

To Russia with More Russia-Bashing

Now that President Trump is bashing Russia, not resetting relations, the mainstream U.S. media has gone from pushing “Russia-gate” conspiracies to decrying doubts about U.S. government anti-Russia claims, notes Nat Parry.

By Nat Parry

After several months of pushing the “Russia-gate” conspiracy theory – a wild-eyed, all-encompassing but somewhat nebulous narrative involving U.S. President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin, WikiLeaks, the Russian mob, assassinations and certain indiscretions with prostitutes in a Moscow hotel – the U.S. mainstream media is now reverting to its traditional role of downplaying conspiracy theories, particularly those raising questions about the intelligence surrounding the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria last week.

On Monday, the New York Times published an article titled “Syria Conspiracy Theories Flourish, at Both Ends of the Spectrum,” which lamented the fact that websites on the left and the right have raised doubts about the casus belli for U.S. military action against Syria.

Noting that some alternative news sites have called the chemical attack a “false flag” operation and others have raised the question of whether Trump’s military action was a “wag the dog” diversion tactic, the Times pointedly attempts to “debunk” the internet memes that have been raising doubts about the chemical attack or calling into question the justification for the U.S. military action.

With an aggressiveness not seen at all when it comes to the unsubstantiated “Russian election-hacking” allegations, the Times fires back forcefully on matters such as whether President Bashar al-Assad had reason to use chemical weapons in the first place or whether anti-Assad forces may have had advance knowledge of the sarin attack. The Times article uses curt, all-caps responses to rebut these claims, such as flatly stating, “FALSE,” “NO EVIDENCE,” or “MISLEADING.”

The Times, for example, points out that Information Clearing House has argued that Assad lacked an obvious tactical or strategic reason to use chemical weapons, and therefore the attack may have actually been carried out by one of the terrorist groups operating in Syria such as Al-Nusra Front. As the Times responds, however, “THIS IS MISLEADING.”

Floating a few reasons that Assad’s forces might have conceivably been motivated to conduct a chemical attack, the Times argues that the attack was “consistent

with Mr. Assad's calculated strategy of attempting to drive out the civilian population in rebel strongholds through bombing neighborhoods and civilian targets." The Syrian leader may have also "felt emboldened" by perceived shifts in U.S. foreign policies and priorities under Trump, the Times speculates.

Of course, this is simply guesswork on the part of the Times, which is not presenting any facts to counter doubts over the official story, but just responding to the doubts with more conjecture. The Times also seems to be cherry-picking some of the more easily "debunked" stories surrounding the Syria case, failing to address legitimate concerns over the lack of proof of Assad's culpability. These include doubts raised by the former British ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford, who told BBC Radio last week that there is "no proof that the cause of the explosion was what they said it was."

It would not make sense for Assad to launch such an attack, Ford said, claiming that it would be "totally self-defeating." He also objected to the veracity of claims made by eyewitnesses who claimed that they saw chemical bombs dropping from the air. "Well, you cannot see chemical weapons dropping from the air," he said. "Such testimony is worthless."

Question of Possession

There are also serious doubts as to whether Syria even possesses the chemical weapons in question, with the United Nations' Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons noting that since 2013, "all of the chemical weapons declared by Syria were removed and destroyed outside of Syrian territory."

While some governments have claimed that Syria's declaration about its chemical weapons program may have been incomplete, the OPCW stresses that it has adapted itself "in unprecedented ways" in efforts "to remove, transport and destroy Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile in the midst of an active conflict zone."

With this in mind, Sacha Llorenti, the Bolivian ambassador to the United Nations, last Friday blasted the United States for unilaterally attacking Syria, saying that it recalls the decision 14 years earlier to attack Iraq based on equally questionable intelligence.

It is "vital to remember what history teaches us," Llorenti said, citing the 2003 invasion of Iraq and holding up a photo of then-Secretary of State Colin Powell delivering false testimony to the U.N. Security Council on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

"Whereas an investigation would have allowed us to establish in an objective manner who is responsible for the [chemical] attacks [in Syria], this is an

extreme, extreme violation of international law," he said.

