

Fake News on Russia and Other Official Enemies

The New York Times, 1917–2017

By [Edward S. Herman](#)

Global Research, August 18, 2017

[Monthly Review](#) 1 July 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

It has been amusing to watch the New York Times and other mainstream media outlets express their dismay over the rise and spread of “fake news.” These publications take it as an obvious truth that what they provide is straightforward, unbiased, fact-based reporting. They do offer such news, but they also provide a steady flow of their own varied forms of fake news, often by disseminating false or misleading information supplied to them by the national security state, other branches of government, and sites of corporate power.

An important form of mainstream media fake news is that which is presented while suppressing information that calls the preferred news into question. This was the case with “The Lie That Wasn’t Shot Down,” the title of a January 18, 1988, *Times* editorial referring to a propaganda claim of five years earlier that the editors had swallowed and never looked into any further. The lie—that the Soviets knew that Korean airliner 007, which they shot down on August 31, 1983, was a civilian plane—was eventually uncovered by congressman Lee Hamilton, not by the *Times*.

Mainstream media fake news is especially likely where a party line is quickly formed on a topic, with any deviations therefore immediately dismissed as naïve, unpatriotic, or simply wrong. In a dramatic illustration, for a book chapter entitled “Worthy and Unworthy Victims,” Noam Chomsky and I showed that coverage by *Time*, *Newsweek*, CBS News, and the *New York Times* of the 1984 murder of the priest Jerzy Popieluzko in Communist Poland, a dramatic and politically useful event for the politicized Western mainstream media, exceeded all their coverage of the murders of a hundred religious figures killed in Latin America by U.S. client states in the post-Second World War years taken together.¹ It was cheap and safe to focus heavily on the “worthy” victim, whereas looking closely at the deaths of those hundred would have required an expensive and sometimes dangerous research effort that would have upset the State Department. But it was in effect a form of fake news to so selectively devote coverage (and indignation) to a politically useful victim, while ignoring large numbers whose murder the political establishment sought to downplay or completely suppress.

Fake news on Russia is a *Times* tradition that can be traced back at least as far as the 1917 revolution. In a classic study of the paper’s coverage of Russia from February 1917 to March 1920, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz found that

“From the point of view of professional journalism the reporting of the Russian Revolution is nothing short of a disaster. On the essential questions the net effect was almost always misleading, and misleading news is worse than none at all.... They can fairly be charged with boundless credulity, and an untiring

readiness to be gulled, and on many occasions with a downright lack of common sense."²

Lippmann and Merz found that strong editorial bias clearly fed into news reporting. The editors' zealous opposition to the communists led the paper to report atrocities that never happened, and to predict the imminent collapse of the Bolshevik regime no fewer than ninety-one times in three years. Journalists uncritically accepted official statements and relied on reports from unidentified "high authority." This was standard *Times* practice.



The Soviet delegation arrives at Brest-Litovsk. Lev Trotsky is in the center surrounded by German officers. David King Collection. (*The Bolsheviks in Power*, p. 152)

This fake news performance of 1917-20 was repeated often in the years that followed. The Soviet Union was an enemy target up to the Second World War, and through it all, *Times* coverage was consistently hostile. With the end of the war and the emergence of the Soviet Union as a military rival, and soon a competing nuclear power, the Cold War was on. In the United States, anti-communism became a national religion, and the Soviet Union was portrayed in official discourse and the news media as a global menace in urgent need of containment. With this ideology in place and with U.S. plans for its own global expansion of power established, the Communist threat would help sustain the steady growth of the military-industrial complex and repeated interventions to counter purported Soviet aggressions.³

An Early Great Crime: Guatemala

One of the most flagrant cases in which the Soviet threat was exploited to justify U.S.-sponsored violence was the overthrow of the social democratic government of Guatemala in 1954 by a small proxy army invading from U.S. ally Somoza's Nicaragua. This action was provoked by government reforms that upset U.S. officials, including a 1947 law permitting the formation of labor unions, and plans to buy back (at tax-rate valuations) and distribute to landless peasants some of the unused property owned by United Fruit Company and other large landowners. The United States, which had been perfectly content with the earlier

fourteen-year-long dictatorship of Jose Ubico, could not tolerate this democratic challenge, and the elected government, led by Jacobo Arbenz, was soon charged with assorted villainies, based on an alleged Red capture of the Guatemalan government.⁴

