

Democrat Mark Warner auditions for the role of grand inquisitor in the anti-Russia campaign

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Senator Mark Warner from Virginia is the congressional spearhead for the fictitious story that Russian interference in the 2016 election led to the triumph of Donald Trump. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has been documenting, this campaign is now rapidly spreading from an attempt by sections of the ruling class to push Trump towards a more aggressive confrontation with Russia, to a call for censorship of the Internet aimed above all at anti-war and left-wing publications. Virtually any sign of social discontent in the United States is now preposterously pawned off in the bourgeois media as the work of Russian agents.

On November 16, 2016, eight days after the election, Warner was named vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Warner has used the position to relentlessly promote the unproven narrative of Russian interference. He has now escalated his campaign into browbeating social media companies to line up behind the campaign to censor the Internet. Warner is one of eight Congressional leaders (the so-called “Gang of Eight”) who regularly receive high-level national security briefings—in other words he shares the closest relationship with the CIA, NSA, FBI and the other 14 government intelligence agencies tasked with keeping the ruling class in power.

Warner went so far as to visit Mark Zuckerberg after the Facebook CEO, days after the election, dismissed the notion that the platform had been used to manipulate voters as a “pretty crazy idea.” After the visit, Facebook announced that about 3,000 ads had been purchased, totaling about \$100,000, from “about 470 inauthentic accounts and Pages in violation of our policies.” This represents a drop in the bucket, given the billions spent by the Democratic and Republican campaigns and their corporate backers in the course of the 2016 campaign.

Warner expressed disappointment from Facebook’s meager *mea culpa*. On September 20, without any evidence to back up his assertions, he stated that the 470 accounts revealed by Facebook “doesn’t pass the smell test.” As proof, Warner merely asserted, “I think there’s a lot more.”

Warner then set his sights on Twitter. On September 28, representatives from the company met with the Senate Intelligence Committee. Twitter’s revelations of Russian efforts to sway the election were equally slight. It found 200 Twitter accounts linked to Facebook accounts that Facebook’s earlier disclosures had identified as connected to Russian efforts to influence users. However, none of the accounts were engaged in advertising on Twitter. Warner found Twitter’s disclosures to be “deeply disappointing.”

Blaming Russia for social discontent

At a November 1 hearing of the Senate Intelligence Committee in which representatives from Google, Twitter and Facebook testified, Warner, seeking to deflect from the fact that vast social inequality in the United States is fueling social conflict, instead blamed rising social discontent on Russia. In his opening remarks, Warner stated, “Russian operatives are attempting to infiltrate and manipulate social media to hijack the national conversation and to make Americans angry, to set us against ourselves, and to undermine our democracy.”

Consciously echoing the anti-communism of the Cold War, Warner added that the “[Russian] threat is not new. Russians have been conducting information warfare for decades.” He then went on to describe a so-called “Russian playbook” of using social media to “magnify propaganda and fake news on a scale that was unimaginable back in the days of the Berlin Wall.”

At the November 1 hearing, Warner also continued to express disappointment in Twitter’s failure to sufficiently capitulate to the narrative of a devious Russian plot. Warner declared, “I’m concerned that Twitter seems to be vastly under-estimating the number of fake accounts and bots pushing disinformation. Independent researchers have estimated that up to 15 percent of Twitter accounts—or potentially 48 million accounts—are fake or automated.” After noting that Twitter had uncovered only a “small percentage” of these alleged fake accounts, Warner was “pleased to see ... that [Twitter’s] number has been rising in recent weeks.”

Warner then called on the tech companies “to commit more resources to identifying bad actors and, when possible, preventing them from abusing our social media ecosystem.” The tech companies are largely already falling in line behind this anti-democratic campaign. Each has announced that they are hiring thousands of people to moderate and review content—in other words, to censor the Internet.

Warner’s emergence as the congressional spokesperson of the unhinged anti-Russian campaign is significant. He is not simply a representative of the ruling class; he is the embodiment of that class. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, as of 2015, Mark Warner’s net worth was \$238,157,630, making him the wealthiest Senator, and the third wealthiest member of Congress.

In the mid-1980s, Warner made his fortune by exploiting a multibillion-dollar government giveaway in the cellphone industry. At that time, the Federal Communications Commission began awarding licenses for the newly emerging cellphone industry by lottery. These licenses entitled the bearer to operate cellular franchises in specific markets. Warner cashed in on the FCC’s privatization scheme by brokering deals between buyers and sellers of these cell phone licenses.

He parlayed this experience of flipping cellphone licenses into joining Columbia Capital, a venture-capital business that focused on the wireless

industry. After 10 years, he made \$150 million. In 1987, Warner also helped found a company called Fleet Call, which eventually became Nextel.

