

For several years now, we have heard about Information Warfare, a new way of fighting enemy countries. This method is as much of an "equalizer" as was the invention of firearms in the late middle age, which gave even a weak man lethality equivalent to a talented swordsman. Keen observers have always warned us that great new inventions can have terrible consequences. Although it is wonderful to have information so available to everyone, regardless of power and wealth, it is not wonderful to have lies and deception used to harm our institutions.

The information revolution spews out so much information, much of it planted by unknowable opinion manipulators, that it overwhelms the public. Many people have lost track of reliable sources (formerly three major TV stations and honorable newspapers of record), leaving the unwary with planted "alternate" truths. There are alternate opinions, but not alternate truths. Internet conspiracy theories are dangerous in a democracy that depends upon informed voters. Our divisions make us patsies.

Russia, our Cold War foe, is much reduced today since the fall of their Communist Empire. They resent and blame us, and their current strongman, Vladimir Putin, has found a way to do something about it. He has made use of the new "equalizer," the computer, to aid in his long-term mandate: to make Western Liberal Democracies (rule of law and separation of powers) disintegrate from within. Our very freedoms can make us vulnerable to an attack of this sort---in the short term. We were equally vulnerable and divided before the Japanese attack in 1941; the same before Militant Islam attacked us on 9-11, 2001. The Nazis and Japanese did not win, however, nor can our medieval Islamist enemy. But Russia, even in its weakness, is giving it a try.

The Russian plot: They have used modern social media to exploit weaknesses and divisions in elections in France, Germany, and now the United States, disseminating fraudulent attacks on the candidates or issues they want voters to reject. They failed in France and so far in Germany, but in the UK, they planted a campaign for exit from the European Union. Voters never knew that was a Russian clandestine campaign, and now, too late, the British have regrets. With Russian mischief, Poland and Hungary are once again neo-fascist dictatorships.

The American Election: They sent 13 Russian agents to fan out across the country collecting election data, hiring unwitting Americans as dupes to organize rallies for their chosen candidate, Donald Trump. Actors were hired to attend rowdy Trump rallies, dressed in prison stripes and in cages, demonstrating "lock her up" about Hillary Clinton.

Posing as Americans, they purloined social security numbers, bank accounts, and purchased Facebook space to run fraudulent ads. They played upon every American frailty: our racial divide, our rural/urban differences, and our propensity to spread conspiracy theories that the gullible are ready to believe. They also stoked our history of misogyny, distrust of women with power, and the resentment against educated "elites" by the less educated and shrinking White male population. And finally, they took advantage of our decency. President Obama and the Intelligence Community were reluctant to appear to interfere in the election by loudly broadcasting the alarm.

The Outcome That Putin Wanted: He detested Hillary Clinton because she interfered with his armed attempts to re-conquer Ukraine. He hated her more than he loved Trump, but he expected Trump to carry out Russia's two main goals: remove the sanctions we imposed for its bad behavior and withdraw America from the global order. So far, our protective institutions: intelligence agencies, vigilant legislators, and the press, have thwarted the first goal, but not the second.

The indictment of the Russian agents by name shows how good our Intelligence is. But parts two and three of Mueller's investigation are yet to come. Is Putin blackmailing our president about money laundering? What is the role of collusion, and can Putin corrupt the next election? Hacking voting machines is less a danger than manipulating greedy or gullible minds, which they did this time. We are indeed at war!

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