In the pre-invasion propaganda campaign, the mainstream media fell into line behind false charges of extreme government repression, threats to its neighbors, and the Communist takeover. The *Times* repeatedly reported these alleged abuses and threats from 1950 onward (my favorite: Sidney Gruson's "How Communists Won Control of Guatemala," March 1, 1953). Arbenz and his predecessor, Juan Jose Arevalo, had carefully avoided establishing any embassies with Soviet bloc countries, fearing U.S. reprisals—to no avail. Following the removal of Arbenz and the installation of a right-wing dictatorship, court historian Ronald Schneider, after studying 50,000 documents seized from Communist sources in Guatemala, found that not only did Communists never control the country, but that the Soviet Union "made no significant or even material investment in the Arbenz regime," and was at the time too preoccupied with internal problems to concern itself with Central America.⁵



Arbenz, [Jorge Toriello](#) (center), and [Francisco Arana](#) (right) in 1944. The three men formed the junta that ruled Guatemala from the October Revolution until the election of Arévalo. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The coup government quickly attacked and decimated the new social groups that had formed in the democratic era, mainly peasant, worker, and teacher organizations. Arbenz had won 65 percent of the votes in a free election, but the "liberator" Castillo Armas quickly won a "plebiscite" with 99.6 percent of the vote. Although this is a result familiar in totalitarian regimes, the mainstream media had by then lost interest in Guatemala, barely mentioning this electoral outcome. The *Times* had claimed in 1950 that U.S. Guatemala policy "is not trying to block social and economic progress but is interested in seeing that Guatemala becomes a liberal democracy."⁶ But in the aftermath, the editors failed to note that the result of U.S. policy was precisely to "block social and economic progress," through the installation of a regime of reactionary terror.

In 2011, more than half a century after 1954, the *Times* reported that Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom had apologized for that “Great Crime,” the violent overthrow of the Arbenz government, “an act of aggression to a government starting its democratic spring.”⁷ The article mentions that, according to president Colom, the Arbenz family is “seeking an apology from the United States for its role” in the Great Crime. The *Times* has never made any apology or even acknowledgement of its own role in the Great Crime.

Another Great Crime: Vietnam

Fake news abounded in the *Times* and other mainstream publications during the Vietnam War. The common perception that the paper’s editors opposed the war is misleading and essentially false. In *Without Fear or Favor*, former *Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury acknowledged that in 1962, when U.S. intervention escalated, the *Times* was “deeply and consistently” supportive of the war policy.⁸ He contends that the paper grew steadily more oppositional from 1965, culminating in the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. But Salisbury fails to recognize that from 1954 to the present, the *Times* never abandoned the Cold War framework and vocabulary, according to which the United States was resisting another nation’s “aggression” and protecting “South Vietnam.” The paper never applied the word aggression to this country, but used it freely in referring to North Vietnamese actions and those of the National Liberation Front in the southern half of Vietnam.

The various pauses in the U.S. bombing war in 1965 and after, in the alleged interest of “giving peace a chance,” were also the basis of fake news as the Johnson administration used these temporary halts to quiet antiwar protests, while making it clear to the Vietnamese that U.S. officials demanded full surrender. The *Times* and its colleagues swallowed this bait without a murmur of dissent.⁹

