Democrats Trade Places on War and McCarthyism

Exclusive: The anti-Russia hysteria gripping the Democratic Party marks a “trading places” moment as the Democrats embrace the New Cold War and the New McCarthyism, flipping the script on Republicans, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Caught up in the frenzy to delegitimize Donald Trump by blaming his victory on Russian meddling, national Democrats are finishing the transformation of their party from one that was relatively supportive of peace to one pushing for war, including a confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.

This “trading places” moment was obvious in watching the belligerent tone of Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee on Monday as they impugned the patriotism of any Trump adviser who may have communicated with anyone connected to Russia.

Ranking Democrat, Rep. Adam Schiff of California, acknowledged that there was no hard evidence of any Trump-Russia cabal, but he pressed ahead with what he called “circumstantial evidence of collusion,” a kind of guilt-by-association conspiracy theory that made him look like a mild-mannered version of Joe McCarthy.

Schiff cited by name a number of Trump’s aides and associates who — as The New York Times reported — were “believed to have some kind of contact or communications with Russians.” These Americans, whose patriotism was being questioned, included foreign policy adviser Carter Page, Trump’s second campaign manager Paul Manafort, political adviser Roger Stone and Trump’s first national security adviser retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn.

In a 15-minute opening statement, Schiff summed up his circumstantial case by asking: “Is it possible that all of these events and reports are completely unrelated and nothing more than an entirely unhappy coincidence? Yes, it is possible. But it is also possible, maybe more than possible, that they are not coincidental, not disconnected and not unrelated.”

As an investigative journalist who has covered (and uncovered) national security scandals for several decades, I would never accuse people of something as serious as betraying their country based on nothing more than coincidences that, who knows, might not be coincidental.
Before we published anything on such topics, the news organizations that I worked for required multiple layers of information from a variety of sources including insiders who could describe what had happened and why. Such stories included Nicaraguan Contra cocaine smuggling, Oliver North’s secret Contra supply operation, and the Reagan campaign’s undermining of President Carter’s Iran-hostage negotiations in 1980.

For breaking those stories, we still took enormous heat from Republicans, some Democrats who wanted to show how bipartisan they were, and many establishment-protecting journalists, but the stories contained strong evidence that misconduct occurred – and we were highly circumspect in how the allegations were framed.

**Going Whole-Hog**

By contrast, national Democrats, some super-hawk Republicans and the establishment media are going whole-hog on these vague suspicions of contacts between some Russians and some Americans who have provided some help or advice to Trump.

Given the paucity of evidence – both regarding the claims that Russia hacked Democratic emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks, and the allegations that somehow Trump’s advisers colluded in that process – it would appear that what is happening is a political maneuver to damage Trump politically and possibly remove him from office.

But those machinations require the Democratic Party’s continued demonization of Russia and implicitly put the Democrats on the side of escalating New Cold War tensions, such as military support for the fiercely anti-Russian regime in Ukraine which seized power in a 2014 U.S.-backed putsch overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovych.

One of the attack lines that Democrats have used against Trump is that his people toned down language in the Republican platform about shipping arms to the Ukrainian military, which includes battalions of neo-Nazi fighters and has killed thousands of ethnic Russian Ukrainians in the east in what is officially called an Anti-Terrorism Operation (or ATO).

The Democratic Party leaders have fully bought into the slanted Western narrative justifying the violent overthrow of Yanukovych. They also have ignored the human rights of Ukraine’s ethnic Russian minorities, which voted overwhelmingly in Crimea and the Donbass to secede from post-coup Ukraine. The more complex reality is simply summed up as a “Russian invasion.”

Key Democrats also have pressed for escalation of the U.S. military attacks
inside Syria to force “regime change” on Bashar al-Assad’s secular government even if that risks another military confrontation with Russia and a victory by Al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists.

In short, the national Democratic Party is turning itself into the more extreme war party. It’s not that the Republicans have become all that dovish; it’s just that the Democrats have become all that hawkish. The significance of this change can hardly be overstated.

Questioning War

Since late in the Vietnam War, the Democrats have acted as the more restrained of the two major parties on issues of war, with the Republicans associated with tough-guy rhetoric and higher military spending. By contrast, Democrats generally were more hesitant to rush into foreign wars and confrontations (although they were far from pacifists).

Especially after the revelations of the Pentagon Papers in the 1971 revealing the government deceptions used to pull the American people into the Vietnam War, Democrats questioned shady rationalizations for other wars.

Some Democratic skepticism continued into the 1980s as President Ronald Reagan was modernizing U.S. propaganda techniques to whitewash the gross human rights crimes of right-wing regimes in Central America and to blacken the reputations of Nicaragua’s Sandinistas and other leftists.

The Democratic resolve against war propaganda began to crack by the mid-to-late 1980s — around Reagan’s Grenada invasion and George H.W. Bush’s attack on Panama. By then, the Republicans had enjoyed nearly two decades of bashing the Democrats as “weak on defense” — from George McGovern to Jimmy Carter to Walter Mondale to Michael Dukakis.

