

When 'Disinformation' Is Truth by Robert Parry

March 16, 2017

Democrats and liberals have climbed into bed with the neocons to push the "Russia-did-it" conspiracy theory as a way to "get Trump," but this New McCarthyism has grave dangers, writes Robert Parry.

The anti-Russian McCarthyism that has spread out from the United States to encompass the European Union, Canada and Australia has at its core an implicit recognition that neoliberal economics and neoconservative foreign policy have failed.

When I recently asked a European journalist why this anti-Russian hysteria had taken root among mainstream European political parties, he answered with a question: "Do you think they can run on their success in handling the recession and the refugees?"

In other words, European voters are angry about the painful economic conditions that followed the Wall Street crash of 2008 and the destabilizing surge of immigrants fleeing from Western "regime change" wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan.

So, like the Democratic Party that doesn't want to engage in a soul-searching self-examination about Donald Trump's victory, the European "establishment" parties need a handy excuse to divert criticism — and that excuse is Russia, a blame-shifting that has allowed nearly every recent criticism of an establishment government official to be sloughed off as "Russian disinformation."

It doesn't even matter anymore that the criticism may be based on solid fact. Even truthful information is now deemed "Russian disinformation" or Russian-inspired "fake news."

We saw that in the Canadian mainstream media's denunciations of Consortiumnews.com for running an article that pointed out that Canada's Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland had misrepresented her family history to white-out her maternal grandfather's role editing a Nazi newspaper in Poland that demonized Jews and justified the Holocaust.

Virtually every mainstream outlet in Canada rallied to Freeland's side when she dismissed our article as Russian disinformation. Only later did a few newspapers grudgingly acknowledge that our story was true and that Freeland knew it was true. Still, the attacks on us continued. We were labeled "Russian disinformationists," with no evidence needed to support the slander and no defense allowed.

Though arguably a small example, the Freeland story reflects what is happening across the Western mainstream news media. Almost every independent-minded news article that questions the establishment narratives on international affairs is dismissed as "Russian propaganda." The few politicians, academics and journalists who don't march in the establishment's parade are "Moscow stooges" or "Putin apologists."

The Russian Resistance

This anti-Russian hysteria began some years ago when Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that Russia would no longer bow to dictates from Washington and Brussels. Russia bristled at the encroachment of NATO on its borders, rejected the neoconservative agenda of "regime change"; wars in Muslim countries, and resisted the U.S.-backed putsch ousting Ukraine's elected president in 2014.

But the anti-Russian frenzy gained unstoppable momentum with the U.S. election in 2016. The Democrats, liberals and neoconservatives were horrified at the shocking upset of their presidential choice, Hillary Clinton, by the boorish and buffoonish Donald Trump.

After this bitter defeat, the losers looked for scapegoats rather than order up a serious autopsy on how they lost to the "unelectable" Trump, i.e. by choosing a corporate candidate who was associated with neoliberal economics and neoconservative war policies. Blaming Russia became the easy excuse that could unify the various pro-Clinton camps.

So, the Obama administration — in an unprecedented step — sought to poison the well for its successor by having the U.S. intelligence community put out evidence-lacking allegations about Russian "meddling" in the U.S. election to elect Trump.

The promoters of this Russia-did-it narrative merged with the "#Resistance" movement to do whatever was necessary to push Trump out of office. It didn't seem to matter that there was very little evidence that the Russians actually did meddle in the election.

The chief claim was that the Russians gave WikiLeaks the Democratic emails revealing the Democratic National Committee's sabotage of Sen. Bernie Sanders's campaign and the emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta exposing the contents of Clinton's hidden speeches to Wall Street and some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

WikiLeaks denied getting the material from the Russians, but — more to the point — there was no evidence of collusion between Moscow and the Trump campaign, as even Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman have acknowledged. (The WikiLeaks disclosures also were not a major factor in Clinton's defeat, which she primarily blamed on FBI Director James Comey briefly reopening the investigation of her using a private email server while Secretary of State.)

Still, the absence of evidence has not deterred Democrats, liberals and neocons from spinning a vast Russian conspiracy theory that ties together Trump's past business dealings in Russia with the notion that somehow Putin foresaw that Trump would become U.S. president, an eventuality that nearly every American pundit considered an impossibility as recently as last year.

But skeptics of the Trump/Russia conspiracy — if they dare note that Putin would have needed the world's best Ouija board to foresee Trump's victory — must then prove that they are not "Russian propaganda/disinformation agents" for having these doubts.

New McCarthyism and Maddow

Given the emergence of this New Cold War, I suppose it made sense that we would soon have a New McCarthyism, although it may have come as a surprise that this witch-hunting is being led by the liberals and the mainstream media, albeit with important assistance from the neoconservatives who have long engaged in smearing the patriotism of anyone who doubted their geopolitical genius.

