

NYT's 'Tinfoil Hat' Conspiracy Theory

Exclusive: There is a “tinfoil-hat” quality to The New York Times’ pushing its “Donald Trump Is Russia’s Manchurian Candidate” conspiracy theory as the newspaper sinks deeper into a New McCarthyism, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There are real reasons to worry about President Donald Trump’s foreign policy, including his casual belligerence toward Iran and North Korea and his failure to rethink U.S. alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, but The New York Times obsesses on Trump’s willingness to work with Russia.

On Saturday, the Times devoted most of its op-ed page to the Times’ favorite conspiracy theory, that Trump is Vladimir Putin’s “Manchurian candidate” though evidence continues to be lacking.

The op-ed package combined a “What to Ask About Russian Hacking” [article](#) by Louise Mensch, a former Conservative member of the British Parliament who now works for Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, and a connect-the-dots graphic that when filled out shows the Kremlin sitting atop the White House. But the featured article actually revealed how flimsy and wacky the Times’ conspiracy theory is.

Usually, an investigation doesn’t begin until there is specific evidence of a crime. For instance, the investigative articles that I have written over the years have always had information from insiders about how the misconduct had occurred before a single word was published.

In the early 1990s, for the investigation that I conducted for PBS “Frontline” into the so-called “October Surprise” case – whether Ronald Reagan’s campaign colluded with Iranians and others to sabotage President Jimmy Carter’s negotiations to free 52 American hostages in 1980 – we had some two dozen people providing information about those contacts from multiple perspectives – including from the U.S., Iran, Israel and Europe – before we aired the allegations.

We didn’t base our documentary on the suspicious circumstance that the Iranians held back the hostages until after Ronald Reagan was inaugurated President on Jan. 20, 1981, or on the point that Iran and the Republicans had motives to sandbag Carter. We didn’t casually throw out the names of a bunch of people who might have committed treason.

When we broadcast the documentary in April 1991, there was a strong evidentiary case of the Reagan’s campaign guilt – and even then we were highly circumspect

in how we presented the story.

Ultimately, the 1980 “October Surprise” case came down to whether you believed the Republican denials or the two dozen or so witnesses who described how this operation was carried out with the help of the Israeli government, French intelligence, and former and current CIA officers – along with former CIA Director George H.W. Bush and future CIA Director William Casey.

In the end, Official Washington was never willing to accept that the beloved Ronald Reagan could have done something as dastardly as conspire with Iranians to delay the release of 52 American hostages. It didn’t matter what the evidence was or that Reagan quickly approved arms shipments to Iran via Israel in 1981, a prequel to the later Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal of 1985-86.

No Direct Evidence

By contrast, what the current “Russia Owns Trump” allegations are completely lacking is an insider who describes any nefarious collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia to arrange the Kremlin’s help in defeating Hillary Clinton and electing Donald Trump.

What we do have is President Barack Obama’s outgoing intelligence chiefs putting out evidence-free “assessments” that Russia was responsible for the “hacking” and the publicizing of two batches of Democratic emails, one from the Democratic National Committee and one from Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta.

The DNC emails revealed that top Democratic Party officials had violated their duty to remain neutral during the primaries and instead tilted the playing field in favor of Hillary Clinton and against Sen. Bernie Sanders. The Podesta emails exposed the contents of Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street, which she was trying to hide from voters, as well as some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

When published by WikiLeaks last year, the emails embarrassed the Clinton campaign but were not regarded as a major factor in her defeat, which she blamed primarily on FBI Director James Comey’s decision to briefly reopen the investigation into whether she endangered national security by using a private email server while Secretary of State.

However, after the shock of Donald Trump’s election, Clinton supporters looked for reasons to block Trump’s inauguration or to set the stage for his impeachment. That was when Obama’s intelligence chiefs began circulating claims that Russia was behind the leaking of the Democratic emails as part of a scheme to put their favored candidate, Trump, in the White House.

The New York Times and other mainstream news outlets, which were strongly hostile to Trump, seized on the allegations, making them front-page news for the past several months despite the paucity of actual evidence that any collusion occurred or that the Russians were even the ones who obtained and distributed the emails.

WikiLeaks denied getting the material from the Russians, suggesting instead that two different American insiders were the sources.

A Witch Hunt?

