

Ten Problems with Anti-Russian Obsession

Many anti-Trump Americans see the Russia-gate “scandal” as a way to derail Donald Trump, but this political opportunism has fed a dangerous anti-Russian hysteria and led Democrats to ignore why they really lost, says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S. mainstream media and Democratic Party politicians have built a major “scandal” out of accusing Russia of “meddling” in the U.S. election to help Donald Trump win the presidency and possibly even colluding with his campaign to do so. The charges began as “allegations” but now are routinely asserted as facts.

The Washington Post recently ran a long article claiming all the above plus saying the operation was directed by Russian President Putin himself and implying not enough has been done to “punish” Russia. The July-August 2017 edition of Mother Jones magazine features an article headlined “We Already Know Trump Betrayed America. Collusion? Maybe. Active Enabling? Definitely.”

Is this effort to indict Russia and condemn Trump based on facts or political opportunism? Does it help or hurt the progressive cause of peace with justice? Following are major problems with the “anti-Russia” theme, starting with the lack of clear evidence.

1) Evidence from CrowdStrike is dubious.

Accusations that Russia stole and released the Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails are based on the findings of the private company CrowdStrike. The DNC did not allow the FBI to scan the computers but relied on a hired private company which claims to have found telltale Russian alphabet characters (Cyrillic) in the computer memory. However, CrowdStrike is known to be political biased, to be connected to the Clintons and to make false accusations such as this one documented by Voice of America. Recently, the Wikileaks “Vault7” disclosures revealed that the CIA has developed software which purposely leaves foreign language characters in memory, casting further doubt on the CrowdStrike evidence.

2) The Steele Dossier looks fictitious.

The accusations of Trump-Russia collusion and Putin’s personal involvement are significantly based on the so-called “Steele Dossier,” a 35-page compilation of “opposition research” on Trump by a former MI6 officer Christopher Steele. The research and reports by Steele first were contracted by anti-Trump Republicans

in the primary race and then by Clinton supporters in the presidential race.

There is no supporting evidence or verification of the dossier's claims; the reports are essentially that a Kremlin source says such-and-such. It has since been revealed that Steele was not in direct contact but collected the information via Russians in the U.K. who in turn received it from supposed Kremlin insiders.

The reports were viewed skeptically by media, politicians and the intelligence community through the summer and fall of 2016. But elements of the dossier became public prior to the election, and it was published in full in the days before Trump's inauguration, including sensational stories of "golden showers" by prostitutes urinating on Trump to "defile" the bed in Moscow's Ritz-Carlton Hotel where the Obamas previously slept.

Is the Steele dossier accurate or was it a P.R. dirty trick designed to damage Trump? The latter seems at least if not more likely. This Newsweek article, "Thirteen things that don't add up in the Russia-Trump intelligence dossier," lists some of the reasons to be skeptical.

3) The "assessment" from several (not 17) Intel Agencies gives no evidence and seems politically biased.

On Jan. 6, the office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) released a 14-page document titled "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections." The report says Russian President Putin ordered a campaign including cyber activity along with "overt efforts" to influence the election through official media (RT) and social media. Half of the report (seven pages) is devoted to describing the effectiveness and growth of the Russian-sponsored news outlet known as "RT," including faulting RT for sponsoring debates among third-party U.S. presidential candidates in 2012 and for covering the Occupy Wall Street protests.

The report gives no solid evidence that the Russians did covertly interfere with the U.S. elections in 2016, acknowledging that the report "does not and cannot include the full supporting information, including specific intelligence and sources and methods." The report further admits that its "judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents."

So, should this report be accepted uncritically? Not if you consider past performance. The CIA has a long history of deception and disinformation, including "politicized intelligence" to support the goals of presidents and

other senior officials. One clear example was the false claims about Iraq's WMD that led to the U.S. invasion in 2003.

In addition, the intelligence leadership has been known to lie under oath. For example, President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who issued the Jan. 6 report, lied in testimony before Congress regarding the extent of the National Security Agency's monitoring of American citizens' private communications. The truth was later revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden, forcing Clapper to retract his statement.

In short, there is no good reason to uncritically accept the statements and assertions of the U.S. intelligence community. Plus, the oft-repeated claim that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the Russia assessment was never true. There was no community-wide assessment, which would have required some form of a National Intelligence Estimate or NIE and would have included dissents as well as consensus judgments.

