



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Russiagate: Another Watergate?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Just as occurred during the Watergate crisis of 1973-74, America – the world’s indispensable power – is again facing a constitutional crisis, with a paralyzed president writhing beneath the Damoclean sword of Russiagate. New evidence sheds fresh light on the origins and making of both “gates,” as does a closer exploration of the Nixon-Brezhnev and Trump-Putin bromances.

Russian leaders have always closely followed US presidential elections, yet they have only twice attempted to seriously affect the outcomes: during the elections of 1968 and 2016. New evidence reveals that the 1972 Watergate drama was rooted in President LBJ’s 1968 “October Surprise” and President Richard Nixon’s Machiavellian response.

Few Americans are aware of the hugely detrimental effects of Watergate on US and Israeli national security prior to and during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Given the enormous challenges the US and Israel are currently facing, more may now be at stake than Trump’s presidency.

### Russiagate

The term “Russiagate” refers to the 2016 theft by Russia of the DNC’s emails and hacking of Hillary Clinton’s insecure server to provide opposition research favorable to Donald Trump.

“I love it,” responded Donald Trump, Jr., to an email from Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, promising “high level and sensitive information that would incriminate Hillary.” On June 9, 2016, Donald Trump, Jr., Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner, and former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort met with Veselnitskaya and a group of Russian American lobbyists.

While she represented the Putin government at the meeting, Veselnitskya was also associated with Washington research firm Fusion GPS, which provides opposition research for both Democrats and Republicans. Her true aim was to lobby against the US Congress's Magnitsky Act, which sanctions pro-Kremlin moguls guilty of human rights abuses.

As of this writing, investigators have uncovered no evidence of any law breached by any Trump, although that can change. Special prosecutor Bob Mueller has assembled a grand jury to continue his investigation. (Moreover, we have just learned that in pursuance of financial issues, Mueller got approval for an unprecedented FBI morning raid of Manafort's home two weeks ago. Stay tuned.)

### **Watergate and LBJ's 1968 Bromance with Kosygin**

The term "Watergate" refers to the 1972 illegal break-in of DNC headquarters in Washington by Richard Nixon's secret police unit, the "plumbers." Four decades later, we have learned that the road to Watergate was paved in the 1968 US presidential election.

At the time, the Kremlin backed Lyndon Johnson's [LBJ's] vice president, Hubert Humphrey, based on the assessment of both Prime Minister Alexi Kosygin and Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Dobrynin that he was the more "stable and predictable" candidate. Note that the minority KGB held a different view. In the eyes of their Washington Resident, KGB General Oleg Kalugin, Nixon – the staunch, anti-communist Republican – was more capable than liberal Democrat Humphrey of taking "...giant steps that could lead to a marked improvement in Soviet-US relations."

In 1968, Soviet Premier Kosygin, not General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, was responsible for negotiations with the US. When Nixon took an early September lead in the polls after the August 20 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Kremlin, as Dobrynin reveals, "... took an extraordinary step, unprecedented in the history of Soviet-American relations, by secretly offering Humphrey...financial aid." Humphrey turned it down, but never told anyone of the offer (including LBJ) for fear of a backlash. By today's standards, he could have unleashed a Russiagate.

### **LBJ's "October Surprise" – Bombing Halt**

On October 25th, LBJ received a letter from Kosygin apprising him that, after weeks of talks, Hanoi had finally agreed to come to the negotiating table with Saigon. Peace talks could begin right away – 14 hours after an LBJ bombing halt. To former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Kosygin's letter "smelled of vodka and caviar." As Rusk explained to this writer on July 26, 1974, he knew Kosygin was eager to have a Moscow summit

to kick off SALT I and minimize the detrimental effects on the Russo-US relationship of Russia's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Both LBJ and Kosygin knew this "October Surprise" could slash Nixon's lead in the polls and help elect Humphrey – but Nixon got wind of the ploy. The powerful Chinese-American lobbyist Anna Chennault, known as "Little Flower" or "Dragon Lady" and head of Republican Women for Nixon, became Nixon's back channel to South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu via his embassy in Washington. Nixon's message to Thieu was to refuse to attend the Paris peace talks, with the promise that South Vietnam would receive more favorable treatment if he won.

The FBI, however, had bugged the South Vietnamese embassy and "Little Flower's" phone, and on November 2, 1968, LBJ learned of Nixon's communication with Thieu. Furious, LBJ threatened Nixon that he would go public with the allegation that Nixon had committed treason by throwing a monkey wrench into the Paris peace negotiations.

