

New documents on Yeltsin-Clinton conversations further expose US “meddling” in Russian politics

Clara Weiss
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In the early summer, the Clinton Foundation released hundreds of pages of newly declassified documents about conversations between US president Bill Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin between 1996 and 1999. The documents show the extent of US meddling in Russian domestic politics in the 1990s, and are a stark testimony to the groveling of the Russian oligarchy, personified by Boris Yeltsin, before US imperialism.

Under conditions of a thoroughly hypocritical and right-wing media hysteria about alleged Russian “meddling” in the 2016 US elections, and a massive NATO military build-up against Russia, these documents acquire special significance. It is telling that hardly any US newspaper reported on the newly declassified records which contradict almost every element of their anti-Russian propaganda.

The earliest documents date from 1996, the year of the presidential elections in Russia. Boris Yeltsin, who had presided over the “shock therapy” with which capitalism was fully restored in Russia, was by now widely hated and stood almost no chance of winning the election. The most likely winner was Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Stalinist Communist Party (KPRF).

That the US heavily intervened in these elections to bolster Yeltsin, with whom Clinton had developed a close political relationship, has long been known. As a matter of fact, the US media, including *Time* magazine, bragged about this operation, which involved sending several highly paid former US officials to Russia to help Yeltsin with his campaign.

The newly released minutes provide more detailed insight into this thoroughly anti-democratic operation.

In a telephone conversation between Yeltsin and Clinton on 21 April 1996, Yeltsin urged Clinton “to not embrace Zyuganov.” Clinton responded: “You don’t have to worry about that. We spent fifty years working for the other result.”

About two weeks later, on 7 May 1996, they spoke again. This time, Yeltsin begged Clinton for a massive IMF loan to be used for his presidential campaign. The conversation is worth quoting at some length:

Yeltsin: Please understand me correctly. Bill, for my election campaign, I urgently need for Russia a loan of \$2.5 billion.

Clinton: Let me ask this: didn’t it help you a lot when the Paris Club rescheduled Russia’s debt? I thought that would have caused several billions of dollars to flow into your country.

Yeltsin: No. It will be coming in the second half of the year. And in the first half of the year, we will only have \$300 million due to conditions set by the IMF. ... But the problem is I need money to pay pensions and wages. Without resolving this matter of pensions and wages, it will be very difficult to go into the election campaign. You know, if we could resolve this subject in a way with him providing the \$2.5 billion in the first half, we could perhaps manage. Or if you could do it under your

banks with Russian government guarantees.

Clinton: I’ll check on this with the IMF and with some of our friends and see what can be done. I think this is the only way it can be done, but let me clarify this. I had understood that you would get about \$1 billion from the IMF before the election. Yeltsin: No, no, only \$300 million. Clinton: I’ll check.

Yeltsin: Okay.

Later on in the conversation, Clinton said: “I was very pleased to see that you quickly dismissed the suggestion that the elections be postponed. This election will be the milestone for Russian democracy. I believe you are right to trust in the wisdom of the Russian voters. Your statement is receiving enormous favorable publicity in the United States and around the world.

The 1996 election in Russia was about as “democratic” as the entire process of capitalist restoration: funded and supported by US imperialism, it was a blatant assault on the democratic rights and social interests of the working class. Clinton, as other US presidents before and after him, used the term “democratic” only to designate developments that corresponded to the political and foreign policy interests of US imperialism.

The pathetic begging of Yeltsin for US support in an election he knew he would otherwise lose was symptomatic of the Russian oligarchy’s relationship toward what it considered its “big brother”. The oligarchy as a whole emerged as the product of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s total capitulation to imperialism, the destruction of the Soviet Union, and has been, from the very beginning, deeply dependent on international finance capital, centered in the US.

Throughout the 1990s, the oligarchy relied on the active help of US imperialism in implementing the “shock therapy”. Countless “advisors”, previous government and active CIA personnel, flocked to Russia to “help” the oligarchs plunder the country and establish control over as many resources as possible.

This close relationship was reflected in the friendship between Yeltsin, a notorious drunkard, and Clinton. In 1996-1997, hardly a conversation passed between the two presidents without Yeltsin telling Clinton that he had “missed him” or offering him a “bear hug”. Clinton, who made no secret of his personal affection for Yeltsin countered by assuring Yeltsin in his turn that he too had missed him and repeatedly praised him as the “father of Russian democracy”.

Whatever the personal affinities between Clinton and Yeltsin, and the almost boundless readiness of the oligarchy to capitulate to demands from Washington, US imperialism showed no sign of easing the pressure on Russia: quite the contrary. As the *World Socialist Web Site* analyzed at the time, US imperialism was determined to bring all the resources that had been opened up through the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 by the Stalinist bureaucracy under its direct control. (See also: “Why is NATO at

war with Yugoslavia? World power, oil and gold”)

Even as the US and NATO recklessly pushed toward the borders of Russia, the Yeltsin administration was scrambling to maintain as high a level of political cooperation as possible. Yet the framework which US imperialism granted to the Russian oligarchy’s maneuvers was shrinking continuously.

The increasingly tense conversations between Clinton and Yeltsin from 1998 and 1999 about the US bombing of Iraq in 1998 and of Serbia in 1999 reflect this dynamic. The first fall-out between Yeltsin and Clinton occurred over the bombing of Iraq, which Yeltsin’s administration, acting above all through the foreign minister who was working closely with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, had tried to prevent by helping to pressure Saddam Hussein for years. (It is worth recalling that the Stalinist bureaucracy gave the green light to the first bombing of Iraq in 1990 under President George Bush.)

