

Hillary Clinton's Deceptive Blame-Shifting

Exclusive: While complaining about “fake news” that undercut her campaign, Hillary Clinton continued her own “fake news” falsehood about the U.S. intelligence assessment on Russian election “meddling,” reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Hillary Clinton has grown even more insistent that she was not at fault for her stunning election defeat last November, claiming that 1,000 Russian “agents” and their American collaborators were a decisive factor, a bizarre twist that further locks the Democrats into their evidence-light “Russia-gate” obsession.

In comments at a California technology conference on Wednesday, Clinton also repeated one of her favorite falsehoods – that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies unanimously concluded that Russia hacked Democratic emails and ran a covert influence campaign against her.

Referring to a report released by President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence (DNI) on Jan. 6, Clinton asserted that “Seventeen agencies, all in agreement, which I know from my experience as a Senator and Secretary of State, is hard to get. They concluded with high confidence that the Russians ran an extensive information war campaign against my campaign, to influence voters in the election. They did it through paid advertising we think; they did it through false news sites; they did it through these thousand agents; they did it through machine learning, which you know, kept spewing out this stuff over and over again. The algorithms that they developed. So that was the conclusion.”

But Clinton’s statement is false regarding the unanimity of the 17 agencies and misleading regarding her other claims. Both former DNI James Clapper and former CIA Director John Brennan acknowledged in sworn testimony last month that the Jan. 6 report alleging Russian “meddling” did not involve all 17 agencies.

Clapper and Brennan stated that the report was actually the work of hand-picked analysts from only three agencies – the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation – under the oversight of the DNI’s office. In other words, there was no consensus among the 17 agencies, a process that would have involved some form of a National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE), a community-wide effort that would have included footnotes citing any dissenting views.

Instead, as Clapper testified before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8,

the Russia-hacking claim came from a “special intelligence community assessment” (or ICA) produced by selected analysts from the CIA, NSA and FBI, “a coordinated product from three agencies – CIA, NSA, and the FBI – not all 17 components of the intelligence community,” the former DNI said.

And, as Clapper explained, the “ICA” was something of a rush job beginning on President Obama’s instructions “in early December” and completed by Jan. 6. Clapper continued: “The two dozen or so analysts for this task were hand-picked, seasoned experts from each of the contributing agencies.”

However, as any intelligence veteran will tell you, if you hand-pick the analysts, you are really hand-picking the conclusion since the agency chiefs would know who was, say, a hardliner on Russia and who could be trusted to deliver the desired product.

On May 23, in testimony before the House Intelligence Committee, former CIA Director John Brennan confirmed Clapper’s account about the three agencies involved.

“It wasn’t a full inter-agency community assessment that was coordinated among the 17 agencies, and for good reason because of the nature and the sensitivity of the information trying, once again, to keep that tightly compartmented,” Brennan said.

In other words, Clinton’s beloved claim that all 17 intelligence agencies were in agreement on the Russian “hacking” charge – an assertion that the “fact-checking” group Politifact has certified as “true” and that has been repeated endlessly by the mainstream U.S. news media – is not true. It is false. Gee, you might even call it “fake news.”

The Mysterious ‘Agents’

But Clinton’s false claim about the intelligence consensus was not her only dubious assertion. Her reference to the 1,000 Russian “agents” is not contained in the Jan. 6 report, either. It apparently derived from unconfirmed speculation from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, who mentioned this claim at a news conference on March 30, admitting that he didn’t know if it was true.

Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said: “We know about the hacking, and selective leaks, but what really concerns me as a former tech guy is at least some reports – and we’ve got to get to the bottom of this – that there were upwards of a thousand internet trolls working out of a facility in Russia, in effect taking over a series of computers which are then called botnets, that can then generate news down to specific areas.

"It's been reported to me, and we've got to find this out, whether they were able to affect specific areas in Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, where you would not have been receiving off of whoever your vendor might have been, Trump versus Clinton, during the waning days of the election, but instead, 'Clinton is sick', or 'Clinton is taking money from whoever for some source' ... fake news."

Of course, many stories about Clinton being sick or her taking money from special interests weren't "fake news." In late 2012, she suffered from a blood clot and – during the 2016 campaign – she was staggered by a bout of pneumonia. She also was paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for speeches to Wall Street and other groups.

Warner didn't specify where his information about the "trolls" came from but it paralleled a claim by freelance journalist Adam Chen who asserted in a podcast with Longform that Russian "trolls" began writing favorably about Trump in late 2015. (The CIA/FBI/NSA report also apparently alluded to the same report without mentioning the name of the journalist or specifying the number of alleged "trolls.")

"I created this list of Russian trolls when I was researching," Chen said, referring to a 2015 reporting project that he turned into a rather thinly sourced New York Times Magazine article accusing a Russian oligarch of funding a professional "troll" operation in St. Petersburg, Russia. "I check on it once in a while, still. And a lot of them have turned into conservative accounts, like fake conservatives. I don't know what's going on, but they're all tweeting about Donald Trump and stuff."

Although such "troll" and "hacking" complaints are treated as a one-way street – coming only from the evil Russians – the reality is that U.S. intelligence agencies, their allies and U.S.-government-funded "non-governmental organizations" have mounted similar operations against Russia and other targets.

It is always difficult to nail down precisely where such operations are originating, but the Russians have cited previous cases of malicious hacking aimed at senior officials, including Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, whose accounts were hacked in 2013 and 2014 including publication of a false resignation and a confession of wrongdoing.