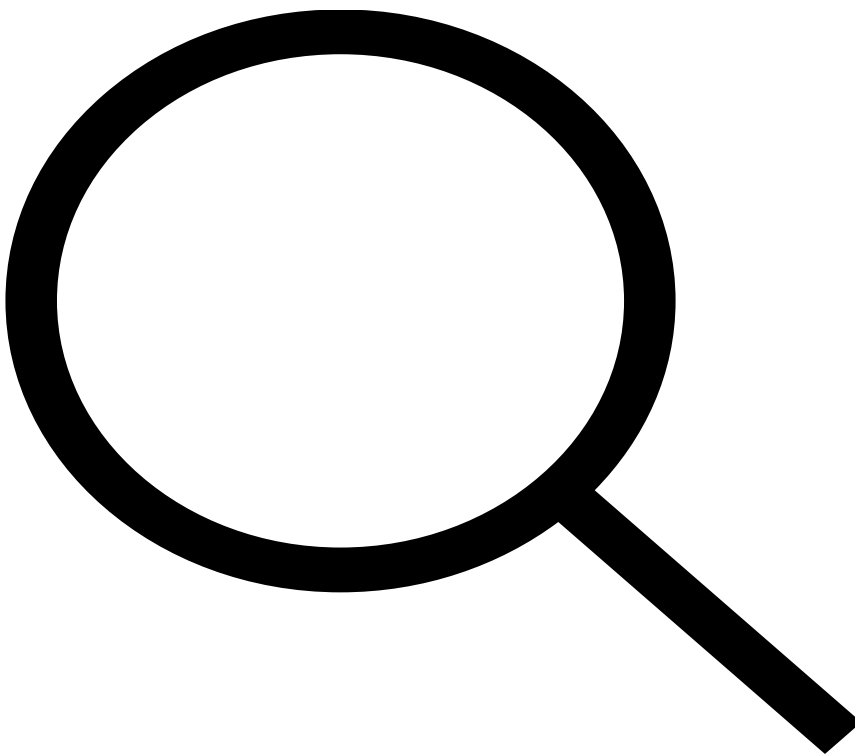


A US tank convoy during the Vietnam War (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Furthermore, although from 1965 onward the *Times* was willing to publish more reports that put the war in a less favorable light, it never broke from its heavy dependence on official sources, or from its reluctance to confront the damage wrought on Vietnam and its civilian population by the U.S. war machine. In contrast with its eager pursuit of Cambodian refugees from the Khmer Rouge after April 1975, the paper rarely sought testimony from the millions of Vietnamese refugees fleeing U.S. bombing and chemical warfare. In its opinion columns as well, the new openness was limited to commentators who accepted the premises of the war and would confine their criticisms to its tactical problems and domestic costs. From beginning to end, those who criticized the war as an immoral campaign of sheer aggression were excluded from the debate.¹⁰

The 1981 Papal Assassination Attempt

The mainstream media gave a further boost to Cold War propaganda in reporting on the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II in Rome in May 1981. At a time when the Reagan administration was seeking to demonize the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” the shooting of the pope by Turkish fascist Ali Agca was quickly tied to Moscow, helped by Agca’s confession—after seventeen months of imprisonment, interrogations, threats, inducements, and access to the media—that the Bulgarians and Soviet KGB were behind it all. No credible evidence supported this connection, the claims were implausible, and the corruption in the process was remarkable. (Agca also periodically claimed to be Jesus Christ.) The case against the Bulgarians (and implicitly the KGB) was lost even in Italy’s extremely biased and politicized judicial framework. But the *Times* bought it, and gave it prolonged, intense, and completely unquestioning attention, as did most of the U.S. media.



Source: [Fatima Crusader](#)

During the 1991 Senate hearings on the nomination of Robert Gates to head the CIA, former agency officer Melvin Goodman testified that the CIA knew from the start that Agca’s confessions were false, because they had “very good penetration” of the Bulgarian secret

services. The *Times* omitted this statement in its reporting on Goodman's testimony. During the same year, with Bulgaria now a member of the "free world," conservative analyst Allen Weinstein obtained permission to examine Bulgarian secret service files on the assassination attempt. His mission was widely reported, including in the *Times*, but when he returned without having found anything implicating Bulgaria or the KGB, several papers, including the *Times*, found his investigations no longer newsworthy.

