

IDEAS

The End of All Illusions

Trump said nothing new in Helsinki—but his remarks clarified and distilled into a single frame his appalling disregard for an assault on America.

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KEVIN LAMARQUE / REUTERS

Even Fox News was appalled at President Trump’s performance at his Helsinki press conference alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin. The network, usually only too happy to cheer on the president, responded somewhat differently this time to Trump’s insistence that “President Putin was extremely strong and powerful in his denial” of Russian involvement in election interference. Neil Cavuto, a Fox Business Network host, called the press conference “disgusting.” Appearing on Fox, Mary Kissel of the conservative *Wall Street Journal* editorial board said that “President Putin scored a great propaganda victory by standing up with President Trump on that stage.” Newt Gingrich declared that Trump’s comments were “the most serious mistake of his presidency.”

From this response, you would expect that Trump had done or said something at the press conference that was truly unprecedented—something so radical that it forced even some of his most loyal supporters, who have stuck with him through the firing of the FBI director, the president’s efforts to dismiss the special counsel,

Privacy settings

and his longstanding refusal to accept the existence of Russian election interference, to break ranks.

But he didn't. In fact, almost every outrageous comment Trump made at the Helsinki press conference was a variation on something he'd said before. That doesn't mean those comments weren't outrageous. But it does mean that the furor over his performance has the echo of Captain Renault's sudden outrage in Rick's Cafe: "I am shocked, shocked, to find that gambling is going on in here!"

The Wall Street Journal reports that the White House had planned for Trump to take a more "confrontational approach" at the press conference and that aides were astonished when the president chose a different route. But what, exactly, did White House staffers think was going to happen? What other way could a one-on-one press conference between Trump and Putin possibly have gone? Or to put it another way: Why all this outrage *now*?

The visual of Trump framed by American and Russian flags, standing alongside a smirking Putin and insisting that Russia had no involvement in his election, was a shocking one. It clarified and distilled into a single frame the president's appalling lack of care toward an assault on the democratic life of the American people and his inability to carry out the duties of his office. As with his comments after the violence in Charlottesville, Trump's obsequiousness toward Putin ripped away what remained of a very tattered fig leaf. Just as Charlottesville made it no longer quite so taboo to describe the president as sympathetic to white supremacy, perhaps Helsinki will allow mainstream commentators to more comfortably acknowledge the danger of the Trump presidency on the world stage.

Across the political spectrum, indignation over the Helsinki press conference has focused on Trump's point-blank refusal to credit the conclusions of his own intelligence agencies on election interference over Putin's "strong and powerful" denial. When asked by an American journalist who he believed, Trump responded: "My people came to me, Dan Coats came to me and some others, they said they think it's Russia. I have President Putin; he just said it's not Russia ... I don't see any reason why it would be."

Coming from Trump, this is nothing new. Not only has he persistently referred to election interference as "the Russia hoax" and suggested that the hacking of the Democratic National Committee might have been carried out by "a 400-pound guy on a bed," he's also pointed directly to assurances by Putin to justify his denials. In July 2017, he tweeted that Putin had "vehemently denied" any

interference in a meeting between the two of them. In June 2018, he tweeted that “Russia continues to say they had nothing to do with Meddling in our Election!” before going on to ask, “Why isn’t Hillary/Russia being looked at?”

The president has previously denigrated the intelligence community’s joint conclusion on election meddling, too. He’s repeatedly pointed to what he identifies as the intelligence failures of the Iraq War to hint that the government’s assessment of Russian interference might not be accurate either. Speaking in July 2017, he suggested that the assessment carried less weight because it was the product of only “three or four” of the 17 intelligence agencies—ignoring the fact that the four agencies involved included the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the CIA, the FBI, and the NSA.

Multiple times on the day of the summit, Trump also gestured toward what Representative Liz Cheney—otherwise a strong supporter of the president—decried as a “moral equivalence” between the United States and Russia. Before his meeting with Putin, he suggested that the “Rigged Witch Hunt” was responsible for a decline in U.S. relations with Russia. Asked by a reporter whether he “[held] Russia accountable” for that decline, the president doubled down: “I hold both countries responsible ... I think we’re all to blame.” There is more than an echo here of Trump’s comments on Putin to Bill O’Reilly in February 2017: “There are a lot of killers,” he said. “You think our country’s so innocent?”

Along with the Fox News talking heads, multiple Republican members of the House and Senate intelligence committees broke with the president to emphasize their faith in the intelligence community’s assessment. In a blistering statement, Senator John McCain wrote that the press conference was “one of the most disgraceful performances by an American president in memory.” Even among Democrats and other long-time opponents of the president, condemnation was unusually fierce: Calls quickly mounted for White House and intelligence officials to resign in protest. Former CIA Director John Brennan declared Trump’s comments “treasonous” and suggested they constituted an impeachable offense.

But it wasn’t only former intelligence officials who were criticizing the president. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, whose office oversaw the 2017 intelligence assessment of Russian interference, released a pointed statement noting that “we have been clear in our assessments of Russian meddling in the 2016 election and their ongoing, pervasive efforts to undermine our democracy, and we will continue to provide unvarnished and objective intelligence in support of our national security.” From Coats, who has been notably quiet in the

face of the president's attacks on the Mueller investigation in recent months, this is a shot across the bow. "Whoa," tweeted Fox News's John Roberts in response.

Magnifying this is the fact that the summit took place just days after a grand jury indicted 12 Russian military intelligence officers for the hacking of the DNC server and the distribution of that information to an organization widely believed to be Wikileaks. Likewise, just hours after the press conference concluded, the Justice Department announced the arrest of a Russian woman accused of attempting to influence U.S. politics on behalf of the Russian government through her connections with the National Rifle Association. Trump's performance was bookended by unspoken rebukes from his own Justice Department—and as a result, the denials and equivocations he gave when standing next to Vladimir Putin appeared particularly absurd.

Though the summit framed Trump and Putin as equals, it was clear that Putin was in charge. He arrived over an hour late, forcing the American president to twiddle his thumbs while waiting. During the press conference, Trump's recitation of Putin's various assurances—Russia had no involvement in the 2016 election, Russia would allow its own officials to question the GRU officers named in Friday's indictment—took on an almost childlike quality. It was a question of power and domination. "The big takeaway from Helsinki," wrote the former Bush administration official Ambassador Nicholas Burns, was "Trump's weakness beside Putin." The right-wing press agreed: "Putin eats Trump's lunch in Helsinki," read the headline of a Fox opinion piece. "PUTIN DOMINATES IN HEL," blared the *Drudge Report*.

The intolerable thing, in other words, was not what Trump said but that he appeared weak. In the slang of the alt-right and the Trumpist right, he looked like a cuck.

The question now is whether, having voiced their outrage over the president's behavior, Trump's aides and supporters, along with congressional Republicans, will finally do anything about it. The aides and officials could resign in protest. Those in Congress have all the power of a coordinate branch of government. It is hard, a year and a half into this presidency, to imagine that anyone in the administration or the Republican caucus would lift more than a finger to stop Donald Trump. But a failure to act now will be its own show of weakness.