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In his summation and comment on the Mueller Report (LRB 9 June), David Runciman understandably focuses on the issue with which Robert Mueller was charged, Russian meddling in the American electoral process. Other issues, such as the campaign finance law, which he mentions, are “a job for legislator, not special prosecutors. Your problem, Congress!”

He is right: the issue posed for Mr. Mueller was narrow and legal rather than comprehensive and political. In short, Mr. Runciman implicitly accepts what both Mr. Mueller and the media have virtually single-mindedly focused on: the Russian involvement in the American elections. This, in our opinion, is understandable but is both ahistorical and misleading.

Consider first the historical experience, at least in modern times: each of the world powers has engaged in prolonged, often overt, frequently covert and sometimes violent programs that attempted to guide, bribe or coerce the governments and opinion-makers of rivals and so to shape their actions and even their political structures.

The list of American actions from the Monroe Doctrine onward aimed not just to keep the Europeans out of Latin America but to make the emerging states into America’s clones. And our relations with Mexican regimes? We often aimed at ‘regime change.’ Even Woodrow Wilson tried to have the recalcitrant Mexican leader Pancho Villa murdered. Successive administrations tried to make the Central American republics safe not for democracy but for American corporations. And Wilson’s plan to make the world safe for democracy? His Fourteen Points aimed at rearranging the European empires in ways that the imperial powers regarded as subversive.

In pushing for radical change, Americans were hardly johnnies-come-lately, but we got more serious in the aftermath of the Second World War. Since then, overtly through the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, Point Four, the IMF, the World Bank and armed force and covertly through a variety of actions undertaken by the CIA, the Defense Department, Radio Free Europe, the Congress for Cultural Freedom etc., we have patronized every willing politician (and his supporters or constituents) we could find. We bought or at least rented country after country — France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Greece, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, (Nationalist) China and Taipei. So far as Russia is concerned, Americans provided advisers, money and propaganda support to Boris Yeltsin’s ‘comeback’ victory in the presidential election of 1996. So, it should not astonish us if the Russians borrowed page from our playbook and tried to help their favored candidate, Mr. Trump, get elected.

Such action was not new for the Russians either. All the Communist leaders from before Lenin were aiming to persuade the whole world to adopt their recipe for world order. They told us all about their aims and methods.

Who thinks that such machinations -- both by the Russians, by us and by other Powers -- began in Trump’s time? Does no one in the media or government service any longer read history? Listening to the breast-beating Democrats or the evasive Republicans, one would think not.

For some of us, it is emotionally satisfying to catch the Russians out. But, in fact, their efforts seem to have had no tangible effect on the election outcome. What is important is the effect of the

brouhaha over their attempt. The comedy being played out in the media for our amusement is precisely what the word amusement originally meant, “diversion.” The cat and mouse game, the speculation and now, finally, the unsatisfying conclusion of Mueller’s report have diverted attention from both the possible use of government power for private financial gain and, even more important, from critical decisions that will shape our lives and the lives of our children for generations to come.

We must not allow ourselves to be distracted from such literally vital questions as: What kind of a world is the Trump administration creating? What is it doing to our little planet’s ability to sustain life? Is it moving us away from a nuclear Armageddon or toward it? Are its trade policies protecting or enhancing our economic well-being? Is it helping to find ways for us to live in affordable security in a multicultural world or trying to beat the wretched of the Earth into submission? Is it helping us to create -- or to preserve – the elements of mutual domestic and international respect that the American Founding Father James Madison told us are the only stable bases of freedom?

From these fundamental issues, Mr. Mueller and the interpretation of his report in the media have given us a popular distraction, almost a Restoration Comedy. But while we can laugh or weep over them, we cannot escape them; they form the scale in which his report has to be evaluated: Can we face them, understand them and set out salvaging the good life many of us have enjoyed? Those tasks are, of course, political rather than legal, but to address them, the first step is to liberate them from the comedy performed by Mr. Trump’s cast of comen, tricksters and adventurers. We need the help of able, well-informed and serious commentators like Mr. Runciman to keep from losing sight of them as we ponder Mr. Muller's report.

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