

Let's take these two themes one at a time.

Invasion of the Troll Army

The journalistic peg for this story is a phantom freelance journalist named **Alice Donovan** whose "first email arrived in the inbox of CounterPunch, a left-leaning American news and opinion website, at 3:26 a.m. - the middle of the day in Moscow".

Aha!

Drawing on its abundant intelligence community sources, the WaPo article continues:

"The FBI was tracking Donovan as part of a months-long counterintelligence operation code-named 'NorthernNight'. Internal bureau reports described her as a pseudonymous foot soldier in an army of Kremlin-led trolls seeking to undermine America's democratic institutions."

Now, it is interesting to note that the only evidence provided in this article for “Russia’s army of trolls” (the expression pops up again) is the existence of this pseudonymous foot soldier named Alice Donovan. And the only evidence of her existence is numerous articles published on about a dozen websites over the past two years. Because when CounterPunch attempted, alarmed by the FBI, to find out who she is, it was unable to do so.

So, in this account, one ephemeral foot soldier is cited as proof of an “army”.

This should immediately raise questions. Why was the FBI investigating someone whose only trace of existence was authorship of website articles? It couldn’t be investigating “a person”, since apparently no one knows who this person is. So it was investigating a website writer. Why? What was its criterion?

“As the 2016 presidential election heated up,” the article continues, Alice Donovan “seemed to be doing the Kremlin’s bidding by stoking discontent toward Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton and touting WikiLeaks, which U.S. officials say was a tool of Russia’s broad influence operation to affect the presidential race.”

In short, “stoking discontent” toward Hillary is the distinguishing sign of being “a tool” of a Russian operation. Incidentally, there are a lot of us who did just that. I am one of them, having written a whole book of discontent toward Hillary. Are we all under FBI investigation?

Is it or is it not the mission of the FBI to run a counterintelligence operation investigating website writers who digress from the official Washington line on Hillary Clinton, Russia and Syria? Alice Donovan did so but her pieces were relatively mild. Why should she be singled out for an FBI counterintelligence operation?

Why was CounterPunch warned against her and not against all of us who write such articles?

The not so subliminal message was: any article submitted to a website that contradicts the official line may be the work of sinister Kremlin agents. The evidence: they’ve found one! Its name is Alice Donovan. So be very careful what you publish.

Of course, the “evidence” is just as invisible as all the “proof” of Russian subversion produced so far by U.S. security agencies. Nobody has seen Alice Donovan. Nobody has talked with her. So far, there is no proof of her existence. But that has not prevented leading mainstream media from proclaiming her as exhibit A for Alice in the media prosecution of Vladimir Putin for “undermining our democracy”.

“The FBI, in keeping with its standard practice in counterintelligence investigations, has kept a close hold on information about Donovan and other suspected Russian personas peddling messages inside the United States”, according to the WaPo.

But not such a close hold that it refrained from unnerving CounterPunch editors with suggestions that it was facilitating Kremlin cyberwar, or from passing along confidential intelligence reports to the most influential newspaper in the Nation’s Capital, whose ties to the CIA are longstanding.

If Alice Donovan is such a threat, why not expose her/his/its identity?

Reacting to FBI warnings, CounterPunch did its own investigation and came up with significant facts.

First, since it was impossible to trace “Alice Donovan”, the FBI must have been alerted by the writings, not by the person. When and how did the snoopers discover that she was apparently using a pseudonym? Did they know that first, meaning that the FBI equated pen names with Russian subversion? But what counts in an article is above all the content, not the signature. Throughout history, writers have used pen names as protection from potential persecution. The FBI exchange with CounterPunch indicates an intention to warn “left-leaning” websites not to publish anonymous articles, which could be a first step toward excluding persons who have something to say but fear getting in trouble because their views are unorthodox, especially in a period of intensifying witch hunt.

But the most significant fact emerging from CounterPunch’s own investigation is that articles by “Alice Donovan” failed to introduce some new strain of Russian propaganda into American cyberspace. They were not at all original. The phantom commentator picked up pieces of articles found on other left-leaning websites, and pasted them together as her own. The articles were cut and paste – in a word plagiarism.

That is the smoking gun, and the fingerprints are not Russian.

Indeed, inasmuch as there was nothing new, nothing particular sensational, no great “fake news” revelation in the Donovan prose, what could the “Kremlin” hope to gain? Why attempt to “undermine our democracy” with a few shadows of other existing internet articles?

This simply makes no sense.

There is another hypothesis, however, that does make sense. It is clear from the very creation of Operation NorthernNight that the FBI was charged with the task of producing proof that Internet dissidence has its origins in a Putin plot. But when such evidence turns out to be difficult or impossible to find, it can be manufactured instead – just as a certain number of “terrorist plots” have been manufactured by luring some gullible fool into a sting operation.

It could be well worth the trouble of the FBI to entrap leftist publications into publishing articles that could be “exposed” as “Kremlin propaganda”. It is obvious that the Deep State is desperate for “evidence” to back up their Russia-is-destroying-our-democracy fairy tale, and this would fit right in. The invention of “Alice Donovan” could provide such “evidence”.

