Anti-Russia war fever spreads on Capitol Hill

Patrick Martin
1 July 2020

Groups of congressional Republicans and Democrats have visited the White House over the past two days for briefings on allegations that the Russian military intelligence agency GRU offered bounties to Taliban fighters who killed American soldiers in Afghanistan.

They have emerged bristling with demands for retaliation, with one Republican senator declaring, "I want to hear their plan for Taliban and GRU agents in body bags"—in other words, for military action by the United States against Russia, possessor of the world's second largest stockpile of nuclear weapons.

The "Russian bounties" campaign is a fabrication by the US military-intelligence apparatus and its preferred mouthpiece, the *New York Times*, which signaled the kickoff of the current campaign with a front-page article Saturday that provided no evidence either of bounties paid or American soldiers killed, only reiterating endlessly that "intelligence officials" believed that Russia had carried out such an operation.

Four days into the affair, there has still been no evidence produced. Not a single witness to the offering, payment or receipt of a "bounty" has been cited. Not a single one of the 31 US military deaths in Afghanistan in 2019 and 2020 has been credibly linked to alleged Russian payments.

The Associated Press carried a report Monday that "Officials are focused in particular" on the death of three Marines, killed when a car bomb exploded outside of Bagram Air Base in April 2019, but did not explain what reason there was for investigating that particular incident.

The same article asserted that captured Taliban fighters had told interrogators about the alleged bounties, claiming, "Officials with knowledge of the matter told the AP that Taliban operatives from opposite ends of the country and from separate tribes offered similar accounts." But the article continued: "The officials would not name the specific groups or give specific locations in Afghanistan or time frames for when they were detained."

Aside from the absence of proof, there is a complete absence of motive. Why would the Russian government want to kill a handful of American soldiers in Afghanistan? What purpose would that serve, in terms of Russian foreign policy? Why would they pay fighters of the Taliban, long branded as terrorists by Moscow? Why would fighters in the Taliban, a group whose origins lie in the Islamic fundamentalist guerrilla groups that fought Soviet troops in the 1980s, serve as Moscow's mercenaries? And why, given that they have fought American imperialism to a stalemate in nearly 20 years of war, suffering massive casualties in the process, would Taliban fighters need a monetary incentive to kill American soldiers?

None of these questions is even raised in the American corporate media, which reproduces the allegations of the US intelligence agencies as though they were unchallengeable truths, no matter how stupid, uncorroborated and self-contradictory.

For official Washington, the "Russian bounties" campaign is merely the latest chapter in the political warfare that has raged for the past four years, since the FBI and CIA began investigating alleged ties between the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and the Russian government.

The Democratic Party has consistently lined up with the sections of the military-intelligence apparatus that have viewed Trump as too soft on Russia and too inclined to abandon longstanding US interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia, from Afghanistan to Syria.

Frightened by the vast popular hostility directed against Trump's attacks on democratic rights, his racist diatribes against immigrants and minorities, and his subordination of all government policy to the needs of Wall Street and big business, the Democrats have sought to divert all opposition to Trump behind a right-wing campaign to brand him as a stooge of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and create a political constituency for US military confrontation with Russia that could lead to nuclear war.

This was the content of the Mueller investigation into alleged Russian intervention in the 2016 elections, conducted for some two and a half years. This was followed by the campaign over Trump's withholding of military aid to Ukraine while demanding an investigation into the business activities of Hunter Biden, the son of the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, which led to Trump's impeachment and Senate trial.

The congressional Democrats and the Biden campaign have seized on the supposed expose by the *New York Times* as another opportunity to revive the anti-Russia hysteria and wage an election campaign centered on portraying Trump as an agent of Putin—a virtual rerun of the 2016 campaign by Hillary Clinton that ended with Trump winning a surprise victory in the

Electoral College.

This would have two major purposes: enabling Biden to avoid addressing the massive social crisis demonstrated in the mounting COVID-19 death toll and the accompanying economic slump; and conditioning the American people to regard Russia with suspicion and hostility, in order to prepare the political climate for war.

The Democrats and their media allies have sought to focus attention, not on any evidence of Russian payment of bounties—the less said about that "big lie" the better, as far as the CIA is concerned—but on claims that Trump failed to respond aggressively enough, or was too indolent even to notice when the intelligence agencies first raised the issue (in February 2020 by one account, a year earlier in other reports).

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the top Democrat in Washington, reiterated her "all roads lead to Russia" critique of Trump in an interview with CNN on Monday morning. "It seems clear that the intelligence is real," she said. "The question is whether the President was briefed. If he was not briefed, why would he not be briefed? Were they afraid to approach him on the subject of Russia?" She speculated that the CIA did not tell Trump about the bounties for fear he would tell Putin.

Among the group of ten Democrats who visited the White House Tuesday morning were two freshmen representatives, newly elected in 2018, who would normally not have been considered for such a high-level mission. But these two, Elissa Slotkin of Michigan and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia, are both former CIA officers, and thus personify the ever-closer alignment between the Democratic Party and the intelligence agencies.

Another member of the "CIA Democrats," the group of nearly a dozen who entered Congress in 2018 from military-intelligence backgrounds, Representative Max Rose of New York, a former combat commander in Afghanistan, said, "It's sickening that American soldiers have been killed as a result of Russian bounties on their heads, and the Commander in Chief didn't do a thing to stop it."

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, used similar language at a press conference that followed his speech on coronavirus in Wilmington, Delaware. In response to media questions, he described Trump's response to the alleged Russian bounties as "dereliction of duty," using the same phrase three separate times, in an effort to play up Trump's deficiencies as "commander-in-chief."

Some Republicans joined in the anti-Russia chorus, albeit without criticizing Trump's response. This included Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska, who made the comment about "Taliban and GRU body bags," calling that a necessary "proportional response" to the alleged Russian action.

Senator Todd Young of Indiana, a former Marine intelligence officer, said the alleged Russian operation "deserves a strong and immediate response from our government." He called for Senate hearings and for Trump to rescind any invitation for Russia to rejoin the Group of Seven, the grouping of the major industrialized nations, and for personal financial sanctions on Putin.

The only reluctance to enlist in the anti-Russia campaign came from the Pentagon, whose spokesman said late Monday there was "no corroborating evidence to validate the recent allegations found in open-source reports." The National Security Agency, which monitors all telecommunications in the Afghanistan region, reportedly told CBS News that the claim of Russian bounty-hunting "does not match well-established and verifiable Taliban and Haqqani practices" and lacks "sufficient reporting to corroborate any links."

But for the bulk of the intelligence establishment, the conventional wisdom was expressed in a commentary in the *Washington Post* by David Ignatius, a columnist who is a frequent conduit for the national-security establishment. While admitting "there's a lot we still don't know about the Russian bounties in Afghanistan"—the understatement of the week—he concluded: "Trump is an obstacle to good policy. Either people don't tell him the truth, or he doesn't want to hear it. Whichever way, he's defaulting on his most basic responsibility as commander in chief."

In other words, Trump should be removed, as the Democrats have been arguing for years, not because of his right-wing policies and aspirations to establish an authoritarian regime, but because he is too unreliable in his role as the principal defender of the interests of American imperialism all over the world.

The author also recommends:

Another anti-Russian smear from the New York Times
[29 June 2020]

Trump emerges strengthened after Democrats' impeachment debacle
[6 February 2020]