

New From Trump University Election Rigging 101

By William deBuys

Donald Trump was right. The election was rigged. What Trump got wrong (and, boy, does he get things wrong) is that the rigging worked in his favor. The manipulations took three monumental forms: Russian cyber-sabotage; FBI meddling; and systematic Republican efforts, especially in swing states, to prevent minority citizens from casting votes. The cumulative effect was more than sufficient to shift the outcome in Trump's favor and put the least qualified major-party candidate in the history of the republic into the White House.

Trumpist internet trolls and Trump himself dismiss such concerns as sour grapes, but for anyone who takes seriously the importance of operating a democracy these assaults on the nation's core political process constitute threats to the country's very being. Let's look at each of these areas of electoral interference in detail.

Gone Phishing: The Drone of Info Warfare Suppose one morning you receive an email from your Internet service provider telling you a security breach has put your data at risk. You are instructed to reset your password immediately. In keeping with the urgency of the situation, the email that delivers the warning provides a link to the page where your new password can be entered. Anxiously you do as instructed, hoping you've acted soon enough to prevent a disaster.

Congratulations: you have successfully reset your password. Unfortunately, you have also provided it to the hackers who sent the original, entirely bogus warning about a breach of security. This kind of ploy is called phishing. It's exactly how the email account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chair, was penetrated. His assistants fell for the ruse.

Alternatively, a phisher might send dozens of intriguing offers to employees of a certain organization over the course of weeks. Each message provides a link for more information, and as soon as someone in a moment of boredom or confusion clicks on it, presto change-o, the hacker is inside that person's computer, free to worm through the network to which it's connected. This is how hackers got into the computers of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and downloaded not just emails but strategic planning documents and other confidential information.

At this point no one aside from Trump die-hards and maybe Trump himself -- he has said so many contradictory things on the subject, it's difficult to tell what he actually believes -- denies that the hackers were Russian and acted under some kind of official instruction, even possibly from the highest levels of Kremlin authority, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moreover, it's clear that the harvest of stolen material was used to help Trump and hurt Clinton. This is the unambiguous conclusion of a National Intelligence Community report released on January 6th and representing the shared conclusions of the CIA, the FBI, and the National Security Agency, which stated: "Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear

preference for President-elect Trump. We have high confidence in these judgments."

None of the meddling was as blatantly subversive as taking electronic control of voting machines and altering vote counts. Nor did the Russian hackers disable vote-tallying computers, as they did in Ukraine in 2014, but they achieved the next best thing. In our information-drenched world, the drumbeat of background noise can be as powerful as what one hears in the foreground. The Russians and their allies, in part through WikiLeaks, parceled out the juiciest tidbits from the stolen material over the course of the summer and fall, and the news media ate it up.

The Democratic dirty laundry they aired showed that Debbie Wasserman Schultz, chair of the DNC, favored Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders. In the ensuing flap, Wasserman Schultz resigned and the public was left with the message that the DNC was both untrustworthy and in disarray -- and indeed, following the chair's departure, the disarray couldn't have been more real. When other emails were released in which Podesta and various colleagues second-guessed Mrs. Clinton's decisions, the message that lingered in the public mind was that even her closest associates had doubts about her, never mind that candid, water-cooler criticism is normal in any undertaking.

The Russians did more than merely steal computer information. They also planted false news stories, both with state sanction (according to the national intelligence report), and without it. One of the upshots of the faux-news business is that, amid intense click-bait competition for advertisers, only sites and articles pandering to the far right make money. Disseminating made-up stories favorable to Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders returned nothing to the bottom line of the freelance hackers operating in what has become one of the Russian-speaking world's newest cottage industries. Evidently a suspension of critical thinking -- or its complete absence -- is easier to exploit among those disposed to hate liberals and love Trump.

