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A Reprise of the Iraq-WMD Fiasco?

By James W Carden

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The controversy over Russia’s alleged interference in the 2016 presidential election shows no sign of letting up. A bipartisan group of U.S. senators recently introduced legislation that would impose sanctions on Russia in retaliation for its acts of “cyber intrusions.”

At a press event in Washington on Tuesday, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, called Election Day 2016 “a day that will live in cyber infamy.” Previously, Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, called the Russian hacks of the Democratic National Committee “an act of war,” while Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, has claimed that there is near unanimity among senators regarding Russia’s culpability.

Despite all this, the question of who exactly is responsible for the providing WikiLeaks with the emails of high Democratic Party officials does not lend itself to easy answers. And yet, for months, despite the lack of publicly disclosed evidence, the media, like these senators, have been as one: Vladimir Putin’s Russia is responsible.

Interestingly, the same neoconservative/center-left alliance which endorsed George W. Bush’s case for war with Iraq is pretty much the same neoconservative/center-left alliance that is now, all these years later, braying for confrontation with Russia. It’s largely the same cast of characters reading from the Iraq-war era playbook.

It's worth recalling Tony Judt's observation in September 2006 that "those centrist voices that bayed most insistently for blood in the prelude to the Iraq war ... are today the most confident when asserting their monopoly of insight into world affairs."

While that was true then, it is perhaps even more so the case today.

The prevailing sentiment of the media establishment during the months prior to the disastrous March 2003 invasion of Iraq was that of certainty: George Tenet's now infamous assurance to President Bush, that the case against Iraq was a "slam drunk," was essentially what major newspapers and television news outlets were telling the American people at the time. Iraq posed a threat to "the homeland," therefore Saddam "must go."

The Bush administration, in a move equal parts cynical and clever, engaged in what we would today call a "disinformation" campaign against its own citizens by planting false stories abroad, safe in the knowledge that these stories would "bleed over" and be picked up by the American press.

WMD 'Fake News'

The administration was able to launder what were essentially "fake news" stories, such as the aluminum tubes fabrication, by leaking to Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller of The New York Times. In September 2002, without an ounce of skepticism, Gordon and Miller regurgitated the claims of unnamed U.S. intelligence officials that Iraq "has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes ... intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium." Gordon and Miller faithfully relayed "the intelligence agencies' unanimous view that the type of tubes that Iraq has been seeking are used to make centrifuges."

By 2002, no one had any right to be surprised by what Bush and Cheney were up to; since at least 1898 (when the U.S. declared war on Spain under the pretense of the fabricated Hearst battle cry "Remember the Maine!") American governments have repeatedly lied in order to promote their agenda abroad. And in 2002-3, the media walked in lock step with yet another administration in pushing for an unnecessary and costly war.

Like The New York Times, The Washington Post also relentlessly pushed the administration's case for war with Iraq. According to the journalist Greg Mitchell, "By the *Post's* own admission, in the months before the war, it ran more than 140 stories on its front page promoting the war." All this, while its editorial page assured readers that the evidence Colin Powell presented to the United Nations on Iraq's WMD program was "irrefutable." According to the Post, it would be "hard to imagine" how anyone could doubt the administration's case.

But the Post was hardly alone in its enthusiasm for Bush's war. Among the most prominent proponents of the Iraq war was The New Yorker's Jeffrey Goldberg, who, a full year prior to the invasion, set out to link Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Writing for The New Yorker in March 2002, Goldberg retailed former CIA Director James Woolsey's opinion that "It would be a real shame if the C.I.A.'s substantial institutional hostility to Iraqi democratic resistance groups was keeping it from learning about Saddam's ties to Al Qaeda in northern Iraq."

Indeed, according to Goldberg, “The possibility that Saddam could supply weapons of mass destruction to anti-American terror groups is a powerful argument among advocates of regime change,” while Saddam’s “record of support for terrorist organizations, and the cruelty of his regime make him a threat that reaches far beyond the citizens of Iraq.”

Writing in Slate in October 2002, Goldberg was of the opinion that “In five years . . . I believe that the coming invasion of Iraq will be remembered as an act of profound morality.”

Likewise, The New Republic’s Andrew Sullivan was certain that “we would find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I have no doubt about that.” Slate’s Jacob Weisberg supported the invasion because he thought Saddam Hussein had WMD and he “thought there was a strong chance he’d use them against the United States.”

Even after it was becoming clear that the war was a debacle, the neoconservative pundit Charles Krauthammer declared that the inability to find WMDs was “troubling” but “only because it means that the weapons remain unaccounted for and might be in the wrong hands. The idea that our inability to thus far find the weapons proves that the threat was phony and hyped is simply false.”

Smearing Skeptics

Opponents of the war were regularly accused of unpatriotic disloyalty. Writing in National Review, the neoconservative writer David Frum accused anti-intervention conservatives of going “far, far beyond the advocacy of alternative strategies.” According to Frum, “They deny and excuse terror. They espouse a potentially self-fulfilling defeatism. They publicize wild conspiracy theories. And some of them explicitly yearn for the victory of their nation’s enemies.”