Missile Gap

From roughly 1975 to 1986, much of the reporting on the purported "missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union was little more than fake news, with *Times* reporters passing along a steady stream of inflammatory official statements and baseless claims. An important case occurred in the mid-1970s, as right-wing hawks in the Ford administration were trying to escalate the Cold War and arms race. A 1975 CIA report had found that the Soviets were aiming only for nuclear parity. This was unsatisfactory, so CIA head George H. W. Bush appointed a new team of hardliners, who soon found that the Soviets were achieving nuclear superiority and preparing to fight a nuclear war. This so-called Team B report was taken at face value in a *Times* front page article of December 26, 1976, by David Binder, who failed to mention its political bias or purpose, and made no attempt to consult experts with differing views. The CIA finally admitted in 1983 that the Team B estimates were fabrications. But throughout this period, the *Times* supported the case for militarization by disseminating false information, much of it convincingly refuted by Tom Gervasi in his classic *The Myth of Soviet Military Supremacy*, a book never reviewed in the *Times*.

Yugoslavia and "Humanitarian Intervention"

The 1990s wars of dismantlement in Yugoslavia succeeded in removing an independent government from power and replacing it with a broken Serbian remnant and poor and unstable failed states in Bosnia and Kosovo. It also provided unwarranted support for the concept of "humanitarian intervention," which rested on a mass of misrepresentations and selective reporting. The demonized Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević was not an ultra-nationalist seeking a "Greater Serbia," but rather a non-aligned leader on the Western hit list who tried to help Serb minorities in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo remain in Yugoslavia as the United States and the European Union supported a legally questionable exodus by several constituent Yugoslav Republics. He supported each of the proposed settlements of these conflicts, which were sabotaged by Bosnian and U.S. officials who wanted better terms or the outright military defeat of Serbia, ultimately achieving the latter. Milošević had nothing to do with the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which Bosnian Serbs took revenge on Bosnian Muslim soldiers who had been ravaging nearby Bosnian Serb villages from their base in Srebrenica under NATO protection. The several thousand Serb civilian deaths were essentially unreported in the mainstream media, while the numbers of Srebrenica's executed victims were correspondingly inflated.¹¹

The Putin Era

The U.S. political establishment was shocked and delighted by the 1989–91 fall of the Soviet Union, and its members were similarly pleased with the policies of President Boris Yeltsin, a virtual U.S. client, under whose rule ordinary Russians suffered a calamitous fall in living standards, while a small set of oligarchs were able to loot the broken state. Yeltsin's election victory in 1996, greatly assisted by U.S. consultants, advice, and money, was, for the editors

of the *Times*, “A Victory for Russian Democracy.”¹² They were not bothered by either the electoral corruption, the creation of a grand-larceny-based economic oligarchy, or, shortly thereafter, the new rules centralizing power in the office of president.¹³



Russian President Vladimir Putin (Source: Strategic Culture Foundation)

Yeltsin’s successor, Vladimir Putin, gradually abandoned the former’s subservience to Western interests, and was thereby perceived as a menace. His reelection in 2012, although surely less corrupt than Yeltsin’s in 1996, was castigated in the U.S. media. The lead *Times* article on May 5, 2012, featured “a slap in the face” from Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observers, claims of no real competition, and “thousands of anti-government protesters gathered in Moscow square to chant ‘Russia without Putin.’”¹⁴ There had been no “challenges to legitimacy” reported in the *Times* after Yeltsin’s tainted victory in 1996.

The demonization of Putin escalated with the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and subsequent Kiev warfare in Eastern Ukraine, Russian support of the East Ukraine resistance, and the Crimean referendum and absorption of Crimea by Russia. This was all declared “aggression” by the United States and its allies and clients, and sanctions were imposed on Russia, and a major U.S.-NATO military buildup was initiated on Russia’s borders. Tensions mounted further with the shooting-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over southeastern Ukraine—promptly, but almost surely falsely, blamed on the “pro-Russian” rebels and Russia itself.¹⁵

Anti-Russian hostilities were further inflamed by the country’s escalated intervention in Syria from 2015 on, in support of Bashar al-Assad and against rebel forces that had come to be dominated by ISIS and al-Nusra, an offshoot of al-Qaeda. The United States and its NATO and Middle East allies had been committing aggression against Syria, in de facto alliance with al-Nusra and other extremist Islamic factions, for several years. Russian intervention turned the tide, frustrating the U.S. and Saudi goal of regime change against Assad, and weakening tacit U.S. allies.