In addition to the doubts that have been raised at the United Nations, a number of the U.S.'s closest G7 allies have refused to implement additional sanctions against Syria without proof of Assad's guilt.

As the BBC reported on Tuesday, "Sanctions against Russia and Syria will not be put in place until after an investigation into last week's apparent chemical attack, British government sources said. Members of the G7 group of leading industrialized nations agreed to delay implementing sanctions until there was 'hard and irrefutable evidence' over the alleged chemical attack."

Yet the New York Times and other mainstream U.S. outlets continue to report as undisputed fact that Assad's government intentionally carried out this attack, and furthermore, that Moscow knew about it in advance.

The sorts of unequivocal retorts that the Times uses against journalists and bloggers for raising doubts about the official stories could, of course, just as easily be applied to the official stories themselves. When the Associated Press, for example, reported on Tuesday that "The United States has made a preliminary conclusion that Russia knew in advance of Syria's chemical weapons attack last week," the Times could have responded with an emphatic all-caps retort such as "NO EVIDENCE."

These retorts could also be used against the accusations of the Russian government engaging in a convoluted conspiracy to undermine Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's electoral chances by hacking John Podesta's and the DNC's emails in order to expose the Democratic establishment's undermining of Bernie Sanders's insurgent campaign while simultaneously "elevating" Trump's candidacy in the media through the so-called "pied piper" strategy, with the evil geniuses of the Kremlin somehow knowing beyond a doubt that this information would sway voters in favor of voting for the least popular major-party nominee in a generation.

Just as the New York Times has denounced theories surrounding the Syria chemical attack as lacking evidence, so too could the entire Russia-gate narrative be picked apart as lacking any foundation in fact. All that one needs to do is actually read the U.S. intelligence assessment that dubiously concluded that Russia "interfered" in the election without offering anything approaching hard proof of this claim – spending seven full pages instead bashing the Russian network RT for its perceived biases.

Going through the Director of National Intelligence report from last January, the reader is left with few details as to how the extraordinary conclusion was

reached that Russia “hacked” the election, which Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, and others have called an “act of war.”

The closest thing to evidence that could be found in the DNI report was regarding so-called Russian fingerprints on the hacking attacks of Podesta’s and the DNC’s emails, including malware associated with Russian hackers, as well as some Cyrillic letters and the phrase “Felix Edmundovich,” a reference to the founder of the Soviet Union’s secret police.

However, as revealed in subsequent WikiLeaks’ disclosures of the so-called Vault 7 documents, the CIA has developed numerous tools, including a library of foreign malware, that can be used to falsely implicate a foreign intelligence service in a cyber-attack.

These revelations called into question the entire basis for Washington’s case against Moscow for allegedly interfering in the U.S. election, but besides a few articles in the alternative press, including at Consortiumnews, the revelations received scant attention.

Apparently, the disclosures of CIA hacking activities – including new revelations of the CIA deploying malware in Samsung televisions as covert listening devices to spy on unwitting Americans – were not the sort of conspiracy theory considered worthy of sustained media coverage in the United States. In contrast to the months of wall-to-wall coverage of Russia-gate, the Vault 7 leaks were largely treated as a one-day story by the mainstream press.

The disparity in coverage speaks to a longstanding aversion of the mainstream media to what it considers illegitimate “new media” encroaching on its territory and peddling conspiracy theories and what is today called “fake news.” This hostility can be traced to the earliest days of the internet.

‘Conspiracy Freaks’

Twenty years ago, responding to a proliferation of alternative news sites on the World Wide Web – or what was called back then the “information superhighway” – Newsweek magazine ran a 1,800-word article entitled “Conspiracy Mania Feeds Our Growing National Paranoia.” In the piece, Newsweek denounced what it called “conspiracy freaks.”

Explaining a growing acceptance of conspiracy theories as evidence of “mass psychosis,” the article warned that the “ranks of the darkly deluded may be growing” as “conspiracism has become a kind of para-religion.”

It took particular aim at the African-American community, which it described as “a hotbed of this kind of suspicion and mistrust,” for believing that “the

CIA had spread the crack epidemic by backing Nicaraguan drug dealers whose profits went to the contras.”

