

The Mystery of the Russia-gate Puppies

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media is determined to prove Russia-gate despite the scandal's cracking foundation and its inexplicable anomalies, such as why Russia would set up a Facebook "puppies" page, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (Updated Oct. 5 with dropping of two Russia-gate claims)

What is perhaps most unprofessional, unethical and even immoral about the U.S. mainstream media's coverage of Russia-gate is how all the stories start with the conclusion – "Russia bad" – and then make whatever shards of information exist fit the preordained narrative.

For instance, we're told that Facebook executives, who were sent back three times by Democratic lawmakers to find something to pin on Russia, finally detected \$100,000 worth of ads spread out over three years from accounts "suspected of links to Russia" or similar hazy wording.

These Facebook ads and 201 related Twitter accounts, we're told, represent the long-missing proof about Russian "meddling" in the U.S. presidential election after earlier claims faltered or fell apart under even minimal scrutiny.

For example, not only have major questions been raised about whether Russian intelligence operatives were behind the "hacking" of Democratic emails, but the Senate Intelligence Committee announced on Wednesday that two early elements of the Russia-gate hysteria – minor changes that were made to the Republican platform and a brief meeting between Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and then-Sen. (now Attorney General) Jeff Sessions at Washington's Mayflower Hotel – have been dropped as innocent or inconsequential.

But like all good conspiracy theories, once one allegation is dismissed as meaningless, it is replaced by another and another.

In the old days, journalists might have expressed some concern that Facebook "found" the "Russia-linked" ads only under extraordinary pressure from powerful politicians, such as Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a leading legislator on the tech industry. But today's mainstream reporters took Warner's side and made it look like Facebook had been dragging its heels and that there must be much more out there.

However, it doesn't really seem to matter how little evidence there is. Anything will do.

Even the paltry \$100,000 is not put in any perspective (Facebook has annual

revenue of \$27 billion), nor the 201 Twitter accounts (compared to Twitter's 328 million monthly users). Nor are the hazy allegations of "suspected ... links to Russia" subjected to serious inspection. Although Russia is a nation of 144 million people and many divergent interests, it's assumed that everything must be personally ordered by President Vladimir Putin.

Yet, if you look at some of the details about these \$100,000 in ads, you learn the case is even flimsier than you might have thought. The sum was spread out over 2015, 2016 and 2017 – and thus represented a very tiny pebble in a very large lake of Facebook activity.

But more recently we learned that only 44 percent of the ads appeared before Americans went to the polls last November, according to Facebook; that would mean that 56 percent appeared afterwards.

Facebook added that "roughly 25% of the ads were never shown to anyone. ... For 50% of the ads, less than \$3 was spent; for 99% of the ads, less than \$1,000 was spent."

So, as minuscule as the \$100,000 in ad buys over three years may have seemed, the tiny pebble turns out really to be only a fraction of a tiny pebble if the Russians indeed did toss it into the 2016 campaign.

What About the Puppies?

We further have learned that most ads weren't for or against a specific candidate, but rather addressed supposedly controversial issues that the mainstream media insists were meant to divide the United States and thus somehow undermine American democracy.

Except, it turns out that one of the issues was puppies.

As Mike Isaac and Scott Shane of The New York Times reported in Tuesday's editions, "The Russians who posed as Americans on Facebook last year tried on quite an array of disguises. ... There was even a Facebook group for animal lovers with memes of adorable puppies that spread across the site with the help of paid ads."

Now, there are a lot of controversial issues in America, but I don't think any of us would put puppies near the top of the list. Isaac and Shane reported that there were also supposedly Russia-linked groups advocating gay rights, gun rights and black civil rights, although precisely how these divergent groups were "linked" to Russia or the Kremlin was never fully explained. (Facebook declined to offer details.)

At this point, a professional journalist might begin to pose some very hard questions to the sources, who presumably include many partisan Democrats and their political allies hyping the evil-Russia narrative. It would be time for some lectures to the sources about the consequences for taking reporters on a wild ride in conspiracy land.

Yet, instead of starting to question the overall premise of this “scandal,” journalists at The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, etc. keep making excuses for the nuttiness. The explanation for the puppy ads was that the nefarious Russians might be probing to discover Americans who might later be susceptible to propaganda.

“The goal of the dog lovers’ page was more obscure,” Isaac and Shane acknowledged. “But some analysts suggested a possible motive: to build a large following before gradually introducing political content. Without viewing the entire feed from the page, now closed by Facebook, it is impossible to say whether the Russian operators tried such tactics.”