The *Times* has covered these developments with unstinting apologetics—for the February 2014 coup in Kiev—which it has never labeled as such, for the U.S. role in the overthrow of the elected government of Victor Yanukovych, and with anger and horror at the Crimea referendum and Russian absorption, which it never allows might be a defensive response to the Kiev coup. Its calls for punishment for the casualty-free Russian “aggression” in Crimea is in marked contrast to its apologetics for the million-plus casualties caused by U.S. aggression “of choice” (not defensive) in Iraq from March 2003 on. The paper’s editors and

columnists condemn Putin's disregard for international law, while exempting their own country from criticism for its repeated violations of that same law.¹⁶

In the *Times's* reporting and opinion columns Russia is regularly assailed as expansionist and threatening its neighbors, but virtually no mention is made of NATO's expansion up to the Russian borders and first-strike-threat placement of anti-missile weapons in Eastern Europe—the latter earlier claimed to be in response to a missile threat from Iran! Analyses by political scientist John Mearsheimer and Russia scholar Stephen F. Cohen that noted this NATO advance were excluded from the opinion pages of the *Times*.¹⁷ In contrast, a member of the Russian band Pussy Riot, Maria Alyokhina, was given op-ed space to denounce Putin and Russia, and the punk rock group was granted a meeting with the *Times* editorial board.¹⁸ Between January 1 and March 31, 2014, the paper ran twenty-three articles featuring Pussy Riot and its alleged significance as a symbol of Russian limits on free speech. Pussy Riot had disrupted a church service in Moscow and only stopped after police intervened, at the request of church authorities. A two-year prison sentence followed. Meanwhile, in February 2014, eighty-four-year-old nun Sister Megan Rice was sentenced to four years in prison for having entered a U.S. nuclear weapons site in July 2012 and carried out a symbolic protest. The *Times* gave this news a tiny mention in its National Briefing section, under the title "Tennessee Nun is Sentenced for Peace Protest." No op-ed columns or meeting with the *Times* board for Rice. There are worthy and unworthy protesters, just as there are victims.

In Syria, with Russian help, Assad's army and allied militias were able to dislodge the rebels from Aleppo, to the dismay of Washington and the mainstream media. It has been enlightening to see the alarm expressed over civilian casualties in Aleppo, with accompanying photographs of forsaken children and stories of civilian suffering and deprivation. The *Times's* focus on those civilians and children and its indignation at Putin-Assad inhumanity stands in sharp contrast with their virtual silence on massive civilian casualties in Fallujah in 2004 and beyond, and more recently in rebel-held areas of Syria, and in the Iraqi city of Mosul, under U.S. and allied attack.¹⁹ The differential treatment of worthy and unworthy victims has been in full force in coverage of Syria.

A further phase of intensifying Russophobia may be dated from the October 2016 presidential debates, in which Hillary Clinton declared that Donald Trump would be a Putin "puppet" as president, a theme her campaign began to stress. This emphasis only increased after the election, with the help of the media and intelligence services, as the Clinton camp sought to explain their electoral loss, maintain party control, and possibly even have the election results overturned in the courts or electoral college by attributing Trump's victory to Russian interference.

A major impetus for the Putin connection came with the January 2017 release of a report by the Office of Director of National Intelligence (DNI), *Background of Assessing Russian Activities and Intention in Recent US Elections*. More than half of this short document is devoted to the Russian-sponsored RT news network, which the report treats as an illegitimate propaganda source. The organization is allegedly part of Russia's "influence campaign...[that] aspired to help President-elect Trump's chances of victory when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to the President-elect." No semblance of proof is offered that there was any planned "campaign," rather than an ongoing expression of opinion and news judgments. The same standards used to identify

a Russian “influence campaign” could be applied with equal force to U.S. media and Radio Free Europe’s treatment of any Russian election—and of course, the U.S. intervention in the 1996 Russian election was overt, direct, and went far beyond any covert “influence campaign.”

