

-
- **Sections**

Democracy Dies in Darkness

- [Sign In](#)
-

The Fix Analysis

Trump's apparent sympathy for assassination

A report suggests Trump initially viewed the poisoning of former Russian agent Sergei Skripal on British soil as fair game for Vladimir Putin. It fits a trend.



President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands in Helsinki on July 16, 2018. (Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)



By [Aaron Blake](#)

April 16

The New York Times is out with [a lengthy look at CIA Director Gina Haspel](#) and her relationship with a president who is often skeptical of his own intelligence community.

One detail in paragraph 15 [stands out](#):

Last March, top national security officials gathered inside the White House to discuss with Mr. Trump how to respond to the nerve agent attack in Britain on Sergei V. Skripal, the former Russian intelligence agent.

London was pushing for the White House to expel dozens of suspected Russian operatives, but Mr. Trump was skeptical. He had initially written off the poisoning as part of legitimate spy games, distasteful but within the bounds of espionage. Some officials said they thought that Mr. Trump, who has frequently criticized “rats” and other turncoats, had some sympathy for the Russian government’s going after someone viewed as a traitor.

The story goes on to say Haspel was able to prevail upon President Trump to offer a tough response, after showing him images of children who had come into contact with the same nerve agent. But

Trump's apparent first impulse here is extremely noteworthy, and very much in keeping with his other commentary on stuff like this.

Put plainly: Trump's default mode seems to border on indifference toward strongmen and their political assassinations.

The most famous/infamous example of this came shortly after Trump was inaugurated, when Bill O'Reilly interviewed him ahead of the Super Bowl. O'Reilly asked Trump about his kind words for Russian President Vladimir Putin on the 2016 campaign trail and noted that Putin was a "killer." But Trump suggested what Putin was doing [was little different than what the United States does.](#)

"There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers," Trump said. "Well, you think our country is so innocent?"

When asked in 2016 about another poisoning of an ex-KGB agent for which [British authorities had just fingered Putin](#), then-candidate Trump suggested he wasn't sure that conclusion was right. "Have they found him guilty? I don't think they've found him guilty," Trump said of the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko. He added: ["If he did it, fine. But I don't know that he did it."](#)

When "60 Minutes" in October 2018 asked Trump about Putin's alleged killings and poisonings of political foes, he said Putin had "probably" engaged in such things, but he also emphasized that ["it's not in our country."](#)

Trump offered similar comments downplaying the U.S. interest in the Saudis' killing of Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi last year. Trump conspicuously noted at the time that the attack ["took place in Turkey, and to the best of our knowledge, Khashoggi is not a United States citizen."](#)

When it comes to Kim Jong Un, Trump's commentary has occasionally boiled over into what appears to be admiration for the North Korean dictator's ability to command power by whatever means necessary. When Fox News's Bret Baier in June 2018 borrowed O'Reilly's tack and noted to Trump that Kim is a "killer" who is "clearly executing people," Trump quickly turned it around. He argued that Kim was a "tough guy" and praised him.

BAIER: You call people sometimes "killers." He — you know, he is a killer. I mean, he's clearly executing people. And —

TRUMP: He's a tough guy. Hey, when you take over a country, tough country, with tough people, and you take it over from your father, I don't care who you are, what you are, how much of an advantage you have, if you can do that at 27 years old, you — I mean that's one in 10,000 that could do that, so he's a very smart guy. He's a great negotiator. But I think we understand each other.

When Baier pressed Trump, Trump returned to an answer reminiscent of the O'Reilly interview: "So have a lot of other people done some really bad things. I mean, I could go through a lot of nations where a lot of bad things were done."

In another interview, Trump even praised Kim’s triumph over his uncle, whom [Kim ultimately executed](#). Kim has also been accused of [ordering the assassination of his half brother](#) in a Malaysian airport using a nerve agent.

“A lot of people, I’m sure, tried to take that power away, whether it was his uncle or anybody else,” Trump told CBS’s “Face the Nation” in April 2017. “And he was able to do it. So obviously, he’s a pretty smart cookie.”

Any of these comments could be dismissed as Trump not wanting to prejudge, as him wanting to forge relationships with complicated people in difficult regions or even as Trump simply being “America first.” But the combined picture is one of a president whose tendency is to shrug at assassinations by strongmen.

While the United States certainly can’t police every human rights abuse across the world, these examples involve attacks that took place on allied soil, that involved a journalist for an American newspaper, that used nerve agents and that allowed dictators to continue to wield power in ways that could threaten the U.S. Given all of that, the idea that Trump’s first impulse was to dismiss the attempted assassination of a former Russian agent on British soil is unsurprising — but also completely noteworthy.

454

Comments



[Aaron Blake](#) Aaron Blake is senior political reporter, writing for The Fix. A Minnesota native, he has also written about politics for the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the Hill newspaper.