

#### A Double Standard?<sup>1</sup>

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Published on **21 July 2017** | [issforum.org](http://issforum.org)

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

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Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5AT>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AT-Trachtenberg>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AT.pdf>

The American political class has been working itself into a lather over the hacking of a number of email accounts, 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 Democratic Presidential candidate 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 America’s internal democratic political process. You don’t hear much nowadays about 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, whose job it is to do this kind of eavesdropping, has an annual 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.<sup>2</sup>

And the NSA has scored some extraordinary successes over the years. The columnist Jack Anderson revealed in 1971, for example, that a U.S. intercept operation operating out of the American embassy in Moscow “was

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<sup>1</sup> This piece (without the footnotes) originally appeared as a guest post on Stephen Walt’s blog in [foreignpolicy.com](http://foreignpolicy.com) on 10 January 2017 ([link](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Dana Priest and William Arkin, “A Hidden World, Growing Beyond Control,” *Washington Post*, 10 July 2010, A1 ([link](#)).

collecting and exploiting the private car phone communications of Politburo leaders.”<sup>3</sup> And that was just the top of the iceberg. 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.”<sup>4</sup> The U.S. government, moreover, 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 each other. 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.”<sup>5</sup>

Should we be outraged about any of this? This sort of spying, when the United States does 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 (to use Secretary of State Henry Stimson’s famous phrase) ‘gentlemen did not read each others’ mail.’ But if the United States is going to eavesdrop on other countries, Americans should not be too surprised—let alone indignant—when other countries do it to them.

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 the U.S. presidential 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. Its basic attitude has been that free elections are great—as long as they do not 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.<sup>6</sup> But it is important to note that the practice was more common during the Cold War than many people realize.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Johnson, *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989*, Book III: Retrenchment and Reform, 1972-1980 (National Security Agency: Center for Cryptological History, 1998) ([link](#)), 82. Anderson, according to that declassified history, “had acquired a box of top secret CIA National Intelligence Digests (NIDs), the unwitting courtesy of an NSC staffer who had been in the habit of taking them home for a little bedtime reading. After a marital falling out, his wife took the accumulated NIDs to Anderson, who kept them in his office and used them in his columns over a period of years.” For other revelations along these lines, see Bill Gertz, “CIA Upset because Perle Detailed Eavesdropping,” *Washington Times*, 15 April 1987 ([link](#)), and ex-President Richard Nixon’s comments quoted in UPI dispatch, 6 April 1984 ([link](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 30-31, 55, 86-87. DCI William Casey was supposed to have personally planted a listening device in the office of a senior official in an unidentified Middle Eastern country. *Ibid.*, 147. On these matters in general, see Matthew Aid, *The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), esp. 143-144, 152-153, 163-165.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Burns Journal II, 60 (entry for 3 April 1973), Digital Ford Presidential Library ([link](#)).

<sup>6</sup> See Stephen Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana: A Cold War Story* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Note also Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan, and the Cold War: The Irony of Interdependence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 67-71.

Indeed, the United States felt free to intervene, sometimes massively, in the internal political affairs even of its 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*.”<sup>7</sup> 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, threw its support behind the conservative government of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in the 1953 German elections; that intervention was said by one German politician to have swung something like a million votes to Adenauer’s side.<sup>8</sup> 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 which, even today, few people on either side of the Atlantic know much about.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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 back room. 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.”<sup>11</sup> None of this was considered out-of-bounds, and the Nuland affair did not

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<sup>7</sup> See Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 158. For a more detailed analysis, see Philip F. Dur, “Ambassador Caffery and the French Alliance,” *Louisiana History* 27:3 (Summer 1986) ([link](#)), 256-259.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard L. Merritt, “The 1953 Bundestag Election: Evidence from West German Public Opinion,” *Historical Social Research* 5:4 (1980) ([link](#)), esp. 8-9; editorial note in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-54*, vol. 7, part 1, 532-533 ([link](#)); and U.W. Kitzinger, *German Electoral Politics: A Study of the 1957 Campaign* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 251.

<sup>9</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 374-377.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Doug Palmer, “Obama: Brexit would move U.K. to the 'back of the queue' on U.S. trade deals,” Politico.com, 22 April 2016 ([link](#)).

<sup>11</sup> Anne Gearan, “In Recording of U.S. Diplomat, Blunt Talk on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, 6 February 2014 (with link to the recording of the phone conversation posted on YouTube) ([link](#)). For a transcript of the call (with commentary) on the BBC website, see “Ukraine Crisis: Transcript of Leaked Nuland-Pyatt Call” ([link](#)).

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 leak that taped phone conversation in the first place.<sup>12</sup>

The assumption is that while the Americans 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 kind of thing to the United States. It is perfectly okay for the U.S. government to eavesdrop on the private communications of the leaders of foreign countries, but it is outrageous that foreign powers should try to hack into the email accounts of American leaders and their associates. It is perfectly normal for the U.S. government to intervene in the internal political affairs of other countries, but it is an outrage when foreign governments try to affect political outcomes within America's own borders. The United States is the "indispensable nation" (to use then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's famous phrase) and the rules that apply to other countries simply do not apply to America.<sup>13</sup> Those are the unspoken assumptions, and it is 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 counter-productive. I do not think the United States should arrogate to itself rights that it would not grant to others. But what that means is that, given the way America behaves, no one should get too upset if other countries behave the same way. If Americans approach the recent email hacking affair with those thoughts in mind, American commentators should thus be able to take what the Russians did in stride. It was in line with the way the world works—a world which is in large part of America's own making.

**Marc Trachtenberg**, an historian by training, is currently a Research Professor of Political Science at UCLA. He is the author of many works on twentieth century international politics. His most recent book, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2012.

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<sup>12</sup> For the official U.S. reaction, see "US Official Apologises to EU Counterparts for Undiplomatic Language," in *The Guardian*, 6 February 2014 ([link](#)).

<sup>13</sup> If America had to use force against Iraq, Secretary Albright declared in a *Today Show* interview in 1998, it was "because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us." Madeleine Albright interview with Matt Lauer, February 19, 1998 ([link](#)). The term was subsequently used by many other American political leaders, including Hillary Clinton in the recent presidential campaign. Donald Trump, on the other hand, was sharply criticized for distancing himself from this sort of rhetoric. See, for example, the *Washington Post* editorial, "Clinton understands America's place in the world. Trump does not," September 3, 2016 ([link](#)). The future president was criticized for comments he made in 2013 rejecting all the talk about "American exceptionalism" and going on to say "I can see that being very insulting to the world."