Regarding more direct Russian intervention in the U.S. election, the DNI authors concede the absence of “full supporting evidence,” but in fact provide no supporting evidence at all—only speculative assertions, assumptions, and guesses. “We assess that...Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2015,” they write, designed to defeat Mrs. Clinton, and “to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process,” but provide no proof of any such order. The report also contains no evidence that Russia hacked the communications of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) or the emails of Clinton and former Clinton campaign manager John Podesta, or that it gave hacked information to WikiLeaks. Julian Assange and former British diplomat Craig Murray have repeatedly claimed that these sources were leaked by local insiders, not hacked from outside. Veteran intelligence experts William Binney and Ray McGovern likewise contend that the WikiLeaks evidence was leaked, not hacked.²⁰ It is also notable that of the three intelligence agencies who signed the DNI document, the National Security Agency—the agency most likely to have proof of Russian hacking and its transmission to WikiLeaks, as well as of any “orders” from Putin—only expressed “moderate confidence” in its findings.

But as with the Reds ruling Guatemala, the Soviets outpacing U.S. missile capabilities, or the KGB plotting to assassinate the pope, the *Times* has taken the Russian hacking story as established fact, despite the absence of hard evidence. *Times* reporter David Sanger refers to the report’s “damning and surprisingly detailed account of Russia’s efforts to undermine the American electoral system,” only to then acknowledge that the published report “contains no information about how the agencies had ...come to their conclusions.”²¹ The report itself includes the astonishing statement that “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact.” Furthermore, if the report was based on “intercepts of conversations” as well as on hacked computer data, as Sanger and the DNI claim, why has the DNI failed to quote a single conversation showing Putin’s alleged orders and plans?

The *Times* has never cited or given op-ed space to William Binney, Ray McGovern, or Craig Murray, leading dissident authorities on hacking technology, methodology, and the specifics of the DNC hacks. But room was found for Louise Mensch’s op-ed “What to Ask about Russian Hacking.” Mensch is a notorious conspiracy theorist with no relevant technical background, described by writers Nathan Robinson and Alex Nichols as best-known for “spending most of her time on Twitter issuing frenzied denunciations of imagined armies of online ‘Putinbots,’” making her “one of the least credible people on the internet.”²² But she is published in the *Times* because, in contrast with the informed and credible Binney and Murray, she follows the party line, taking Russian hacking of the DNC as a premise.

The CIA’s brazen intervention in the electoral process in 2016 and 2017 broke new ground in the agency’s politicization. Former CIA head Michael Morell announced in an August 2016 op-ed in the *Times*: “I Ran the C.I.A. Now I’m Endorsing Hillary Clinton,” and former CIA boss Michael Hayden published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* just days before the election, entitled “Former CIA Chief: Trump is Russia’s Useful Fool.” Morell had yet another op-ed in the *Times* on January 6, now openly assailing the new president. These attacks were

unrelievedly insulting to Trump and laudatory to Clinton, even portraying Trump as a traitor; they also made clear that Clinton's more pugnacious stance toward Syria and Russia was preferable by far to Trump's leanings toward negotiation and cooperation with Russia.

This was also true of the scandal surrounding former Trump Defense Intelligence nominee Michael Flynn's telephone call with the Russian ambassador, which may have included a discussion of the incoming administration's policy actions. The political possibilities of this interaction were quickly grasped by outgoing Obama officials, security personnel, and the mainstream media, with the FBI interrogating Flynn and with widespread expressions of horror at Flynn's action, which could have allegedly exposed him to Russian blackmail. But such pre-inauguration meetings with Russian diplomats have been a "common practice" according to Jack Matlock, the U.S. ambassador to Russia under Reagan and Bush, and Matlock had personally arranged such a meeting for Jimmy Carter.²³ Obama's own ambassador to the country, Michael McFaul, admitted visiting Moscow for talks with officials in 2008, even before the election. Daniel Lazare has made a good case not only that the illegality and blackmail threat are implausible, but that the FBI's interrogation of Flynn reeks of entrapment. "Yet anti-Trump liberals are trying to convince the public that it's all 'worse than Watergate.'"²⁴

The political point of the DNI report thus seems to have been, at minimum, to tie the Trump administration's hands in its dealings with Russia. Some analysts outside the mainstream have argued that we may have been witnessing an incipient spy or palace coup that fell short, but still had the desired effect of weakening the new administration.²⁵ The *Times* has not offered a word of criticism of this politicization and intervention in the election process by intelligence agencies, and in fact the editors have been working with them and the Democratic Party as a loose-knit team in a distinctly un- and anti-democratic program designed to undermine or reverse the results of the 2016 election, on the pretext of alleged foreign electoral interference.

