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Taibbi: On Russiagate and Our Refusal to Face Why Trump Won

Faulty coverage of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign later made foreign espionage a more plausible explanation for his ascent to power

By **MATT TAIBBI**



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump greets supporters after his rally at Ladd-Peebles Stadium on August 21, 2015 in Mobile, Alabama. The Trump campaign moved tonight's rally to a larger stadium to accommodate demand.

Mark Wallheiser/Getty Images

Last weekend, I published a **book chapter** criticizing the Russiagate narrative, claiming it was a years-long press error on the scale of the WMD affair heading into the Iraq war.

Obviously (and I said this in detail), the WMD fiasco had a far greater real-world impact, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost and trillions in treasure wasted. Still, I thought Russiagate would do more to damage the reputation of the national news media in the end.

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report to Congress, containing a quote from Special Counsel **ROBERT MUELLER**. “[T]he investigation did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities.”

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Suddenly, news articles appeared arguing people like myself and Glenn Greenwald of the *Intercept* were **rushing to judgment**, calling us bullies whose writings were intended to leave reporters “cowed” and likely to “**back down from aggressive coverage of Trump.**”

This was baffling. One of the most common criticisms of people like Greenwald, Michael Tracey, Aaron Mate, Rania Khalek, Max Blumenthal, Jordan Chariton and many others is that Russiagate “skeptics” — I hate that term, because it implies skepticism isn’t normal and healthy in this job — were really secret Trump partisans, part of a “horseshoe” pact between far

left and far right to focus attention on the minor foibles of the center instead of Trump’s more serious misdeeds. Even I received this label, and I once wrote a book about Trump called *Insane Clown President*.

A typical social media complaint:

@mtaibbi and all his deplorable followers. The truth will come out and your premature celebrations are embarrassing.

It’s irritating that I even have to address this, because my personal political views shouldn’t have anything to do with how I cover anything. But just to get it out of the way: I’m no fan of **Donald Trump**.

I had a well-developed opinion about him long before the 2016 race started. I once interned for Trump’s nemesis-biographer, the **late, great muckraker Wayne Barrett**. The **birther campaign** of 2011 was all I ever needed to make a voting decision about the man.

I started covering the last presidential race in 2015 just as I was finishing up a book about the death of Eric Garner called **I Can’t Breathe**. Noting that a birther campaign started by “peripheral political curiosity and reality TV star Donald Trump” led to 41 percent of respondents in one poll believing Barack Obama was “not even American,” I

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If anyone could communicate the frustration black Americans felt over Stop-and-Frisk and other neo-vagrancy laws that made black people feel like they could be arrested anywhere, it should have been Barack Obama. He'd made it all the way to the White House and was still considered to be literally trespassing by a huge plurality of the population.

So I had no illusions about Trump. The **Russia** story bothered me for other reasons, mostly having to do with a general sense of the public being misled, and not even about Russia.

The problem lay with the precursor tale to Russiagate, i.e. how Trump even got to be president in the first place.

The 2016 campaign season brought to the surface awesome levels of political discontent. After the election, instead of wondering where that anger came from, most of the press quickly pivoted to a new tale about a Russian plot to attack our Democracy. This conveyed the impression that the election season we'd just lived through had been an aberration, thrown off the rails by an extraordinary espionage conspiracy between Trump and a cabal of evil foreigners.

This narrative contradicted everything I'd seen traveling across America in my two years of covering the campaign. The overwhelming theme of that race, long before anyone even thought about Russia, was voter rage at the entire political system.

The anger wasn't just on the Republican side, where Trump humiliated the Republicans' chosen **\$150 million contender**, Jeb Bush (who got three delegates, or **\$50 million per delegate**). It was also evident on the Democratic side, where a self-proclaimed "Democratic Socialist" with little money and close to no institutional support became **a surprise contender**.

Because of a series of press misdiagnoses before the Russiagate stories even began, much of the American public was unprepared for news of a Trump win. A cloak-and-dagger election-fixing conspiracy therefore seemed more likely than it might have otherwise to large parts of the domestic news audience, because they hadn't been prepared for anything else that would make sense.

This was particularly true of upscale, urban, blue-leaning news consumers, who were not told to take the possibility of a Trump White House seriously.

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the White House should have been a long period of ruthless self-examination. This story delayed that for at least two years.

It wasn't even clear Trump wanted to win. Watching him on the trail, Trump at times went beyond seeming disinterested. There were periods where it looked like *South Park's* “**Did I offend you?**” thesis was true, and he was actively trying to lose, only the polls just wouldn't let him.

Forget about the gift the end of Russiagate might give Trump by allowing him to spend 2020 peeing from a great height on the national press corps. The more serious issue has to be the failure to face the reality of why he won last time, because we still haven't done that.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Trump meet in Helsinki.