Similarly, The New Republic’s Jonathan Chait castigated anti-war liberals for turning against Bush. “Have Bush haters lost their minds?” asked Chait. “Certainly some have. Antipathy to Bush has, for example, led many liberals not only to believe the costs of the Iraq war outweigh the benefits but to refuse to acknowledge any benefits at all.”

Yet of course we now know, thanks, in part, to a new book by former CIA analyst John Nixon, that everything the U.S. government thought it knew about Saddam Hussein was indeed wrong. Nixon, the CIA analyst who interrogated Hussein after his capture in December 2003, asks “Was Saddam worth removing from power?” “The answer,” says Nixon, “must be no. Saddam was busy writing novels in 2003. He was no longer running the government.”

It turns out that the skeptics were correct after all. And so the principal lesson the promoters of Bush and Cheney’s war of choice should have learned is that blind certainty is the enemy of fair inquiry and nuance. The hubris that many in the mainstream media displayed in marginalizing liberal and conservative anti-war voices was to come back to haunt them. But not, alas, for too long.

A Dangerous Replay?

Today something eerily similar to the pre-war debate over Iraq is taking place regarding the allegations of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election. Assurances from the intelligence community and from anonymous Obama administration “senior officials” about the *existence* of evidence is being treated as, well, *actual* evidence.

State Department spokesman John Kirby told CNN that he is “100% certain” of the role that Russia played in U.S. election. The administration’s expressions of certainty are then uncritically echoed by the mainstream media. Skeptics are likewise written off, slandered as “Kremlin cheerleaders” or worse.

Unsurprisingly, The Washington Post is reviving its Bush-era role as principal publicist for the government’s case. Yet in its haste to do the government’s bidding, the Post has published two widely debunked stories relating to Russia (one on the scourge of Russian inspired “fake news”, the other on a non-existent Russian hack of a Vermont electric utility) onto which the paper has had to append “editor’s notes” to correct the original stories.

Yet, those misguided stories have not deterred the Post’s opinion page from being equally aggressive in its depiction of Russian malfeasance. In late December, the Post published an op-ed by Rep. Adam Schiff and former Rep. Jane Harmon claiming “Russia’s theft and strategic leaking of emails and documents from the Democratic Party and other officials present a challenge to the U.S. political system unlike anything we’ve experienced.”

On Dec. 30, the Post editorial board chastised President-elect Trump for seeming to dismiss “a brazen and unprecedented attempt by a hostile power to covertly sway the outcome of a U.S. presidential election.” The Post described Russia’s actions as a “cyber-Pearl Harbor.”

On Jan. 1, the neoconservative columnist Josh Rogin told readers that the recent announcement of sanctions against Russia “brought home a shocking realization that Russia is using hybrid warfare in an aggressive attempt to disrupt and undermine our democracy.”

Meanwhile, many of the same voices who were among the loudest cheerleaders for the war in Iraq have also been reprising their Bush-era roles in vouching for the solidity of the government’s case.

Jonathan Chait, now a columnist for New York magazine, is clearly convinced by what the government has thus far provided. “That Russia wanted Trump to win has been obvious for months,” writes Chait.

“Of course it all came from the Russians, I’m sure it’s all there in the intel,” Charles Krauthammer told Fox News on Jan. 2. Krauthammer is certain.

And Andrew Sullivan is certain as to the motive. “Trump and Putin’s bromance,” Sullivan told MSNBC’s Chris Matthews on Jan. 2, “has one goal this year: to destroy the European Union and to undermine democracy in Western Europe.”

David Frum, writing in *The Atlantic*, believes Trump “owes his office in considerable part to illegal clandestine activities in his favor conducted by a hostile, foreign spy service.”

Jacob Weisberg agrees, tweeting: “Russian covert action threw the election to Donald Trump. It’s that simple.” Back in 2008, Weisberg wrote that “the first thing I hope I’ve learned from this experience of being wrong about Iraq is to be less trusting of expert opinion and received wisdom.” So much for that.

Foreign Special Interests

Another, equally remarkable similarity to the period of 2002-3 is the role foreign lobbyists have played in helping to whip up a war fever. As readers will no doubt recall, Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress, which served, in effect as an Iraqi government-in-exile, worked hand in hand with the Washington lobbying firm Black, Kelly, Scruggs & Healey (BKSH) to sell Bush’s war on television and on the op-ed pages of major American

Chalabi was also a trusted source of Judy Miller of the *Times*, which, in an apology to its readers on May 26, 2004, wrote: “The most prominent of the anti-Saddam campaigners, Ahmad Chalabi, has been named as an occasional source in *Times* articles since at least 1991, and has introduced reporters to other exiles. He became a favorite of hard-liners within the Bush administration and a paid broker of information from Iraqi exiles.” The pro-war lobbying of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has also been exhaustively documented.