Unlike today's politicians, however, LBJ ultimately decided to put the interests of the country before politics. Said the late Nixon speechwriter turned *New York Times* columnist William Safire, "Nixon probably would not be president if it were not for Thieu."

### **Nixon's Bromance with Brezhnev**

Brezhnev's bromance with Nixon – an unexpected phenomenon – was soon in full bloom, and following their May 22, 1972 summit, the two leaders signed both SALT I and an ABM treaty and agreed to large-scale emigration to Israel of Soviet Jews. Nixon should have felt he was a shoo-in against any Democratic candidate – yet days after the summit, he ordered the plumbers to break into the Watergate Hotel. Why?

### **1972 Watergate Rooted in 1968 "October Surprise"**

In *America's Stolen Narrative*, Robert Parry demonstrated that it stuck in Nixon's craw that evidence of his treason was still in the possession of LBJ or the Democratic Party. Any published evidence of his 1968 sabotage of the Vietnam peace talks could sink his election prospects. Nixon's extension of the war to 1973 had cost the lives of 20,763 US soldiers, with 111,230 wounded. About a million Vietnamese also died.

To Nixon's horror, on June 14, 1971, *The New York Times* began publishing leaker Daniel Ellsberg's *Pentagon Papers* on the Vietnam War. Fearing disclosure, Nixon wanted those files at any cost. Thus he ordered his plumbers to firebomb and break into the Brookings Institution, the think tank of the Democratic Party. "You're to break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them in," he ordered his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman.

Fortunately, the Brookings plan was scuttled. But Nixon sent his plumbers twice to the Watergate Hotel, the first time on May 28th, 1972, days after the Moscow summit. They bugged the facility, but the files they retrieved did not satisfy Nixon. They were sent in again on June 17, and that time, they were caught. After White House tapes established Nixon's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, he resigned.

But what happened to LBJ's "X file?" In an interview with Johnson's NSA, Walter Rostow, on July 30, 1974, this writer learned that after LBJ's death in 1973, Rostow had given the file to the LBJ Library with instructions that it not be opened for 50 years. It was declassified after 20.

### **Putin's Bromance with Trump**

Trump's bromance with Putin in 2016-17 evokes Nixon's with Brezhnev in 1972-74. By 2012, Russia's 2009 "reset" with the US, as attempted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, was over. As Putin saw it, she had fomented the huge demonstrations against him during Russia's parliamentary elections in October 2012.

Moreover, it can be inferred from the US Congress's investigation of Clinton's unsecured and illegal server that Putin's hackers must have learned that the Obama administration, led by Clinton, was covertly seeking regime change in Libya and Syria. The Americans were consequently arming rebels who had morphed into jihadists. In 2015, Putin militarily intervened in Syria to protect both his investments there and the Syrian dictator, Assad.

The turning point for Putin likely came in the summer of 2016, when former CIA Director Mike Morell – a Hillary adviser – recommended, with her support, the "killing [of] Russians in Syria." Unsurprisingly, Putin became an open supporter of Donald Trump. "We liked President Trump ... because ... he was willing to restore American-Russian relations."

Unlike any other Russian leader, Putin – the "cool calculator of Russia's national interests," in Kissinger's words – was mesmerized by the Trump campaign. He declaimed to interviewer Oliver Stone, "[Trump] knew the fiber in the souls of the people ... [he] knew how to play to their hearts." He also rhapsodized about Trump's "protection of traditional [family] values."

### **Putin's "Almost" Bombing Halt in Syria**

Almost a half century after LBJ's 1968 "October Surprise" bombing halt in Vietnam, President Barack Obama sought a ceasefire and bombing halt in Syria in October 2016. Like Nixon, Putin channeled Machiavelli. His complying with the halt would have helped Obama's candidate, Hillary. He said time had run out, and in any case, "Our foreign ministry says we would have to talk to the new administration [hopefully Trump's]."

Still believing Hillary would likely win, Putin resorted to harsh Cold War rhetoric and even canceled a US-Russian agreement on the disposal of weapons-grade plutonium. On election night, however, there were champagne corks popping in the Kremlin.

A consequence of Trump's election, however, was Democrat fury over Russia's hacking of the DNC's and Hillary's e-mails. Choosing to blame Hillary's defeat on Putin rather than on the candidate, they sought to make any contact the Trump team had had with Russia radioactive.