But the Democratic Party’s resistance to dubious war rationalizations collapsed in 1991 over George H.W. Bush’s Persian Gulf War, in which the President rebuffed less violent solutions (even ones favored by the U.S. military) to assure a dramatic ground-war victory after which Bush declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”

Fearful of being labeled disloyal to “the troops” and “weak,” national Democrats scrambled to show their readiness to kill. In 1992, Gov. Bill Clinton left the campaign trail to return to Arkansas to oversee the execution of the mentally impaired Ricky Ray Rector.

During his presidency, Clinton deployed so-called “smart power” aggressively, including maintaining harsh sanctions on Iraq even as they led to the
unnecessary deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children. He also intervened in the Yugoslavian civil war by bombing civilian targets in Belgrade including the lethal destruction of the Serb TV station for the supposed offense of broadcasting “propaganda.”

After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, many leading congressional Democrats – including presidential hopefuls John Kerry, Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton – voted to authorize President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. Though they offered various excuses (especially after the Iraq War went badly), the obvious real reason was their fear of being labeled “soft” in Republican attack ads.

The American public’s revulsion over the Iraq War and the resulting casualties contributed to Barack Obama’s election. But he, too, moved to protect his political flanks by staffing his young administration with hawks, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. (and later CIA Director) David Petraeus. Despite receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama also became comfortable with continuing Bush’s wars and starting some of his own, such as the bombing war against Libya and the violent subversion of Syria.

By nominating Hillary Clinton in 2016, the Democratic Party completed its transformation into the Party of War. Clinton not only ran as an unapologetic hawk in the Democratic primaries against Sen. Bernie Sanders – urging, for instance, a direct U.S. military invasion of Syria to create “no fly zones” – but positioned herself as a harsh critic of Trump’s hopes to reduce hostilities with Russia, deeming the Republican nominee Vladimir Putin’s “puppet.”

Ironically, Trump’s shocking victory served to solidify the Democratic Party’s interest in pushing for a military confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. After all, baiting Trump over his alleged “softness” toward Russia has become the centerpiece of Democratic hopes for somehow ousting Trump or at least crippling his presidency. Any efforts by Trump to ease those tensions will be cited as prima facie evidence that he is Putin’s “Manchurian candidate.”

Being Joe McCarthy

National Democrats and their media supporters don’t even seem troubled by the parallels between their smears of Americans for alleged contacts with Russians and Sen. Joe McCarthy’s guilt-by-association hearings of the early Cold War. Every link to Russia – no matter how tenuous or disconnected from Trump’s election – is trumpeted by Democrats and across the mainstream news media.

But it’s not even clear that this promotion of the New Cold War and the New McCarthyism will redound to the Democrats’ political advantage. Clinton
apparently thought that her embrace of a neoconservative foreign policy would bring in many “moderate” Republicans opposed to Trump’s criticism of the Bush-Obama wars, but exit polls showed Republicans largely rallying to their party’s nominee.

Meanwhile, there were many anti-war Democrats who have become deeply uncomfortable with the party’s new hawkish persona. In the 2016 election, some peace Democrats voted for third parties or didn’t vote at all for president, although it’s difficult to assess how instrumental those defections were in costing Clinton the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

More broadly, the Democratic obsession with Russia and the hopes for somehow exploiting those investigations in order to oust Trump have distracted the party from a necessary autopsy into why the Democrats have lost so much ground over the past decade.

While many Democratic leaders and activists are sliding into full-scale conspiracy-mode over the Russia-Trump story, they are not looking at the party’s many mistakes and failings, such as:

–Why did party leaders push so hard to run an unpopular establishment candidate in a strongly anti-establishment year? Was it the fact that many are beholden to the Clinton cash machine?

–How can Democrats justify the undemocratic use of “super-delegates” to make many rank-and-file voters feel that the process is rigged in favor of the establishment’s choice?

–What can the Democratic Party do to reengage with many working-class voters, especially downwardly mobile whites, to stop the defection of this former Democratic base to Trump’s populism?

–Do national Democrats understand how out of touch they are with the future as they insist that the United States must remain the sole military superpower in a uni-polar world when the world is rapidly shifting toward a multi-polar reality?

Yet, rather than come up with new strategies to address the future, Democratic leaders would rather pretend that Putin is at fault for the Trump presidency and hope that the U.S. intelligence community – with its fearsome surveillance powers – can come up with enough evidence to justify Trump’s impeachment.

Then, of course, the Democrats would be stuck with President Mike Pence, a more traditional Religious Right Republican whose first step on foreign policy would be to turn it over to neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, a move that would likely mean a new wave of “regime change” wars.
At such a point, that might put the Democrats and Republicans in sync as two equally warmongering parties, but what good that would do for the American people and the world is hard to fathom.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Yes, Hillary Clinton Is a Neocon” and “Democrats Are Now the Aggressive War Party.”]

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).