

Former CIA chief: Trump is Russia's useful fool

By Michael V. Hayden November 3, 2016

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I know I'm not the first to notice this, but Donald Trump really does sound a lot like Vladimir Putin.

There has always been a sympathetic authoritarian chord between the Republican presidential nominee and the Russian president. Both are on record as admiring The Strong Leader. They've even complimented one another on the trait. Putin could have been humming along when Trump was claiming "I alone can fix it" during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention. Maybe he was.

Each seems to have a pretty conspiratorial view of the world, too. Putin comes by his naturally. He's a product of a KGB Marxist philosophy where "the other" — any other — is reflexively identified as hostile and created by immutable forces of history, something to be feared and ultimately crushed.

Trump seems to view business a bit that way. At least I don't recall a lot of win-win vocabulary when he touts his dealmaking skills.

At the political level, Trump sees quite a few powerful "others" in the American electoral process: a corrupt media, international banks, unrestricted immigrants, a variety of globalists, free-traders and (at least some) Muslims. It's a list Putin could second or, in some cases, jail or worse.

Sounding simultaneously populist and a little bit the conspiratorial Marxist, Trump has claimed that these unseen forces could rig the U.S. election. It's a theme that Putin is happy to echo. Indeed, it's a theme that his intelligence services are happy to actively propagate.

And in that case, the American presidential candidate routinely comes to the defense of his Russian soul mate. In the face of a high-confidence judgment of the U.S. intelligence community that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and then weaponized embarrassing emails to sow confusion here, the man who would be president has declared: "Our country has

no idea,” “I don’t think anybody knows it was Russia that broke into the DNC. . . . It could also be lots of other people” and “They always blame Russia.”

Rejecting a fact-based intelligence assessment — not because of compelling contrarian data, but because it is inconsistent with a preexisting worldview — that’s the stuff of ideological authoritarianism, not pragmatic democracy. And it is frightening.

Trump also echoes Putin when it comes to Syria and the Islamic State, or ISIS. Here he follows the Moscow line that we and the Russians have common purpose and that Russia and Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad (and Iran) are “killing ISIS.”

Actually, they are not. They are bucking up the Assad regime that, if anyone is keeping score, has killed more innocents than the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate, have combined. And the attractiveness of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to Sunni Muslims is a direct byproduct of the depredations of the Assad regime — the regime that Russia saved from collapse a year ago.

It’s a little complicated, I suppose, but not so hard that it explains or justifies the willful ignorance that Trump seems to display. His second debate formulation — “I don’t like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS” — is precisely the formulation that the Syrian president has been attempting to craft. “It’s me or the terrorists” has been his false dilemma. It’s hard to explain how the candidate of a major American political party could have gotten there, especially after receiving classified intelligence briefings.

Perhaps some of this is explained by the murky ties of some on team Trump to things Russian. There is certainly a history there, and perhaps a comfort level as well.

Former campaign manager Paul Manafort did consulting work for the now-discredited but decidedly pro-Russian regime of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, and recent revelations in Kiev have stoked questions about whether Manafort should have registered here as working on behalf of a foreign power.

Manafort denies any role in July’s successful effort to suppress a Republican platform pledge to provide lethal defensive weapons to the Ukrainians in their continuing battle against separatists and the Russian army. Although it’s clear that the suppression was initiated by Trump staffers, Trump has denied any personal responsibility for it. The whole episode was too quickly forgotten; it begs explanation.

Then there’s Carter Page, an adviser with intermittent contacts with the campaign, but with deep ties to Russian money, oil and gas, who has blamed aggressive Western policies for the mess in the Ukraine and what he describes as the “so-called annexation of Crimea.” So-called?

And what about the money? Although Trump has said, “I have zero investments in Russia,” his son Donald Jr. conceded in 2008 that “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets . . . we see a lot of money pouring in from Russia.” Absent more detailed data (such as tax returns), who knows?

We have really never seen anything like this. Former acting CIA director [Michael Morell](#) says that Putin has cleverly recruited Trump as an unwitting agent of the Russian Federation.

I'd prefer another term drawn from the arcana of the Soviet era: polezni durak. That's the useful fool, some naif, manipulated by Moscow, secretly held in contempt, but whose blind support is happily accepted and exploited.

That's a pretty harsh term, and Trump supporters will no doubt be offended. But, frankly, it's the most benign interpretation of all this that I can come up with right now.

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