



The Continuing, Poisonous Russia Obsession

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For more than a decade, there has been pronounced animus toward Russia in the American news media and among hawks, especially congressional Democrats, in the political community. That hostility surged when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014. Furious political leaders and Western media outlets slammed the Kremlin's action as an outrageous case of unprovoked aggression, akin to the start of Adolf Hitler's expansionist binge in the late 1930s. Such an interpretation greatly oversimplified a complex historical and contemporary situation involving Ukraine, but it became the dominant narrative in the United States.

The Crimea episode also triggered an onslaught of smears against American scholars, journalists, and political figures who rejected that simplistic narrative and advocated a more nuanced, conciliatory policy toward Russia. Innuendos and even outright accusations that dissenters were Moscow's dupes or traitors soon reached levels not seen since the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Matters became even more heated when leading Democrats accused the Russian government of interfering in the 2016 U.S. election to help defeat Hillary Clinton. Worse, they accused Donald Trump's campaign of colluding with that effort.

Collusion allegations, fed by leaks from leaders of the intelligence agencies and amplified by their allies in Congress and the media, not only led Barack Obama's administration to launch an FBI investigation into Trump's campaign, it ultimately escalated to the appointment of a special counsel, Robert Mueller, in May 2017 to continue and expand the inquiry. The Russia issue remained at the center of public and media attention throughout the following years. Blatant anti-Trump (and broader anti-Russia) bias characterized most of the press coverage and political debates.

Key Democrats in Congress, such as California representatives Adam Schiff and Eric Swalwell, and New York representative Jerrold Nadler, were especially eager to push the Russia conspiracy narrative. After the Democrats gained control of the House in the 2018 midterm election, Schiff became chairman of the Intelligence Committee and Nadler chairman of the Judiciary Committee. From those posts, they launched new probes (with maximum publicity) into the supposed collusion scandal.

Some members of the media were at least as enthusiastic as Schiff, Swalwell, and Nadler in pushing the "Trump is a Russian agent" theme. An especially avid voice was that of MSNBC host Rachel Maddow. Writing in February 2019, *New York Post* columnist Kyle Smith noted,

For two years Maddow built her MSNBC show around an actual conspiracy theory, that Trump was engaged in some kind of illegal collusion with Vladimir Putin, and issued one wild speculation after another: that there was a 'continuing operation' involving Putin pulling strings here, that Putin was in a position to blackmail Trump into recalling troops from the Russian

border, that a Trump-directed missile attack could have been ordered by Putin, that the Russians might be in a position to shut down our power during cold weather.

Maddow, though, has not been the only prominent media figure guilty of circulating wild, unsupported Russia conspiracy theories. The *Washington Post* has amassed an especially unsavory record. When an anonymous group, PropOrNot, issued a report in November 2016 accusing more than 200 websites on both the Left and Right of being “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda,” the *Post* touted the report. Dozens of other outlets then picked up the *Post* story, and it quickly became a media sensation. As skeptical *Intercept* reporter Glenn Greenwald pointed out, however, “those statistics were provided by a new, anonymous group that reached these conclusions by classifying long-time, well-known sites – from the Drudge Report to Clinton-critical left-wing websites such as Truthout, Black Agenda Report, Truthdig, and Naked Capitalism, as well as libertarian venues such as Antiwar.com and the Ron Paul Institute – as “Russian propaganda outlets.” *Post* editors ultimately backed away from the story with a lengthy “editor’s note,” but the misinformation had already circulated extensively.

Another *Post* story asserted that Russian hackers had invaded the U.S. electricity grid through a Vermont utility, a probe that someday could lead to the denial of heat to consumers in wintertime. The report caused predictable outrage and panic, along with anti-Russia vitriol and threats from US political leaders. But then, Greenwald noted, the *Post* “kept diluting the story with editor’s notes – to admit that the malware was found on a laptop not connected to the US electric grid at all – until finally acknowledging, days later, that the whole story was false, since the malware had nothing to do with Russia or with the US electric grid.” Such erroneous news stories stoked an ever-growing anti-Russia narrative in the United States.