The Joe McCarthy of Russia-gate

The Times then turned to Clinton Watts, a former FBI agent and a top promoter of the New McCarthyism that has swept Official Washington. Watts has testified before Congress that almost anything that appears on social media these days criticizing a politician may well be traceable to the Russians.

For instance, last March, Watts testified in conspiratorial terms before the Senate Intelligence Committee about “social media accounts discrediting U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan.” At the time, Ryan was under criticism for his ham-handed handling of a plan to “repeal and replace” Obamacare, but Watts saw possible Russian fingerprints.

Watts also claimed that Sen. Marco Rubio’s presidential bid “anecdotally suffered” from an online Russian campaign against him, though many of you may have thought Rubio flamed out because he was a wet-behind-the-ears candidate who performed robotically in the debates and received the devastating nickname “Little Marco” from Donald Trump.

Watts explained that these nefarious Russian schemes left no discernible earmarks or detectable predictability. Russians attack “people on both sides of the aisle ... solely based on what they [the Russians] want to achieve in their own landscape, whatever the Russian foreign policy objectives are,” Watts complained.

Watts’s vague allegations appear to have been the impetus behind Sen. Warner’s repeated demands that Facebook find some evidence to support the suspicions.

After Facebook came up empty twice, Warner flew to Silicon Valley to personally confront Facebook executives who then found what Warner wanted them to find, the \$100,000 in suspected Russia-linked ad buys.

So, it perhaps made sense that the Times would turn to Watts to explain the rather inexplicable Russian exploitation of puppies. According to Isaac and Shane, Watts “said Russia had been entrepreneurial in trying to develop diverse channels of influence. Some, like the dogs page, may have been created without a specific goal and held in reserve for future use. ‘They were creating many audiences on social media to try to influence around,’ said Mr. Watts, who has traced suspected Russian accounts since 2015.”

In other words, if you start with the need to prove Russian guilt, there are no alternative explanations besides Russian guilt. If some fact, like the puppies page, doesn’t seem to fit the sinister conspiracy theory, you simply pound it into place until it does.

Yes, of course, Russian intelligence operatives must be so sneaky that they are spending money (but not much) on Facebook puppy ads so they might sometime in the future slip in a few other ideological messages. It can’t be that perhaps the ads were not part of some Russian government intelligence operation.

The Russ-kie Plot

But even if we want to believe that these ads are a Russ-kie plot and were somehow intended to sow dissension in the U.S., the totals are insignificant, a subset of a subset of a subset of \$100,000 in ad buys over three years that, as far as anyone can tell, had no real no impact on the 2016 election – and surely much, much, much less than the political influence from, say, Israel.

If we apply Facebook’s 44 percent figure, that would suggest the total spending in the two years before the election was around \$44,000 and much of that focused on a diverse set of issues, not specific candidates. So, if some Russians did spend money to promote gay rights and to push gun rights, any negligible impact on the 2016 election would more or less have been canceled out between Clinton and Trump.

Yet, over these still unproven and speculative allegations of Russian “links” to these Facebook ads, the national Democrats and their mainstream media allies are stoking a dangerous and expensive New Cold War with nuclear-armed Russia.

I realize that lots of Democrats were upset about Hillary Clinton’s humiliating defeat and don’t want to believe that she could have lost fairly to a buffoon like Donald Trump. So, they are looking for any excuses rather than looking in the mirror.

The major U.S. news outlets also have joined the anti-Trump Resistance, rather than upholding the journalistic principles of objectivity and fairness. The Post even came up with a new melodramatic slogan for the moment: “Democracy Dies in Darkness.”

But yellow journalism is not the way to shed light into darkness; it only blinds Democrats from seeing the real reasons behind Trump’s appeal to many working-class whites who feel disaffected from a Democratic Party that seems disinterested in their suffering.

Yes, I know that some Democrats are still hoping against hope that they can ride Russia-gate all the way to Trump’s impeachment and get him ridden out of Washington D.C. on a rail, but the political risk to Democrats is that they will harden the animosity that many in the white working class already feel toward the party.

That could do more to strengthen Trump’s appeal to these voters than to weaken him, while hollowing out Democratic support among millions of peace voters who may simply declare a plague on both parties.

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](#)).

