

The American media revives the methods of McCarthyism

By Patrick Martin
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In the wake of the one-two punch of articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* suggesting that President Trump is an agent of the Russian government—or to be precise, that the FBI suspected that he was a Russian agent and opened a counterintelligence investigation (as the *Times* reports), and that Trump is concealing his private dealings with Putin as president (as the *Post* claims)—the American media has gone into a McCarthyite hysteria.

In the depths of the anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 1950s, with which the name of Senator Joseph McCarthy is indelibly associated, the question, “Are you now or have you ever been” ... a member of the Communist Party, an agent of Moscow, etc., became almost stereotyped. It was leveled at actors, directors, screenwriters, left-wing political activists, even mid-level government officials, who were hauled before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee or McCarthy’s Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

When President Trump made a prearranged call in to Jeannine Pirro of Fox News during her Saturday night program, she asked him, in a joking tone, “Are you now or have you ever worked for Russia, Mr. President?” Pirro was clearly phrasing the question as a way to mock the media assault spearheaded by the *Times*, and Trump responded in kind, denouncing the question as “the most insulting thing I’ve ever been asked.”

The *Times* and its media chorus responded, however, as Senator McCarthy would have. “Aha,” they declared, “Trump didn’t answer the question directly. He’s hiding something!” The newspaper’s web site noted the exchange with Pirro on Sunday, writing, “Mr. Trump did not directly answer the question.”

This became the media mantra over the next 24 hours.

The Associated Press: “[T]he president avoided directly answering when Pirro asked whether he currently is or has ever worked for Russia.”

The Hill: “President Trump late Saturday declined to directly answer a question from Fox News host Jeannine Pirro about whether he had ever ‘worked for Russia,’ calling it ‘insulting.’”

The *Washington Post*’s opinion editor, James Downie: Pirro’s question “triggered a two-minute rant, none of which included the word ‘no.’”

Similarly questions were raised on the Sunday television interview programs, with CNN’s Jake Tapper, host of “State of the Union,” playing a tape of the Pirro-Trump exchange and declaring, “The president did not directly answer the question.”

The media commentary came full circle with a front page report by Peter Baker of the *New York Times*, published Monday, which began: “So it has come to this: The president of the United States was asked over the weekend whether he is a Russian agent. And he refused to directly answer.”

Baker’s “news analysis,” an editorial in all but name, declared that this question—in effect, whether Trump is guilty of treason, a capital offense—“has hung over his presidency now for two years.”

The obviously concocted frenzy over the “are you now or have you ever been” question is only one aspect of the campaign by the media, the Democratic Party and sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, which the WSWs has characterized as neo-McCarthyite, for good reason.

The “anti-Trump” coalition in ruling circles has brought together the neo-conservative warmongers who bear the main responsibility for the war in Iraq, the liberal imperialists who backed the war in Libya and the current US intervention in Syria, and direct representatives of the military-intelligence apparatus itself. This unholy alliance can be seen in three columns published over the weekend, in the wake of the *Times* and *Post* reports, all of them embracing the “Trump is a Russian agent” allegation.

On Monday the *Washington Post* published an op-ed column by Max Boot, one of the most notorious advocates of the Iraq war, under the scare headline, “Here are 18 reasons Trump could be a Russian asset.” In both style and substance, Boot is echoing McCarthy, who would stand at a podium declaring (always falsely) that he was in possession of a list of 18, or 59, or 240 “known communists” in one or another organization or government department.

Boot enumerates his claimed 18 reasons, mainly a rehash of the now well-publicized contacts between various Trump aides and Russian officials, as well as the Trump organization’s efforts to gain access to the Russian market. But he includes in his list of “reasons,” the fact that “Trump attacks and undermines the Justice Department and the FBI,” that he is “pulling U.S. troops out of Syria, handing that country to Russia and its ally Iran,” and that “Trump is sowing chaos in the government” through the partial shutdown and by installing “acting” appointees at top positions in the Pentagon and Justice Department, “thus furthering a Russian objective of undermining its chief adversary.”

In other words, virtually any action Trump takes in his conflict with the military-intelligence apparatus or the Democratic Party is cited as proof that he is a Russian stooge.

In Politico.com, former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the leading anti-Russia operative of the administration of President Bill Clinton, has a column headlined, “It’s Already Collusion.” Talbott dismisses any need to prove, through actual evidence, that Trump is a Russian agent. “It’s staring us in the face,” he argues, from the record of Trump’s foreign policy.

Talbott presents the Putin regime as the full-fledged revival of Stalinism, claiming that “the Cold War is back with several new and ominous features,” the main one being the alignment of the US president with the ruler in Moscow. “Trump is integral to Putin’s strategy to strengthen authoritarian regimes and undermine democracies around the world,” he writes, calling this policy an “unprecedented aberration” that “if it is allowed to persist—it will jeopardize our security.”

He concludes, “Trump has been colluding with a hostile Russia throughout his presidency. We’ll see if it started before that.”

Finally there is the column posted on the CNN website by Asha Rangappa, senior lecturer at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs and Yale University, and a former FBI agent who specialized in counterintelligence operations,

working in New York City after the 9/11 attacks.

She writes, “As a former FBI agent who conducted investigations against foreign intelligence services, I know that the bureau would have had to possess strong evidence that Trump posed a national security threat to meet the threshold for opening such an investigation. But the more important question now is not how or why the case was opened, but whether it was ever closed.”

Rangappa notes that closing such an investigation happens in one of two ways, determining that there is no threat to national security (a false alarm), or by taking actions to “neutralize” the threat. The former FBI agent concedes that what she calls the normal methods of neutralizing an intelligence threat—monitoring, denial of access to information, feeding false information, seeking to recruit or bribe the agent, or expelling them from American soil—cannot be carried out against the president of the United States.

The former FBI agent argues that even if Mueller’s investigation has uncovered no criminal actions by President Trump, Mueller could still deliver material to Congress to demonstrate that “the threat to national security is ongoing,” allowing Congress to impeach Trump and remove him from office. She carefully avoids any suggestion of the use of force—certainly among the most common methods used by the intelligence services to “neutralize” targets—perhaps to avoid a visit by the Secret Service. But the implication is nonetheless there.

The resort to anti-democratic and conspiratorial methods by Trump’s opponents within the US ruling elite demonstrates that they are not genuinely hostile to his right-wing, authoritarian policies—the persecution of immigrants, the brazen racism, the militaristic bluster—but rather seek to substitute their own equally right-wing and equally authoritarian perspective, including massive censorship of the internet and stepped-up US military intervention in Syria, Ukraine and other areas along the borders of Russia.

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