

Don't Call Washington A Swamp Call It a Potemkin Village

by Marc Epstein



“Deep State Swamp” by Ben Garrison

“Drain the swamp” along with “Lock her up” were the two most memorable slogans of the Trump campaign. “Lock her up” vanished with Hillary Clinton’s defeat, but the ratcheting up of the ongoing investigation into Russian collusion with the members of the Trump campaign has put the Washington Swamp front and center.

When Special Counsel Robert Mueller staffed up his operation with a passel of high-powered DC scalp-hunters, many of whom were Clinton supporters, with the grant of an open-ended mandate and a budgetary blank check, the sense of foreboding among Trump supporters was palpable. Hence the swamp.

The image of a swamp infested by “Deep State” operatives slithering their way through a multiplicity of intelligence agencies, while they excrete venomous leaks, preoccupies the minds of Trump’s supporters who inhabit fly-over America. The swamp creatures’ intentions are barely cloaked, as they attempt to unhorse a duly elected sitting president.

But I’d argue that calling Washington DC a swamp does a disservice to swamps. According to National Geographic, the swamp between the Tigris and Euphrates, the birthplace of civilization, is named the “fertile crescent” because it is “so rich in biodiversity,” a diversity that made civilization possible. And Webster’s Second International notes that swamps are “characteristically dominated by trees and shrubs,” not venom.

That is why currently the federal government is in the midst of 30-year Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) that will cost close to \$10 billion dollars when it’s completed. The project exists precisely because the Everglades were shrinking.

Who among us wants to see the Everglades disappear?

Since Russia occupies center stage, for my money a more accurate, and far more insidious description of Washington DC’s current condition isn’t the swamp, it’s the Potemkin village – in reverse. It fools the ruled not the rulers.

Prince Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin-Tavrisheski, served Catherine the Great, variously as Major General of Cavalry, President of the War College, Governor General of the southern provinces, Field Marshall, lover, and according to Simon Sebag Montefiore, most probably her husband too.

But he is best remembered for the villages that bear his name. It was purported that he created movie set –like villages stocked with his extras posing as happy peasants inhabiting new façade houses to please Catherine when she undertook a

grand tour of the newly acquired Crimea in 1787.

While it's unlikely that such villages were ever constructed, the Potemkin village metaphor signifying a ruse that deludes those in power into thinking that everything is just hunky-dory throughout the land stuck.

Ever since grade school we've been taught the bureaucracy is staffed by means of a non-partisan merit based examination system. This bureaucracy executes policy regardless of which party occupies the White House, or holds the majority in the legislature.

Donald Trump's ascension into the presidency and the consequent response to it has shattered those civics lessons and revealed them to be little more than Potemkinesque myths. I'd argue that Donald Trump's most unlikely victory and the unprecedented response that seeks nothing less than his defenestration revealed that the administrative state is little more than a wholly owned subsidiary of the Democrats.

The Congressional Republicans you watch on TV are little more than extras used as props to give the country the illusion that there is really a functioning two party system.

While much has been made of Republican dominance of state legislatures, county government and governorships, in contrast to the Democrat's bi-coastal archipelago dominance, almost no one has commented on how little that means in light of the inexorable spread of federal power over the realm since the New Deal.

The most recent iteration of this power is Obamacare, a massive health care tax that controls at least 15% of the economy. As of 2015 the Republican House had passed no fewer than 56 repeals of the Affordable Care Act, which they knew would go nowhere as long as Democrats controlled the Senate and the White House.

But the cries of “just you just wait until we get the White House” have been exposed as little more than empty boasts. From what we’ve seen, the serial repealers have proven themselves to be diffident, inept, and downright frightened of governing. That’s because the script calls for them to be rhetorical contrarians and nothing more.

When Senator Chuck Schumer warned the new president that “You take on the intelligence community – they have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you,” he wasn’t advising a friend how to stay out of trouble. It was a clear warning that the apparatus is in our hands not yours. Michael Cohen’s contrived plea deal with language that clearly sought to paint Donald Trump as a co-conspirator along with the anvil dropped on Paul Manafort is proof that apparatus is not a paranoid fantasy.

There have been eighteen Republican presidents since the founding of the party. Three out of four of our assassinated presidents have been Republicans. There have been five unsuccessful assassination attempts. Three out of five were Republicans. We’ve had five special counsels (or special prosecutors) investigating presidential administrations. Four of five of those being investigated were Republicans.

So if you’re a Republican president you might say you enter the White House with a pre-existing condition.

On June 17, 2017, a Saturday, the slowest of news days, the *Wall Street Journal*, published a 1200-word editorial titled “Robert Mueller’s Mission.” It deserves to be widely read and disseminated.

In their lengthy dissertation they offer about a dozen reasons by my count why Robert Mueller is perhaps the worst possible choice to conduct this “investigation.” When I came across the sentence that stated “Mr. Mueller is widely admired and no one questions his personal integrity, but...” I burst out laughing.

What you come away with is the sense that not only is the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover alive and well in the upper reaches of the FBI, it has actually gotten much worse. While Hoover might have held the goods on all sorts of politicians that he would use to his advantage, he wouldn't recognize the perversion of police powers and the judiciary that we are witnessing today. If Alan Furst is looking for new material he might turn his attention away from Europe, where he has mastered the machinations of spies and the police state to back home. That's because l'affaire Trump increasingly smacks of a one-party state that uses the national security apparatus to eliminate its enemies.