Challenging the Saudi Air War on Yemen

Placating Saudi Arabia over the Iran nuclear deal, President Obama authorized U.S. military support for the Saudi air assault on Yemen, a policy now facing congressional challenge, as Gareth Porter explained at The American Conservative.

By Gareth Porter

The bill introduced by a bipartisan group of House members last week to end the direct U.S. military role in the Saudi coalition war in Yemen guarantees that the House of Representatives will vote for the first time on the single most important element of U.S. involvement in the war – the refueling of Saudi

coalition planes systematically bombing Yemeni ci



In doing so, moreover, the bipartisan bill, H. Con. Res. 81, will provide a major test of Congressional will to uphold the War Powers Act of 1973, which reasserted a Congressional role in restraining presidential power to enter into wars without its approval in the wake of the Vietnam War debacle.

Since the Obama administration gave the green light to the Saudi war of destruction in Yemen in March 2015, it has been widely recognized by both Congress and the news media that U.S. military personnel have been supplying the bombs used by Saudi coalition planes. But what has seldom been openly discussed is that the U.S. Air Force has been providing the mid-air refueling for every Saudi coalition bombing sortie in Yemen, without which the war would quickly grind to a halt.

The Obama administration, and especially the Pentagon and the U.S. military, became nervous about public statements about that direct U.S. military role in the Saudi war after some legal experts began to raise the issue internally of potential U.S. legal responsibility for apparent war crimes in Yemen.

Refueling Saudi coalition bombing missions “not only makes the U.S. a party to the Yemen conflict, but could also lead to U.S. personnel being found complicit in coalition war crimes,” Kristine Beckerle, Yemen and UAE researcher at Human Rights Watch, has observed.

The political sensitivity of that direct and vital U.S. military role in the Saudi coalition airstrikes was so great in the last year of the Obama administration that U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power, in an interview with a New Zealand journalist twice declared, deceptively, “We are not involved in carrying out airstrikes in Yemen.”

Bipartisan Bill

The bill introduced by Democratic Representatives Ro Khanna of California and Mark Pocan of Wisconsin, and Republican Representatives Thomas Massie of Kentucky and Walter Jones of North Carolina, calls for Congress to “direct” the President to “remove” U.S. military personnel from their role in the Saudi air war against the forces of the Houthi-Saleh alliance in Yemen. It would give the President 30 days in which to end the U.S. military role in support of the Saudi-led war in Yemen unless and until Congress has enacted either a declaration of war or an authorization of those activities.

The co-sponsors believe members will support it because U.S. direct involvement in the Saudi war of destruction in Yemen has enmeshed the United States in the world’s worst man-made humanitarian crisis in many years. Some 542,000 Yemenis, already weakened by starvation, have now succumbed to a cholera epidemic that is far worse than any in the world for the past 50 years, as the *New York Times* reported in August.

The starvation and cholera epidemic are the consequences of a multi-faceted strategy aimed at creating such civilian suffering as to finally break the resistance of the Houthi-Saleh forces. The Saudi strategy has included:

- Targeting of hospitals, markets and agricultural infrastructure.
- Destruction of cranes necessary to offload any large-scale humanitarian assistance at the main port of Hodeida and refusal to replace them with new cranes.
- A naval blockade that has strictly limited shipping of food, fuel and other necessities to Hodeida port.
- Closing down the civilian airport to prevent delivery of humanitarian aid.
- Destruction of roads and bridges necessary for delivery of humanitarian aid.
- Closing down the Central Bank of Yemen – the only institution in Yemen that was providing liquidity to millions of Yemenis.

Another selling point for H. Con Res. 81 is that it is based explicitly on the language of the War Powers Act of 1973, passed by a two-thirds majority in the House overriding a veto by President Richard M. Nixon. The War Powers Act includes a provision that, “[A]t any time that United States Armed Forces are engaged in hostilities outside the territory of the United States, its possessions and territories without a declaration of war or specific statutory authorization, such forces shall be removed by the President if the Congress so directs by concurrent resolution.”

Congressional Authority

The proposed bill argues that the direct U.S. military involvement in the Saudi Yemen war has never been authorized by Congress, and that the provision in the wars powers act is therefore applicable. It specifically exempts U.S. forces operating in Yemen against Al Qaeda, which were authorized under the 2001 Authorization for Military Force (AUMF) and which have not generated critical public and Congressional reactions.