In a telephone conversation on 22 November 1997, in which Clinton indicated that he was considering military options, Yeltsin tried to insist on diplomatic pressure, saying: “You know that we will be ready to apply pressure on him every day and to keep our representative, Viktor Posuvalyuk, there on a daily basis. We want to pressure him into accepting our conditions. We are going to act until his mind is set correctly.” Yet despite the attempts by the Russian oligarch to help further a deal, in late 1998, the US bombed Iraq, once again, without warning and without a declaration of war.

Tensions further escalated over the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia a few months later. Throughout the first months of 1999, Yeltsin was arguing, or, rather, begging, the US president to continue to pursue a “diplomatic” solution to the conflict with Serbian leader Milosevic, with whom sections of the Russian ruling elite maintained close ties.

On 24 March, 1999, NATO started to bomb Serbia. The strikes would last until 10 June 1999, killing up to 538 civilians, and destroying numerous public buildings and critical infrastructure in the impoverished country. In Russia, some 96 percent of the population denounced the strikes as a “crime against humanity”. Meanwhile, Yeltsin was coming under massive pressure from within the oligarchy and sections of the military, who felt that Russia’s betting on an alliance with the US had ended in a disaster.

In a phone call with Clinton on 25 April 1999, which lasted over one and a half hours, an exasperated and visibly desperate Yeltsin urged Clinton to immediately end the bombing. He assured Clinton that he was resisting calls from within his army command for military intervention.

Yeltsin: You know that I am hearing concerns by our military who are talking about getting military servicemen to go and help Milosevic. You know I have condemned this in the strictest terms and convened my Security Council and said there should be no talk about that. Any General that speaks of sending troops to help Milosevic will be summarily dismissed from the military.

Clinton: Thank you.

Then, Yeltsin indicated that it was impossible for him to defend his position for long, urging Clinton to end the war as soon as possible. Visibly exasperated, Yeltsin shouted: “do not push Russia into this war. You know what Russia is. You know how it is equipped, but don’t push Russia into this.”

Fearing an escalation of the conflict, Yeltsin set into motion a major diplomatic mission with Chernomyrdin, then the head of Gazprom which at the time was the world’s largest gas monopoly, to persuade Milosevic to enter negotiations with the US and NATO. Soon after the ending of the NATO bombardment, Yeltsin told Clinton in a 13 June 1999 telephone conversation that he had designated Vladimir Putin as his successor. (Putin was a high-ranking member of the presidential administration in Moscow since the rigged elections of 1996.)

Yeltsin: Shortly, in the next few days, you will have a meeting with Mr.

Putin. Briefly at this time, I would like to tell you about him so you will know what kind of man he is. It took me a lot of time to think who might be the next Russian president in the year 2000.

Unfortunately, at that time, I could not find any sitting candidate. Finally, I came across him, that is, Putin, and I explored his bio, his interests, his acquaintances, and so on and so forth. I found out he is a solid man who is kept well abreast of various subjects under his purview. At the same time, he is thorough and strong, very sociable. And he can easily have good relations and contact with people who are his partners. I am sure you will find him to be a highly qualified partner. I am very much convinced that he will be supported as a candidate in the year 2000. We are working on it accordingly.

Clinton said: ...we have had good contacts with Mr. Putin so far, and I look forward to meeting with him in Auckland.

It is fair to say that Clinton knew more about “what kind of man” Putin was than over 90 percent of Russian voters at the time. Putin, the ex-KGB man behind the rise of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg, had been a murky figure for most of the 1990s. His main preoccupation, apart from dealings with the local mafia, were backdoor conversations with representatives of foreign banks and imperialist governments whom he visited as the right hand of Sobchak. According to the British journalist Ben Judah, Putin enjoyed the sympathy of roughly 1 percent of the population when he was designated by Yeltsin as his successor.

At a meeting in Istanbul on 19 November 1999, Yeltsin and Clinton had the following exchange about Putin:

Clinton: Who will win the election?

Yeltsin: Putin, of course. He will be the successor to Boris Yeltsin. He’s a democrat, and he knows the West.

Clinton: He’s very smart.

Yeltsin: He’s tough. He has an internal ramrod.

He’s tough internally, and I will do everything possible for him to win—legally, of course. And he will win. You’ll do business together. He will continue the Yeltsin line on democracy and economics and widen Russia’s contacts. He has the energy and the brains to succeed.

With all the anti-Putin propaganda in the US and Western media, it is worth recalling that Putin was considered a formidable choice by Yeltsin. Putin’s “toughness” was endorsed by business circles internationally who felt that Russia needed its own “Pinochet” to put the country in order, and establish a firm framework for the reckless and unhampered exploitation of the working class and Russia’s resources through major banks and corporations.

The fact that Putin’s nomination was at least in part a result of the growing sentiments within the Russian oligarchy that it could only defend its interests by pushing back, at least to some extent, against the United States, was lost upon most US observers until Putin’s moves against the pro-US oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky in 2003.

The push-back from the Russian oligarchy—however limited—has since established limitations upon the exploitation of Russia’s raw material resources for foreign companies. The Russian oligarchy has also maintained its own foreign policy alliances and economic ties, including with other major imperialist powers like Germany, that are at odds with the economic and foreign policy interests of US imperialism.

All of this has been an ever-growing thorn in the side of US imperialism in its drive to global hegemony. This is the fundamental motivation for the hysterical anti-Russia and anti-Putin campaign of recent years. In shedding light on both the crimes of US imperialism in the 1990s, and Washington’s relations with the Russian oligarchy under Yeltsin, the newly declassified documents are yet another testimony to the fundamentally deceitful and right-wing character of this campaign.



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