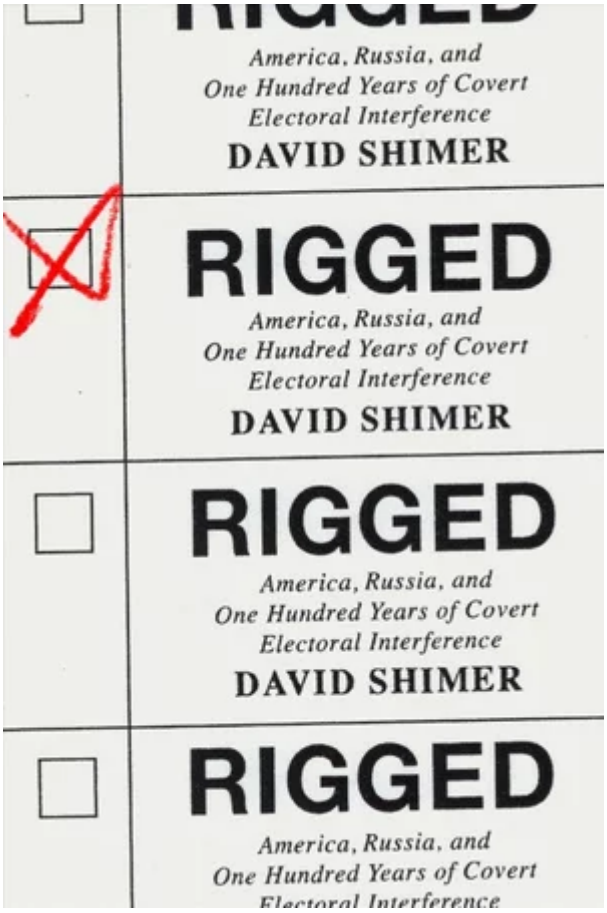
In 'Rigged,' A Comprehensive Account Of Decades Of Election Interference

By Philip Ewing ⋮ 9-11 minutes ⋮ 6/9/2020



In the bleak midwinter of a political year in Washington, a top out-of-power partisan contacts a Russian diplomat at the embassy in Washington.

The topic of discussion: What their governments might do for each other in the coming administration.

This scene may sound familiar, only it wasn't former national security adviser Mike Flynn. The American political figure was former Illinois Gov. Adlai Stevenson, who went up to the Soviet embassy in January of 1960 to see Ambassador Mikhail Menshikov.

After "caviar, fruits and drinks," his excellency the ambassador produced a message from Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev.

"We are concerned with the future, and that America has the right president," the Soviet leader wrote, per Stevenson's later recollection. Moscow wanted to get behind him against what it considered a distasteful hardliner: Vice President Richard Nixon. "Because we know the ideas of Mr. Stevenson, we in our hearts all favor him," Khrushchev wrote. Continued the letter:

> "Could the Soviet press assist Mr. Stevenson's personal success? How? Should the press praise him, and if so, for what? We can always find many things to criticize Mr. Stevenson for because he has said many harsh and critical things about the Soviet Union and communism! Mr. Stevenson will know best what would help him."

This overture — which Stevenson rebuffed — is one of many gems unearthed by David Shimer in his important new history, *Rigged: America, Russia, and One Hundred Years of Covert Electoral Interference.*

Stevenson's encounter encapsulates the essence of a very old game.

If Russia's attack on the 2016 election and other elections in Great Britain and Western Europe seemed like bolts from the blue, they shouldn't. Shimer's authoritative book places them in their proper context as only the latest installments in the long-running and sometimes grim practice of statecraft.

To be clear, the experiences of 2016 and since *were* novel in key ways, of which more below, but the premise of the work — the goal of a nation to bring about a desired outcome within the politics of another — was not.

Comrade Lenin

The Russians, Shimer argues, had a head start, one that derives from the ambitious and paranoid aspects of early Communism in the Soviet Union and its progenitor, Vladimir Lenin.

They also had a standing, peacetime secret intelligence service, which the United States, in the 19-teens, did not. Lenin and his successors made foundation stones of the agencies that became — and then evolved from — the KGB and the army's GRU.

Washington tried to catch up.

After World War II, it and the then-new CIA also got into the business of trying to change the course of events within nations around the world.

This work made the CIA infamous in many places, but Shimer focuses his attention in *Rigged* specifically on the influence of democratic elections, not on coups or armed operations.

The American stories haven't been excavated as often and make for fascinating reading, as when President Harry Truman ordered the CIA to help defeat communists in Italy's 1948 election. It did many things, including infuse a lot of cash.

