

House of Trump House of Putin
The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia

Craig Unger

London: Bantam Press, 2018, £20

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There's something odd about a 337 page book with 52 pages of footnotes but no index. It suggests to me that it had to be rushed into print before Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into the Trump campaign's alleged links to Russia finally produces some real killer dirt. That way, its premise of being 'The *Untold* Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia' (emphasis added) might still appear eye-catching.

Those 52 pages of footnotes are, however, a pointer to the fact that this is a story which *has* been told before. Unger's book has received a lukewarm reception since it doesn't really break new ground; but it does have the merit of placing a lot of otherwise widely disseminated bits of information into one volume. Bringing the jumble of bits together, like reassembling Humpty Trumpty, provides the reader with a clearer understanding of how Trump – or, more precisely, how Trump's business – got to where it is today.

According to Unger, that happened through the accommodation (literally) of Russian loose cash. His Trump Tower condos, not just in New York but in their manifestations elsewhere around the world, were a favoured money-laundering vector for the oligarchs' wandering millions. This is the single most important feature of Trump's business success; and, according to Unger, led to the occasional failure such as the non-appearance of a Moscow Trump Tower despite 27 years of effort. According to Unger:

' . . . hundreds of millions of dollars in financing for various Trump-branded properties – in SoHo, Toronto, Panama and more – had been repeatedly traced to Russians trying to get their money out of their country. And that is precisely what the Trump Moscow project could *not* offer. Laundering money for the wealthiest Russians meant getting their money out of Russia – not putting more in it.' (emphasis in the original)

It was only this factor that enabled Trump to claim during his presidential campaign that he had not invested in Russia. In fact, reading this book, one gets the impression that he rarely invested any of his own money in anything.

Trump has surrounded himself, or simply been surrounded by, dubious Russian oligarchs, most of whom have seriously nefarious connections. What is striking, ploughing through the endless shenanigans of these amoral, Mafia-connected types, is how immune most of them are to imaginary American concepts of accountability. They come and go as they please, although

occasionally one or two get caught out – a sufficient number, I suppose to demonstrate that the justice system works sometimes. Their immunity is not absolute, but they do what they can to ensure it is enhanced. Hence, in a brief section Unger does not develop, we find that leading Russian ‘industrialists’ were major funders – mainly through lobbying contracts – of big cheeses in the Republican Party, including Bob Dole, Trent Lott, John Breaux, Mitch McConnell, Marco Rubio, Lindsay Graham, John Kasich and John McCain (the last four received donations to their political action committees). Naturally, the Russians could also afford the best U.S. legal representation.

Occasionally Unger goes off into some considerable detail about the back stories of the oligarchs, and I wish the information was better organised. Perhaps in an admission of this there is a section at the back of the book entitled ‘Trump’s Fifty-Nine Russia Connections.’

Ultimately we learn nothing that couldn’t have been gleaned from the multitude of public sources used by Unger, but there are one or two questions which arise from this book which have not yet been answered. The biggest unknown is what dirt have the Russians got on Trump? Perhaps a clue can be found in the infamous meeting between Don Trump Jr. and the Russians who claimed to have compromising material on Hillary Clinton. The Trump team were sent a four-page memo ‘asserting that Democratic donors had allegedly evaded paying US taxes on Russian investments. They had been donors to Obama and it was possible they were donors to Hillary Clinton as well.’ I suspect the Trump team were just as interested in what info the Russians had on *their* tax affairs, not least in the light of the President’s refusal to reveal his own tax returns. This could be more damaging than the claim Trump spent a night in a Moscow hotel room – the very one used by the Obamas – watching women urinating on the bed. That, given previous evidence, probably wouldn’t offend his base. But his supporters may resent paying their taxes when he doesn’t.

With an index, Unger’s book would be invaluable. Absent an index, it is a guide to a maze which feels like it may not actually lead anywhere.

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