More allegations

For all of the hype, the Trump collusion narrative gradually unraveled. Indeed, the real collusion scandal was how congressional activists and anti-Trump elements in the press cooperated closely with hawkish leaders in the FBI and the intelligence agencies regarding the Russia issue in general and allegations about Trump’s supposed disloyalty in particular. Schiff and his colleagues routinely received high-level leaks of information putting Trump and Russia in a bad light. So, too, did the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, MSNBC, and other anti-Trump media outlets. Indeed, a veritable media–intelligence community partnership became evident. Former CIA director John Brennan, former NSA director James Clapper, and former FBI director James Comey were all frequent guests on the leading television news shows. Such figures had two features in common: they all loathed Trump, and they all regarded Russia as an existential security threat to the United States and all democratic countries.

Even when Robert Mueller’s lengthy investigation failed to uncover evidence of collusion or a measurable Russian impact on the US election, most congressional and media types – who had given maximum exposure to that allegation for more than two years – still refused to back off. Neither did FBI and intelligence community leaders. In fact, even when Justice Department Inspector General Michael Horowitz issued his report in December 2019, documenting the extent of FBI abuses in its investigation of the Trump campaign, members of the anti-Russia brigade still sought to perpetuate their narrative that Russian infiltration posed a threat to America’s political system.

In February 2020, yet another “blockbuster” story appeared in the *New York Times* – this time about a classified intelligence briefing given to the House Intelligence Committee the previous week asserting that Russia was busily interfering in the upcoming election. Reuters reporter Jonathan Landay noted that “US officials have long warned that Russia and other countries would try to interfere in the 2020 US presidential election campaign.” But once again accusations from members of the US intelligence apparatus targeted Russia while barely mentioning other possible foreign actors. That emphasis continued to feed the narrative that Trump was a Russian asset, and that Moscow’s machinations were the chief threat to the nation’s security.

This time, though, the intelligence community’s new warnings regarding the Russian menace were not entirely partisan. The *Washington Post* broke a story confirming that agencies had briefed Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders a few weeks earlier that Moscow was trying to influence primary contests to benefit his candidacy. Sanders’s reaction indicated just how intimidating allegations of pro-Russian sentiments had become in the American political debate. “Unlike Donald Trump, I do not consider Vladimir Putin a good friend. He is an autocratic thug who is attempting to destroy democracy and crush dissent in Russia,” Sanders said. “Let’s be clear: the Russians want to undermine American democracy by dividing us up and, unlike the current president, I stand firmly against their efforts, and any other foreign power that wants to interfere in our election.”

Allegations about Russia’s dire threat to America, and the smearing of anyone who disputes that narrative, appear to be growing worse, not diminishing. A *New York Times* op-ed by Jonathan Stevenson, who served on the National Security Council staff during Obama’s administration, used Trump’s appointment of Richard Grenell as Acting Director of National Intelligence to make such a foray. Stevenson’s principal grievance quickly came into focus. “Mr. Grenell, like Mr. Trump, does not rate Russian efforts to manipulate American elections a pressing national security concern. From this perspective, Mr. Grenell’s appointment as the country’s highest-ranking intelligence officer looks intended to ensure that any US intelligence assessments and warnings of Russian meddling in the 2020 election are downplayed and withheld from Congress, if not completely suppressed.”

Other targets

Drive-by smears accusing political or ideological opponents of having unsavory links to Russia have now become a pervasive feature in America’s political process. At times, they are so strained as to be almost comical – if it weren’t for their ugly echoes of McCarthyism. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s critics have taken to calling him “Moscow Mitch.” Ironically, they do so even though he was an ardent hawk during the Cold War and is staunchly anti-Putin. McConnell stated explicitly in August 2018, that he thought “the Russians are acting like the old Soviet Union.”