A right-wing political record

Warner then turned from the business world to politics. Warner served as governor of Virginia from 2002 to 2006. During his first two years in office, he cut state spending in every state agency, except for K-12 education, and eliminated 3,000 state government positions. Warner also entirely eliminated 50 state boards and commissions.

Higher education was especially hard hit. In his first year in office, Warner cut \$500 million for post-secondary education. As a result, tuition at Virginia's public colleges and universities rose by an average of 15.6 percent for the 2002-2003 school year over the previous academic year. The cuts also included a \$114.5 million reduction in the state's Department of Health and Human Resources—affecting public health programs, including emergency medical services programs and programs for the elderly.

As governor Warner supported the death penalty, with 11 executions occurring on his watch. While he did push further than other governors at the time in ordering the use of DNA tests for review of certain death penalty convictions, his spokeswoman told the *New York Times* in March 2006, "It's not like he wants to be a DNA or criminal justice crusader. It is not his hope that his actions will help the death penalty abolition movement."

After his governorship, Warner strongly considered a run for the 2008 Democratic nomination for president. In March 2006, the *New York Times* characterized him as "an unapologetic pro-business Democrat" who "rejects the reflexive anti-corporatism that permeates much of the populist fervor online." At the time Warner explicitly rejected any turning of the Democratic Party towards even the token liberal reformism of the past. "If the move is truly back to old-line 70's populism, then I'm probably not the guy," Warner told the *Times*. Instead, Warner sought a meeting with the far-right American Enterprise Institute to get, as the *Times* reported, "its libertarian perspective on policy issues."

Warner also supported the 2003 Iraq invasion and occupation. In a January 2006 interview on ABC's "This Week," Warner was asked whether he supported the Iraq invasion. Indicating his support for the criminal war, he replied that it was pointless for Democrats to argue against it. That year, he was the keynote speaker at the Democrats' Jackson Day Dinner in Springfield, Missouri. His criticisms of the Bush administration regarding the Iraq invasion were merely that it didn't get "Iraq to a stable position."

Warner and Wall Street

In 2008, with both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the race, Warner lowered his sights and ran for an open US Senate seat from Virginia, winning it easily. He has served on the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, while among his 20 biggest donors have been a who's who of American finance capitalism: JP Morgan, Goldman Sachs, the Blackstone Group, Prudential Financial, Morgan Stanley, Capital One Financial, and Citigroup.

Among other services rendered to the financial industry, in 2010 Warner played a key role in blocking an increase of the tax rate on "carried

interest," which is the percentage of income paid out to investment managers. Typically, such managers receive in payment 2 percent of assets as a regular fee, as well as a certain percentage of the fund's profits. While these managers pay regular income tax on the 2 percent fee, the share of the profits, called "carried interest," is only taxed at the far lower long-term capital gains rate.

Warner's intervention blocked a House-passed tax bill that would have taxed most of the carried interest earned by venture capital, private equity and real estate investment fund managers as earned income. Warner's actions in preventing the closing of this loophole helped save the ruling class an estimated \$18 billion a year in taxes.

Warner was also a strong backer of the "Bowles-Simpson" deficit reduction plan, which came out of an Obama-assembled bipartisan commission back in 2010. The commission was chaired by Erskine Bowles, a multimillionaire investment banker who served in the Clinton administration, and Alan Simpson, a former senator-turned-corporate lobbyist. The commission's plan called for cutting the corporate tax rate and cuts to Social Security by raising the Social Security retirement age. In 2011, the so-called bipartisan "gang of six," including Warner, sponsored legislation that incorporated its recommendations.

Warner is well aware of the rising social tensions in the United States which form the backdrop and impetus to the anti-Russia campaign. In May 2016, speaking before an audience of business and political elites at the Milken Institute's 2016 Global Conference, Warner warned: "If you don't think the frustration of Americans with our overall system—not just our political system, but our business system, our tax code—is at the boiling point, then Katy bar the door! The walls that are gonna have to be built, may not be at borders, they may be around neighborhoods the way they are in many Third World countries around the world."

Warner's anti-Russia campaign, joined by the rest of the Democratic Party, along with its media allies such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, is an attempt to divert the growing anger from the population at social inequality and unending war in a reactionary direction. It is also part and parcel of calls from the ruling class in the United States and internationally to curb and suppress free speech on the Internet.

Rather than appeal to popular hostility to Trump on the basis of his support for war, tax cuts for the wealthy, further cuts to health care, or his fascistic immigration policies, Warner and the Democrats seek to divert this hostility into the fraudulent claim that Russian interference led to the election of Trump. As a faithful member of the ruling class, Warner above all seeks to dissipate any challenge from the working class and youth based on a socialist perspective that would challenge the capitalist system that he defends.



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