In 2015, the "Panama Papers," a vast trove of documents purloined from a Panamanian law firm, became an investigative project that involved a USAID-funded news outlet and led to attacks on President Vladimir Putin for corruption even though his name did not appear in the documents.

So, this high-tech spy-vs.-spy game – if that's what it is – does not appear to

be originating entirely from the Russian side of the street. But the U.S. intelligence community is not going to divulge what it knows about the attacks against Russia, only what it can “assess” about Russia’s possible attacks against Western targets.

No Self-Criticism

Neither, of course, are Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party eager to engage in a serious self-criticism about how they managed to blow an extremely winnable race against an extraordinarily flawed candidate in Donald Trump. Rather than look at their own missteps and misjudgments, they are presenting themselves as innocent victims.

In Wednesday’s interview – after misrepresenting what the Jan. 6 report actually said – Clinton suggested that the Trump campaign must have colluded with the Russians in “weaponizing” the data.

“How did they know what messages to deliver?” Clinton asked. “Who told them? Who were they coordinating with, or colluding with? ... [The Russians] were conveying this weaponized information and the content of it. ... So the Russians – in my opinion and based on the intel and the counterintel people I’ve talked to – could not have known how best to weaponize that information unless they had been guided. ... Guided by Americans and guided by people who had polling and data information.”

Although Clinton lacked any proof of this convoluted accusation, she cited as her “best example” the fact that “within one hour, one hour of the ‘Access Hollywood’ tapes being leaked [in which Trump was caught boasting about groping women], within one hour, the Russians – let’s say WikiLeaks, something – dumped the John Podesta emails.”

However, if you changed the context of this claim slightly – and made a similar jump in logic – you would surely be labeled a nutty conspiracy theorist, but instead Clinton has drawn nods of agreement for this wholly unsubstantiated speculation.

Yet, besides blaming the Russians and WikiLeaks for her loss, Clinton spread the blame even wider, for instance, to The New York Times for focusing too much on her decision to use a private email server while Secretary of State – “they covered it like it was Pearl Harbor” – and for the Times’ Nate Silver publishing optimistic odds on her chances for victory. “I also think I was the victim of a very broad assumption I was going to win,” she said.

Clinton also placed blame on the Democratic National Committee for lacking money and sophisticated technology. “I get the nomination. So I’m now the nominee of

the Democratic Party. I inherit nothing from the Democratic Party,” she said. “I mean it was bankrupt; it was on the verge of insolvency; its data was mediocre to poor, nonexistent, wrong. I had to inject money into it.”

Yet, when Clinton was asked about some of her own “misjudgments,” she slipped back into the defensive posture that contributed to her troubles as a presidential candidate. For instance, regarding why she gave lucrative speeches to Goldman Sachs between her time leaving the State Department and announcing her White House run, she answered coyly, “They paid me.”

When pressed on the point, Clinton retreated behind the sanctity of the 9/11 terror attack and the issue of women’s rights. Reminded that “you’re not somebody who needed that money for the next week’s shopping, and you knew you might run, so why do it?” – she responded:

“The most common thing that I talked about in all those speeches was the hunt for Bin Laden. You know, that was one of the central missions that I felt from the time the towers fell on 9/11 as a Senator from New York.”

Then, Clinton added, “you know, men got paid for the speeches they made. I got paid for the speeches I made. And it [the paid-speech issue] was used, and I thought it was unfairly used.”

Blocking Witnesses

So, while the Democrats dig themselves deeper into the so-far empty pit of blaming Russia for their electoral disaster, the Russia-gate investigation continues to take on other curious aspects, such as an unwillingness to hear from some of Donald Trump’s advisers who have been named in accusations and who have volunteered to testify publicly.

On Wednesday, Carter Page, a Navy veteran and businessman who had lived in Russia, announced that his plans to defend himself in testimony next week before the House Intelligence Committee had been placed on hold by the Democrats.

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the committee and a major sparkplug powering the investigation, offered a curious denial of Page’s complaint while confirming the truth of it.

The New York Times, which has been another advocate for blaming Russia, phrased the postponement of Page’s testimony as if Page were the unreasonable one, reporting:

“Representative Adam Schiff ... dismissed accusations from Carter Page, another Trump adviser who is under scrutiny, that the committee is preventing him from

testifying. Mr. Schiff ... said the investigation would first review relevant documents before interviewing witnesses.”

In other words, Page, who has been portrayed via intelligence leaks to the news media as essentially a traitor, won't be given the opportunity to defend his reputation until Schiff and the other Democrats decide the time is ripe.

Yet, it's not as if the House Intelligence Committee has not taken public testimony about Russia-gate. For instance, former CIA Director Brennan was allowed to speak indirectly about Page and other possibly treasonous Americans amid media reports naming Page as one of those suspected Russian “agents.”

Normal investigations grant the people under attack at least the opportunity to defend themselves and their reputations in a timely fashion, rather than make them live under the cloud of suspicion without having a chance to state their case.

If their sworn testimony is later undermined by evidence developed by investigators, the witnesses can be called back and called out on possible perjury. So, it's not as if Schiff and the other Democrats are surrendering prerogatives by letting Page testify now rather than later. Indeed, Page would be putting himself in legal jeopardy if he is caught lying.

Even the Republican-driven “Benghazi investigation,” which also had the look of an over-the-top “witch hunt,” gave Secretary of State Clinton and other Obama administration officials multiple opportunities to explain their response to the Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate.

But, so far, a similar courtesy has not been extended to the targets of the Russia-gate investigation.

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).
