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What Russian Meddling Teaches Us About America

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Terrell Jermaine Starr provides historical examples of Russia exploiting pre-existing racial tensions in the United States and argues that America will continue to be vulnerable until it course-corrects from its racist past and present.

One thing is clear about Russian meddling currently taking place during the 2020 election: most of America did not learn much from 2016. The Kremlin's main objective four years ago was to cause chaos in America's electoral process, and one of its main methods for doing so was to exacerbate pre-existing racial tensions. Final reports from U.S. intelligence agencies certainly made clear that the Kremlin saw it as a major national security weakness.

American leaders—the majority of whom are white—should have seen this as an opportunity to conduct national dialogues on why racism is a security threat and engage in very difficult conversations around our failures as a country to correct institutional racism and combat white supremacy. This was a time for inward interrogation.

But the media coverage of Russian interference in American politics has focused more on Russian aggression than American vulnerabilities. Much of the first two years of the investigation into Kremlin meddling revealed how Moscow infiltrated social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter, to spread disinformation and misinformation among Black and White Americans. The Kremlin undertook “[an array of efforts](#)” to make Black Americans distrust Democrats and the democratic process in general. And the Kremlin is [at it again](#) this year.

But it isn't that the Kremlin only recently discovered America's divide over race. The Russians have exploited American racial tensions since long before the Cold War. [According to The Atlantic](#), the USSR:

...exploited the oppression of Southern blacks for their own economic benefit. It was the height of the Great Depression, and the Soviet Union was positioning itself not only as a workers' utopia, but as a racial utopia as well, one where ethnic, national, and religious divisions didn't exist. In addition to luring thousands of white American workers, it brought over African-American workers and sharecroppers with the promise of the freedom to work and live unburdened by the violent restrictions of Jim Crow.

In 1928, the USSR [determined](#) that Black Americans had the greatest potential for revolting against Western imperialism and adopted an anti-racism policy that deemed any attack against Black Americans was an attack against Soviet national security interests. The Kremlin, through the Communist Party of America, [supported](#) the “Scottsboro

Boys,” a group of young Black men and Black children who were falsely accused of rape in Alabama and found guilty by an all-White jury.

[A 1963 memo](#) by the Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research broke down the extent of Russia’s Cold War media campaign against the US, which was specifically focused on racial tension:

Recurrent themes in the Soviet treatment have been: that racism is inevitable in the capitalist system and can only be eradicated along with capitalism itself; that the federal government is actually supporting the racists by its general inertia and because of unwillingness to antagonize Southern Democrats; that the hypocrisy of the US claims to leadership of the free world is laid bare; that US racism is clearly indicative of its policies towards black people around the world.

It is already difficult to fight foreign meddling in our domestic politics. But our refusal to acknowledge the reasons for our vulnerability to misinformation makes that fight unwinnable. The United States must engage in the painful necessary dialogue about race in America. But it cannot do so if political leaders reject the reality of that racism even as they traffic in racist tropes about [African nations](#), [Mexican immigrants](#), or [police brutality](#). That America remains exposed to the Kremlin’s racial playbook reveals that much of the country is content not changing.

As a journalist who specializes in the USSR and race issues, I watched with keen interest to see if media networks would interrogate one of the underlying sources for Russian disinformation and misinformation: White Americans made anxious by the Obama presidency. The few people bold enough to lead conversations around this fact were Black writers. Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in [The Atlantic](#), in 2017, that Trump’s election was a direct result of Obama’s presidency and his focus on bridging economic and social gaps between people of color and access to healthcare and wealth. As for the Kremlin influence, Coates keenly pointed out the extent of Russian power to influence U.S. elections:

In a recent New Yorker article, a former Russian military officer pointed out that interference in an election could succeed only where “necessary conditions” and an “existing background” were present. In America, that “existing background” was a persistent racism, and the “necessary condition” was a black president. The two related factors hobbled America’s ability to safeguard its electoral system.

What Coates did was what all in national media and politics should have done: interrogate white supremacy. They did not and that is where American national security is weakened. In a nation where Black people are disproportionately affected by health disparities and targeted by police discrimination and brutality, where Muslims were profiled after the attacks on 9/11 under the guise of national security and where people from Muslim-majority nations were banned under the false pretense of protecting the homeland, America is ill-equipped to challenge the racial dimensions of white people’s [economic anxiety](#).

When Hanna Nikole-Jones launched her Pulitzer Prize-winning [1619 Project](#), which reimagined if we looked at 1619 as our founding year instead of 1776, she was met with extreme scrutiny from the academy, media pundits and elected officials. And while critical race theory is essential scholarship that should be taught at every level of our education systems, President Trump has [threatened it with the prospect of federal investigations](#). The very kind of self-reflection that America needs to heal itself and repel Russian disinformation and manipulation is the very truth-telling that too many Americans refuse to undergo. That is not a uniquely Russian problem but an American, white supremacist one.

Russia's campaigns have succeeded in exacerbating our polarization not so much because it imposed lies on America. It succeeded because White America refuses to course-correct from its racist past that has led it into its still racist present. Until it does, the Kremlin or any other determined adversary can successfully execute disinformation campaigns to influence Americans' faith in the electoral process, the candidates who participate in it, and each other.

Author

Terrell Jermaine Starr is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and the senior reporter at [The Root](#), where he writes about US politics, Russia and Eastern European politics and race in America. In 2018, [Diversity in National Security Network and New America](#) selected him as one of the top African-American experts in foreign policy and national security. Starr is also a [2018-2020 Global Strategist Association fellow](#), a fellowship that aims to place Black people in foreign policy discussions and positions of power. He is the founder and host of [Black Diplomats](#), a weekly foreign policy podcast that explores the world via travel, politics, culture, and news from a Black perspective. He regularly appears on *In The Thick Podcast* and *The Young Turks*, where he provides analysis on Eastern European and US politics. He is working on his first book, *Black Man On The Steppes*, a memoir about how growing up in Detroit helped him understand imperialism functions in Eastern Europe and the rest of the world.

You can follow Terrell Starr on Twitter at [@Russian_Starr](#)

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