That this kind of gullibility is more than just politically dangerous became clear in December when Edgar Welch of Salisbury, North Carolina, stormed into Comet Ping Pong, a pizza joint on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C., filled mainly with parents and children. Welch was carrying a handgun and an assault rifle, which he fired. He later explained that he intended to "self-investigate" reports that had been ricocheting around the Internet asserting that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta operated a child trafficking ring out of that restaurant. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

The hoax that fooled the benighted Edgar Welch first appeared on the Internet in late October, shortly before the election. Via Twitter, Reddit, Facebook and other platforms, users subsequently clicked it onward several million times. Among the enthusiastic retweeters of this sort of claptrap (if not the specific Comet Ping Pong story) was retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn, whom Trump has named his national security adviser, a position for a modicum of probity, if not honesty, used to be a requirement. (Flynn's son did, however, promote the Comet story on social media.)

In the echo chamber of the Internet, the drone of half-truths and lies blurs the edges of the real. Eventually, it imparts a kind of lazy, unevaluated validity to memes of all kinds: Hillary is a

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Thursday, 19 January 2017 09:04 - Last Updated Tuesday, 31 January 2017 00:27

crook, immigrants are criminals, Muslims are terrorists. In such a world, Trump's chronic mendacity becomes unremarkable. This is political branding, advertising, and product definition in the twenty-first century. It's part of what the spinmeisters call "seizing the narrative," and the more you seize it for your side, the harder it becomes for your opponents to make their case. Truth is beside the point.

Russian faux-news stories, purloined emails, and "exfiltrated" documents dogged the Democratic campaign. They were like gnats that packed a painful bite, buzzing continually wherever Clinton went. They distracted the media and the public from Trump's much more substantial sins and reinforced the memes that he and his proxies chanted at every opportunity. They built toward a death by a thousand cuts. That was the background. Then, into the foreground stepped FBI Director James Comey.

Out of Line On October 28th, only 11 days before Election Day, with early voting already underway in many states, Comey delivered a letter to Congressional leaders stating that, "in connection with an unrelated case, the FBI has learned of the existence of emails that appear to be pertinent to the investigation" of Hillary Clinton's private email server. They were, devastatingly enough, on a computer that scandal-ridden former Congressman Anthony Weiner had shared with his wife and Clinton aide Huma Abedin. At the time, Comey did not have a warrant to inspect those emails or any idea what the emails specifically contained. He released his letter in violation of longstanding Justice Department procedures and contrary to direct advice from Attorney General Loretta Lynch.

The most sympathetic thing that might be said about Comey's rogue gambit was that he felt a muddle-headed sense of obligation to keep the public and, more particularly, Republican members of Congress informed about developments in an investigation that he had declared resolved nearly four months earlier. A darker interpretation is that he dropped his bomb intending to help the Trump campaign, which, if true, would constitute a violation of the Hatch Act and entitle him to an extended stay in a facility populated by people he used to prosecute. We may never know his motives in full, but it is rumored that he will offer some kind of statement after the inauguration.

Motives aside, Comey's letter detonated across the late-stage election landscape. Predictably the media went into overdrive, as did Trump. With his usual bombast he proclaimed that "this is bigger than Watergate," and the spinning went on from there. Clinton's polling numbers nosedived. On November 5th, Comey issued a follow-up letter in which he conceded that, um, well, the trove of emails added absolutely nothing new to the previously dormant investigation. This 11th hour admission did little to mend the damage already inflicted on Clinton and may, in fact, only have deepened the injury by keeping the item in the news and underscoring the suspicions many voters felt toward her.

Nate Silver, at FiveThirtyEight, suggested that the flap may have cost Clinton a three-point swing among the electorate and calculated that, after the Comey bombshell hit, the probability of her winning the presidency plunged by 16%. He also suggested that Comey's letter may have influenced down-ballot races, especially in the all-important struggle for control of the Senate. Bloomberg reported even more dramatic numbers, finding that Clinton's 12-point lead

eroded to a single percentage point, making the race essentially a dead heat.