Remember back in 1984 when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick, an early neocon, denounced traitorous Americans who would "blame America first";

But it appears now that many liberals and even progressives are so blinded by their hatred of Trump that they haven't thought through the wisdom of their new alliance with the neocons — or the fairness of smearing fellow Americans as "Putin apologists";

Meanwhile, mainstream news organizations have abandoned even the pretense of professional objectivity in their propagandistic approach toward anything related to Russia or Trump. For instance, I would defy anyone reading The New York Times's coverage of Russia to assess it as fair and balanced when it is clearly snarky and sneering.

It also turns out that this New McCarthyism has become profitable for its leading practitioners. The New York Times reported on Monday that the ratings for MSNBC's Rachel Maddow are soaring with her frequent anti-Russian rants.

"Now, rattled liberals are surging back [to network television], seeking catharsis, solidarity and relief," the Times wrote, citing a Kentucky woman explaining why she has become a devotee of Maddow: "She's always talking about the Russians!"

Frankly, for the past dozen years, I've wondered about Maddow. I first heard her on the radio in August 2005 when she was a summer fill-in at Air America reporting on President George W. Bush's Katrina fiasco, which she partly blamed on the deployment of Louisiana National Guard units to Iraq, so they couldn't help evacuate flooded New Orleans.

It was clear that Maddow was talented and her excoriation of the Iraq War was on point, although — by summer 2005 — it didn't require a huge amount of journalistic courage to slam Bush over the Iraq War. As I watched her career rise through a regular Air America gig to her show on MSNBC and then to stardom as an anchor on the network's election coverage, I always wondered whether she would put her lucrative corporate acceptance at risk and go against the grain at a tough journalistic moment.

Now, Maddow's behavior in becoming a modern-day mainstream-media Joe McCarthy has put my doubts to rest. She is riding high in the ratings by keeping her whip hand coming down hard on the bash-Russia steed. She is putting her career or her politics ahead of journalism.

Like so many other Democrat/liberal/neocon activists, Maddow not only ignores the evidentiary gaps in the Russia-did-it conspiracy theory but she seems oblivious to the dangers of her opportunism. By stirring up this McCarthyistic frenzy, she and her "never-Trump" allies make a rational policy toward nuclear-armed Russia nearly impossible. Thus, she is contributing to the real risk of a hot war with Russia that could lead to the annihilation of life on the planet.

One of the bitter ironies here is that Trump's critics correctly noted that his thin-skinned temperament made him unfit to possess the nuclear button, but they are now egging him into a mano-a-mano confrontation with Putin. If Trump doesn't get the better of Putin in every situation, Trump will face renewed pummeling for "selling out" to the Russians.

Already, neocon Sen. Lindsey Graham has declared, "2017 is going to be a year of kicking Russia in the ass in Congress." If Trump doesn't go along, he will face battering from the likes of Maddow, The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and pretty much every mainstream news outlet. So, Trump may have no political choice but to get tough. But what happens when Putin pushes back?

In the past when I've made this point about the recklessness of Russia-bashing, I've been told that I'm being alarmist, that "kicking Russia in the ass" and baiting Trump to join in the kicking won't lead to a nuclear war, that the Russians aren't that stupid. Yeah, let's hope not.

On the upside of this anti-Russia strategy, the anti-Trump activists insist it is the most promising route to get rid of Trump, which they view as justifying almost any action. It's not for them to prove that Trump did conspire with Putin to rig the U.S. presidential election; it's enough to raise the suspicion and use it to push for Trump's impeachment.

As someone who has covered national security scandals since the 1980s, I am familiar with the kind of evidence that should be required for making serious allegations. For instance, when Brian Barger and I wrote the first story about Nicaraguan Contra drug trafficking in 1985 for The Associated Press, we had about two dozen sources, plus documents. Most of the sources were insiders — i.e., inside the Contra movement and inside the Reagan administration — who described how the operation was run. We had this evidence before we made any public accusation.

In the case of the Russia-Trump conspiracy theory, the U.S. intelligence community has presented almost no evidence of Russian "hacking" and admits that it has no evidence of Trump's collusion with the Russians. As far as we know, there is no insider who has described how this alleged conspiracy occurred.

That is not to say that some evidence might not eventually surface that confirms the Russia-Trump suspicions, but that is true of all conspiracy theories. Who knows, maybe Joe McCarthy was right about all those Communists inside the U.S. government secretly working for the Kremlin? Maybe he did have a real list of names. But that is what "witch hunts" are all about — investigations designed to prove a point whether true or not.

In this current case, however, the downside is not "just" the destruction of people's careers and a few imprisonments. The downside of playing chicken with nuclear-armed Russia is the end of life as we know it. At such a moment, journalists and politicians should demand the highest standards of proof, not no proof at all.

Sometimes, I envision the argument that I would hear as the mushroom clouds begin rising over U.S. and Russian cities. If not incinerated in the first moments of the cataclysm, the "smart" people of the mainstream U.S. media (and their liberal and neocon allies) would be insisting that it wasn't their fault; it was someone else's fault; blame-shifting to the end.

So, as the Democrats and liberals join with the neocons in launching this New McCarthyism over Russia — and with people like Rachel Maddow leading the charge — what is arguably the most depressing fact is that there appears to be no Edward R. Murrow, a mainstream journalist with a conscience, anywhere on the horizon.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).