

The New York Times fabricates Russian murder plot

Patrick Martin
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Not since William Randolph Hearst cabled his correspondent in Havana in 1898 with the message, “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war,” has a newspaper been so thoroughly identified with an effort to provoke an American war as the *New York Times* this week.

The difference—and there is a colossal one—is that Hearst was fanning the flames for the Spanish-American War, a comparatively minor conflict, the first venture by American imperialism to seize territory overseas, in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The *Times* today is seeking to whip up a war fever directed against Russia, one that threatens to ignite a third world war fought with nuclear weapons.

There is not the slightest factual basis for the series of articles and commentaries published by the *Times*, beginning last Saturday, claiming that the Russian military intelligence service, the GRU, paid bounties to Taliban guerrillas to induce them to attack and kill American soldiers in Afghanistan. Not a single soldier out of the 31 Americans who have died in Afghanistan in 2019-2020 has been identified as a victim of the alleged scheme. No witnesses have been brought forward, no evidence produced.

The sole foundation of the reports in the *Times*, since reinforced by similar articles in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the Associated Press, and accounts on cable and network television, are the unsupported, uncorroborated statements of unnamed intelligence officials. These officials give no proof of their claims about the operation of the supposed network of GRU agents—how the money came from Russia to Afghanistan, how the money was distributed to Taliban fighters, what actions the Taliban fighters carried out, what impact these actions had on any American military personnel.

Yet six days into this press campaign, there has been no acknowledgement in the “mainstream” corporate media that there is anything dubious or unsubstantiated about this narrative. Instead, the main focus has been to demand that the Trump administration explain when the president learned of the alleged Russian attack and what he proposes to do about it.

The *Times* reporters spearheading this campaign are not journalists in any real sense of the term. They are conduits, passing on material supplied to them by high-level operatives in

the CIA and other intelligence agencies, repackaging it for public consumption and using their status as “reporters” to provide more credibility than would be given to a press release from Langley, Virginia. In other words, the CIA has provided the plot line, and the newspaper creates the narrative framework to sell it to the American people.

The *Times* and individual reporters like David Sanger and Eric Schmitt have a track record. The newspaper played a leading role in helping the Bush administration fabricate its case for war against Iraq in 2002-2003. It was not just the notorious Judith Miller, with her tall tales of aluminum tubes being used to build centrifuges as a step to an Iraqi atomic bomb. There was an entire chorus of falsification, in which Schmitt (January 21, 2001, “Iraq Rebuilt Bombed Arms Plants, Officials Say”) and Sanger (November 13, 2002, “U.S. Scoffs at Iraq Claim of No Weapons of Mass Destruction,” and December 6, 2002, “US Tells Iraq It Must Reveal Weapons Sites”) among many articles, played major roles.

In this week’s “Russian bounties” campaign, Schmitt and Sanger are at it again. A front-page article published Thursday under their joint byline carries the headline, “Trump’s New Russia Problem: Unread Intelligence and Missing Strategy.” This article is aimed at advancing the claim that Trump was negligent in responding to allegations against Russia, either being too lazy to read the President’s Daily Brief—a summary of world events and spy reports produced by the CIA—or choosing to ignore the report because of his supposed subservience to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The political line of the article is set early on, when the authors claim that “it doesn’t require a high-level clearance for the government’s most classified information to see that the list of Russian aggressions in recent weeks rivals some of the worst days of the Cold War.” The list is ridiculously thin, including “cyberattacks on Americans working from home” (no evidence presented) and “continued concern about new playbooks for Russian actors seeking to influence the November election” (this is a description of the state of mind at the CIA, not of any actual steps taken by Russia). The purpose is to place the current allegations about Russian bounties in the context of the long-running effort to portray Russian President Vladimir Putin as the evil genius and puppet master of world politics.

Schmitt, in an article co-authored with Michael Crowley, refers to “intelligence reports that Russia paid bounties to Taliban-affiliated fighters to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan,” as though this was an established fact. The article cites various unnamed “former officials” of the Trump and Obama administrations who claim that such an allegation would certainly have been brought to Trump’s attention, and that his failure to take action in response must be seen as negligence.

The article suggests that there is “supporting evidence” for the CIA claims of a Russian bounty plot, citing, among other things, “detainee interrogations, the recovery of about \$500,000 from a Taliban-related target and intercepts of electronic communications showing financial transfers between the Russian military intelligence unit and Afghan intermediaries.” In point of fact, every item on this list represents an assertion by unnamed intelligence sources, not evidence: no actual detainees, cash hoards or electronic intercepts have been produced.

Another article by Schmitt, along with three Afghan-based reporters, focuses on the alleged role of an Afghan businessman, Rahmatullah Azizi, a former drug smuggler and US government contractor, in whose home investigators found a cash hoard of half a million in US dollars. Again, “US intelligence reports” are cited, claiming Azizi was “a key middleman between the GRU and militants linked to the Taliban.” Again, there is no actual evidence cited, and Azizi himself cannot be found. As for the alleged cash hoard, this suggests more the proceeds of narcotics trafficking than anything else, an enterprise in which Azizi was supposedly engaged.

The article asserts that the Russian government organized the bounty scheme as “payback” for decades of humiliation in Afghanistan at the hands of the United States, although how killing a handful of US soldiers would accomplish such a goal is a mystery. Moreover, the *Times* also admits, citing an unnamed congressman who participated in a White House briefing on the allegations, that the intelligence briefing did not “detail any connection to specific US or coalition deaths in Afghanistan,” and that “gaps remained in the intelligence community’s understanding of the overall program, including its precise motive ...”

In other words, the Russian “bounties” program has no identifiable victims and no credible motive. This makes the unanimity of the media chorus that much more damning a self-indictment. Why is there not a single article or commentary in the corporate media challenging the claims being peddled by the CIA? It is not that these claims are particularly convincing in and of themselves. Far from it. It is the *source* of the claims that is decisive: if the US intelligence apparatus says it is so, the American media obediently salutes.

The real question to be answered about the latest anti-Russian provocation is this: what political considerations are the driving

force of this episode of media fabrication?

It is no coincidence that the Afghanistan “bounties” story has surfaced just at the point where the Trump administration is visibly reeling in the face of the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and the popular upsurge against police violence. The American ruling class has been deeply shaken by the outraged protests by large interracial crowds, particularly of young people, that have swept virtually every American city and town. And the financial aristocracy is well aware of the deep-seated popular opposition to its drive to force workers back to work under conditions where every large factory, warehouse and office is a potential epicenter for the ongoing resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The response to this crisis by the political and media representatives of the ruling elite is twofold: seeking to split the working class along racial lines and seeking to divert domestic social tensions into a campaign against foreign antagonists, particularly China and Russia.

The *New York Times* acts as a political mouthpiece of the Democratic Party, which is determined to block any mass radicalization of workers and youth. In the event that former Vice President Joe Biden is elected in November and takes office in January 2021, an incoming Democratic administration will carry out policies no less reactionary than those of Trump.

The campaign against Trump’s alleged “dereliction of duty”—a phrase used by Biden three times during his Tuesday press conference—is nothing more than a continuation of the campaign by the Democrats to attack Trump from the right, as too “soft” on Russia and too unwilling to intervene in the Middle East. This began with the anti-Russia campaign that triggered the two-year-long Mueller investigation, continued with the Ukraine phone call that led to impeachment, and now emerges in the form of increasingly vehement demands that the US government “retaliate” for an entirely fabricated Russian effort to kill American soldiers.



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