

Did Trump Make the Right Play or Did Trump Get Played?

From accusations of “treason” to blunt assessments that, “The president of the United States made a fool of himself in his meeting in Helsinki on Monday with Russian dictator Vladimir Putin,” the majority consensus is that Putin won and Trump lost. Even the pro-Trump Drudge report headlined with, “PUTIN DOMINATES IN HEL.” (The accompanying picture of a confident, smiling Putin and a slump-shouldered Trump said it all.) But is it totally clear that Trump got played?

Naturally, the liberal media and the Democrats bashed Trump. But that was a foregone conclusion. No matter what the outcome of the summit, Trump would be lambasted by his opponents.

It’s the fact that a number of Republican congressmen also lined up to denounce Trump that is so concerning. (In particular, they were shocked at his trashing of American intelligence and his near-defense of Russia.)

Where was the expected bravado? Where was the alpha-male leader who got in the face of Germany’s Angela Merkel and Britain’s Theresa May and challenged the EU and NATO? Did he finally meet his match? Or was it simply a matter of Trump’s ego obscuring his vision? (In other words, he was more upset with Robert Mueller and the Democrats than he was concerned with speaking the truth to Putin.)

It’s possible that all the above (and more) are true.

It’s possible that Trump was thinking more about himself and his reputation than he was thinking about the good of America. It’s possible that he was outmaneuvered by the more politically savvy Putin. It’s possible he was even outmanned by Putin.

I don't mean to defend his words, and I don't claim to know his intentions.

And it's clear that he has totally had it with the Mueller investigation. An investigation that has dragged on for endless months. An investigation that was triggered by leaks from the just-fired James Comey. An investigation that still offers no proof that Trump colluded with Russia.

What if, in the end, Trump will be found not guilty of collusion by Mueller? Just think of the hundreds of thousands of hours lost, of the millions of words spilled, of the dark suspicions aroused. And all because of what? A political (or, worse still, personal) vendetta? It is for good reason that Trump is upset.

But does that excuse what he said today, comparing American intelligence (and/or guilt) to Russian intelligence (and/or guilt)?

Ironically, the same liberals who cheered President Obama when he spoke freely of America's failing when abroad are the very ones ready to crucify Trump. Conversely, the same conservatives who excoriated Obama as anti-patriotic are now scrambling to find ways to defend Trump. So much for unbiased media.

Putin, for his part, made some interesting remarks to Chris Wallace in a testy, post-press conference interview.

He explained there was no reason to meet if they were just going to insult each other, asking, "Why should this come as a surprise? Was it worth going all the way to Helsinki, going through the Atlantic, to just insult one another and—well, it's not exactly the diplomatic standard in the world. There is no need to go and meet a person if you just want to insult another person. We met to try to find a way for improving our relationship and not aggravating it or destroying it completely."

Could this be what Trump had in mind as well?

As for Wallace's probing question as to whether Russia had any dirt on Trump, Putin said, "I don't want to insult President Trump when I say this—and I may come as rude—but before he announced that he will run for presidency, he was of no interest for us. He was a rich person, but, well, there's plenty of rich persons in the United States. He was in the construction business. He organized the beauty pageants. But no, it would never occur to anyone that he would think of running for president. He never mentioned his political ambitions. It sounds like it's utter nonsense."

He has a point. Why in the world would Russia have taken Trump as a serious candidate for president before 2015? He was merely a rich guy in the construction business who organized beauty pageants.

And this leads me back to the initial question: Did Trump make the right play, or did he get played?

On the one hand, it's easy to see how he appeared weak, not to mention unpatriotic. He certainly didn't sound like Mr. "America first" when he threw some of our agencies under the bus.

But others, like Al Perotta on the Stream, have noted that, "Trump didn't learn his politics in the posh lounges of academia. He learned them on the hard streets of New York. Let Obama quote U Thant. Trump will quote Don Corleone: 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.'"

"There is also another saying that used to have some meaning in our culture. 'Actions speak louder than words.'"

Perotta continued, "Last March, a bunch of Russian mercenaries in Syria started advancing on a U.S. position. The U.S. warned the Russians several times to back off. They didn't. And they were destroyed. Our military killed 200 to 300 Russians."

And he asked, "If you are Vladimir Putin, what message have you already received? What informs your decisions more? A few nice words at a press conference or the bodies of your comrades?"

"It's okay to speak softly when you've already hit someone with a big stick."

Was this a large, unspoken part of the dynamic?

Interestingly, Senator Rand Paul has defended the president's actions, saying, "It's gotten so ridiculous that someone has to stand up and say we should try to engage even our adversaries and open up our lines of communication. We're going to talk to the president about some small steps in order to try to thaw the relations between our countries."

That, for me, is the ultimate question.

Yes, it's true that our president allowed partisan politics to play into the Helsinki news conference. But those very politics—specifically, the Mueller investigation—were about the only thing the media spoke of for days. And these were the issues raised by the media in the immediate aftermath of the summit. Why is it so shocking that Trump addressed it from his perspective, with lots of distrust towards our intelligence?

The big thing for me is this: Did Trump positively engage an adversary? Did he open a door wider that previously had been almost shut? In five or 10 years, will our countries be on better terms?

It could well be that some of Trump's public comments were ill-advised, if not indefensible. But maybe, just maybe, he also did something very positive. Maybe he worked toward befriending an enemy. Time will tell.