

McCarthy's Smiling Ghost: Democrats Point the Finger at Russia

By [Norman Solomon](#)

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On Tuesday, Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) and six ranking members of major House committees sent President Obama a letter declaring, "We are deeply concerned by Russian efforts to undermine, interfere with, and even influence the outcome of our recent election."

A prominent signer of [the letter](#) — Rep. [Adam Schiff](#) (D-Calif.), the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee — is among the Democrats most eager to denounce Russian subversion.

A week ago, when the House approved by a 390-30 margin and sent to the Senate the Intelligence Authorization Act for fiscal 2017, Schiff praised "important provisions aimed at countering Russia's destabilizing efforts — including those targeting our elections." One of those "important provisions," [Section 501](#), sets up in the executive branch "an interagency committee to counter active measures by the Russian Federation to exert covert influence."

This high-level committee could easily morph into a protracted real-life nightmare.

While lacking public accountability, the committee is mandated to ferret out such ambiguous phenomena as Russian "media manipulation" and "disinformation." Along the way, the committee could target an array of activists, political opponents or irksome journalists. In any event, its power to fulfill "such other duties as the president may designate" would be ready-made for abuse.

The committee is to be selected by presidential appointees, including the director of the FBI — an agency with leadership that has all too often pursued covert and overt political agendas, from the times of J. Edgar Hoover to James Comey.

All in all, the provision is a gift for the next president, tied up in a bow by congressional Democrats.

This country went through protracted witch hunts during the McCarthy era. A lot of citizens — including many government workers — had their lives damaged or even destroyed. The chill on the First Amendment became frosty, then icy. Democracy was on the ropes.

Joe McCarthy rose to corrosive prominence at the midpoint of the 20th century by riding hysteria and spurring it on. The demagoguery was fueled not only by opportunistic politicians but also by media outlets all too eager to damage the First Amendment and other civil liberties in the name of Americanism and anti-communism.

Today, congressional leaders of both parties seem glad to pretend that Section 501 of the Intelligence Authorization Act is just fine, rather than an odious and dangerous threat to precious constitutional freedoms. On automatic pilot, many senators will vote aye without a second thought.

Yet by rights, with growing grassroots [opposition](#), this terrible provision should be blocked by legislators in both parties, whether calling themselves progressives, liberals, libertarians, Tea Partiers or whatever, who don't want to chip away at cornerstones of the Bill of Rights.

Most Democratic leaders, for their part, seem determined to implicitly — or even explicitly — scapegoat the Russian government for the presidential election results. Rather than clearly assess the impacts of [Hillary Clinton](#)'s coziness with Wall Street, or even the role of the FBI director just before the election, the Democratic line seems bent on playing an anti-Russia card.

Perhaps in the mistaken belief that they can gain some kind of competitive advantage over the GOP by charging Russian intervention for [Donald Trump](#)'s victory, the Democrats are playing with fire. The likely burn victims are the First Amendment and other precious freedoms.

When liberals have helped to launch a witch hunt, Republican politicians have been pleased to boost it into the stratosphere. That's what happened after Harry Truman issued an executive order in March 1947 to establish "loyalty" investigations in every agency of the federal government.

Truman may have thought he was tossing GOP extremists a bone that they would stop to gnaw on. But he actually supplied them with red meat for an all-out assault on civil liberties. An ambitious new arrival in the House named Richard Nixon did his part to escalate the witch hunting. So did other Republican lawmakers, like Sens. Karl Mundt of South Dakota and Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. Some Democrats, like Nevada's Sen. Pat McCarran, were pleased to join in. The rest is disgraceful and tragic history.

Now, most lawmakers on Capitol Hill seem inclined to let it happen again. Of course the upcoming era won't be the same as the one that bears the name of McCarthy. History doesn't exactly repeat itself, but it can rhyme an awful lot.

Norman Solomon is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, where he coordinates [ExposeFacts](#). Solomon is a co-founder of [RootsAction.org](#).

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Articles by: **Norman
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