

# Afghanistan Bounties: Pot, Meet Kettle (and Turn Off the Stove!)

“American intelligence officials have concluded that a Russian military intelligence unit secretly offered bounties to Taliban-linked militants for killing coalition forces in Afghanistan,” claims the *New York Times*.

More controversially, the authors write that US president Donald Trump was briefed on the assessment (he denies it) and the piece’s tagline says that his administration “has been deliberating for months” on how to respond (he says the US intelligence community didn’t find the claims credible).

Naturally, the response preferred by those who buy the *Times*’s version of events is:

First, make domestic political hay with it. Sure, trying to frame Trump as a Russian asset has backfired spectacularly every time it’s been tried, but sooner or later it’s bound to work, right?

Second, make foreign policy hay with it. Punish the Russians until they’ve been baited back to full-blown Cold War levels of enmity, all the while whining that “they hate us for our freedom.”

I’ve got a better plan.

First, reduce the US military presence in Afghanistan to zero. If there aren’t any US forces in Afghanistan, no US forces in Afghanistan will be in danger due to supposed “Russian bounties.”

Second, ignore — forget! — the slim possibility that Russian bounties were behind any American deaths.

Problems solved.

Why should the US let the Russians off the hook and quit worrying about it? Here’s why:

To date, fewer than 2,500 Americans have died in Afghanistan in nearly 19 years of war.

The Russians’ 1979-1989 Afghan war lasted about half as long. Their toll was 15,000 dead.

Why didn’t the Russians get off as lightly as the Americans?

Because the US government spent at least \$3 billion directly funding and arming groups like al Qaeda to fight the Russians in Afghanistan (through the CIA’s “Operation Cyclone”),

and billions more indirectly via the Pakistani government.

Even counting only the known direct aid, that amounts to a \$200 in-kind bounty for every dead Russian soldier. \$200 was a pretty sweet paycheck, more than Afghanistan's per capita GDP during most of that period.

If there is a Russian bounty program on US troops in Afghanistan now, it's clearly been less successful than the equivalent US program was 30-40 years ago. And with that program, the US government gave up any conceivable standing to complain about a Russian remix.

That supposed remix is just one more reason, from among a long list of good reasons, to bring the troops home from Afghanistan.