If you were an FBI hack, commissioned with writing articles to be signed by “Alice Donovan”, how would you go about it? As an FBI hack, you probably have no idea how to write such an article. The easiest way would be to copy what real “left-leaning” authors had written. The Donovan papers added nothing to what was already in the public domain. They said nothing that other writers had not written, and that might risk further poisoning the minds of gullible Americans. She just cut and pasted. That would be a most convenient way to “invent” a fictional Russian troll – set her loose among the websites and then “discover” the scandal. Just a new twist on the FBI’s perpetual entrapment ploys. A variation on the theme of sting operations. We lure you into doing something we can accuse you of. But it is the “left-

leaning” websites that are lured into having published “fake news” by a “Kremlin troll”.

This should teach them to be careful!

There is indeed no proof that “Alice Donovan” is a creation of the FBI undercover operation known as NorthernNight, just as there is no proof that “Alice Donovan” was a creation of a Kremlin disinformation campaign. However, there is proof that the FBI undercover operation existed. From its secret sources, The Washington Post reveals that a “previously unreported order – a sweeping presidential finding to combat global cyber threats – prompted U.S. spy agencies to plan a half-dozen specific operations to counter the Russian threat.” Why couldn’t “Alice Donovan” have been one of those operations?

On the other hand, the Kremlin disinformation campaign is still a matter of speculation – despite all the mainstream reports based, like this one claims to be, on “interviews with dozens of current and former senior U.S. officials at the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, and U.S. and European intelligence services, as well as NATO representatives and top European diplomats.”

Since all those interviews are anonymous, what makes them more credible than an anonymous blogger? Where is the evidence – of anything?

This whole article is built on the a priori assumption of the existence of “an army of Kremlin trolls” out to destroy American democracy. The theme is imaginatively elaborated, but never supported by solid facts.

Saving Trump From the Trolls

If the first theme in the article is designed to intimidate “left-leaning” websites, obliging them to tow the official line, and henceforth threatened with accusations of colluding with “the Kremlin’s army of trolls” if they do not do so, the second theme is indirectly addressed to Trump. The subliminal message: jump onto the anti-Russia bandwagon and you may not be impeached after all.

This message is delivered by innuendo. Whereas the whole “Russian fake news” campaign got off the ground as a way to explain the preposterous election of **Donald Trump**, and also as a way to discredit the despised president and prepare his destitution, the tone has changed. Now, the WaPo reports, Trump is not a beneficiary but a target of Russian disinformation:

“After Trump took office, Russia’s army of trolls began to shift their focus within the United States, according to U.S. intelligence reports. Instead of spreading messages to bolster Trump, they returned to their long-held objective of sowing discord in U.S. society and undermining American global influence. Trump’s presidency and policies became a Russian disinformation target.”

“Donovan and other Kremlin-backed personas” began attacking the Trump administration for, among other things, supporting “terrorists” and authorizing military strikes that killed children in Syria.

“ ‘They are all about disruption,’ said a former official briefed on the intelligence. ‘They want

a distracted United States that can't counter **Vladimir Putin's** ambitions'."

What ambitions are those? According to Washington informants, this was because Putin wanted to "make up for its diminished military" by seizing on "influence campaigns and cyberwarfare as equalizers."

Now, one might think that if all Russia can muster to "equalize" the United States' unprecedented military machine is an army of Alice Donovans, all those security experts in Washington should relax and stop worrying.

According to this tale, that is just what they did, convinced that "it was all over and we'd won the propaganda war". Then came - horrors! - RT, a Russian sponsored American television channel than offers viewers a vision of the news that strikes the Washington Post like an exorcism chant.

Poor, Fragile America

So now U.S. security officials run whimpering to The Washington Post claiming that top policy-makers were misled by "a misguided belief in the resilience of American society and its democratic institutions." Miscalculations and "bureaucratic inertia" left the United States "vulnerable to Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election"... The world's greatest democracy turns out to be a house of cards.

What a confession! It turns out that if the Russians huff and puff, they can blow the house down.

"I thought our ground was not as fertile," said **Antony J. Blinken**, President Barack Obama's deputy secretary of state. "We believed that the truth shall set you free, that the truth would prevail. That proved a bit naive."

Gee whiz, the guys in Washington are just too honest to dream of the nasty things those mean Russians can do. But now The Washington Post is there, hand in hand with "the intelligence community", to warn us, and to warn you, Mr. Trump, that the Russians are the bad guys out to destroy America and you must do everything to stop them.

These complaints have a familiar ring. Whenever the Pentagon is gearing up to bomb some hapless country into regime change, we hear the same chorus from the mainstream media, from intelligence experts and high officials "on conditions of anonymity", as well as from assorted semi-governmental "non-governmental" human rights organizations, proclaiming that American leaders must be awakened from their idealistic dreams in order to stop the latest Hitler from doing whatever it is such villains do. Of course, America's naive leaders are just too kind and innocent to take this latest terrible threat seriously - until alerted by diligent spooks and their mainstream media collaborators. We've heard this again and again. Remember how human rights advocates had to nag and nag the gentle US war machine to get it to bomb Serbia, to bomb Libya, to arm "good" Syrian rebels. Official America is so good and trusting that it has to be forced to take necessary defensive action.

So come on, Trump, just wake up to the Putin cyber threat, and all will be forgiven.

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