The collapse of the New York Times' "Russian bounties" campaign

By Patrick Martin
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Less than two weeks after it kicked off a media frenzy with its front-page report claiming that the Russian military intelligence agency GRU had paid bounties to Taliban fighters in Afghanistan to kill American soldiers, the *New York Times* published an editorial effectively conceding that there was no factual basis for its reporting.

The editorial appeared on Wednesday, July 8, one day after General Frank McKenzie, the commander of Centcom, with overall responsibility for Afghanistan and the Middle East, told the press that there was no evidence that any US soldiers had been killed because of the alleged Russian bounties.

"I didn't find that there was a causative link there," McKenzie said, "the intel case wasn't proved to me." In any case, he continued, no additional precautions were required because the US military already takes "extreme force protection measures" in Afghanistan "whether the Russians are paying the Taliban or not."

McKenzie was speaking Tuesday by telephone to a group of reporters including the Associated Press, which ran a report. The *Times* did not report his comments, which diametrically contradicted the newspaper's own reporting of June 27.

But that night, the newspaper's editorial page threw in the towel, publishing an editorial on the *Times* web site which appeared the next morning in the print edition, under the headline, "Don't Let Russian Meddling Derail Afghanistan Withdrawal Plans."

The editorial begins with the admission: "There's a lot still missing from the reports that Russia paid for attacks on American and other coalition forces in Afghanistan. That's why it's critical that emotions and politics be kept at bay until the facts are in."

This appeal for waiting "until the facts are in" is remarkable since the *Times* itself had claimed to be in possession of the facts about alleged Russian efforts to murder American soldiers, citing unnamed "intelligence officials," and it gave the signal for a vast media campaign aimed at whipping up a very specific "emotion," hatred of Russia.

Moreover, the Democratic Party—with which the *Times* is closely allied—immediately seized on this report to resurrect its long-discredited claims that Trump is a Russian stooge and does nothing without Vladimir Putin's direction and approval.

This was the basis, first of the Mueller investigation and then of the impeachment inquiry, neither of which developed any credible evidence to back the McCarthyite howling about the White House doing the bidding of the Kremlin. Now the *Times* report has become the basis for demands by Democrats, and many Republicans, that Trump take immediate action that would, the words of one senator, result in Russians going home "in body bags."

The editorial further admits that there was no independent reporting to back the claims of Russian bounty payments. Instead, its articles "cite intelligence findings." In other words, the *Times* served as a conduit for unnamed officials, apparently in the CIA, who leaked uncorroborated and disputed claims, allegedly based on the interrogation of prisoners captured in the war with the Taliban. The CIA did not divulge who these prisoners are, where they are being held, and what torture or other mistreatment they may have been subjected to.

The editorial goes on to say: "Then there's the question of the motives behind the leaks and the solidity of the information."

One might think that a first rule of journalism would be to question the motives of officials when they come forward with such inflammatory allegations, as well as

to seek confirmation of claims made by an agency which specializes in lying and political provocations. However, that is not the relationship between the *New York Times* and the CIA.

On the contrary, the *Times* has been a willing stenographer and propagandist for the US intelligence services for many decades, going back to the "weapons of mass destruction" fraud that paved the way to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and well before.

The editorial continues: "Other questions abound: When did the reported payments begin? Were they payback for American support of Afghan militants against Soviet troops there in the 1980s, or something else? Were the payments a factor in the deaths of any American or other coalition troops? Was the intelligence tweaked by people seeking to hinder efforts to withdraw American troops?"

These are the questions that should, of course, have been addressed *before* the *Times* published its front-page "exposé." The fact that they are only raised *now*, in an editorial 12 days later, is a declaration of journalistic bankruptcy.

As the last question in the list suggests, as well as the headline of the editorial, it now appears that CIA officials opposed to Trump's decision to pull most US troops out of Afghanistan on a timetable geared to the November 3 election leaked the "bounties" claim to the *Times* to generate political pressure to overturn that decision. They were successful, as the White House has now delayed the final withdrawal, meaning that it can be more easily reversed by an incoming Democratic administration if Trump loses the election.

The *Times* is not the only "news" organization with egg on its face after the collapse of the "bounties" campaign. NBC News published a similar retraction on its web site, under the defensive headline, "U.S. officials say intel on Russian bounties was less than conclusive. That misses the big picture."

NBC admits that a "growing chorus of American officials" say that the evidence of Russian bounties is "less than conclusive." But it argues that the "big picture" is the unsurprising news that Russian and American interests in Afghanistan do not coincide, and that Moscow has sought to cultivate relations with the Taliban in recent years, and even provide indirect support.

NBC casts some resentful blame on the *Times* for calling the report on the bounties a "finding" of the intelligence community, i.e., a consensus assessment, which turned out not to be true. The CIA only drew its conclusion with only "moderate confidence"—a term of art that means, in effect, "we made it up"—while the National Security Agency, an arm of the Pentagon, said "it could not corroborate" the reports.

None of this alters the fact that the allegation of Russian bounties has entered the bloodstream of American capitalist politics like snake venom for which there is no antidote.

Hence the spectacle of Representative Jason Crow, a former Army special forces officer in Afghanistan, one of the CIA Democrats whose rise was analyzed and exposed by the WSWS in 2018, joining with Republican Liz Cheney, the daughter of the former vice president and unindicted war criminal, to co-sponsor an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, barring the Trump administration from withdrawing troops from Afghanistan until it has taken action over the allegations of "Russian bounties."

There is little doubt that Democratic candidates, from Joe Biden on down, will be making an issue of Trump's failure to "punish" Russia for killing American soldiers, right through November 3, regardless of the abject disavowal of these bogus charges by the *Times* .

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