

Another anti-Russian smear from the New York Times

By Patrick Martin
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Another weekend, and another sensational and fact-free, front-page report in the *New York Times* aimed at portraying the Russian government as the focus of all evil in the world.

Saturday's front page of the *Times* carried an article headlined, "Russians Offered Afghans Bounty to Kill U.S. Troops, Officials Say." A subordinate headline indicated the secondary target of the latest blast: "Trump Administration Has Spent 3 Months Debating Response."

The article thus has several political purposes: to incite a war fever against Moscow, and to denounce the Trump administration for its supposed reluctance to confront Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

The article served to signal the American media as a whole to step up its propaganda to convince the American people to regard Russia as a deadly enemy and to condition them to support war with a country that possesses the second-largest stockpile of nuclear weapons on the planet.

Moreover, as Trump's polls plummet due to his disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and violent threats against peaceful protesters, a major aim of the media's renewed upsurge of the anti-Russia campaign aims to divert mounting popular opposition in a prowar direction.

At this point in a commentary, it would be appropriate to review the factual contentions in the *Times* article and rebut any distortions. But in this particular example, there is no factual substratum, no matter how dubious, to address. The 1,500-word article, carrying no less than three bylines (Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Michael Schwartz), does not adduce a single fact to support its claim of Kremlin blood money.

Instead, the article reports the opinions of top officials of the US military-intelligence apparatus as though they were facts, beginning with, "American intelligence officials have concluded that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition forces in Afghanistan—including targeting American troops..."

This is followed by a paragraph beginning with the inimitable words, "The United States concluded," in which the CIA official dictating to his *Times* stenographers is given the authority of all 330 million inhabitants of this country.

The third paragraph claims that Trump and other top officials were briefed on the alleged Russian operation and discussed

how to respond, a revelation attributed to the same "officials." The article continues, attributing its assertions in the same vein:

- "The officials familiar with the intelligence ..."
- "The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity ..."
- "... officials were said to be confident about the intelligence ..."
- "Some officials have theorized ..."
- "The officials briefed on the matter said ..."

Perhaps the most specific sentence refers to what these unnamed informants did *not* say: "The officials did not describe the mechanics of the Russian operation, such as how targets were picked or how money changed hands."

This is a particularly significant omission, given that only 20 Americans died in Afghanistan in all of 2019, many of them killed by the Afghan soldiers they were training, or by suicide attackers, neither of whom could credibly be described as motivated by the desire to receive Moscow gold.

The article admits, "it was not clear which killings were under suspicion." In other words, this is an alleged conspiracy to commit murder in which no victims have been identified. This is convenient, allowing the *Times* to evade the thorny problem of naming names and attributing any specific death to a Russian connection.

The article notes the flat denials from the Russian government and the Taliban (whose fighters, after waging war on the US invaders for 18 years on religious and nationalist grounds, have supposedly become Russian mercenaries), as well as the refusal of any official representative of the CIA, Pentagon, State Department and National Security Council to comment.

Subsequently, the White House flatly denied the most politically charged claim in the article—that Trump had been briefed on the alleged Russian conspiracy and had done nothing about it. White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany issued a statement declaring: "The CIA Director, National Security Advisor, and the Chief of Staff can all confirm that neither the President nor the Vice President were briefed on the alleged Russian bounty intelligence."

This denial gained confirmation from a source hostile to the White House—House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, one of the "gang of eight" congressional leaders who are regularly informed by

the intelligence agencies about the most sensitive operations and issues. While denouncing Trump for doing nothing to respond to the supposed Russian attack, Pelosi said she herself had not been briefed on it.

It is hard to argue with the assessment issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry, which wrote:

“This unsophisticated plant clearly illustrates the low intellectual abilities of the propagandists of American intelligence who, instead of inventing something more plausible, have to make up this nonsense.”

But neither the entirely nonexistent factual support for the Times account nor the subsequent across-the-board denials slowed the media response to this anti-Russian stink bomb.

Within 24 hours, the entire continuum of the corporate media, from local daily newspapers to the main television networks, was dominated by reports on the supposed Russian campaign to kill American soldiers. The *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, CNN and Fox News all said they had confirmed the Times report, but since it was merely publishing the opinions of unnamed intelligence officials, this proves only that the officials expressed the same views to the other media outlets—again without the slightest factual substantiation.

The media outcry was accompanied by demands from Democrats that Trump account for his alleged three-month silence on the issue, and from both Democrats and Republicans that retaliatory measures be carried out immediately against Moscow.

Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.) tweeted on Sunday morning: “If reporting about Russian bounties on US forces is true, the White House must explain: 1. Why weren’t the president or vice president briefed? Was the info in the PDB [Presidential Daily Brief]? 2. Who did know and when? 3. What has been done in response to protect our forces & hold Putin accountable?”

Senator Tim Kaine (D-Va.) wrote: “President Trump was cozying up to Putin and inviting him to the G-7 all while his Administration reportedly knew Russia was trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan and derail peace talks with the Taliban.”

Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.), an Afghanistan war veteran now being vetted as a possible vice-presidential nominee, wrote on Twitter, “Donald ‘America First’ Trump is literally placing Russian interests ahead of American lives, and Republicans do nothing. Putting party before country doesn’t just empower Trump to continue serving his own interests, it can cost American lives too.”

The presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, former Vice President Joe Biden, told a virtual town hall meeting, “Not only has he failed to sanction or impose any kind of consequences on Russia for this egregious violation of international law, Donald Trump has continued his embarrassing campaign of deference and debasing himself before Vladimir Putin.”

Biden continued, “His entire presidency has been a gift to

Putin, but this is beyond the pale,” adding, “It’s a betrayal of the most sacred duty we bear as a nation, to protect and equip our troops when we send them into harm’s way.”

The WSWS is implacably opposed to the right-wing Russian nationalist regime of Putin. He represents the billionaire oligarchs, who enriched themselves from the destruction of the Soviet Union by Stalinism, and the subsequent impoverishment of the Russian and Soviet working class through the restoration of capitalism.

But it must be said that, even if the allegations about “Russian bounties” were true, they would represent a drop in the bucket compared to the decades of American military-intelligence operations aimed at killing Soviet and then Russian soldiers, or allies of the Soviet bloc, as well as supporters of revolutionary-nationalist groups in various countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The death toll rises into the millions: Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, Brazil, Argentina, Angola, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen ...

In Afghanistan itself, the Carter administration initiated what its national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, proudly predicted would become Russia’s Vietnam: an effort to bleed Soviet military forces by recruiting, arming and training the guerrilla fighters of the *mujaheddin*, the Islamic fundamentalist forces from which both Al Qaeda and the Taliban would ultimately emerge. This operation killed tens of thousands of Soviet troops in the course of nearly a decade of war.

More recently, US-backed Islamic fundamentalist groups have been unleashed within Russia, in the insurgency in Chechnya, and in Syria, where Al Qaeda-linked fighters financed by Saudi Arabia and armed by Washington have killed dozens, if not hundreds, of Russian soldiers and advisers. In one particularly bloody incident, US warplanes incinerated an estimated 200 Russian soldiers, designated as pro-Assad “mercenaries” in order to avoid admitting there had been a direct military clash between two nuclear-armed powers.

Not a word of this bloody record appears in the media screeds about Putin’s “bounties” or the warhawk pronouncements of Washington politicians from both the capitalist parties.

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