

New York Times columnist Charles Blow blames Russia for the fall in black voter turnout

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New York Times columnist Charles Blow, in a predictable but revealing op-ed article, has weighed in on last week's indictments of 13 Russian nationals and three companies on charges of meddling in the 2016 US elections.

According to Blow, the alleged Russian trolls attacked the "black vote" in particular. The *Times* writer claims that "young black activist-minded voters" were targeted by the Russians and convinced, in significant if indeterminate numbers, to "lay down one of the most powerful political tools they have, thereby ensuring an amplification of their own oppression."

To make his case, Blow uncritically quotes from the federal indictment itself, charging that the "[d]efendants and their co-conspirators... began to encourage US minority groups not to vote in the 2016 US presidential election or to vote for a third-party US presidential candidate."

Let us pause and consider the implications of the remarkable claim by Blow that choosing not to vote, or voting for a third party, constitutes "ensuring an amplification of their own oppression." The *New York Times* and the rest of the major capitalist media wax indignant over alleged Russian election meddling, declaring it an attack on "American democracy." But democracy ostensibly includes the right to vote for a third party—in the relatively rare event that one manages to obtain ballot status—including the Green Party and its 2016 presidential candidate Jill Stein. Yet Blow, citing the federal indictment, calls urging people to vote for a third party an attack on the right to vote! He is in favor of voting rights... as long as the ballots are cast for the right candidates.

Blow accuses the Russians of "nudging [black voters]

toward an apathy built on anger." In other words, the decision not to choose between two candidates of the ruling class is an illegitimate display of "apathy." The text of the federal indictment makes clear that the alleged Russian meddling included social media appeals to not "resort to the lesser of two devils." What Blow condemns as apathy is in many cases a conscious political decision. But in so far as it threatens the political monopoly of two corporate-controlled, right-wing parties, Blow deems it illegitimate, if not treasonous.

Even if one assumes that all of the charges in the indictment are true—a doubtful assumption given the vast and well-documented capacity of the FBI to fabricate and lie—the idea that Putin or his trolls are needed to suppress voter turnout in the US is preposterous. Even in the most bitterly contested US presidential elections, barely 50 percent of the population votes. Among African-Americans the percentage of abstention has been in this range, and it has been far higher in non-presidential years. Vast numbers of working people have concluded that they have no choice within the two-party system, that it is a sham, that it represents the rich and only the rich. The ability of the corporate establishment and financial aristocracy to dictate the policies of government on all levels by bribing politicians and buying elections was enshrined into law by the notorious *Citizens United* decision handed down by the Supreme Court in 2010.

On top of its billions in campaign donations and ads, the ruling class ensures its monopoly of the political system by throwing up enormous obstacles in the path of socialist or independent candidates, including restrictive ballot access laws that make it virtually

impossible for candidates who are not enormously wealthy to get on the ballot in many of the most populous states. Left-wing candidates opposed to the two-party monopoly are routinely marginalized by the media and excluded from election debates.

As Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin explained over a century ago—in words that need not be altered—democracy under capitalism is “democracy for an insignificant minority, democracy for the rich... the oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representative of the oppressing class shall represent and repress them in parliament.”

Confronting corrupt candidates of the ruling class in both parties, is it any mystery that millions of voters chose not to cast ballots in 2016? Russian sources are supposed to have spent a measly \$15 million. For every one vote that alleged Russian meddling may have influenced, there were undoubtedly at least 100 voters who needed no reminder of the role of Clinton, the favored candidate of Wall Street and the CIA, and the broken promises, escalating militarism and rising inequality of the Obama years. Trump, the fascistic pseudo-populist, was able to exploit disgust with the Democrats to obtain the necessary level of abstention among working class voters, black and white, as well as votes by desperate sections of workers to win the electoral vote.

Many African-Americans were well aware of the role of the Clintons, in both the “welfare reform” and law-and-order hysteria of the 1990s, during Bill Clinton’s two terms in the White House, which increased mass incarceration to record levels.

Let us examine the issue of voter suppression as it really exists, not in the fertile imagination of Charles Blow. Some five years ago, the US Supreme Court invalidated the most crucial provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, thus freeing nine states, mostly in the South, to enact changes in voting procedures without first obtaining federal approval. This set in motion a whole series of efforts to chip away at voting rights that were won in generations of struggle against Jim Crow segregation. In recent years, for instance, the number of states demanding photo identification as a condition for voting has increased to 18.

The attacks on voting rights have been spearheaded by the most reactionary elements within the Republican Party, but the Democrats and their supporters such as

Blow, now screaming about election tampering by foreigners, have been virtually silent about real attacks that have disenfranchised millions of voters. Their concern is not the right to vote, but the defense of the utterly anti-democratic two-party system of American capitalism.

So naked is Blow’s obeisance to the political status quo that he feels obliged to somewhat cover his tracks, admitting that fellow purveyor of racist politics and author Michelle Alexander, as well as the former National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick, denounced Hillary Clinton. Not wanting to attack these figures, he winds up with the argument that “in making their electoral choices, black folks had unwanted hands on their back, unethical and illegal ones...”

Notwithstanding this double-talk, the aim of Blow’s column is very clear. Any workers and youth who fight against the stranglehold of the capitalist two-party system are at best unwitting dupes of the “revisionist” power Russia or other foreign actors singled out as enemies of US imperialism. They have been warned.

There is a political logic to this neo-McCarthyism. Those who persist in their un-American activity, who look for alternative news sources and fight to break from the parties of big business, the Democrats in particular, are guilty of disloyalty and will be dealt with accordingly. Just as pioneer socialist Eugene Debs was sent to prison for opposing the First World War 100 years ago, so today the label of treason can and will be pinned on those who resist the bipartisan war preparations of the ruling class.

Blow’s column shows the reactionary role of racial identity politics. He calls the alleged Russian meddling “a racialized crime.” This highlights the role of identity politics in cultivating a constituency in the upper middle class for imperialist war abroad and repression at home.



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