In the fall of 2015, when I first started covering Trump's campaign, a few themes popped up:

First, like any good hustler, Trump knew how to work a room. At times, he recalled a comedian trying out new material. If he felt a murmur in the crowd in one speech, he'd hit it harder the next time out.



what seemed like more planned shots at **nation building** or overseas was that left us **not broke**” and unable to build schools at home.

These themes seemed to come from feeling out audiences and noting these lines were scoring with veterans in his crowds. (Studies have since shown Trump did well in **areas with returning vets**).

As time went on, he made the traveling press part of his act. The standard campaign setup was perfect for him. We were like zoo animals, standing on risers with ropes around us to keep the un-credentialed masses out.

Even that small symbol of VIP-ism Trump turned to his advantage. Behind the ropes we were what national campaign reporters mostly always are: dorky blue-staters with liberal arts degrees from expensive colleges dressed in gingham and khaki, and looking out of place basically anywhere on earth outside a trendy city block or a Starbucks.

Trump, the billionaire, denounced us as the elitists in the room. He'd call us “bloodsuckers,” “dishonest,” and in one line that produced laughs considering who was saying it, “**highly-paid.**”

He also did something that I immediately recognized as brilliant (or diabolical, depending on how you look at it). He dared cameramen to turn their cameras to show the size of his crowds.

They usually wouldn't – hey, we don't work for the guy – which thrilled Trump, who would then say something to the effect of, “See! They're **very dishonest people.**” Audiences would turn toward us, and boo and hiss, and even throw little bits of paper and other things our way. This was unpleasant, but it was hard not to see its effectiveness: he'd re-imagined the lifeless, poll-tested format of the stump speech, turning it into menacing, personal, WWE-style theater.

Trump was gunning for votes in both parties. The core story he told on the stump was one of system-wide corruption, in which there was little difference between Republicans and Democrats.

He destroyed Jeb Bush by caricaturizing him as a captive of corporate interests (noting, for instance, that Pharma bigwig **Woody Johnson was Jeb's finance chair**), then used the exact same tactic on Hillary Clinton. He often mentioned them together.



(here he put on a Thurston Howler III aristocrat voice) I don't like Donald Trump's tone.

This was right after claiming Hillary Clinton said the exact same thing. In the same mock-aristocrat voice, he'd done a Hillary impersonation: **"I don't like Donald Trump's tone."**

The message was clear: Jeb and Hillary were the same political animal, snobs and elite phonies. This dovetailed with his general pitch, which claimed most Americans were struggling because both parties were feeding from the same campaign-finance teat, pimping themselves out to huge job-exporting corporate donors. Which, let's face it, is more than a little true. Less obviously true was his solution, putting a blabbermouth reality star in charge of fixing it all. But the pitch was scoring for a reason.

Like a con man who can lift a wallet in the middle of a melee, Trump thrived amid the chaos. He drank in the condemnation when he denounced McCain for being "captured," or when he doubled down on absurd claims he'd seen Muslims dancing in New Jersey after 9/11.

Most politicians come crawling to the press begging forgiveness after they say dumb things. Trump did the opposite and went on the offensive. It took a while to grasp that what he was really selling was the image of an outraged political establishment. He wanted his voters to see how much he was getting to "us."

Perhaps just by luck, Trump was tuned in to the fact that the triumvirate of ruling political powers in America – the two parties, the big donors and the press – were so unpopular with large parts of the population that he could win in the long haul by attracting their ire, even if he was losing battles on the way.

If Trump insulted an innocent person like *Times* reporter Serge Kovaleski, who is disabled, his goal wasn't to try to win a popularity contest. He was after the thing that always came next: the endless "scornful rebukes" from press and celebrities. These rituals always went on just a bit too long, to the point where it was clear both Trump and the media were milking the incidents for publicity.

Trump would push right up until he caught the press having too much fun with something outrageous he'd done (the *Washington Post* running **"Donald Trump's 'Schlonged': A linguistic investigation"** was an infamous example), at which point he'd declare victory and move on to the next outrage.



when they're making money off my lawsuit.

I thought this was all nuts and couldn't believe it was happening in a real presidential campaign. But, a job is a job. My first feature on candidate Trump was called "**How America Made Donald Trump Unstoppable.**" The key section read:

In person, you can't miss it: The same way Sarah Palin can see Russia from her house, Donald on the stump can see his future. The pundits don't want to admit it, but it's sitting there in plain view, 12 moves ahead, like a chess game already won:

President Donald Trump...

It turns out we let our electoral process devolve into something so fake and dysfunctional that any half-bright con man with the stones to try it could walk right through the front door and tear it to shreds on the first go.

And Trump is no half-bright con man, either. He's way better than average.



MOBILE, AL- AUGUST 21: U.S. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump takes the stage at Ladd-Peebles Stadium on August 21, 2015 in Mobile, Alabama. The Donald Trum

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Traditional Democratic audiences appeared thrilled by the piece and shared it widely. I was invited on scads of cable shows to discuss *ad nauseum* the “con man” line.

