



Smears and Hyperbole: Neo-McCarthyism Run Amok On Russia Policy

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Donald Trump's comments during the 2016 presidential campaign that he wanted the United States to have more-cooperative relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia have triggered a mixture of hysteria and viciousness among his political adversaries. Hawks conduct a concerted campaign to demonize Russia and portray it as a dire threat not only to the security of the West, but as a specific threat to America's political system. Claims that Russian intelligence operatives hacked the Democratic National Committee and meddled in the 2016 election have intensified that campaign.

The result is a toxic ideological environment in which advocates of a hardline policy toward Moscow routinely impugn both the patriot-ism and ethics of their opponents. Already in October 2016, Hillary Clinton stated that her opponent would be "Putin's puppet." Although Trump and his current or former advisors have been the principal targets of such vilification, they are by no means the only ones. Even scholars and journalists who previously enjoyed impeccable credentials are now the victims of character assassination.

Debasing the media and public dialogue in that fashion is bad enough, but it also has real-world policy consequences. The overwrought campaign that Sen. Joseph McCarthy and some of his colleagues conducted during the 1950s to ferret out alleged communist agents had a long-lasting deleterious impact. Modern-day defenders of McCarthy note that when the Kremlin archives were opened following the demise of the Soviet Union, documents confirmed that some of his targets, such as Treasury official Harry Dexter White, were in fact Soviet agents. But McCarthy and his supporters hardly confined their accusations to the handful of real traitors. Unfounded accusations of communist sympathies destroyed the reputations and careers of numerous innocent parties.

McCarthy's "loyalty" crusade also intimidated critics of Washington's existing foreign policy and chilled debate, preventing consideration of worthwhile alternatives. One consequence of that rigidity and the absence of meaningful public scrutiny was the simplistic equation of North Vietnam's behavior with Nazi Germany's aggression in the late 1930s. U.S. leaders then erroneously concluded that the United States had to intervene in Vietnam's civil war. More than 58,000 Americans and more than a million Vietnamese paid with their lives for that blunder.

The current bout of neo-McCarthyism threatens to have a similar corrosive effect on policy toward Russia and even on modest modifications to the U.S. commitment to NATO. Outspoken Democrats vie with each other to heap abuse on Russia and any American official who questions the stereotype of that country as supreme planetary villain. Rep. Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) insisted

that Russia's alleged election meddling was "an act of war." Her California colleague, Rep. Eric Swalwell, echoed that assertion. "We were attacked by Russia," he charged, and the electronic assault "was ordered by Vladimir Putin." Such accusations were relatively restrained, though, compared to Washington congressman Denny Heck's comparison of Russia's actions to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Worries about Russia, he insisted, had nothing to do with politics. Instead, "this is about patriotism . . . this is about country, and the very heart of what this country is built on, which is open, free, trusted elections."

Ad hominem attacks

A corollary to the effort to demonize Russia is the allegation that the motive for Moscow's actions was to help Trump win the election because Russian leaders considered him either a willing agent of influence or a dupe. That narrative has now become pervasive. Media allies of the Democrats, especially the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, MSNBC, Salon, and the *Huffington Post*, feature both official editorials and opinion columns, as well as editorials masquerading as news stories, either explicitly or implicitly making that case. The propaganda barrage has persisted even though the actual evidence ranges from thin to nonexistent.

It has become politically hazardous even for people not associated with the Trump administration to advocate a strategy of realism and restraint toward Moscow. The innuendoes — and sometimes outright accusations — against Trump and his associates are mushrooming. And it appears to be having an impact on policy. Observers note that Trump seems to be backing away from adopting a conciliatory policy toward Moscow regarding Crimea and other issues. Widespread speculation that he would move promptly to soften or even lift the economic sanctions that the Obama administration imposed on Russia has yet to be borne out. Moreover, the president's rhetoric regarding Russia has clearly hardened. One reason may well be a fear that if he does not ostentatiously display a "tough" line on Russia, the accusations of being Putin's tool will grow even worse, and more Americans will believe them.

