

# A Double Standard?

*By Marc Trachtenberg*

The American political class has been working itself into a lather over the hacking of a number of email accounts affiliated with the Democratic Party, evidently by Russian intelligence, and the subsequent leaking of information from those emails during the recent presidential election campaign. Those leaks, it is said, hurt Hillary Clinton and might well have cost her the election.

The prevailing view is that what the Russians did was intolerable — that what we had here was an outrageous intrusion by a foreign power into our internal democratic political process. You don't hear much nowadays about transparency and the "public's right to know." What is emphasized instead is the threat to American democracy posed by those Russian actions. What nerve the Russians had even trying to hack into the private communications of American political leaders! What nerve they had trying to influence our presidential election!

But isn't there a bit of a double standard at work here? The complainers certainly know that the U.S. government eavesdrops, as a matter of course, on the private communications of many people around the world. The National Security Agency NSA, whose job it is to do this kind of eavesdropping, has a budget of about \$10 billion, and, according to an article that came out in the *Washington Post* a few years ago, intercepts and stores "1.7 billion e-mails, phone calls and other types of communications" every day.

The NSA has scored some extraordinary successes over the years. At one point during the Cold War, a recently declassified history of the NSA tells us, a U.S. intercept operation operating out of the American Embassy in Moscow "was collecting and exploiting the private car phone communications of Politburo leaders." As Bob Woodward noted in 1987, "elite CIA and National Security Agency teams," called "Special Collection Elements," could "perform espionage miracles, delivering verbatim transcripts from high-level foreign-government meetings in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and phone conversations between key politicians." And the U.S. government was not just spying on enemies and terrorists. It was, and presumably still is, very interested in what the leaders of friendly countries are saying to one another. In 1973, for example, Arthur Burns,

then chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, noted in his diary that the U.S. government apparently knew “everything that goes on at German cabinet meetings.”

Should we be outraged by any of this? This sort of spying, when we do it, is widely accepted. I doubt whether there is a single member of the U.S. national security establishment who would like to go back to the days when “gentlemen did not read each other’s mail.” But if we’re going to eavesdrop on other countries, we shouldn’t be too surprised — let alone indignant — when other countries do it to us.

In the present case, however, it is not just the hacking that people object to. It is the fact that this information was used to influence our election. But here, too, a certain double standard is at work. Since 1945, America has intervened in the internal political affairs of other countries as a matter of course. Our basic attitude has been that free elections are great — as long as they don’t produce outcomes the U.S. government doesn’t like. Many of these episodes — Indochina, Congo, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and so on — are quite well-known. Other cases — like Guyana, where the Kennedy administration put heavy pressure on the British to prevent Cheddi Jagan from coming to power through the democratic process — are less familiar. The practice was more common during the Cold War than people realize.

Indeed, the United States felt free to intervene, sometimes massively, in the internal political affairs of our democratic allies. To be sure, most people are vaguely aware of the fact that such interventions were common in the late 1940s. To cite but one example: The U.S. ambassador in Paris, according to his diary, told the French prime minister in 1947, “no Communists in gov. or else.” But even after the situation in Western Europe had stabilized, direct intervention was by no means out of the question if the stakes were high enough. The Eisenhower administration, for example, made it clear to the German people how it wanted them to vote in their 1953 elections; That intervention, according to German political scientists who studied this issue closely, resulted in a landslide victory for the conservative Konrad Adenauer government. A decade later, however, after the Americans had soured on Adenauer, the U.S. government played a leading role in driving him from power — an extraordinary episode that, even today, few people on either side of the Atlantic know much about.

None of this should be dismissed as ancient history. The habits that were formed during the Cold War period remain very much intact.

The U.S. government still feels it has the right to influence the outcomes of elections in other countries. Everyone remembers how President Barack Obama warned the British, just before the Brexit vote, that if they chose to leave the European Union, they would be “in the back of the queue” when it came to making trade deals with the United States. Perhaps Obama was just warning British voters about the inevitable consequences and not making an explicit (if subdued) threat; but in either case he was actively trying to influence the outcome of the referendum itself.

But the less well-known case of America’s involvement in Ukrainian politics is far more revealing. In 2014, Victoria Nuland, a high State Department official, was taped, presumably by Russian intelligence, talking with the U.S. ambassador in Kiev, Geoffrey Pyatt. The tape of that intercepted phone conversation was soon posted on *YouTube*. It was clear that Nuland and Pyatt had strong feelings about who should be running things in Ukraine. It was also clear that the United States (to use Pyatt’s term) had a “scenario” for bringing about the political changes that were to its liking. As the *Washington Post* put it, they spoke “like political strategists, or perhaps like party bosses in a smoky backroom. Using shorthand and nicknames, they game out what they would like to see opposition figures do and say, and discuss how best to influence some opposition decision-making.” None of this was considered out of bounds, and the Nuland affair did not even get much attention at the time. Nuland was certainly not fired from her job. The finger was instead pointed at the Russians for having had the audacity to listen in on and then leak that phone conversation in the first place.

The assumption is that while we have the right to intervene in the internal political affairs of all kinds of countries around the world, it is outrageous if any of them try to do the same thing to us. We have the right to eavesdrop on the private communications of the leaders of foreign countries, but it is outrageous that they should try to hack into the email accounts of American leaders and their associates. America is the “indispensable nation,” and the rules that apply to other countries simply do not apply to us. Those are the unspoken

assumptions, and it's not hard to imagine how foreigners react to the sort of behavior they lead to. Does the word "arrogant" come to mind here?

My own feeling is that a double standard of this sort is morally repulsive and politically counterproductive. I don't think we should arrogate to ourselves rights that we would not grant to others. But what that means is that, given the way we behave, we should not get too upset if other countries behave the same way. If we approach the recent email hacking affair with those thoughts in mind, we should be able to take what the Russians did in stride. It was in line with the way the world works — a world that is in large part of our own making.

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<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/10/stealing-elections-is-all-in-the-game-russia-trump/>

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