This made me nervous, because it probably meant these people hadn’t read the piece, which among other things posited the failures of America’s current ruling class meant Trump’s insane tactics could actually work.

Trump was selling himself as a traitor to a corrupt class, someone who knew how soulless and greedy the ruling elite was because he was one of them.

His story of **essentially buying the attendance of the Clintons** at his wedding – no matter what you think of it – resonated powerfully with voters. He sneered at Hillary as the worst kind of aristocrat, a member of a family with title and no money. She and Bill were second-tier gentry, the kind who had to work, and what work! Hillary was giving speeches to firms like Goldman Sachs for amounts of money Trump would probably say he spent on airplane snacks (even if it were a lie).

He claimed **Goldman “owned her.”** Having watched Trump wipe out Jeb using similar arguments, I thought a race against Hillary Clinton, who was running on her decades of experience residing in hated Washington, “would be a pitch right in Trump’s wheelhouse.”

Trump’s chances increased when pundits ignored polls and insisted he had no shot at the nomination. The universality of this take reeked of the same kind of single-track, orthodox official-think that later plagued the Russia story.

Nate Silver, the ex-baseball stats guru and renowned “National Oracle™” (as **Gizmodo cheekily called him**), laughed at Trump’s chances^[1].

His site, *FiveThirtyEight*, ran a **story** called “Why Donald Trump Isn’t a Real Candidate, In One Chart.” The piece said Trump was more likely to “play in the NBA finals” or **cameo in another *Home Alone* movie** than win the nomination.

Dana Milbank in the *Washington Post*: “I’m so certain Trump won’t win the nomination that I’ll eat my words if he does. Literally.” Milbank ended up actually doing this, for which he **deserves a lot of credit.**



soon be writing **Trump might have been recruited by the RCB in 1997.**

It isn't just that wizards of prognostication were wrong. The bigger issue was why they were so confident. A common take was the political establishment just wouldn't allow it.

Former "The Note" writer Mark Halperin used to talk about having his finger on the pulse of the "**Gang of 500**," which he described as "campaign consultants, strategists, pollsters, pundits and journalists who make up the modern-day political establishment." The subtext of Halperin's pieces was that the Gang of 500 decided elections.

It's hard to understand how it never occurred to Halperin or anyone else that people might be grossed out by the concept of 500 self-appointed guardians of democracy deciding the presidency for 300 million people.

In this case, just by saying out loud the idea that the people who mattered would never let Trump win, probably helped Trump win. It validated his talk about "elites."

Nate Cohn of *The New York Times* wrote Trump had "**just about no shot** of winning the nomination no matter how well he is doing in the early polls." He prefaced this by saying it is "the party elites who traditionally decide nomination contests."

When Trump defied these predictions and sealed up the Republican nomination, he immediately became subject to a new legend, about how he was destined to be the biggest landslide loser in history of general elections: bigger than Alf Landon or even George McGovern, whose very name in America is synonymous with "loser."

Here are some takes on Trump's campaign *after* he sealed up the nomination:

David Brooks: Trump will be the "**biggest loser**" in American politics.

The Week: "Trump is poised to lose the **biggest landslide** in modern American history."

George **Will**: "Donald Trump may find a place in history – by losing just that badly."

I belong on this infamous list myself. In one of the worst mistakes of my career, I ended up changing my mind about "free-falling" Trump's chances, spending the stretch was predicting

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Trump would already be president-elect before he was taken seriously as an electoral phenomenon. Right up until the networks called Florida for him on election night, few major American media figures outside **of Michael Moore** – who incidentally was also **right about WMDs and ridiculed for it** – believed a Trump win possible.

The only reason most blue-state media audiences had been given for Trump's poll numbers all along was racism, which was surely part of the story but not the whole picture. A lack of any other explanation meant Democratic audiences, after the shock of election night, were ready to reach for any other data point that might better explain what just happened.

Russiagate became a convenient replacement explanation absolving an incompetent political establishment for its complicity in what happened in 2016, and not just the failure to see it coming. Because of the immediate arrival of the collusion theory, neither Wolf Blitzer nor any politician ever had to look into the camera and say, "I guess people hated us so much they were even willing to vote for Donald Trump."

Post-election, Russiagate made it all worse. People could turn on their TVs at any hour of the day and see anyone from Rachel Maddow to Chris Cuomo openly reveling in Trump's troubles. This is what *Fox* looks like to liberal audiences.

Worse, the "walls are closing in" theme – two years old now – was just a continuation of the campaign mistake, reporters confusing what they wanted to happen with what was happening. The story was always more complicated than was being represented.

It still is, which is important to note as we wait for the final release of the Mueller report, which incidentally also won't be the last word on what happened in the last few years.

There are a lot of mysteries left with this affair, and none of them will be cleared up anytime soon. We still don't even understand the beginning of this story.

[1] *I noted this previously, in my book *Hate Inc.**

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