

# New York Times column compares Trump probe to hunt for Soviet “atomic spies”

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A column in the *New York Times* March 24, by former *Times* national security correspondent Timothy Weiner, introduced a new element into the campaign over alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election. Weiner wrote that the FBI today “is running the most explosive counterintelligence case since Soviet spies stole the secrets of the atom bomb more than 70 years ago.”

“Some of those atomic spies didn’t speak Russian: they were Americans,” Weiner added, “We now know that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia attacked American democracy by meddling in the 2016 election. Did he enlist American mercenaries?”

Weiner’s column, demanding an independent prosecutor to handle what he terms “this keg of Kremlin dynamite,” dovetails with other media and Democratic Party voices calling Moscow’s supposed interference “an act of war” and suggesting the Trump administration’s purported ties to Russia raise the specter of treason. His reference to atomic spies is a new and sinister element in the neo-McCarthyite attacks on Trump from the right. Weiner is drawing an explicit connection between the Cold War search for spies and the probe of the Trump administration today.

As many historians have testified, there was no single “secret” of the atom bomb. The term was used to explain away the fact that the USSR, so soon after the horrible toll taken by the war against fascism, was able to challenge the monopoly on nuclear weapons that Washington had demonstrated with such ruthless brutality in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The claim that “atom spies” provided crucial “secrets” to the Soviet Union served much the same purpose as the campaign over “who lost China?” after the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949. The espionage hysteria of this period was used for propaganda purposes in the Korean

War. The Red Scare at home saw socialists and militants victimized and driven out of the trade unions. Civil liberties and democratic rights were trampled, in the name of fighting an alleged “Fifth Column” of traitors in the US.

The witch-hunt was closely associated with the name of Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from the state of Wisconsin. McCarthy’s peak power roughly coincided with the time between the arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of conspiracy to commit espionage in 1950 and their execution in the electric chair three years later, on June 19, 1953. These were also the years of the war in Korea.

The Rosenberg trial was a notorious example of class justice. Both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were found guilty and sentenced to die. While Julius Rosenberg was in fact “guilty” of attempting to assist the USSR at a time when it was a wartime ally of the United States against Nazi Germany, his actions had little to do with the atomic bomb. The death sentence, grossly disproportionate even to the charge of conspiracy on which he was convicted, was used to whip up chauvinism and intimidate opponents of the imperialist war drive. Ethel Rosenberg, as subsequent history has shown, was innocent of the espionage conspiracy charges, but was murdered by the state after an unsuccessful effort to use her as a hostage to force her husband to confess. This is the context in which Weiner’s language about “spies [who] stole the secrets of the atom bomb” must be understood today.

The neo-McCarthyite reference to spies in the same breath as the Trump administration is particularly ironic and revealing when one considers the political pedigree of the current president. A young but very important member of the prosecutor’s staff in the Rosenberg trial was Roy Cohn, who was soon hired as chief counsel for

McCarthy's Senate internal security subcommittee, where he became, next to McCarthy himself, the most prominent spokesman for the witch-hunt. It was later revealed that during the course of the Rosenberg trial, Cohn had been in virtually daily (and illegal) contact with Judge Irving R. Kaufman, and had pressed for a death sentence.

Cohn went on to a filthy and lucrative career as a right-wing lawyer and fixer in New York City. An important client, going back to 1973, when the future president was still in his 20s, was none other than Donald Trump. The two became extremely close, and Cohn was an acknowledged mentor to the real estate tycoon.

The methods of Cohn and McCarthy, the trademark bullying and tough-guy persona, can be seen in Trump's tactics, his demagogic attacks on the "media elite" along with the denunciations of immigrants and Muslims, even as he packs his cabinet with billionaires and heads the most reactionary administration in US history. It is Trump who most closely resembles McCarthy among political figures today.

It is a measure of how diseased the two-party capitalist political system in the United States has become, and how far to the right the Democratic Party has traveled, that it is now the liberal *New York Times* that takes its cue from the witch-hunt era and leads the effort to outflank the Trump administration from the right.

The Democrats and erstwhile liberals like Weiner—the author of histories of the CIA and FBI which criticized their "excesses" and incompetence—are going all-out in their frenzied charges over supposed Russian interference in last year's election. While no evidence has been presented to back up these claims, it would not be a great shock if the Putin regime, facing escalating threats from Washington, sought to take advantage of the political crisis reflected in the rise of Trump.

The leak of emails from the Democratic National Committee, then made public by WikiLeaks, supplied information that exposed the nature of the Clinton campaign. By contrast, as Weiner's own books have described, US imperialism is the unchallenged champion when it comes to coups, aggression and ruthless regime change operations over the past 65 years, actions designed to remove and overthrow

elected governments all over the world. The installation of a right-wing nationalist regime in Ukraine, on Russia's doorstep, three years ago is one of the more recent examples. State Department official Victoria Nuland was caught on tape at the time, bragging of Washington's bankrolling and giving marching orders to its favored politicians in Kiev.

The right-wing campaign of the Democrats is not an anomalous event, but reflects the historical crisis and decay of American capitalism over many decades. As has been proven repeatedly in the past quarter century, there is no constituency within this ruling elite for the defense of democratic rights. This shift proceeded and deepened during the Obama administration, beneath the lying attempts to dress up war crimes and contorted efforts to justify drone killings and global intelligence gathering and attacks on privacy.

Weiner himself is representative of a layer of the liberal upper-middle class which discovered the virtues of the intelligence agencies under Obama, and now come forward to champion those state institutions in their fight against Trump. The main motive in this "intramural scrimmage," as Obama himself put it, is not domestic policy, but rather the insistence by the Democrats, and some Republican hawks led by Senator John McCain, on preparations for conflict with Russia as the major foreign policy focus for American imperialism.

The efforts to turn the clock back to the Cold War witch-hunt show the dangers of allowing the struggle against the Trump administration to be channeled into the right-wing imperialist Democratic Party. They illustrate the urgent need for the independent struggle of the working class against the growing danger of war.



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