

Commentary...

We know election interference when we see it

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

It must seem like a pretty good joke in the labyrinthine halls of the Kremlin: the Americans in a giant twist about Russian interference in the 2016 election. We ought to recognize it when we see it. The Russians understand — better than 99 percent of Americans — that the USA is the world champion of meddling in the internal political affairs of sovereign nations.

Of course, when WE do it, it's "promotion of democracy." One might forgive the spider in the Kremlin for rolling his eyes at the pious hypocrisy. A short and incomplete list of countries in which we've interfered, intervened and outright overthrown regimes in order to further our geopolitical interests might offer some perspective:

Mexico; Chile; Cuba; the Dominican Republic; Panama; El Salvador; Nicaragua; Venezuela... Actually, it would be easier and much briefer to list countries in Latin America where we haven't interfered, intervened or invaded.

Republic of Vietnam; the Philippines; Iran; Iraq; Afghanistan; Syria; Libya;

Israel; Ukraine; Italy; Republic of Georgia; Russia itself...

We're talking dumping mountains of cash to influence elections, financing and backing coups d'état, and, when necessary, full-scale military intervention.

Oh, but most of that was in the old days — you know, the Cold War.

Yeah... no. It started well before the post-World War II U.S.-Soviet rivalry, and it has continued well past the fall of the Berlin Wall and the purported "End of History." For historically amnesiac Americans, the past isn't just past; it's like it never happened. The countries where we play our games don't see things that way. The actions of the past resonate down to the present, whether we choose to remember them or not.

We sow the wind and are constantly surprised when years down the line a whirlwind kicks up and blows us over.

Just one example: We and the Brits overthrew the government of Mohammed Mosadegh in Iran in 1953. Seemed like a good idea at the time. It took 20 years for that exercise in not-very-covert strongarm

realpolitik to wind itself up into the tornado of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Now here we are in 2017, still trying to figure out what to do about a revolutionary Shi'ite Iran, which has extended its influence across Iraq and Syria to its Hezbollah client in Lebanon.

Our actions in Eastern Europe are of a much more recent vintage, and from the perspective of Vladimir Putin, directly challenge his power in the here and now. From the perspective of the Kremlin, the Russians are defending themselves against OUR aggressive behavior in what they consider their legitimate sphere of influence.

Our conviction that we act for (well mostly) benign purposes and that there is no moral equivalence between our actions and the sanguine activities of the bloody-handed tyranny of the Russian (née Soviet) kleptocratic state may be a comforting tale to tell ourselves — when we think about it at all — but it doesn't cut any ice with the Russians. Everybody's the hero in his own movie.

We're playing a game of thrones here, and have been ever since we stepped out onto the world stage in the

Spanish-American War in 1898. You could push it as far back as 1846, when we provoked a war with Mexico and gained what is now the American Southwest and California for our efforts. The game of thrones is nasty and played for the highest stakes — and dirty play is always part of the deal. We've made some smart plays and some really dumb — and costly — plays. Some of the dumbest plays have been a result of pretending that we don't really play in the dirty, nasty game at all.

That's the one big advantage Putin has, as the leader of a petro-state in very shaky economic condition: He at least knows he's playing the great game and who his adversary is — and he embraces it.

Unfortunately, our own current players in the game are rank amateurs — and

incompetent ones at that. It's tempting to see sinister motives at play in the coziness of Trump's campaign with Russian agents of influence. Bannon, Flynn, Manafort — admittedly, there's a lot of smoke there. Yet it's increasingly difficult to picture the Trump family being capable of rubbing two sticks together to actually make a fire.

Given Trump's shallow narcissism and utter cluelessness about history and geopolitics, he may well have simply been treating this whole business as just another Miss Universe Pageant that the Russians could partner with him on. Which is, in itself, an astounding geostrategic state of affairs to ponder.

Historian Alfred McCoy points out the hard

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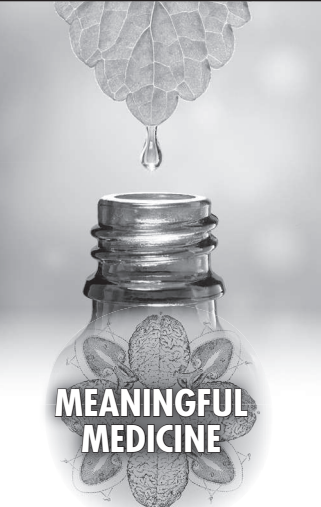
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