Con. Res. 81 applies a provision of the War Powers Act to ensure that opponents in the Foreign Affairs Committee or the majority leadership won't be able to keep it bottled up without a vote. The War Powers Act puts any proposed Congressional resolution for action regarding an unauthorized use of force on a fast track for an early floor vote, making it a "priority resolution." Once the measure is referred to the House or Senate foreign affairs committee, the War Powers Act requires that the committee report out a resolution within 15 days, and that the resolution must then come to a vote within three days.

Aides say the co-sponsors will present the measure as a response to a policy initiated and carried out for nearly two years by the Obama administration. They say a number of Republican offices are now seriously considering co-sponsorship of H. Con. Res. 81.

In addition to the humanitarian disaster and war powers issues linked to the direct U.S. military role in Saudi airstrikes, the co-sponsors will be pointing to multiple ways the U.S. role in the war makes the American people less secure, according to Congressional aides. One of the effects of the war has been to enormously strengthen the position of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), considered the biggest single foreign threat to carry out terrorist actions against the United States after two failed efforts in recent years. Saudi-backed Yemeni forces have been fighting alongside AQAP against the Houthis-Saleh forces. And the war has given AQAP much greater territorial control, political legitimacy and access to money and arms than it ever had before.

Yet another argument is the longer-term hatred of the United States that the U.S. direct involvement in the Saudi bombing campaign and starvation strategy is creating.

Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut told CNN's Jake Tapper in June 2016, "If you talk to Yemenis, they will tell you, this is not perceived to be a Saudi bombing campaign. This is perceived to be a U.S. bombing campaign. What's happening is that we are helping to radicalize the Yemeni population against the United States."

Lawrence Wilkerson, former Chief of Staff to Colin Powell, has been meeting with Republican House members to urge them to support the bill. “The war being waged in Saudi Arabia with U.S. assistance is brutal and vicious, and it is a losing one for both the U.S. and Saudi Arabia but a boon for AQAP,” Wilkerson said in an interview with TAC. “It should cease immediately.”

But sponsors and advocates of H. Con. Res. 81 may have to refute arguments about Iran that the Saudis and the Obama administration have used to justify the Saudi war in Yemen. Wilkerson noted Republican members who cited Iran’s alleged role in the Houthi war effort and the common U.S.-Saudi opposition to it.

“They argue that the Saudis are doing our work for us, so we’ve got to hold our nose and support them,” said Wilkerson.

But that argument reflects a false narrative created by the Obama administration that Iran has been arming the Houthis for years. Administration officials used a U.N. panel obviously set up at Washington’s behest to recycle old and demonstrably fabricated claims of Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis. The Houthis have undoubtedly obtained missiles and other weapons from Iran, but the U.N. panel of experts on Yemen reported in January 2017 that it did not have sufficient evidence to “confirm any direct large-scale supply of arms” from Iran to the Houthis.

More importantly, the modest military assistance from Iran came in response to the Saudi coalition air assault on Yemen – not the other way around. And contrary to the official Pentagon myth of a “proxy war” against Iran in Yemen, the Houthis are fighting the Saudis for Yemeni interests – not to serve Iranian interests.

Gareth Porter is an independent journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of numerous books, including *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* (Just World Books, 2014).

Follow him on Twitter [@GarethPorter](#). [This article first appeared at

<http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/when-did-congress-vote-to-aid-saudis-yemen-war/>

Why Trump Slaps Down Minority Protests

There’s a troubling subtext to President Trump’s harsh attacks on people of color who complain and protest, as if he thinks they should keep quiet and know their place, as Michael Winship observes.

By Michael Winship

A post-surgical convalescence has held me captive to the 24/7 news cycle more than usual so I've been far too immersed than is healthy in the concurrent sagas of Donald Trump versus the National Football League and the United States Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Hence a couple of thoughts about aspects of Trump's life and worldview that may help connect some dots:

First, when it comes to sports, Trump adores a big fat spectacle. He would have loved the Coliseum of ancient Rome. Can't you just see him ruling over the games? Lions versus Christians or maybe one of the re-creations of a great Roman naval victory when they flooded the bottom of the arena with water and set ships ablaze, slaves giving up their lives for show business and special effects?

And can't you also picture him with his jaw jutting out, tangerine head crowned with tilted laurels and body clad in disheveled toga, turning his thumb down with a leer in his eye as he sends the defeated to their deaths?