The orchestrated anti-Russia sentiment has already reached alarming levels. Scarcely a day goes by without House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Rep. Adam Schiff (ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee), Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, or other prominent Democrats contending, at the very least, that there is "circumstantial evidence" that members of the Trump campaign colluded with Russian intelligence agents during the 2016 election cycle.

Merely having meetings with Russia's ambassador to the United States or other Russian diplomats is deemed to be strong evidence of such collusion. Yet oddly enough almost no one makes allegations of that sort when similar contacts are made with Chinese officials, Israeli diplomats, or representatives of numerous other countries. Both the Democratic Party leadership and their media allies also exhibited convenient amnesia that several prominent Democrats met with the same Russian diplomats that the Trump people did. The reality is that political figures in both parties, as well as journalists and think tank scholars, who deal with foreign policy issues find that they need to meet with, well, foreigners.

To imply that such contacts constitute a treasonous collusion is either irrational or terribly cynical. But that is the spin that critics put on those activities. Unfortunately, contradictory statements by National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and Attorney General Jeff Sessions enhanced the credibility of such allegations. The carefully cultivated political and media frenzy

about the activities of Trump associates with respect to Russia has even led to an FBI investigation and congressional hearings.

The new McCarthyism is not purely a partisan campaign, however. Prominent neo-conservative Republicans have enthusiastically joined in the assault. In fact, they sometimes are even more strident than liberal Democrats. That point, as well as just how ugly the crusade has become, was evident when Arizona Sen. John McCain launched a vicious verbal assault on fellow GOP Sen. Rand Paul in mid March.

The issue that triggered McCain's outburst was a pending Senate vote on admitting Montenegro to NATO. McCain noted Paul's previous opposition, but instead of countering his arguments, the Arizona senator resorted to slurs and accusations. If one opposed the measure promoting Montenegro's membership, he insisted, "You are achieving the objectives of Vladimir Putin ... trying to dismember this small country which has already been the subject of an attempted coup." McCain continued: "If they object, they are now carrying out the desires and ambitions of Vladimir Putin, and I do not say that lightly." He then asked for unanimous consent for an immediate voice vote to rush the measure through. Paul invoked his senatorial privilege to object and insist on a floor debate and a roll call vote.

McCain's infamous temper then erupted. "The only conclusion you can draw," he thundered, "is 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."

Such an outrageous smear might have made even Joe McCarthy blush. Paul's objections to Montenegro's NATO membership were logical and straightforward. "Currently, the United States has troops in dozens of countries and is actively fighting in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen (with the occasional drone strike in Pakistan)," he said in an interview with the *Daily Beast*. "In addition, the United States is pledged to defend 28 countries in NATO. It is unwise to expand the monetary and military obligations of the United States given the burden of our \$20 trillion debt." Whether one agreed with his points or not, they were perfectly legitimate, and they had nothing whatever to do with promoting the interests of Vladimir Putin. Indeed, respected scholars had argued that adding a small, corrupt, militarily insignificant member such as Montenegro provided no benefit either to NATO or to the United States. It merely added to America's already worrisome alliance burdens and strategic overextension.

Daniel Larison, a columnist for *The American Conservative*, rebuked McCain for his ad hominem attack on Paul. Larison also identified a broader, unsavory motive for resorting to such tactics. "McCain's accusation is obnoxious, but it also shows how weak the case for bringing Montenegro into NATO is. If there were a strong argument in favor of adding a new member, McCain wouldn't have to stoop to attacking Paul as a Russian pawn, but there isn't and even he knows that." *Reason* magazine editor Matt Welch was even more repulsed than Larison at McCain's conduct. Noting that he had defended the Arizona senator in the past, Welch stated, "To see him go rhetorically McCarthyite against a fellow American for having the temerity to disagree with his often questionable foreign-policy judgment is one of the most disgraceful moments of his long career."