Though we do not know how widespread the practice has been as of yet, something similar is taking place today. Articles calling for confrontation with Russia over its alleged “hybrid war” with the West are appearing with increasing regularity. Perhaps the most egregious example of this newly popular genre appeared on Jan. 1 in *Politico* magazine. That essay, which claims, among many other things, that “we’re in a war” with Russia comes courtesy of one Molly McKew.

McKew is seemingly qualified to make such a pronouncement because she, according to her bio on the *Politico* website, served as an “adviser to Georgian President Saakashvili’s government from 2009-2013, and to former Moldovan Prime Minister Filat in 2014-2015.” Seems reasonable enough. That is until one discovers that McKew is actually registered with the Department of Justice as a lobbyist for two anti-Russian political parties, Georgia’s UMN and Moldova’s PLDM.

Records show her work for the consulting firm Fianna Strategies frequently takes her to Capitol Hill to lobby U.S. Senate and Congressional staffers, as well as prominent U.S. journalists at *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, on behalf of her Georgian and Moldovan clients.

“The truth,” writes McKew, “is that fighting a new Cold War would be in America’s interest. Russia teaches us a very important lesson: losing an ideological war without a fight will ruin you as a nation. The fight is the American way.” Or, put another way: the truth is that fighting a new Cold War would be in McKew’s interest – but perhaps not America’s.

While you wouldn't know it from the media coverage (or from reading deeply disingenuous pieces like McKew's) as things now stand, the case against Russia is far from certain. New developments are emerging almost daily. One of the latest is a report from the cyber-engineering company Wordfence, which concluded that "The IP addresses that DHS [Department of Homeland Security] provided may have been used for an attack by a state actor like Russia. But they don't appear to provide any association with Russia."

Indeed, according to Wordfence, "The malware sample is old, widely used and appears to be Ukrainian. It has no apparent relationship with Russian intelligence and it would be an indicator of compromise for any website."

On Jan. 4, BuzzFeed reported that, according to the DNC, the FBI never carried out a forensic examination on the email servers that were allegedly hacked by the Russian government. "The FBI," said DNC spokesman Eric Walker, "never requested access to the DNC's computer servers."

What the agency did do was rely on the findings of a private-sector, third-party vendor that was brought in by the DNC after the initial hack was discovered. In May, the company, CrowdStrike, determined that the hack was the work of the Russians. As one unnamed intelligence official told BuzzFeed, "CrowdStrike is pretty good. There's no reason to believe that anything that they have concluded is not accurate."

Perhaps not. Yet CrowdStrike is hardly a disinterested party when it comes to Russia. CrowdStrike's founder and chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, is also a senior fellow at the Washington think tank, The Atlantic Council, which has been at the forefront of escalating tensions with Russia.

As I reported in *The Nation* in early January, the connection between Alperovitch and the Atlantic Council is highly relevant given that the Atlantic Council is funded in part by the State Department, NATO, the governments of Latvia and Lithuania, the Ukrainian World Congress, and the Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk. In recent years, it has emerged as a leading voice calling for a new Cold War with Russia.

Time to Rethink the 'Group Think'

And given the rather thin nature of the declassified evidence provided by the Obama administration, might it be time to consider an alternative theory of the case? William Binney, a 36-year veteran of the National Security Agency and the man responsible for creating many of its collection systems, thinks so. Binney believes that the DNC emails were leaked, not hacked, writing that "it is puzzling why NSA cannot produce hard evidence implicating the Russian government and WikiLeaks. Unless we are dealing with a leak from an insider, not a hack."

None of this is to say, of course, that Russia did not and could not have attempted to influence the U.S. presidential election. The intelligence community *may* have intercepted damning

evidence of the Russian government's culpability. The government's hesitation to provide the public with more convincing evidence *may* stem from an understandable and wholly appropriate desire to protect the intelligence community's sources and methods. But as it now stands the publicly available evidence is open to question.

But meanwhile the steady drumbeat of "blame Russia" is having an effect. According to a recent you.gov/Economist poll, 58 percent of Americans view Russia as "unfriendly/enemy" while also finding that 52 percent of Democrats believed Russia "tampered with vote tallies."

With Congress back in session, Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain is set to hold a series of hearings focusing on Russian malfeasance, and the steady drip-drip-drip of allegations regarding Trump and Putin is only serving to box in the new President when it comes to pursuing a much-needed detente with Russia.

It also does not appear that a congressional inquiry will start from scratch and critically examine the evidence. On Friday, two senators – Republican Lindsey Graham and Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse – announced a Senate Judiciary subcommittee investigation into Russian interference in elections in the U.S. and elsewhere. But they already seemed to have made up their minds about the conclusion: "Our goal is simple," the senators said in a joint statement "To the fullest extent possible we want to shine a light on Russian activities to undermine democracy."

So, before the next round of Cold War posturing commences, now might be the time to stop, take a deep breath and ask: Could the rush into a new Cold War with Russia be as disastrous and consequential – if not more so – as was the rush to war with Iraq nearly 15 years ago? We may, unfortunately, find out.