


# Substantial Disruption



## Putin's Pet Pachyderm

By Mike Tully

Edsel Ford, the President of Ford Motor Company, wanted something special for a planned vacation in March of 1939. Since he owned and operated a major auto manufacturer, he commissioned Chief Stylist Bob Gregorie, a high school dropout who designed many of Ford's most influential and popular cars of the 1930s and 1940s, to design a personalized ride. Gregorie had a preternatural ability to translate Edsel Ford's imaginings into drawings and models and their alliance inspired a smart new vehicle the owner could use on road trips and driving the grounds of his Florida estate. Gregorie based his design on the Lincoln-Zephyr, a popular model of the late 1930s. Ford wanted an updated version, one with sleek European design features, more "continental" as it were. In about an hour Gregorie came up with a design that would be known as the Lincoln Continental. Edsel Ford's new toy debuted on February 20, 1939. The unveiling of the Continental should have been the signature event of that particular day in American history, but it was eclipsed by a more sinister one.

Around the time Ford was debuting the Lincoln Continental, thousands of Nazis were filing into New York's Madison Square Garden, many of them brandishing swastikas on flags and armbands. [Some 22,000 of them packed the arena](#), facing a giant portrait – not of Adolph Hitler, but of George Washington, whom the German American Bund had ordained, "the first fascist." Bund members, Americans of German descent, were the most notorious Nazi sympathizers in the United States. But they were not alone. The next year the "[America First Committee](#)" was formed to oppose American involvement in World War Two. At its peak the America First Committee had some 800,000 members, most considerably more mainstream than the Bund membership. Its ranks included a future President (Gerald Ford) and a future Supreme Court Justice (Potter Stewart). The Committee, concerned about accusations of anti-Semitism, removed two notorious anti-Semites from its executive committee: former U. S. Olympic Chairman Avery Brundage, who had banned two Jewish athletes from the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and Henry Ford, Edsel's father. Unfortunately, the Committee failed to excise its most famous spokesperson, Charles Lindbergh, who denounced American Jews for "their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government."

The German American Bund dissolved in late 1939 and the America First Committee evaporated in the heat of World War Two. Both were consigned to history's footnotes until Donald Trump became President. He recalled the America First Committee by using the term "America First" in his campaign and inaugural address and his tacit approval of a white nationalist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, [rekindled memories of the Madison Square Garden event](#) of 1939. But the analogy to World War Two geopolitics is not limited to Trump's white nationalism, ugly as it is, but to his embrace of a leader and nation whose interests run counter to ours.

Just as the German American Bund and the America First Committee served the interests of Adolph Hitler, Trump serves the interests of Vladimir Putin. His efforts to inflame and aggravate social and racial tensions in the U. S. mirror activities by Russian bots on social media. He legitimizes Putin by ignoring his attacks on political dissent and a free press, his ordering overseas assassinations, his annexation of Crimea and unlawful intervention in the Ukraine, and his power play in the Middle East. He denounces the investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election as a political “witch hunt” and endorses Putin’s denials over the unanimous verdict of American intelligence agencies that Russian meddling continues. Trump’s denunciation of our closest allies jeopardizes America’s world standing and elevates Russia’s and his attacks on the NATO alliance threaten the free world’s best defense against Russian aggression. When Trump and Putin recently stood side-by-side in Helsinki it was sickeningly obvious that Putin was the puppet master and Trump his marionette.

The Bund, Committee and other German sympathizers never amounted to more than a fringe irritant in American society that did not present a clear and present danger to the nation. But what if their sentiments had been shared by forty percent of the country? Could a nation so divided have been able to stand up to Germany and its allies? Could a house divided have led the trans-Atlantic alliance? Would that America have stood as a symbol of hope and freedom for the rest of the world?

In 2018 America, we have been attacked and our President has sided with the attacker. More dangerously, he has taken his supporters and what used to be a respectable political party with him. The Republican majority in Congress is feckless and irresponsible. “Few Republican officials today are willing to openly criticize the president, even if they have deeply held reservations about Trump’s ability to govern,” [wrote former Republican Congressman David Jolly](#). “They instead keep their laments private, their panic measured and their comments off the record.” That leaves Trump alone to fashion the message for his followers and the results would make even Putin smile. A [recent Gallup Poll](#) shows that 40% of Republicans view Russia as an ally or friend, a rating that nearly doubled in four years. Putin’s popularity among Republicans has doubled in three years, [according to the Pew Research Center](#). That’s why Trump knows he can embrace Putin and get away with it. His followers make him feel supported and protected – like hip waders in sewage.

It has come to this: in 2018 America, you can be a patriot, or you can be a Republican. You cannot simultaneously be both.