

“Russia is Paying the Taliban”: Afghan Bounty Scandal Comes at Suspiciously Important Time for US Military Industrial Complex

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The latest scandal, like others before it, is based on scant testimony by anonymous officials and has had the effect of pushing liberal opinion on US foreign policy into a far more hawkish direction.

Based on anonymous intelligence sources, [The New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), and [Wall Street Journal](#) released bombshell reports alleging that Russia is paying the Taliban bounties for every U.S. soldier they can kill. The story caused an uproar in the United States, dominating the news cycle and leading presumptive Democratic presidential candidate **Joe Biden** to [accuse](#) Trump of “dereliction of duty” and “continuing his embarrassing campaign of deference and debasing himself before **Vladimir Putin**.” “This is beyond the pale,” the former vice-president [concluded](#).

However, there are a number of reasons to be suspicious of the new reports. Firstly, they appear all to be based entirely on the same intelligence officials who insisted on anonymity. The official could not provide any concrete evidence, nor establish that any Americans had actually died as a result, offering only vague assertions and admitting that the information came from “interrogated” (i.e. tortured) Afghan militants. All three reports stressed the uncertainty of the claims, with the only sources who went on record — the White House, the Kremlin, and the Taliban — all vociferously denying it all.

The national security state also has a history of using anonymous officials to plant stories that lead to war. In 2003, the country was awash with stories that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, in 2011 anonymous officials warned of an impending genocide in Libya, while in 2018 officials accused **Bashar al-Assad** of attacking Douma with chemical weapons, setting the stage for a bombing campaign. All turned out to be untrue.

“After all we’ve been through, we’re supposed to give anonymous ‘intelligence officials’ in The New York Times the benefit of the doubt on something like this? I don’t think so,” Scott Horton, Editorial Director of [Antiwar.com](#) and author of “[Fool’s Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan](#),” told MintPress News. “All three stories were written in language conceding they did not know if the story was true,” he said, “They are reporting the ‘fact’ that there was a rumor.”

Horton continued:

“There were claims in 2017 that Russia was arming and paying the Taliban, but then the generals admitted to Congress they had no evidence of either. In a humiliating debacle, also in 2017, CNN claimed a big scoop about Putin’s support for the Taliban when furnished with some photos of Taliban fighters with old Russian weapons. The military veteran journalists at [Task and Purpose](#) quickly debunked every claim in their piece.”

Others were equally skeptical of the new scandal.

“The bottom line for me is that after countless (Russiagate related) anonymous intelligence leaks, many of which were later proven false or never substantiated with real evidence, I can’t take this story seriously. The intelligence ‘community’ itself can’t agree on the credibility of this information, which is similar to the situation with a foundational Russiagate document, the January, 2017 intelligence ‘assessment,’” said [Joanne Leon](#), host of the [Around the Empire Podcast](#), a show which covers U.S. military actions abroad.

Suspicious timing

The timing of the leak also raised eyebrows. Peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban are ongoing, with President Trump committing to pulling all American troops out of the country. A number of key anti-weapons of mass destruction treaties between the U.S. and Russia are [currently expiring](#), and a scandal such as this one would scupper any chance at peace, escalating a potential arms race that would endanger the world but enrich weapons manufacturers. Special Presidential Envoy in the Department of the Treasury, **Marshall Billingslea**, recently [announced](#) that the United States is willing to spend Russia and China “into oblivion” in a new arms race, mimicking the strategy it used in the 1980s against the Soviet Union. As a result, even during the pandemic, business is [booming](#) for American weapons contractors.

“The national security state has done everything they can to keep the U.S. involved in that war,” remarked Horton, “If Trump had listened to his former Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, we’d be on year three of an escalation with plans to begin talks with the Taliban next year. Instead Trump talked to them for the last year-and-a-half and has already signed a deal to have us out by the end of next May.”

“The same factions and profiteers who always oppose withdrawal of troops are enthusiastic about the ‘Bountygate’ story at a time when President Trump is trying to advance negotiations with the Taliban and when he desperately needs to deliver on 2016 campaign promises and improve his sinking electoral prospects,” said Leon.

What kind of monstrous country would fund and recruit fighters to attack occupying troops from an adversary country? It’s an unprecedented breach of international ethics in all cases, but it’s especially morally grotesque to do it against a foreign military in Afghanistan. pic.twitter.com/D6XdzMONaZ

— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [June 28, 2020](#)

If Russia is paying the Taliban to kill Americans they are not doing a very good job of it. From a high of 496 in 2010, U.S. losses in Afghanistan have [slowed](#) to a trickle, with only 22 total fatalities in 2019, casting further doubt on the scale of their supposed plan.

Ironically, the United States is accusing the Kremlin of precisely its own policy towards Russia in Syria. In 2016, former Acting Director of the C.I.A. **Michael Morell** appeared on the Charlie Rose show and [said](#) his job was to “make the Russians pay a price” for its involvement in the Middle East. When asked if he meant killing Russians by that, he replied, “Yes. Covertly. You don’t tell the world about it. You don’t stand up at the Pentagon and say, ‘We did this.’ But you make sure they know it in Moscow.”

Like [RussiaGate](#), the new scandal has had the effect of pushing liberal opinion on foreign policy to become far more hawkish, with Biden now campaigning on being “tougher” on China and Russia than Trump would be. Considering that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists recently set their famous [Doomsday Clock](#) — an estimation of how close they believe the world is to nuclear armageddon — to just 100 seconds to midnight, the latest it has ever been, the Democrats could be playing with fire. The organization specifically singled out U.S.-Russia conflict as threatening the continued existence of the planet. While time will tell if Russia did indeed offer bounties to kill American troops, the efficacy of the media leak is not in question.

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