

Political Theater in Washington and the Russians

by Michael Curtis



The ongoing long running drama in political theater in the U.S. Congress depicting the story and fantasies of alleged relations and collusion between the presidential campaign team of Donald Trump and unnamed Russians bids fair to outlast any commercial offering on New York's Broadway.

The Congressional drama has everything: 50,000 missing (now found) text messages sent between two FBI agents, one the deputy head of counterintelligence and the other a lawyer, the two physically involved and both politically hostile to Trump, inexplicable problems and technical glitches with official mobile phones and software, puzzling softening of language by a FBI director, an alleged secret society with a political agenda within the FBI, a critical dossier written by a former British spy and funded by the opposition party, and talk of "extensive conspiracies with the Kremlin."

With little exaggeration, the Washington farce appears to be the counterpart of the British comedy *The Play that Goes Wrong*, with its unceasing mishaps, doors sticking, props

falling, characters missing cues or forgetting their lines.

We spectators wonder who the hero or the villain of the Washington drama will turn out to be at the revelation at the denouement of the drama. One candidate conspicuous for backing into the limelight is Adam B. Schiff, US Representative for California, 28th District. He has played an ardent role as top Democrat in the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence since March 2017. In this Winter's Tale he resembles a modern day "snapper up of unconsidered trifles."

Rep Schiff speaks with assurance that he possesses the truth. On December 10, 2017 he assured the rest of the cast in the drama that "The Russians offered help, the (Trump) campaign accepted help. The Russians gave help, and the President made full use of that help." The dialogue of this rather extravagant statement is less akin to normal parliamentary discussion than to Alice in Wonderland, "Sentence first-verdict afterward," or to the self-assurance of the amusing and bumbling French detective, Inspector Jacques Clouseau, the amusing and somewhat eccentric character played by Peter Sellers.

Irrespective of the arguments made by participants in the Congressional drama, one factor needs further development. On January 22, 2018 Attorney General Jeff Sessions responded to the issue of the 50,000 missing text messages. No stone will be left unturned to confirm why they are not available. "We will," he said, "use every technology available to determine whether the missing messages are recoverable from another source." And they were found.

Everyone inside and outside Washington will agree on the driving force of technology in search of the truth as for economic growth. No one doubts the resourcefulness of American business and technology, as every purchaser of the Apple iPhone X and iPads appreciates, and anticipates with the arrival of voice-activated speaker HomePod.

But it is worth considering the power and effectiveness of Russian technology in the Congressional drama of alleged attempts by Russia to influence the 2016 presidential election, any collusion between unnamed Russians and members of the Trump campaign team, charges of obstruction of justice, and the significance of undisclosed meetings, later remembered in tranquility, especially those meetings with the former Russian Ambassador, Sergei Kislyak, to the U.S.

This pause for thought is occasioned by the publication of two studies recently issued by academic and responsible organizations, one by the 2018 Bloomberg Innovation Index and the other by Cornell University's Insead business school and the World Intellectual Property Organization.

The 2018 Bloomberg Index, based on seven criteria including research and development spending, patent activity, and concentration of high-tech public companies, outlines the ranking of the world's most innovative countries. For the first time in the history of the Index the U.S. has dropped out of the top ten countries. Those countries in order are South Korea, Sweden, Singapore, Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Finland, Denmark, France, and Israel. It is relevant for the Washington inquiry into collusion between Russia and the Trump team that the U.S., which had been ninth in 2017, is now number 11, while Russia, the supposed architect of an extensive conspiracy is ranked number 25.

These declines in ranking of innovative development in the US and Russia suggest a decline in scientific education and in the proportion of science and engineering graduates in the labor force, and the need for more government funding for research, and for technological initiatives.

The second report, that may be helpful in assessing Washington activity is the 2017 Global Innovation Index, issued by the joint group, Cornell University's Insead business school and the World Intellectual Property Organization. The 2017 Index,

which focuses on innovation in agriculture and food systems, has different rankings from Bloomberg. It places Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, US and the UK as the most innovative countries, and shows a rise in other countries. India is an emerging innovation center in Asia, and nine of the countries are in the Sub-Saharan region. Russia is not listed in the 25 countries surveyed.

Ranking of countries obviously changes from year to year, depending on various factors: the amount of government research and development budgets; advances in industrial and agricultural technologies and innovations; breakthroughs in areas such as genetics and nano-and biotechnologies; progress in information technology; the use of sensors, drones, robots, and even virtual reality; the impact of globalization; multilateral trade agreements; the amount of protectionism; and political sensitivities that affect economic behavior.

We can therefore expect changes in the ranking of the U.S. and Russia from the innovative and development perspective. But at present, caution is desirable in assessing the innovative capacities of Russia.

Evidently Russia has been involved in the U.S. as elsewhere in financial deals, in property, and business enterprises, purchases of sports teams, money laundering, and attempts to overcome the Magnitsky Act, the 2012 law that bars Russian officials suspected of human rights abuses from entering the U.S.

It is also clear that Russia is playing a questionable and undesirable role in the civil war in Syria and may be held at least partly accountable for a chemical weapon attack in that war. Yet what is surprising, and relevant to the drama in DC are the reports on the relatively low level of innovation in Russia. The beginning of wisdom for Congress members eagerly searching to find collusion in the 2016 presidential election is to consider whether they have given Russia too much credit

for its technological advances.