

# THE WHITE HOUSE ATTEMPTS TO UNRING THE ELECTION INTEGRITY FEARMONGERING

Over the weekend, the White House gave the NYT a statement on the integrity of our elections that deserves more attention. Here it is, in full:

The Kremlin probably expected that publicity surrounding the disclosures that followed the Russian Government-directed compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations, would raise questions about the integrity of the election process that could have undermined the legitimacy of the President-elect. Nevertheless, we stand behind our election results, which accurately reflect the will of the American people.

The Federal government did not observe any increased level of malicious cyber activity aimed at disrupting our electoral process on election day. As we have noted before, we remained confident in the overall integrity of electoral infrastructure, a confidence that was borne out on election day. As a result, we believe our elections were free and fair from a cybersecurity perspective.

That said, since we do not know if the Russians had planned any malicious cyber activity for election day, we don't know if they were deterred from further activity by the various warnings the U.S. government conveyed.

As the NYT noted in its introduction to this

statement, the person who released this statement (my guess is Ned Price, but that's just a wildarseguess) would not let him or herself be identified. While this is a long-time habit of the Obama Administration (one that merely exacerbated a Bush habit), consider what it means that a statement intended to increase confidence about our electoral process was issued anonymously.

You're doing it wrong.

The statement itself highlights the perverse effect of all the fearmongering about Russia hacking our elections.

Let's start with the last paragraph. "We do not know if the Russians had planned any malicious cyber activity for election day [... or] if they were deterred." This suggests that at no time before the election did anyone in the White House know of plans to disrupt the election. That's an important detail, because many sloppy journalists have consistently misread reports of the hacking of voter registration lists from a Russian hosting service but that may not have even been Russians must less the Russian state to mean that the Russian state was trying to hack the election itself. While there was one late report that suggests FBI may have gotten more reason to believe these polling list probes were Russian state entities, this statement seems to refute that.

Indeed, the second paragraph seems to back that. "The Federal government did not observe any increased level of malicious cyber activity aimed at disrupting our electoral process on election day." The White House, now explicitly speaking for the entire Federal government, says that there was *no* increased malicious cyber activity aimed at disrupting election day, regardless of the actor. While it's certainly possible known probes of registration lists continued, according to this statement they didn't accelerate as the election drew near. This makes it more likely these probes were identity theft related, not Russian state

tampering.

If there was no there there to all the claims of Russian hacking our election infrastructure (which is distinct from claims that Russia hacked the DNC and other political organizations, which is something our spooks do as well), then why didn't the White House stop all the fearmongering about the election infrastructure beyond the joint ODNI/DHS statement that admitted there was no conclusive evidence that was happening?

That's where this statement starts.

The Kremlin probably expected that publicity surrounding the disclosures that followed the Russian Government-directed compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions ... would raise questions about the integrity of the election process that could have undermined the legitimacy of the President-elect.

They're not even saying "rais[ing] questions about the integrity of the election" is what "the Kremlin" ("the Kremlin" has served as a very sloppy metonymy throughout this discussion) had in mind. They're just guessing that the intent existed.

Throughout the discussion of Russian hacking, the entire point of it has been one of the weakest points of the allegations: no one ever provided a credible explanation for how releasing validated copies of real emails could undermine the election. The strongest case I saw made is that the emails provided something that Trump himself, his true-believers, Macedonian teenagers, and Russian propagandists could hang false stories onto; but that's no different from what happened to official Hillary emails released under FOIA (to say nothing of FBI leaks about same) or actual events like Hillary's pneumonia. Those people can make lies up about anything and they don't

need Podesta emails to do so. Trump, as Republicans have for decades, turned out to be perfectly capable of raising baseless concerns about election integrity (as he did again last night).

So here, when asked why, after dick-waving about an imminent Russian hack of the election, the White House wasn't backing a review of the vote, this White House official who wouldn't go on the record instead effectively said, "Who knows? 'The Kremlin' probably figured the damage was done."

Which brings me to my complaint about the way the Russian hacking has been dealt with – largely fed by a deliberate Hillary effort to emphasize Trump's Russian ties rather than all his shady dealings generally.

Who is responsible for doubts about the integrity of our election? The hack-and-leakers? Trump? Or the national security officials (who, in this case, won't even go on the record) making uncertain claims that the Russians intend to undermine confidence in elections? At some point, those pounding the war drums are the ones who are undermining confidence, not the Russian hackers themselves.

And none of those actions take place in a vacuum. Even as both the Russians (allegedly) were undermining faith in our elections and national security types were hyping up concerns that people might lose faith in our elections which likely helped undermine faith in our elections, there were real reasons why Americans shouldn't have faith in their elections. Consider this line: "As a result, we believe our elections were free and fair from a cybersecurity perspective." This anonymous person at the White House is asserting there were no hacks of the election. But he or she is not asserting the election was free and fair.

Of course not. That's because in a number of states – notably, in swing states NC and WI – the Republicans undertook known, documented

efforts to ensure the elections weren't free and fair by making it harder for likely Democratic voters to vote than Republican voters.

Voters – especially students and voters of color normally targeted in suppression efforts – *shouldn't* be complacent about the integrity of our elections. Numerous circuit courts have found evidence showing they're not free and fair. Our elections were not going to be free and fair well before Russian hackers targeted the DNC.

But rather than focusing on the things closer to home that we need to improve, we're all worried the Russians are coming ... to do what decades of Republican efforts have already done.