

The Russia Insinuation Collapses

Trump wins again, but now faces policy challenges.

by Conrad Black



The ignominious collapse of the Democratic claims and insinuations that Donald Trump was improperly connected to the Russian government has de-escalated the Democrats' campaign against the president – from a frenzied assault seeking impeachment and removal for a cause to be named later, to guerrilla war. Russian collusion has vanished down the same deep hole as the charges of sexism, racism, and a will to autocracy. It is widely believed that press reports in the *New York Times* and other outlets accustomed to receiving and amplifying anti-Trump leaks from within the administration (a thoroughly illegal process), as well as an aside of Democratic representative Adam Schiff of California, to the effect that the House Intelligence Committee would want to know about the surveillance of the Republican campaign, confirm that there was such surveillance. Most intelligence-agency directors in

the latter Obama era have volunteered that there was no evidence of such collaboration. The impact of Trump's famous tweet accusing Obama of tapping his telephones has been substantially muted, as the Democrats have assisted in repurposing the whole matter from panting like the Hound of the Baskervilles after evidence of Trump-Putin collusion to detached curiosity about intelligence practices, as if these were conducted without, as has been claimed, the knowledge of President Obama and his entourage. If that were entirely clear, the Obama camp would probably be even more unctuous than it has been.

This has left the relays of performing and talking airheads on the Sunday news-comment shows and in sound bites on the Democratic news networks (all except Fox) with the task of executing a 180-degree turn in a very narrow space. Some have managed it better than others. The incessant mudslinging at the Trump family and entourage seems also to be subsiding, and even Hillary Clinton reproached the African-American self-professed comic who pitifully tried to give a lewd spin to a photograph of Kellyanne Conway sitting with her feet on a sofa in the Oval Office as she sent an e-mail on her cellphone.

The *New York Times*' weekly effort to festoon the Never Trump post-trauma effort with recondite historical conjurations has sputtered from David Brooks's contortion of the Enlightenment last week to Timothy Egan's comparison of Steve Bannon with Thomas Cromwell this week. Egan likened Bannon to Cromwell, who facilitated Henry VIII's apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church and martyrization of Thomas More and John Fisher. (Cromwell's undoing came when he championed the marriage of the unwed king – he had beheaded his wife, Anne Boleyn, on a false charge of adultery – to Anne of Cleves. Cromwell was attainted of treason and decapitated, as Anne Boleyn had been.) What Egan finds in this famous vignette of 16th-century British history of any relevance to the Trump administration is left to challenge the imagination of persevering readers.

The best I could come up with was that Egan wants us to believe that Trump is a Henrician personality, a capricious and tempestuous tyrant potentially also of 400 pounds, who beheads his wives (Melania beware).

It seems finally to be penetrating the minds of his more perfervid enemies that Trump will serve his term, and the hope for a quick destruction of his presidency by inciting the country, through their nasty parrots in the media, to believe that it had inadvertently, and through shabby manipulation of the electoral system with the collusion of the Kremlin, had foisted upon it government by Frankenstein, isn't making it. Given all that has happened, the hysteria over the migrant order, the whole farrago of Russian nonsense, this de-escalation has been another heavy defeat for Trump's enemies. He has been facing a media that is 90 percent hostile and invents more news than it fairly reports. The ninja vandals at Berkeley, the mobs at airports, the Golden Shower, and the disgraced mythmaker Brian Williams lecturing the president about failing to uphold the integrity of his office, while Mika Brzezinski, also on MSNBC, warbled incoherently about a menace to the security of the world – it has been a baptism by fire and defamation that have failed. The *Times* signaled the change of tactic when it advised its readers on March 11 to litigate against the administration and Trump personally. This won't work either, any more than has the "scorched earth" of obstructive questioning and amending that the Democratic minorities in the Congress have thrown at everything and every nominee the administration has brought forward.

The country is tired of it and whether it likes Trump or not, he is the president and deserves a chance. In the circumstances, his approval rating, in the mid 40s, is a levitation. Now we are entering a more civilized and traditional period where this president, who made extravagant promises in his campaign and since the election, and has an enabling congressional majority, has to deliver. He has done

well with a flurry of executive orders, and he is very engaged with the members of the Congress, having Ted Cruz, and others with whom he exchanged memorable acerbities when in pursuit of the Republican nomination, round for family visits. The *Times'* often humorous giggle-leader, Gail Collins, had the heebie-jeebies on Monday because Trump had met with an African-American Democratic congressman and expressed a determination to lower drug prices. She assured Congressman Elijah Cummings and other readers that this wasn't the real Trump, who is an ogre and a buffoon with a total attention deficit and a biological inability to be truthful.

The most entertaining episode of this new phase was the spectacle of Preet Bharara, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, who had been delighted to tell us that he would "consider" serving the new administration, spluttering with incredulous rage when asked to resign, and winning the Sally Yates prize for abrupt dismissals from high legal positions for March, when Trump effectively uttered the uplifting words: "You're fired." Bharara is the apogee of publicity-seeking abuse of his prosecutorial office, of the evils of trial by media and by the corruption of the plea bargain: the extortion of inculpatory perjury with threats of prosecution and a promise of immunity from prosecution no matter how mendacious the resulting testimony. Unfortunately, the flush and flabby lair of Big Law will doubtless embrace him cozily.

Now, at last, Trump will have to perform. The Ryan health-care bill cannot be the final product and Trump has hinted at that. Rand Paul has called for repeal before there is agreement on a replacement, a matrix for health-care disaster and political suicide. The increased competition among insurance companies should pass, and the tax credits are fine as long as the need is real and they are claimed only when needed. But better health care for those not covered by public or private plans and of modest or insufficient means is going to be costly, and

probably cannot be passed off entirely to the states with top-ups of Medicaid. Presumably, the president will demonstrate his capacity as a negotiator.

Everyone, presumably including Mr. Trump, knew this would not be easy, and everyone, presumably including Mr. Ryan, knows that the present bill won't do. The Democrats are rubbing their hands and ululating with joy as they have every day since the Trump candidacy was announced, except on Election Night. The president apparently believes that there is more political upside in non-coercion and lower cost and greater competition than there is downside in less-predictable care for the lowest economic rung. This is a hardball game and he is a hardball president.

With health care and the budget and the tax plan coming on its heels and related to it, we will see how well Donald Trump understands the art of the political deal, and whether the Democrats can go on pretending they are watching the destiny of Humpty Dumpty, or not. Trump has won every round so far. Finally, he will have his chance to make history, change the country, and reverse the decline of America. It's showtime.

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