"We had bags of money that we delivered to selected politicians to defray their political expenses, their campaign expenses, for posters, for pamphlets," as Shimer quotes one CIA officer.

But election influence also wasn't that simple: Much of the American suasion in the Italian election was as plain as day and wielded in the open.

The inside game vs. the outside game

Washington threatened to withhold post-WWII aid if Rome went communist; Italian-Americans wrote letters to relatives in the old country urging them to spurn the communists; Frank Sinatra and Joe DiMaggio contributed radio broadcasts.

History records that Italians elected the Christian democrats who were Washington's preferred interlocutors and kept the communists out of power.

So how much of that was thanks to the public messaging from the United States — and how much because of the CIA's hidden hand? This question about causality and efficacy will linger.

Inside the Agency and around Washington, however, the answer was obvious. Shimer's research and reporting shine in sections like this one, in which he characterizes the sentiment about how much the CIA believed its own work: He quotes one official saying it, then a second, and then a third.

Although the efficacy of covert action might never be provable definitively, leaders in Washington and Moscow continued to believe in the value of this kind of work through the Cold War and beyond. Then-deputy CIA Director Robert Gates was reporting to Congress in secret about Soviet election interference in the 1980s.

And President Bill Clinton — whom Shimer interviewed for this book — described his desire to put Uncle Sam's thumb on the scales in the 2000 election in Serbia that ousted its infamous president Slobodan Milošević. The State Department helped opponents and civic organizations and trained activists to monitor polling places.

"For Washington, overt democracy promotion, rather than covert electoral interference, had become the rule," Shimer writes.

Comrade Putin

Russian President Vladimir Putin was watching. He complained to Clinton about the American military operations in the former Yugoslavia and appears never to have dropped his belief that the United States was worming into elections around the world — and especially in his front yard.

Meanwhile, the world moved online. That not only made individual American political targets vulnerable to foreign cyberattackers but also millions of people available, in a new, "neutral" medium, to the very old arts of persuasion or agitation.

In the old days, a group with a name such as "the World Peace Council" might have circulated pamphlets. Or an explicitly communist group might have made a straight-ahead case for world revolution, as Shimer writes.

By 2016, an influence specialist in Saint Petersburg, posing as a fellow citizen, could metaphorically tap an individual American on the shoulder. They formed groups. They shared memes. They organized rallies that took place in the real world.

And in key cases, as, for example, with black voters, they hammered a message: "We" — Russians pretending to be black American citizens — can't win with either of these candidates, so "we" — real black voters — must stay home.

And so on.

Disinformation is consequential. Based on nothing more than the apparently comforting or affirming nonsense they've been told by a stranger, people will take action. Some even will take actions that endanger their own children, and others, by keeping them from being vaccinated.

Many people, even most people, may not respond to these kinds of suggestions in this way. But in an American election that can be decided by small margins — fewer people than fit into Michigan Stadium on a typical autumn Saturday to see the Wolverines — reaching and changing individual minds isn't nothing.

If you could get a message to 100 million people and affect the behavior of 1 percent of them, that could do the trick.

What difference does it make

Does that mean that Russia elected Trump in 2016?

Shimer recounts the story in ample detail and includes the views of both those who think it was determinative and those who believe it wasn't. His section about the torturous deliberations within President Obama's administration about how to respond to Russia's active measures is comprehensive to the point of encyclopedic.

Shimer's purpose is less to answer the question — after all, the spies and diplomats still don't all agree about the U.S. efforts in Italy in 1948 — than to establish that after roughly a century of dirty tricks and active measures, the reach afforded by Facebook and Twitter changed the old game for malefactors such as Russia's "Internet Research Agency."

"The CIA focused on manipulating the psyches of Italian voters," Shimer writes. "Today, billions of people have uploaded their psyches to the Internet, exposing them to targeted manipulation. The platform is new, but the goal of shaping people's views is not."

Later, in assessing 2016, he writes: "What must be beyond debate is that the IRA influenced the minds of unsuspecting voters. Its divisive content spread far and wide, reaching more than 100 million Americans," he writes.

That also has brought a new default kind of practice in statecraft and politics.

Political campaigns must be on guard for attacks, as must elections officials across America's thousands of individual voting jurisdictions, as must spies and security officials and Washington. Political cyberattacks continue apace.

The United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to buy new machines, upgrade IT systems and change its practices to try to protect ballots from interception, sabotage or other mischief.

But as Shimer writes in his painstaking book, this game has seldom been about changing ballots as much as it has been about changing minds.