Digging deeply into the "Comey Effect," Sean McElwee and his colleagues at Vox found that it correlated with sharp downturns for Clinton in both national and state polling, probably accounting for a surge toward Trump that was particularly pronounced among "late-deciders" -- people who made up their minds only when they were at the brink of going to the polls. Moreover, the surge was likely shaped by an astonishing "peak" in the negative news coverage of Clinton, centering on her emails. In the last week of the campaign, 37% of all coverage of Clinton was "scandal"-related, far higher than had been the case for months.

These are powerful statistics. Three percentage points in an election in which nearly 129 million ballots were cast for the top two candidates amounted to 3.87 million votes. Add them to the 2.86 million by which Clinton beat Trump in the popular vote, and you have a victory margin more than a million and a half votes larger than that by which Obama beat Romney in 2012. You also have a big win in the Electoral College. People would have been talking about a landslide.

As things turned out, Trump's victory in the Electoral College was determined by fewer than a combined 100,000 votes in the swing states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. You can massage the numbers many different ways, but if Comey's letter accounted for only 2% of Trump's votes in those states, then without the letter Clinton would have won all three of them -- and the presidency.

Elections are always contingent: weird stuff happens. In 1960, Richard Nixon hit his knee on a car door moments before the first-ever televised presidential debate. He'd just had surgery on the knee to combat a staph infection, and the pain from the swelling bump undermined his performance. It's an old story: for want of a nail, a shoe is lost, for want of a shoe, a horse, and the rest is history. But the intervention of a high government official on a completely politicized hot-button issue at the apex of a presidential campaign is unprecedented in American history. It exceeds by orders of magnitude the contingencies of elections past.

Voter Suppression In the last year or two did you receive a postcard from election authorities asking you to confirm your present address? I did. Those postcards originate from Operation Crosscheck, a brainchild of Kris Kobach, the Republican secretary of state in Kansas, in which 27 states collaborated to uncover the identities of citizens registered to vote in multiple states. That's a common enough occurrence since people rarely bother to cancel old registrations when they move from one state to another. Sounds benign, right?

Not so. As Greg Palast detailed in Rolling Stone last August, this purge of voter rolls was methodologically inept and had the effect of disproportionately disenfranchising minority voters. The crosschecking frequently matched only first and last names, ignoring middle names and suffixes like junior or senior. As a result, common surnames -- Jones, Washington, Garcia, and the like -- generated huge numbers of matches. The intent of the program was to prevent double voting, a form of voter fraud that the right has frequently decried as widespread, but for which no one has found substantial evidence. (As the New York Times reported in the wake of election 2016, no significant evidence of voter fraud of any sort was found.) This fake issue

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has, however, been used as a smokescreen for implementing voting restrictions that inhibit poor people, students, and minorities, who usually vote Democratic, from exercising their franchise.

Poor people, as Palast points out, are "overrepresented in 85 of 100 of the most common last names. If your name is Washington, there's an 89% chance you're African-American. If your last name is Hernandez, there's a 94% chance you're Hispanic. If your name is Kim, there's a 95% chance you're Asian."

Crosscheck sent 7.2 million matches to the 28 originally participating states. (Oregon dropped out when its officials realized the extent of Crosscheck's flaws.) Nearly all of them with Republican secretaries of state then handled matters as they saw fit, eliminating an estimated 1.1 million voters from their rolls. Virginia, for instance, dropped more than 41,000 registrations as "inactive" shortly before the election. In many cases, state authorities sent voters cryptic, small-print postcards like the one I received.

Undoubtedly, many students and poor voters, who move frequently from apartment to apartment, never even got their postcards, and when they failed to respond, their voter registrations were canceled. In Michigan, which Donald Trump won by 10,704 votes, Crosscheck provided a purge list of 449,922 names. How many of these people were prevented from voting? How many voted but had their ballots disallowed? No one knows for sure, but the situation cries out for sustained and aggressive investigation.

At least 14 states compounded the problems of Operation Crosscheck by creating new, additional obstacles for voters, including eliminating early voting on weekends, reducing polling place hours, and mandating the use of photo IDs. In Wisconsin, a new voter ID law was sold to the public with promises that the state's motor vehicles department would issue appropriate IDs to non-drivers within six business days of application. In actual fact, the process often took six to eight weeks. Even an order from a federal court (that found as many as 300,000 voters may have been affected) failed to speed up the turgid Wisconsin bureaucracy.

