

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](#)).