The *Times* and the mainstream media in general have also barely mentioned the awkward fact that the allegedly hacked disclosures of the DNC and Clinton and Podesta emails disclosed uncontested facts about real electoral manipulations on behalf of the Clinton campaign, facts that the public had a right to know and that might well have affected the election results. The focus on the evidence-free claims of a Russian hacking intrusion have helped divert attention from the real electoral abuses disclosed by the WikiLeaks material. Here again, official and mainstream media fake news helped bury real news.

Another arrow in the Russophobia quiver was a private intelligence "dossier" compiled by Christopher Steele, a former British intelligence agent working for Orbis Business Intelligence, a private firm hired by the DNC to dig up dirt on Trump. Steele's first report, delivered in June 2016, made numerous serious accusations against Trump, most notably that Trump had been caught in a sexual escapade in Moscow, that his political advance had been supported by the Kremlin for at least five years, under Putin's direction, in order to sow discord within the U.S. political establishment and disrupt the Western alliance. This document was based on alleged conversations by Steele with distant (Russian) officials: that is, strictly on hearsay evidence, whose assertions, where verifiable, are sometimes erroneous.²⁶ But it said just what the Democrats, the mainstream media, and the CIA wanted to hear, and intelligence officials accordingly declared the author "credible," and the media lapped it up. The *Times* hedged somewhat on its own cooperation in this tawdry campaign

by calling the report “unverified,” but nevertheless reported its claims.²⁷

The Steele dossier also became a central part of the investigation and hearings on “Russia-gate” held by the House Intelligence Committee starting in March 2017, led by Democratic Representative Adam Schiff. While basing his opening statement on the hearsay-laden dossier, Schiff expressed no interest in establishing who funded the Steele effort, the identity and exact status of the Russian officials quoted, or how much they were paid. Apparently talking to Russians with a design of influencing an American presidential election is perfectly acceptable if the candidate supported by this intrusion is anti-Russian!

The *Times* has played a major role in this latest wave of Russophobia, reminiscent of its 1917–20 performance in which, as Lippmann and Merz noted in 1920, “boundless credulity, and an untiring readiness to be gulled” characterized the news-making process. While quoting the CIA’s admission that it had no hard evidence, relying instead on “circumstantial evidence” and “capabilities,” the *Times* was happy to describe these capabilities at great length and to imply that they proved something.²⁸ Editorials and news articles have worked uniformly on the false supposition that Russian hacking was proved, and that the Russians had given these data to WikiLeaks, also unproven and strenuously denied by Assange and Murray.

The *Times* has run neck-and-neck with the *Washington Post* in stirring up fears of the Russian information war and illicit involvement with Trump. The *Times* now easily conflates fake news with any criticism of established institutions, as in Mark Scott and Melissa Eddy’s “Europe Combats a New Foe of Political Stability: Fake News,” February 20, 2017.²⁹ But what is more extraordinary is the uniformity with which the paper’s regular columnists accept as a given the CIA’s assessment of the Russian hacking and transmission to WikiLeaks, the possibility or likelihood that Trump is a Putin puppet, and the urgent need of a congressional and “non-partisan” investigation of these claims. This swallowing of a new war-party line has extended widely in the liberal media. Both the *Times* and *Washington Post* have lent tacit support to the idea that this “fake news” threat needs to be curbed, possibly by some form of voluntary media-organized censorship or government intervention that would at least expose the fakery.

The most remarkable media episode in this anti-influence-campaign was the *Post*’s piece by Craig Timberg, “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say,” which featured a report by a group of anonymous “experts” entity called PropOrNot that claimed to have identified two hundred websites that, wittingly or not, were “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda.” While smearing these websites, many of them independent news outlets whose only shared trait was their critical stance toward U.S. foreign policy, the “experts” refused to identify themselves, allegedly out of fear of being “targeted by legions of skilled hackers.” As journalist Matt Taibbi wrote, “You want to blacklist hundreds of people, but you won’t put your name to your claims? Take a hike.”³⁰ But the *Post* welcomed and promoted this McCarthyite effort, which might well be a product of Pentagon or CIA information warfare. (And these entities are themselves well-funded and heavily into the propaganda business.)

