

The new McCarthyism and the suppression of political dissent

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The McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s are viewed, among all thinking people, as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the United States. The term “McCarthyism” is synonymous with false allegations, intimidation and character assassination to serve the most reactionary political aims.

Now, seven decades later, a new period of political witch-hunting has begun, spearheaded by the Democratic Party and the media outlets principally associated with it, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The tagline of McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” could be replaced with “Are you now, or have you ever been, a critic of the US government?”

Associated with allegations of “fake news” and “conspiracy theories,” the new McCarthyism is itself one of the greatest fake news conspiracy theories ever hatched. It began with the claim that Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 presidential elections due to the intervention of the Russian government. These charges, which have been building steadily since the election, have entered a new stage, with virtually daily articles in the *Times* and the *Post* seeking to attribute political and social opposition within the United States to the nefarious operations of Vladimir Putin.

“People familiar with the covert influence campaign,” the *Washington Post* reported Monday, say Russia sought to promote “African American rights groups, including Black Lives Matter.” Russian agents likewise helped promote support for “N.F.L. players who do not stand for the national anthem,” spreading hashtags such as “#boycottnfl” and “#takeaknee,” the *Times* declared Thursday.

The *Post* explicitly drew parallels to the allegations by the FBI and other intelligence agencies that the civil rights movement of the 1960s expressed not legitimate

social grievances, but the activities of communist spies and agitators. “Much like the online ads discovered by Facebook,” writes the *Post*, “messages spread by Soviet-era operatives were meant to look as though they were written by bona fide political activists in the United States, thereby disguising the involvement of an adversarial foreign power.”

Like the charges of Russian “hacking” of Democratic Party emails, none of this is supported by any hard evidence. Hence the increasingly strident demands by political operatives that social media companies produce material supposedly documenting the most wild claims and spectacular allegations.

In the new witch-hunt, the role of Joe McCarthy is played by Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the richest man in the Senate and the leading Democrat on the powerful Senate Intelligence Committee. Perhaps more than any other politician, Warren is the spokesman of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Amid a barrage of media propaganda, Warner is twisting the arms of technology executives to get them to fall in line behind the campaign to censor the Internet.

Warner’s latest convert is Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who on Wednesday issued a contrite apology for previous expressions of skepticism. “After the election,” Zuckerberg wrote, “I made a comment that I thought the idea misinformation on Facebook changed the outcome of the election was a crazy idea. Calling that crazy was dismissive and I regret it.”

Zuckerberg shifted his position after he got a personal visit from Warner at Facebook’s headquarters. It is not hard to imagine the type of threats that were made by the CIA-connected Senator to force Zuckerberg to retract his earlier statement. Following Warner’s visit, Facebook produced a list of 3,000 accounts, which the company said had made \$100,000 in ad purchases

aiming to “sow divisions” during the election.

When Warner turned this information over to Twitter, demanding that they corroborate it, the company reported that it found that none of some 450 accounts turned over to it by Facebook had been engaged in any advertising on the social media platform.

Twitter did provide data on advertising by Russia Today (RT), which it acknowledged, “was public” due to “the open nature of the Twitter platform.” It concluded, that “these campaigns were directed at followers of mainstream media and primarily promoted RT Tweets regarding news stories.” On Thursday, Warner denounced the failure of Twitter executives to give him what he wanted, declaring their statements to be “deeply disappointing” and “inadequate on almost every level.”

Warner then threatened to subpoena Twitter executives to appear at a hearing on Russia’s alleged intervention in the 2016 election, something that neither the executives that brought about the 2008 stock market crash, nor the intelligence agents who turned a blind eye to Saudi involvement in the September 11 terror attacks, were ever subjected to.

Even if one were to presume that all the claims of Russian ad purchases were true, the idea that a hundred thousand dollars shifted the US election in Trump’s favor would be laughable, if the implications of the baseless charges were not so serious.

All of this is aimed at creating the political and legal foundations for domestic repression. It is not Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump that the ruling class is worried about, but the emergence of social and political opposition within the United States. Indeed, Warner’s witch-hunt is taking place even as the Democrats are collaborating with Trump, the supposed beneficiary of Russian “meddling,” on a whole series of domestic legislative issues.

The United States is a social tinderbox. The Democrats are attempting to create a “narrative” that social anger is the product not of unprecedented levels of social inequality, police violence and unending military conflicts, but “fake news” promoted by Russian intelligence. Organizations and individuals who criticize government policy are, according to this logic, the hired agents of foreign “enemies.”

It is significant that in Warner’s campaign on the role of social media and Internet platforms in facilitating the

promotion of “fake news,” Google is left out. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, Google adopted new algorithms earlier this year aimed at suppressing left-wing and socialist publications, above all the WSWS.

Since announcing changes to its algorithm to demote “alternative viewpoints” in the name of promoting “authoritative sources,” Google has slashed search traffic to 13 left-wing, progressive, and antiwar websites by nearly 55 percent. The pressure on Facebook and Twitter is aimed at ensuring that they adopt and implement similarly aggressive measures.

The new McCarthyism represents an immense threat. Core democratic rights are under attack. The campaign must be resisted. Similar efforts are underway internationally, with European governments seeking to place severe restrictions on the functioning of social media. Protests must be organized to demand an end to Internet censorship and the witch-hunting of political dissent. The *World Socialist Web Site* pledges to oppose and expose the political scoundrels leading this campaign.

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