How thin the Russia-Trump case is becomes evident in reading the Times' op-ed by Louise Mensch. After introducing herself as someone who has "followed the Russian hacking story closely," she lists 25 people by name, including various Trump advisers as well as Internet moguls Mark Zuckerberg and Peter Thiel, who should be hauled before the House Intelligence Committee for interrogation along with unnamed executives of several corporations and banks.

"There are many more who need to be called but these would be a first step," Mensch wrote. In reviewing Mensch's long article, it's unclear if she's proposing only a "fishing expedition" or would prefer a full-fledged "witch hunt."

At one point earlier in this process, I wrote an article warning that the "investigation" could become something of a "did-you-talk-to-a-Russian" inquisition. Some readers probably felt I was going too far, but that now appears to be exactly what is happening.

Many of Mensch's suggestions pertain to people associated with the Trump campaign who gave speeches in Moscow or otherwise communicated with Russians. It appears any contact with a Russian, any discussion of disagreements between the U.S. and Russia, or any political comment that in any way echoes what some Russian may have said becomes "evidence" of collusion and treason.

The extremism of Mensch's tendentious article is further illustrated by her suggestion that Trump should be impeached if there is any truth to his widely discredited tweet that Obama had ordered wiretaps on Trump Tower. She wrote:

"If ... the president tweeted real news, he revealed the existence of intercepts that cover members of his team in a continuing investigation. That would be obstruction of justice, potentially an impeachable offense."

Most of us who have reported on Trump's bizarre "tapp" tweet have criticized him for making a serious charge without evidence (as well as his poor spelling), but Mensch seems to believe that the more serious offense would be if Trump somehow

were telling the truth. She wants any truth-telling on this issue to be grounds for Trump's impeachment, even though he may have been referring, in part, to her November article reporting on the FISA warrant that supposedly granted permission for members of Trump's team to be put under electronic surveillance.

A Tinfoil Hat

To dramatize her arguments further, Mensch then demonstrates a thorough lack of knowledge about recent American history. She claims, "Never in American history has a president been suspected of collaborating with a hostile foreign power to win an election."

Whatever you want to think about the 1980 October Surprise case – and there is substantial evidence that it was real – it definitely constituted an example in American history when a president was "suspected of collaborating with a hostile foreign power to win an election."

Another case in 1968, which now even The New York Times grudgingly accepts, involved Richard Nixon colluding with the South Vietnamese government to torpedo President Lyndon Johnson's Paris peace talks to assure Nixon's election. Although South Vietnam was then an ally, the allegations about Nixon also included outreach to North Vietnam, although Hanoi ended up sending a delegation to Paris while Saigon did not.

Yet, what is perhaps most shocking about Mensch's op-ed and its prominent placement by the Times is that the story has all the elements of a "tinfoil-hat" conspiracy. It's the sort of wild-eyed smearing of American citizens that the Times would normally deride as an offensive fantasy that would be mentioned only to mock the conspiracists.

But the Times is now so deep into its campaign to demonize Russia and to destroy Trump that all normal journalistic standards have long ago been tossed out the window.

While there are many valid reasons to protest Trump and his policies, this descent into a New McCarthyism is both grotesque (because it impugns the patriotism of Americans without evidence, only breathless questions) and dangerous (because it escalates the New Cold War with Russia, a confrontation that could stumble into a nuclear holocaust).

At such moments, supposedly serious newspapers like The New York Times should show extraordinary caution and care, not a reckless disregard for truth and fairness. But no one in Official Washington seems willing to play the role of attorney Joseph Welch when he finally stood up to Sen. Joe McCarthy with the famous question, "At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Trump's Team Embraces Iranian Myths

Key players in the Trump administration have stuck to the neoconservative insistence on "regime change" in Iran rather than take a fresh look at the reality, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Some hardline myths about Iran never seem to die. One myth especially pertinent to U.S. policy is that revolutionary regime change in Iran is a significant possibility in the near future and that with a bit more of a push from the outside, the Islamic Republic will collapse and be replaced by something much more to our liking.

This illusion was prevalent in much of the George W. Bush administration, which accordingly adhered to a policy of refusing to deal with Iran and instead of trying to isolate it and to inflict economic pain through sanctions. Several years of lack of results in the face of ever-increasing sanctions demonstrated the fecklessness of that policy. The sanctions became useful only when the next U.S. administration began to negotiate with Iran and sanctions were used as a bargaining chip to conclude an agreement that blocks all possible paths to an Iranian nuclear weapon.