On December 23, 2016, President Obama signed the Portman-Murphy Countering Disinformation and Propaganda Act, which will supposedly allow the United States to more effectively combat foreign (namely Russian and Chinese) propaganda and disinformation. It

will encourage more government counter-propaganda efforts, and provide funding to non-government entities to help in this enterprise. It is clearly a follow-on to the claims of Russian hacking and propaganda, and shares the spirit of the listing of two hundred tools of Moscow featured in the *Washington Post*. (Perhaps PropOrNot will qualify for a subsidy and be able to enlarge its list.) Liberals have been quiet on this new threat to freedom of speech, undoubtedly influenced by their fears of Russian-based fake news and propaganda. But they may yet take notice, even if belatedly, when Trump or one of his successors puts it to work on their own notions of fake news and propaganda.

The success of the war party's campaign to contain or reverse any tendency to ease tensions with Russia was made dramatically clear in the Trump administration's speedy bombing response to the April 4, 2017, Syrian chemical weapons deaths. The *Times* and other mainstream media editors and journalists greeted this aggressive move with almost uniform enthusiasm, and once again did not require evidence of Assad's guilt beyond their government's claims.³¹ The action was damaging to Assad and Russia, but served the rebels well.

But the mainstream media never ask *cui bono?* in cases like this. In 2013, a similar charge against Assad, which brought the United States to the brink of a full-scale bombing war in Syria, turned out to be a false flag operation, and some authorities believe the current case is equally problematic.³² Nevertheless, Trump moved quickly (and illegally), dealing a blow to any further rapprochement between the United States and Russia. The CIA, the Pentagon, leading Democrats, and the rest of the war party had won an important skirmish in the struggle over permanent war.

Notes

1. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), chapter 2.
2. Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, *A Test of the News* (New York: New Republic, 1920).
3. On the Grand Area framework, see Noam Chomsky, "The New Framework of Order," in *On Power and Ideology* (Boston: South End, 1987).
4. Edward S. Herman, "Returning Guatemala to the Fold," in Gary Rawnsley, ed., *Cold War Propaganda in the 1950s* (London: Macmillan, 1999).
5. Ronald Schneider, *Communism in Guatemala, 1944-1954* (New York: Praeger, 1959), 41, 196-97, 294.
6. Editorial Board, "[The Guatemala Incident](#)," *New York Times*, April 8, 1950.
7. Elisabeth Malkin, "[An Apology for a Guatemalan Coup, 57 Years Later](#)," *New York Times*, October 11, 2011.
8. Harrison Salisbury, *Without Fear or Favor* (New York: Times Books, 1980), 486.
9. Richard Du Boff and Edward Herman, *America's Vietnam Policy: The Strategy of Deception* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs, 1966).

10. See Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, chapter 6.
11. Editorial Board, "[A Victory for Russian Democracy](#)," *New York Times*, July 4, 1996.
12. Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "[The Dismantling of Yugoslavia](#)," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 5 (October 2007); Herman and Peterson, "[Poor Marilise: Her Old Allies Are Now Attacking the Tribunal and Even Portraying the Serbs as Victims](#)," ZNet, October 30, 2008, <http://zcomm.org>.
13. Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade: America and the Tragedy of Post-Communist Russia* (New York: Norton, 2000).
14. Ellen Barry and Michael Schwartz, "[After Election, Putin Faces Challenges to Legitimacy](#)," *New York Times*, March 5, 2012.
15. Robert Parry, "[Troubling Gaps in the New MH-17 Report](#)," Consortium News, September 28, 2016, <http://consortiumnews.com>.
16. Paul Krugman says, "Mr. Putin is someone who doesn't worry about little things like international law" ("[The Siberian Candidate](#)," *New York Times*, July 22, 2016)—implying, falsely, that U.S. leaders do "worry about" such things.
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