In the November election, voter turnout in Wisconsin, which Trump won by 22,748 votes, was the lowest in 20 years. It fell 13% in Milwaukee, where most of the state's black voters live. Part of the problem was undoubtedly the unpopularity of the major candidates, but voter suppression seems to have played a significant role, too. As Ari Berman of the Nation points out, the active discouragement of poor and minority citizens from voting -- not just in Wisconsin, but in Virginia, North Carolina, and many other states -- was undoubtedly the most underreported story of 2016.

Alas, Poor Hamilton
The last kind of man whom Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, as architects of the new American republic, saw as a fit head of state was someone modeled on the character of a medieval prince: narcissistic, volatile, cruel, deceitful, and as vulnerable to manipulation by flattery as by insult. But Hamilton and Madison were hardly naïve. They fully understood that no democracy could be completely immune from such men. In fact, they expected that the House of Representatives, in particular, would ultimately open its doors to a fair share of lunatics, demagogues, and nincompoops. History has more than validated this view.

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Hamilton and Madison, however, believed that the presidency of the new United States had to be protected from unqualified men at all costs, and so they came up with a plan. They invented the Electoral College. Writing in the Federalist 68 in March 1788, Hamilton extolled their creation and explained,

"The process of election affords a moral certainty, that the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications. Talents for low intrigue, and the little arts of popularity, may alone suffice to elevate a man to the first honors in a single State; but it will require other talents, and a different kind of merit, to establish him in the esteem and confidence of the whole Union, or of so considerable a portion of it as would be necessary to make him a successful candidate for the distinguished office of President of the United States."

The inauguration of Donald J. Trump looms. If the old saying about "rolling over in one's grave" has any substance, Hamilton and Madison should be spinning like turbines.

In truth, our electoral process is broken. Key protections provided by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were gutted in 2013 by a Supreme Court more blatantly political than any in living memory. Right-wingers in North Carolina thereupon ginned up a suite of voting restrictions that, in the words of a federal judge, targeted black Democratic voters "with almost surgical precision." The judge struck down the most egregious provisions of that law, but repressive efforts in North Carolina, Wisconsin, and other Crosscheck states will continue to be advanced, as opportunity permits. The vital task is to deny the opportunity.

Meanwhile, James Comey has shown that a lone, rogue public official can interject himself into the most sensitive of national moments in a way that not even his roguish predecessor J. Edgar Hoover would have countenanced. And Vladimir Putin has evidently found the cheapest of methods, using electrons instead of sanctions or guns, to undermine the political institutions of his adversaries and befuddle their people.

The extent to which Trump campaign functionaries maintained links, if any, with Russian operatives remains unknown. On January 11th, a 35-page document consisting of memoranda on Trump's Russian connections, compiled by a researcher hired by his opposition, became public. That document contains allegations ranging from the salacious to the treasonous. Although none of them has been verified, the leaked release of the memoranda has intensified public pressure on Trump to offer a full accounting of his relationship with Russian business interests and the Putin regime. Irrespective of whether these lines of inquiry produce information of substance, the fact remains that a foreign, hostile power used subterfuge to interfere with the domestic electoral politics of the United States.

On that last count, many an Iranian, Guatemalan, or citizen of any of scores of countries might justifiably say that turnabout is fair play, for the United States has a long and well-documented history of meddling in other countries' elections. The consequences of a breakdown of democracy in the United States, however, are costly for the entire world. Missiles and nuclear codes are at stake. So, too, is the ever-narrowing window for meaningful global action on climate change, not to mention the clout of the world's largest economy and most powerful

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military. All of these things, by hook and by crook, have now been entrusted to a man very like a medieval prince. William deBuys's most recent book, *The Last Unicorn: A Search for One of Earth's Rarest Creatures*, was listed by the *Christian Science Monitor* among the 10 best nonfiction books of 2015. He is a TomDispatch regular.

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