Newsweek also criticized Oliver Stone, director of “Platoon” and “JFK,” and Chris Carter, the creator of the popular “X-Files” television series, for promoting dangerous ideas that had the effect of eroding trust in the government. “On ‘The X-Files,’ everything from who killed JFK to why the Buffalo Bills lose so many Super Bowls is traceable to a single master plan,” Newsweek sneered.

Of course, Newsweek wasn’t alone in scoffing at popular conspiracy theories in the 1990s. In fact, it was conventional wisdom among “respectable” media that government leaders simply do not cross certain lines, and that certain stories, for example, regarding CIA involvement in the cocaine trade – no matter how much evidence backed them up – were off-limits. Those who failed to get on board with this groupthink, for example Gary Webb who wrote a widely disseminated series for the San Jose Mercury News about the CIA-crack cocaine connection, had their careers destroyed.

This trend continued into the 2000s, with millions of angry Americans still seething over the stolen election in 2000 told to “get over it,” and then called crazy for doubting the basis for George W. Bush’s case for invading Iraq in 2003.

A couple years later, those who raised questions about the government’s botched response to Hurricane Katrina were accused by the Washington Post of “racial paranoia” and hawking “conspiracy theories,” such as the widespread belief that New Orleans’ levees may have been intentionally blown up to protect rich neighborhoods at the expense of poorer ones, or to drive low-income African Americans out of town.

But skip ahead a decade, and oddly, this same media that historically has been so hostile to conspiracy theories was seen eagerly pushing conspiracy theories surrounding Clinton’s loss to Trump. Headlines of “Russian election hacking” were freely used by the Washington Post, CNN and the New York Times, despite the fact that there is zero evidence that Russia manipulated any voting machines in any state to alter the outcome of the election, or even any substantial proof offered to support the claims that the Kremlin attempted to influence voters’ decisions by exposing private emails between DNC officials.

Russia, Russia, Russia!

Nevertheless, the Democrats and the media have coalesced around the conventional wisdom that the election was lost due to a Russian plot, which conveniently

absolves the national Democratic Party of any responsibility for losing the election – for example by writing off the white working-class vote or nominating a deeply flawed establishment candidate during a decidedly anti-establishment year – while simultaneously calling into question the legitimacy of Trump’s presidency.

It also feeds into the rallying cry that the Democrats have embraced since losing the election, which has been variations of the theme “This is not normal,” expressed by the hashtag #NotNormal on social media. This theme laments the loss of a more “normal” time, presumably personified by Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama.

Typically, the slogan refers to Trump’s controversial dealings with Russia, his unconventional communication style and his extensively documented conflicts of interests, as well as perceived misogyny, nepotism, racism and incompetence in his administration.

Clearly, there is very little that can be considered “normal” about this administration, including the strange role of Trump’s daughter, Ivanka, who has moved into the White House while the First Lady, Melania Trump, lives in New York. The First Daughter reportedly was instrumental in convincing the President to carry out the unilateral attack on Syria.

“Ivanka is a mother of three kids and she has influence. I’m sure she said: ‘Listen, this is horrible stuff,’” Ivanka’s brother Eric Trump told the Telegraph.

While that is certainly not normal, what the Democrats and the media are revealing through their #NotNormal campaign and the official conspiracy theories that they are promoting – while downplaying other theories or doubts about government claims – is how much they actually consider “normal.”

In today’s America, what is normal, according to the bipartisan consensus, are unilateral strikes against countries without evidence and in violation of international law. It is also apparently normal for televisions to spy on law-abiding citizens, and with drone strikes shooting up 432 percent under the Trump presidency so far, it is apparently quite normal to use flying robots to bomb suspected terrorists (and their eight-year old daughters) half-way around the world. Indefinite detention at the legal black hole of Guantanamo is also rather normal.

After all, these are all policies that have been in place for a decade and a half under both Democratic and Republican administrations, and hope seems to be dwindling for returning to a period of actual normalcy.

Nat Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*. [This article first appeared at <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2017/04/11/notnormal-democrats-and-mass-medias-double-standards-on-conspiracy-theories/>]