In raising the Russia meddling allegation last October – before the presidential election – Clapper simply claimed to be speaking for the Intelligence Community and that was then falsely interpreted to mean that all 17 intelligence agencies agreed. A formal assessment – though not an NIE – was not undertaken until December leading to the Jan. 6 report, which was the work of what Clapper later described as “hand-picked” analysts from three agencies: CIA, NSA and FBI.

On June 29, The New York Times ran a grudging correction to one of its stories that had repeated the false claim about the “17 intelligence agencies” although that canard continues to resonate on cable news channels as way to shut down any questioning of what has become the new groupthink believing in “Russian meddling.”

Another reason to be skeptical is the fact that Trump and elements of the Intelligence Community have clashed and some senior intelligence officials may be looking to pay back the President. Even Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer warned Trump about the dangers of bucking the CIA and other agencies: “They have six ways to Sunday at getting back at you.”

What better way of getting back at Trump than shining a bright light on the Steele dossier by including a summary of its contents as a classified annex to the Jan. 6 report, thus giving credence to the third-hand accusations and giving news organizations a peg for publishing the salacious allegations?

Finally, it is significant that the NSA would only grant “moderate confidence” to the accusation that “Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances.” Page 13 of the Jan. 6 report explains

that moderate confidence means the information is “plausible but not of sufficient quality or corroborated sufficiently to warrant a higher level of confidence.”

In an apparent reference to those NSA doubts, The Washington Post reported on June 25 that “Some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia came from another country, officials said. Because of the source of the material, the NSA was reluctant to view it with high confidence.”

Though the Post did not identify the country, this reference suggests that another key element of the case for Russian culpability was based not on direct investigations by the U.S. intelligence agencies, but on the work of external organizations with checkered histories.

Given the Intelligence Community’s history of deception and politicization – and especially given the false assumption about the 17-agency consensus – there is every reason to be skeptical and to demand credible and verifiable evidence about the core charge that Russia did “meddle” in the U.S. election.

4) The counter-evidence seems stronger and more factual.

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), including William Binney, a former technical director of the NSA, asserts that the DNC email release was caused by a leak not a “hack.” The distinction is important: a hack is done over the Internet; a leak is done transferring files onto a memory stick with little or no record. VIPS believes the emails were taken by an insider who transferred the files onto a thumb drive. If the files had been transferred over the Internet, the NSA would have a record of that since virtually every packet is stored.

In addition, the publisher of the DNC and Podesta emails, Wikileaks, says it did not receive the emails from Russia. Also, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange has offered a reward for the discovery of the murderer of Seth Rich, the young DNC Director of Voter Expansion who was mysteriously murdered on July 22, 2016. When asked if Seth Rich was the source of the DNC emails, Assange does not reply directly but it is implied.

Since Trump’s November victory, there also have been accusations of “Russian interference” in European elections. But in each case, subsequent investigations showed the opposite. In Germany, France and the U.K., security services found no evidence to support the initial allegations. The French security chief dismissed the claims of the Macron campaign saying the hack “was so generic and simple that it could have been practically anyone.”

5) The purported “crimes” have been wildly inflated.

The leaking of DNC and Podesta emails has been inflated into an “attack on US democracy” and an “act of war.” Not to be outdone in the hyperbole department, The Washington Post article calls this “the crime of the century.” It’s quite astounding; even if Russia were guilty of hacking the DNC servers and the emails of Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta, the information was truthful, not “fake news” or disinformation as some mainstream media outlets have suggested. The idea that disclosing truthful and newsworthy information amounts to an “act of war” is preposterous, and indeed dangerous.

Plus, the Wikileaks-related stories were secondary problems for the Clinton campaign, far less important than the FBI closing and then re-opening the criminal investigation of Clinton’s use of a private email server for her official business as Secretary of State or her labeling half of Trump’s supporters as “deplorables.”

And, blaming RT for reporting on shortcomings in the U.S. democratic process and faulting the network for allowing third-party candidates to have a forum – as the Jan. 6 report does – amount to an absurdity. Even former U.S. President Jimmy Carter questions whether the U.S. is a still democracy, saying: “Now it’s just an oligarchy, with unlimited political bribery being the essence.”

6) The anti-Russia hysteria has reduced resistance to reactionary changes in domestic policy.

For progressives, the anti-Russia hysteria has not only bordered on McCarthyistic challenges to people’s patriotism but has diverted time and attention from the need to build opposition to Trump policies including the loss of net neutrality, increased military spending, reductions in environmental protection, plans to slash health-care for the poor to permit more tax cuts for the rich, and reduction in other budgets for education and social programs.