### **Brezhnev's Deception**

While he appears eager to restore relations with Russia, Trump should remain vigilant. Russian leaders care about Russian national interests. Indeed, Brezhnev – even as he was consoling Nixon about Watergate at San Clemente in the summer of 1973 – was involved in a serious deception.

At that time, it was assumed that Russia had infuriated Egypt by refusing to provide modern weapons to it or to Syria. Anwar Sadat had expelled most of Russia's military advisers, and it was widely believed that there would be no war with Israel anytime soon. But while Brezhnev issued general warnings to Nixon about possible war in the Middle East, he did not reveal that Russia's tiff with Egypt had been overcome. Russian military experts were already aiding Sadat's generals for a surprise Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel on Yom Kippur.

This truth, unknown for decades, resided in the Russian archives. On July 15, 1972, Gorbachev's foreign policy adviser, the late Anatoly Chernyaev, wrote in his secret diary:

Egypt's premier Sidki was persuaded to come to Moscow, and ... I think, they have settled it ... they must have given much to him, if not all he wanted.

The ruse was confirmed by the Egyptian government-controlled *Ruz al-Yusuf* magazine, which reported that "various [Egyptian] government agencies spread rumors" about the Russo-Egyptian rift to support the deception. Eventually, Sadat himself called it "a strategic cover – a splendid strategic distraction for our going to war."

### **"Egypt will not invade"**

During this period, Kissinger described Nixon as "loaded" with alcohol and often incapacitated. Meanwhile, his NSA, General Alexander Haig, was appointed Chief of Staff. Much like Trump's own newly appointed Chief of Staff, General John Kelly, Haig held the White House together during the chaos of Watergate.

## **“Domestic Considerations” [Watergate]**

With war now in the offing, Israel needed 72 hours to prepare full mobilization. But, because of the ruse and the failures of US intelligence during Watergate, the Israel Defense Force [IDF] didn't get that precious time. Nevertheless, recovering from its initial shock, the IDF regrouped, crossed the Suez Canal, and began encircling Egypt's 3rd Army Corps. IDF tanks began to head towards Cairo.

Dobrynin would later recall that Sadat phoned Moscow begging for help. Brezhnev then sent a message to Nixon suggesting a joint intervention by the US and Russia to restore peace, with a veiled threat that Russia was ready to act alone if necessary.

The US went on Defcon 3 (combat alert), and the normally cool Dobrynin furiously demanded an explanation. Kissinger told him the action was “mostly determined by domestic considerations [read: Watergate]” and “not to be taken by Moscow as a hostile act.”

Unlike during the Cuban Missile crisis, where the US went on Defcon 3 and even Defcon 2, the combat alert was revoked after one day. Nixon, in an attempt to soothe Brezhnev, conceded that “he might have lost his cool a bit during the crisis, but that could be explained partly by the siege of his political opposition and personal enemies who were using the pretext of Watergate to undermine his authority.”

Nixon's military aid to Israel helped save her, but it did not save his presidency. Forced to resign after 15 months of agony, he ended up with only one friend, Leonid Brezhnev, who supported him to the end. America and Trump should heed the lesson.

The repercussions of an agonized, weakened, and finally vacated Nixon presidency were felt not only in the Middle East but also in southeast Asia. Shaken by Watergate, Congress cut military aid to South Vietnam. Thus, instead of peace in Vietnam came a large conventional invasion by the North Vietnamese. Saigon fell in 1975. Three falling dominoes became communist countries: South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Watergate and the fall of Vietnam severely depressed the spirit of the American people and weakened the presidency for years. Moreover, it encouraged the Kremlin's joint interventionism with Cuba in several Third World regions.

## **Preventing Russiagate from Becoming Another Watergate**

Russiagate is not Watergate – yet. The leaks, denials, cover-ups, and even witness-tampering show politically naive novices stumbling and scrambling to protect themselves while learning on the job. These kinds of obstacles can be overcome.

There is nothing more dangerous to the US than a president politically paralyzed and isolated by long-term investigations in the face of nuclear and other major geopolitical threats. The most significant challenges to the nation arise from deep partisan disunity at home and selfish rivalries over power and revenge. In contrast to Nixon in 1960 and LBJ in 1968, when neither leader protested a lost election but put the country first, the leaders of today are placing personal and party interests first.

Haunted by the spirit of Watergate, the forging of national unity within the US – the indispensable world power – is the most crucial mission currently faced by our national leaders. May they rise to the task.

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