But even such a neo-cold war stance was not sufficient to shield him from accusations that he does Russia’s bidding. To his opponents, McConnell’s refusal to blindly endorse new “election security” laws and support the impeachment of Trump was sufficient to impugn his loyalty to the country. In July 2019, MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough asserted that McConnell’s “lack of action” on allegations of Russian election meddling was downright “un-American.” He continued his indictment by accusing the majority leader of “aiding and abetting Vladimir Putin’s ongoing attempts to subvert American democracy.” The following month, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi

used the derisive “Moscow Mitch” nickname because of Mc-Connell’s stance on election security.

When adversaries weren’t applying the “Moscow Mitch” label, they were ridiculing McConnell for protesting the smear. They were especially indignant about his response that the term constituted McCarthyism. *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank stated that “McCarthyism, by definition, is a type of defamation using indiscriminate allegations based on unsubstantiated charges. But the allegations underlying Moscow Mitch are specific and well-substantiated. He has blocked virtually every meaningful bill to prevent a repeat of Russia’s 2016 election interference.”

How that position automatically constituted treasonous behavior to serve Russia’s interests and did not merely reflect an honest policy disagreement, Milbank did not discuss. On another occasion, he was even more explicit in his depiction of McConnell’s alleged servitude to Moscow, flatly calling the Senate majority leader a “Russian asset,” and justifying the use of that label. “Russia attacked our country in 2016. It is attacking us today. Its attacks will intensify in 2020. Yet each time we try to raise our defenses to repel the attack, McConnell, the Senate majority leader, blocks us from defending ourselves.” Milbank went on: “Let’s call this what it is: unpatriotic. The Kentucky Republican is, arguably more than any other American, doing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s bidding.”

His diatribe both exaggerated the significance of Russia’s “attacks” and impugned a political opponent simply for daring to resist policies that Milbank believed to be important. If that line of argument doesn’t constitute McCarthyism, it’s a great imitation.

Hyping the Russia threat carried over into the impeachment case against Trump. Ostensibly, the complaint was that Trump pressured Ukraine’s recently elected president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to investigate Trump’s political rival Joe Biden, as a condition for releasing a congressionally approved military aid package for Kiev. But it became apparent throughout the impeachment hearings and trial that Trump’s critics had a much broader agenda.

Several witnesses during the House impeachment hearings demonstrated one important and ominous point. Ambassador William B. Taylor, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George P. Kent, NSC staffer Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, and others made it clear that they did not object merely to Trump’s alleged bid for a quid pro quo from Zelensky. Instead, they saw Trump’s entire Ukraine policy as insufficiently hardline and, therefore, unacceptable.

Indeed, Taylor and Kent exuded an attitude that it was improper for the president to change any aspect of a staunchly supportive US policy toward Kiev and a correspondingly hostile policy toward Russia. It was not a new stance, and it didn’t apply just to Ukraine policy. More than two years earlier, Arizona Sen. John McCain excoriated his colleague Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) for opposing NATO membership for Montenegro. “You are achieving the objectives of Vladimir Putin,” McCain charged. When Paul refused to back down, his attack continued. “[He] has no justification for his objection to having a small nation be part of NATO that is under assault from the Russians. So I repeat again, the senator from Kentucky is now working for Vladimir Putin.” NATO membership for a militarily irrelevant microstate was the litmus test for loyalty to America.

McCain's attitude has now become pervasive. To Russophobes, it is self-evident that Russia is a dire threat to America's security, liberty, and governance. And woe be to anyone who disputes that conventional wisdom in the slightest! Such a stridently hawkish stance stifles meaningful debate on an important foreign-policy issue, and it promotes unreasoning hostility toward the one country that has the military wherewithal (more than 2,000 nuclear weapons) to erase the United States as a functioning society. The new McCarthyism is, therefore, not just ugly and disreputable as a political and ideological tactic, it has potentially catastrophic real-world consequences. That approach already has helped produce a new cold war with Moscow, and a hot war is no longer a far-fetched possibility. Unfortunately, anti-Russia sentiment has become so virulent, it will be difficult for Trump or any future president to defuse the dangerous bilateral tensions and pursue a more conciliatory policy.

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