Further, the “blame-Russia” and “hate Trump” campaigns have reduced the credibility of liberals and progressives and make it harder to reach out to white working-class Americans who voted for Trump, in part, because they felt ignored and disrespected by the national Democratic Party.

7) The DNC and Podesta leaks were not bad; they were good.

If one is to take The Washington Post’s new slogan seriously – “Democracy Dies in Darkness” – you’d have to agree that shedding light on the secret machinations of the DNC and the Clinton campaign was a service to democracy, not an attack on democracy.

The leaks exposed how the DNC was violating its mandate to remain neutral during the primaries. Instead, the DNC leadership conspired to boost Clinton’s

candidacy and frustrate a successful challenge by Sen. Bernie Sanders. If there was an “attack on democracy,” it was by the DNC leadership, not from the public release of authentic emails. And, as for the Podesta emails, they revealed the contents of Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street, which she had sought to hide from voters, and exposed some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

8) Social media criticizing Clinton was not bad; much of the criticism was accurate.

While short on actual evidence of a Russian hack, the Jan. 6 report blames Russia for undermining “public faith in the US democratic process” by denigrating Clinton and harming “her electability and potential presidency.” The report suggests that Russia was responsible for anti-Clinton online messages, tweets, Facebook posts, etc.

Yet, it was predictable that Hillary Clinton would generate a lot of opposition during the presidential campaign since she has long been a magnet for right- and left-wing criticism. She is strongly disliked by many progressives for a number of reasons, including her warmongering foreign policy. So, it should come as no surprise that social media was alive with tweets, pages, posts and campaigns against Clinton – as it was with harsh criticism of Donald Trump.

It is self-deception to think this opposition was initiated or controlled in any substantial way by Moscow. Without doubt, the overwhelming majority of the criticism directed at Hillary Clinton – and at Donald Trump – was sincere and home-grown.

9) The anti-Russia hysteria distracts from an objective evaluation of why the Democratic Party lost.

Instead of doing an honest and objective assessment of the election failure, the Democratic Party has invested enormous time and resources in promoting the narrative of Russian “meddling” and collusion with Trump. If the Democrats want to regain popularity – and gain congressional seats in 2018 as well as the White House in 2020 – they need to look in the mirror and undertake reforms, including a shake-up of leadership which has changed very little in over 15 years.

The Democrats must confront the reality that many working-class Americans view the party as elitist and lacking a deep concern for the economic suffering of average people.

By concentrating so much energy on blaming “Russia, Russia, Russia,” the DNC also ignores that it tilted the primary race in Clinton’s favor while Sanders might well have been a much stronger candidate against Trump. In that sense, the Democratic Party’s leaders have nobody to blame but themselves for Trump’s

victory.

10) The anti-Russia hysteria reduces resistance to neoconservative forces pushing for more war.

By obsessing on Russia-gate, Democrats and liberals are playing into the hands of neoconservatives and the Military Industrial Complex, which are pushing for another war in the Middle East and an expensive New Cold War with Russia. The immediate flashpoint is Syria where the Syrian government and allies are making slow but steady progress defeating tens of thousands of foreign-funded extremists.

In response, the U.S. and its allies have escalated their intervention and aggression trying to prolong the conflict and/or grab territory to block a Syrian government victory. The expanding U.S. military role in Syria also is threatening to bring about a direct clash between United States, which is operating inside Syria in violation of international law, and Russia, which has come to the aid of the internationally recognized government.

The Democratic and liberal hysteria around Russia has confused huge numbers of people who now have been led to believe that Russia is America's "enemy" and must be confronted militarily around the world. Leading liberals are allying themselves with the CIA and war hawks, while also alienating peace voters, another important voting bloc.

Looking back over the eight months since the election, the obsession with Russia-gate may have started from shock over Trump's election and then morphed into a resistance to his presidency (including the unlikely hope that the "scandal" would lead to his impeachment), but the hysteria has contributed to significant mistakes by those who have embraced it.

The mainstream news media jettisoned any pretense of objectivity as it joined the "hate-Russia" and "get-Trump" movement. Many Democrats and liberals also opportunistically and uncritically accepted and promoted the anti-Russia demonization, including McCarthyistic attacks on Americans who balked at the political/media stampede and questioned the accusations as either lacking in evidence or exaggerated.

Meanwhile, Trump finds himself getting pressured by Democrats and liberals to adopt even more warlike stances – to prove that he's not Putin's puppet – including a slide toward a new war in the Middle East and a step onto the slippery slope that could lead to nuclear annihilation.

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