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Is There Money Behind the Trump-Putin Love Affair?

A Commentary for Montana Cowgirl
By Evan Barrett
December 31, 2016

As the CIA and seventeen intelligence agencies and the FBI have determined to a high level of confidence that Russia used hacking and leaking to interfere with our recent Presidential election – effectively interfering with the functioning of our democracy – Donald Trump maintains a stance of denial.

Since the Obama Administration alerted the American people of this intervention back in July, what have we heard from President-elect Trump? Nothing but praise for Putin and denial of the Russian actions.

In the September 26 presidential debate – – Trump said:

> "I don't think anybody knows if it's Russia that broke into the DNC. She says Russia, Russia, Russia, but I don't. Maybe it was. I mean it could be Russia, but it could also be China, it could also be lots of other people. It also could be somebody sitting on their bed that weighs 400 pounds, OK? You don't know who broke into DNC."

In the October 9 debate, Donald Trump said:

> "I notice anytime anything wrong happens they like to say the Russians. She doesn't know it's the Russians doing the hacking. Maybe there is no hacking but they always blame Russia. And the reason they blame Russia because they think they are trying to tarnish me with Russia."

On Fox News Sunday on December 11, after being elected, the following exchange with Chris Wallace took place:

> Wallace" "The CIA has concluded that Russia intervened in the election to help you win the presidency. Your reaction?"
> Trump: "I think it's ridiculous. I think it's just another excuse. I don't believe it. I don't know why and I think it's just, you know, they talked about all sorts of things. Every week it's another excuse …No I don't believe that at all …Nobody really knows. And hacking is very interesting. Once they hack, if you don't catch them in the act you're not going to catch them. They have no idea if it's Russia or China or somebody. It could be somebody sitting on the edge of a bed someplace."

Just the other day, on December 28th at Mar-a-Lago alongside boxing promoter Don King, the following exchange:

> Reporter: "What do you think generally about the sanctions against Russia?"
> Trump response: "I think we ought to get on with our lives. I think the computers have complicated lives very greatly. Our age of computer has made it where nobody knows exactly what is going on."

As sanctions are being imposed by the Obama Administration, as even strong Republicans in Congress are calling for a bi-partisan investigation and for even stronger sanctions against Russia, Trump adheres to his denial, his low level of concern (he'll bother to take a briefing on it in a week), and his bromance with Vladimir Putin.

What is behind this willful ignorance? Is it “strategic ignorance” as coined by legal specialist Ari Melber of MSNBC? Or is there something more?

With Donald Trump, it is a safe bet that the way to understand his actions (other than understanding his Narcissistic Personality Disorder) is to “follow the money,” as purportedly stated by “Deep Throat” during the Nixon Watergate affair that led to Nixon’s impeachment. Facts about Trump’s finances and how they relate to Russia, Russian oligarchs and Putin are shrouded in secrecy. But they might well be about money which might emerge if Trump released his tax returns as all previous presidential candidates over the last 4 decades have.

By the way, you do remember that he promised his tax returns would be released as he continued to give a bundle of excuses. Here’s betting they never will be released. And that may not be because they would reveal Trump’s non-payment of taxes or his misuse and misrepresentations related to his so-called charitable foundation. The refusal might be tied to the financial relationship Trump appears to have with Russia.

While Trump “trumpets” in his books about coming out of bankruptcies and big losses, it is a fact that all major US banks have effectively black-balled Trump. The exception is Deutsche Bank, which is really a German bank with a strong US presence. So Trump cannot get much financing in the US. Where does he go for money?

Listen to the words of Donald Trump, Jr. at a real estate conference in 2008:

> “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets. We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia.”

If we can believe his son’s words, Trump may well be financially beholding to Russian oligarchs. In 2013 he staged the Miss Universe pageant in Moscow, sponsored by big money from a Russian oligarch. Afterward Trump bragged “Almost all of the oligarchs were in the room.”

And if you know anything about Russia, you know that the Russian oligarchs are oligarchs only with the friendship and approval of Vladimir Putin as they have been instrumental in helping Putin acquire the billions upon billions that he has amassed in hidden accounts around the world.

So it is a reasonable question to ask if Trump is financially beholding to Putin, the oligarchs and Russia. Perhaps that would explain his singular reluctance to express any outrage at what the Russians have tried to do to our elections and our democracy. Without Trump’s tax returns, it is hard to nail this down, but it is reasonable to be suspicious. Here’s hoping against hope that those tax returns will eventually be made public.

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Evan Barrett of Butte, will soon be retiring after 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He currently writes columns and commentaries, is an award-winning producer of Montana history films at Montana Tech/Highlands College and occasionally teaches. These are his personal views.