But he confuses his love of glitz with knowledge of the game. As he does when it comes to virtually every subject, the President wrongly fancies himself an expert on professional athletics. His Trump Tower office is filled with sports memorabilia and a quick Google search shows Trump posing over the years with a panoply of pro stars, many of them African-American. There he is with Muhammad Ali. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. George Foreman. Jim Brown. Shaquille O'Neal.

In 1992, when heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson was found guilty of rape, Trump jumped to his defense, called the conviction "a travesty" and said it wasn't his pal's fault – "I've seen women going around touching him... He walks in a room and the women start grabbing him..." Sounds like Trump's own Access Hollywood tape, doesn't it?

Twenty-four years later, as he campaigned for president, Trump was still touting his friendship at a rally in Indiana, the very state where Tyson was arrested: "Mike Tyson endorsed me. I love it. He sent out a tweet. Mike. Iron Mike. You know, all the tough guys endorse me. I like that, OK?"

A Tough Guy

Trump thinks he's a tough guy, too. Witness his remarks about pro football rules when he spoke at that Sept. 22 rally for Alabama U.S. Sen. Luther Strange,

who last week lost a runoff primary to crazed Judge Rc



“Today if you hit too hard – 15 yards! Throw him out of the game! They had that last week. I watched for a couple of minutes. Two guys, just really, beautiful tackle. Boom, 15 yards! The referee gets on television – his wife is sitting at home, she’s so proud of him. They’re ruining the game! They’re ruining the game.”

This mindless egging on of violence at the risk of mortal harm comes in the wake of the latest overwhelming evidence of National Football League (NFL) players who have had their lives and careers destroyed by the severe brain damage of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

That Trump seems to think that he has a masterly knowledge of pro football and how it should be run and played goes back to his disastrous involvement in the mid-1980s with the United States Football League (USFL), an upstart challenger to the NFL that might have had a chance at success had it not been for Trump’s bumbling. Apparently, he was trying to leverage his ownership of the USFL’s New Jersey Generals into an NFL franchise that the league wasn’t about to give him.

So when it comes to this whole controversy about players taking a knee during “The Star Spangled Banner,” it would be a mistake to rule out Trump’s ongoing grudge against the NFL as a factor in his attacks. Nor should it come as a surprise that he has chosen to exploit a basic and essentially civil protest against police who kill unarmed civilians and explode it into an attack on God and country, roiling his base and once more chiseling into America’s racial divide.

In the words of Charlie Pierce over at *Sports Illustrated*, Trump “never saw a crack in the pavement he couldn’t turn into an earthquake.”

To sum up: Evidence suggests that Donald Trump fawns over a player with slobbering fan fever as long as you're an athlete who stays in line, shows appreciation and entertains the boss. But step out of line, express an opinion in conflict with his own and suddenly it's thumbs down from the emperor. Just like that, you're a security threat to the nation.

And to rub it in further, Trump denounced NFL owners who have been supportive of their team protests as "afraid of their players, if you want to know the truth, and I think it's disgraceful."

That's not a referee's whistle you're hearing, it's the shrill dog whistle of bigotry and white paranoia, of a hypocrisy that decries dissent from racial minorities while defending the rights of neo-Nazis and those who speak out against anyone who finds statues and monuments celebrating the secessionist South to be offensive.

Bread and Circuses

And the hits just keep on coming. Trump continues to find, as the great Jelani Cobb recently wrote at *The New Yorker*, novel ways "to diminish the nation he purportedly leads... [he] is a small man with a fetish for the symbols of democracy and a bottomless hostility for the actual practice of it."

When it comes to the catastrophe in Puerto Rico, at first it seemed – as was true of Roman emperors at the Coliseum distracting the masses with bread and circuses – that the President was again using the NFL controversy, this time to divert attention from the slowness of hurricane emergency relief.

But once San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz declared, "We are dying, and you are killing us with the inefficiency and the bureaucracy," Trump went on the attack once more, declaring that she had "poor leadership ability" and is being manipulated by Democrats. Puerto Rican officials, Trump tweeted, "want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort."

Damn, there goes that dog whistle again. People of color raising their voices in protest make our loutish emperor mad and antsy. He puts the petty in petty tyrant. Time to call foul and throw him out of the game.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter: [@MichaelWinship](https://twitter.com/MichaelWinship). [This article first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/calling-foul-donald-trump-rhetoric/>]
