
Sunday 12 August 2018

**President Trump's relationship with Putin's Russia is 'the biggest scandal since Watergate,' says
investigative journalist Luke Harding at Edinburgh International Book Festival**

Russian intelligence's influence on the election of Donald Trump is "definitely the biggest scandal since Watergate", according to veteran Guardian journalist and author Luke Harding. "I think it out-Watergates Watergate."

Harding, the paper's Moscow bureau chief until he was expelled by the Kremlin in 2011, was speaking with radio producer and podcaster Joe Haddow at a sold-out event at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival.

Harding was attending the festival to promote his new book *Collusion: How Russia Helped Trump Win The Whitehouse*, a non-fiction thriller including dirty money, sketchy property deals, a Miss Universe Pageant, money laundering, hacking, and Kremlin espionage.

"We now know that Russia mounted a sophisticated, multi-layer espionage operation to try and influence the [American] election and to help Donald Trump and hurt Hilary Clinton, involving cyber-hacking, trade craft, and oligarch intermediaries getting close to Trump's campaign," he said. "What I wanted to explain [in the book] was that there was nothing new in this, that actually the KGB has long been in the business of trying to subvert Western democracies, and to pick favourites who they think will damage and destabilise their enemies."

While arguing that Trump's personality made him the KGB's dream candidate - "he was malleable, not a deep thinker; he was greedy, he was exploitable" - Harding believes even they didn't seriously consider he could become President. "I think he was fantastically underestimated, by the American intelligence community, by his political opponents, by British analysts and the British Government and also by Russia,"

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he explained. “They identified him as the candidate who would essentially discredit American democracy, who would undermine it from within, who would be an accelerant, throw petrol on America’s ethnic problems, psychological problems, political problems.

“Indeed, I think the way it was conceptualised in Moscow was that Hilary Clinton would win the election, we would have America’s first woman president, but Donald Trump would be a permanent stone in her shoe. So from Day One, he would be on Fox News saying ‘That woman cheated, the election wasn’t fair’. Russian trolls had already prepared a Twitter hashtag, ‘#democracyRIP’, they were planning to unleash as soon as Hilary won. From the very beginning Hilary would be this weakened figure because of this internal strife, of which Donald Trump would be the figurehead.

“That was the game plan. It was quite a good game plan. I think it would have happened. Trump himself said he wouldn’t necessarily recognise the legitimacy of the election. And then, of course, he won.”

Responding to an audience question, Harding also suggested there may have been Russian involvement during the Brexit Referendum. “Russia and the Kremlin wanted Brexit because their calculation was quite simple. Brexit would weaken the UK, both politically and economically; it would diminish it as an international entity, it would estrange it from its European allies, and make us poorer and less influential. Russia has always seen the UK as - if America is the big dog - the small dog that runs alongside, as a serious strategic adversary.”

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