The myth often is connected to a faith in exile groups as instruments for quick transition to a completely different type of regime. Many of those hoping for regime change in Iran look in this way to the Mujahedin-e Khalq, a cult-cum-terrorist group that actually has almost no popular support within Iran. Some of the same people had placed a similar faith in Iraqi exile Ahmed Chalabi, whose qualities as a huckster more than as someone who could father a new Iraqi republic became increasingly apparent after the U.S. invasion of 2003.

Today there evidently is another expression of the old myth about Iran, with talk about regime change, [among Trump loyalists](#) at the White House and National Security Council staff. According to these individuals, increased pressure and kicks from the outside can bring about positive results in Iran, rather than, as expert analysis both inside and outside the national security bureaucracy

explains, merely eliciting hostile responses from a firmly implanted Islamic Republic.

It is unclear whether holding of the myth represents genuine misbelief or instead is a rationalization covering other reasons the holders want to maintain Iran as a perpetually isolated *bête noire*. Either way, the myth leads to damaging and ineffective U.S. policy.

Iran is not at all close to any political upheaval that could be described as a new revolution or a counter-revolution, even with more pressure and pushes from the outside. Iranian politics certainly exhibits plenty of disagreement and controversy, with the possibility of significant policy change coming out of that political competition. Despite the substantial defects in the Iranian political system, there is a political robustness missing from, say, the Arab monarchies on the other side of the Persian Gulf. But most Iranians do not have an appetite for making a new revolution.

Both the regime and the people in Iran have demonstrated an ability to withstand hardship much greater than what U.S. sanctions can inflict. They did so during the extremely costly eight-year Iran-Iraq War, which Iran doggedly continued for some time even after Saddam – who started the war – began seeking an armistice. Certainly if pressure or punishment from an outside power is involved, both the regime and the people exhibit determined resistance.

Much Evolution

There already has been much evolution in the direction and nature of the Islamic Republic during its nearly four decades of existence, although probably not as much as there would have been without the ostracism. The large majority of Iranians today were born since the revolution. Hijabs have inched above hairlines, and domestic life has become looser and freer. Especially for the female half of the population, looking across the Gulf does not instill any ideas about better alternatives.

More important for U.S. and Western interests has been the evolution in Iran's external policies. Any hopes within the regime in the immediate aftermath of the revolution for like-minded revolutions elsewhere in the region have long ago been dispelled, as the realization sunk in that such revolutions were unlikely and that Iran's system would survive anyway. The most obvious form of Iranian state-conducted international terrorism – a campaign of assassinating exiled dissidents – effectively ended years ago, partly because of the regime's desire to have normal and fruitful relations with Europe.

Further evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its policies in the years

ahead will correlate directly with the extent to which it has normal political and economic interaction with the rest of the world. Isolation and punishment would strengthen Iranian hardliners' arguments that there is neither a possibility of, nor a payoff to be expected from, such interaction. Bolstering of the hardline position in turn would mean diminished prospects for further liberalizing political change in Iran.

Conversely, increased commerce, foreign investment, and the economic development that go with them would strengthen the political position of those favoring normality in foreign relations, would increase the Iranian stake in even more peaceful normality, would loosen the grip of those in Iran whose economic and political power depend on isolation, and would increase Iranian exposure to ideas and examples of still more change.

One of the next big potential turning points in Iranian politics will be the selection of a new supreme leader; the current leader, Ali Khamenei, is 77 and not in the best of health. There is talk in Tehran about how this transition may well entail not just the picking of Khamenei's successor but also redefining the role of supreme leader. Specifically, the thinking points to a role somewhat closer to that played by the senior Shia cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani. This would mark a further significant move away from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's concept of the clerical jurist.

Those in the United States seeking, or at least talking about, regime change in Iran should face up to how the best way to achieve such change is to let these processes that already are in train play out, and to encourage them with increased interaction and commerce between Iran and the West. The change may not be sudden enough or violent enough to be described as a revolution with a capital R, but the change is even more likely than anything sudden or violent to be in a direction favorable for Western interests.

This will be the course of Iranian history as long as we do not screw up the process with mindlessly applied isolation, economic punishment, and attempted subversion.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