Trump loyalists and Rand Paul are far from being the only targets of the latest bout of McCarthyism. The motives of Princeton University professor Stephen F. Cohen, a longtime

distinguished scholar regarding the Soviet Union and Russia, have been impugned and his reputation sullied because he dares to advocate a conciliatory policy toward Russia. Such terms as “Putin’s American apologist” and “Putin’s pal” are routine features of the vitriol directed against Cohen.

He is not a rare victim. Anyone who argues that NATO’s expansion eastward to Russia’s border needlessly provoked Moscow, or that Russia’s actions in Ukraine were largely a response to the West’s role in helping demonstrators overthrow the elected, pro-Russian government in Kiev, usually receives the same treatment. Targets have included Jeffrey Taylor, columnist for the *Atlantic*, University of Chicago professor (and dean of the realist school among U.S. international relations scholars) John Mearsheimer, conservative writer and former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, and an assortment of journalists with a wide range of ideological orientations, such as Larison, Glenn Greenwald, Justin Raimondo, and Stephen Kinzer. Epithets such as “apologists,” “stooges,” “Russian trolls,” and “useful idiots” appear frequently in hawkish attacks on those maverick foreign-policy critics.

Vested interests

Such tactics poison the debate atmosphere, making meaningful dialogue and the consideration of intelligent policy alternatives nearly impossible. There are multiple causes of the new McCarthyism. Liberal Democrats, still smarting from their party’s unexpected defeat in the 2016 presidential election, seem to be seeking a scapegoat to explain the shocking outcome. Believing that it was all the result of a Russian plot in conjunction with the venal Donald Trump is a lot more comforting than admitting that the party offered an uninspiring candidate and had an arrogant, wildly overconfident campaign organization. There may also be some sentiment to engage in payback for the grief (and more than a few smears) that Republicans inflicted upon Barack Obama. If they have to resort to Russia baiting and McCarthyite tactics to accomplish their goals, many Democratic partisans seem perfectly willing to do so.

For more-hawkish Democrats, as well as for McCain, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R–S.C.), and other neoconservative Republicans who have signed on to the witch-hunt, there also appears to be a deeper policy motive. Trump’s critical comments about NATO and Washington’s other alliances indicated a policy shift that menaced the status and careers of influential figures who are wedded to the foreign-policy status quo. If he meant those comments seriously (although there are some doubts about that), the United States would very likely embrace a substantially more restrained foreign policy. So-called humanitarian interventions and regime-change wars would not be part of an “America First” strategy. Washington’s relations with longtime military allies would be less extensive — and some relations might even be jettisoned. There also would be a less confrontational posture toward Russia, the nation that ardent interventionists have designated as the Great Menace to America’s security.

Even the mere possibility that the Trump administration might transform U.S. foreign policy in that fashion poses a threat to a multitude of vested interests. They have struck back in an attempt to preserve a paradigm that has dominated Washington’s approach to global affairs since 1945 and preserve their own important roles. Unfortunately, they have chosen a political and ideological strategy that is intrinsically odious and has destructive policy implications.

It is never healthy to attempt to stifle public debate by demonizing dissenting views. Both the McCarthy period and the acrimonious delegitimizing of dissent surrounding the 2003 invasion of

Iraq should have confirmed that lesson. In the latter case, critics who dared oppose the rush to war were denounced in the ugliest terms. Neoconservative author David Frum's infamous *National Review* article, "Unpatriotic Conservatives," was typical. Frum linked a wide array of conservative and libertarian critics of the war to a few writers he said were anti-Semites, tarring all of them with that brush. He also accused skeptics of "having made common cause with left-wing and Islamist anti-war movements in this country and in Europe. They deny and excuse terror." Even worse, "some of them explicitly yearn for the victory of their nation's enemies."

The habit of smearing advocates of a restrained foreign policy has resurfaced. Previous bouts produced tragic results, both in terms of the nation's domestic political health and the ability to make constructive, sometimes imperative, changes in foreign policy. The latest manifestation of McCarthyism threatens to do the same, and it needs to be strangled in its cradle.

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