

Russia-Bashing Helps Wall Street Democrats

National Democrats have used hyperbolic Russia-bashing to shield themselves from blame for Hillary Clinton's defeat and to block progressives from pulling the party away from Wall Street, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

After Hillary Clinton's devastating loss nearly six months ago, her most powerful Democratic allies feared losing control of the party. Efforts to lip-synch economic populism while remaining closely tied to Wall Street had led to a catastrophic defeat. In the aftermath, the party's progressive base – personified by Bernie Sanders – was in position to start flipping over the corporate game board.

Aligned with Clinton, the elites of the Democratic Party needed to change the subject. Clear assessments of the national ticket's failures were hazardous to the status quo within the party. So were the groundswells of opposition to unfair economic privilege. So were the grassroots pressures for the party to become a genuine force for challenging big banks, Wall Street and overall corporate power.

In short, the Democratic Party's anti-Bernie establishment needed to reframe the discourse in a hurry. And – in tandem with mass media – it did. The reframing could be summed up in two words: Blame Russia.

By early winter, the public discourse was going sideways – much to the benefit of party elites. The meme of blaming Russia and Vladimir Putin for the election of Donald Trump effectively functioned to let the Wall Street-friendly leadership of the national Democratic Party off the hook. Meanwhile, serious attempts to focus on the ways that wounds to democracy in the United States have been self-inflicted – whether via the campaign finance system or the purging of minorities from voter rolls or any number of other systemic injustices – were largely set aside.

Fading from scrutiny was the establishment that continued to dominate the Democratic Party's superstructure. At the same time, its devotion to economic elites was undiminished. As Bernie Sanders told a reporter on the last day of February: "Certainly there are some people in the Democratic Party who want to maintain the status quo. They would rather go down with the Titanic so long as they have first-class seats."

Amid great luxury and looming catastrophe, the party's current hierarchy has invested enormous political capital in depicting Vladimir Putin as an unmitigated arch villain. Relevant history was irrelevant, to be ignored or denied.

'An Evil Empire'

With dutiful conformity from most Democrats in Congress, the party elites doubled, tripled and quadrupled down on the emphatic claim that Moscow is the capital of, by any other name, an evil empire. Rather than just calling for what's needed – a truly independent investigation into allegations that the Russian government interfered with the U.S. election – the party line became hyperbolic and unmoored from the available evidence.

Given their vehement political investment in demonizing Russia's President Putin, Democratic leaders are oriented to seeing the potential of detente with Russia as counterproductive in terms of their electoral strategy for 2018 and 2020. It's a calculus that boosts the risks of nuclear annihilation, given the very real dangers of escalating tensions between Washington and Moscow.

Along the way, top party officials seem bent on returning to a kind of pre-Bernie-campaign doldrums. The new chair of the Democratic National Committee, Tom Perez, can't bring himself to say that the power of Wall Street is antithetical to the interests of working people. That reality came to painful light this week during a live appearance on national television.

During a 10-minute joint interview along with Bernie Sanders on Tuesday night, Perez was a font of exactly the kind of trite empty slogans and worn-out platitudes that oiled the engines of the dismal Clinton campaign.

While Sanders was forthright, Perez was evasive. While Sanders talked about systemic injustice, Perez fixated on Trump. While Sanders pointed to a way forward for realistic and far-reaching progressive change, Perez hung onto a rhetorical formula that expressed support for victims of the economic order without acknowledging the existence of victimizers.

In an incisive article published by *The Nation* magazine, Robert Borosage wrote last week: "For all the urgent pleas for unity in the face of Trump, the party establishment has always made it clear that they mean unity under their banner. That's why they mobilized to keep the leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Representative Keith Ellison, from becoming head of the DNC. It's why the knives are still out for Sanders and those who supported him."

While Bernie Sanders is hardly a reliable opponent of U.S. war policies, he is significantly more critical of military intervention than the Democratic Party

leaders who often champion it. Borosage noted that the party establishment is locked into militaristic orthodoxies that favor continuing to inflict the kind of disasters that the United States has brought to Iraq, Libya and other countries: “Democrats are in the midst of a major struggle to decide what they stand for and who they represent. Part of that is the debate over a bipartisan interventionist foreign policy that has so abjectly failed.”

For the Democratic Party’s most hawkish wing – dominant from the top down and allied with Clinton’s de facto neocon approach to foreign policy – the U.S. government’s April 6 cruise missile attack on a Syrian airfield was an indication of real leverage for more war. That attack on a close ally of Russia showed that incessant Russia-baiting of Trump can get gratifying military results for the Democratic elites who are undaunted in their advocacy of regime change in Syria and elsewhere.

The politically motivated missile attack on Syria showed just how dangerous it is to keep Russia-baiting Trump, giving him political incentive to prove how tough he is on Russia after all. What’s at stake includes the imperative of preventing a military clash between the world’s two nuclear superpowers. But the corporate hawks at the top of the national Democratic Party have other priorities.

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