A Patriot's Field Guide to Psychological Warfare

An Army Psyop Vet breaks down *propaganda, disinformation, and malicious influence,* from the American Homeland to the Ukrainian Warzone

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A Patriot's Guide to Psychological Warfare, Disinfo, and Manipulation

A layperson breakdown by an Army PSYOP Vet, from the American Homeland to the Ukraine Warzone

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Who am I and why do I care?

From Special Warfare training at Fort Bragg and a country-wide PSYOP mission in Iraq, US CENTCOM PSYOP liaison work, half a dozen large-scale Combat Training Rotation (CTC) wargames as a PSYOP Sergeant, Russian language certification at the Defense language Institute (DLI), to a US Army Europe (USAREUR) high-level, NATO-themed exercise based around the Russia-Ukraine war, I've amassed considerable knowledge and experience in the arena of Russian propaganda and of information warfare in general. I want to make what I feel are the most crucial and important aspects of this easily accessible to more Americans, using unclassified insights into the art and science of 'PSYOPS' and the methods being used by Russia against America as well as against Ukraine. This can help equip more of us to harden ourselves accordingly, as well as protect sacred ideals.

What is this Field Guide?

This free online field guide gives an easy-to-follow breakdown of the main principles and methods used in information warfare, running the reader through modern real-life examples. It explains how this strategy exploits our tendency to react and jump to false conclusions. In step-by-step fashion, it shows how propaganda and disinfo over cyber and media domains fan the flames on all fronts, from amplifying the message of white supremacist movements to using fake BLM accounts and exploiting tensions within communities of color.

It shows how 'flashpoint issues' such as guns, immigration, religion, race, and conspiracies are weaponized against the American people, by targeting specific segments of our population through an analysis of their fears, resentments, and ideological 'pressure points'. It uses illustrations and examples across our political map to show how these messages 'press the right buttons' to create the emotional response that allows the message to plant and seed itself in their minds.

Finally, it shows how information warfare campaigns are being used to weaken and undermine the US and NATO countries, target various demographic audiences, and lead us to lose faith in the democratic system and way of life.

Concept & Purpose

Taken from key parts of a book draft I wrote in 2021, this field guide is my attempt to take what I've learned in the warzone and continue to be of service to this country, but in one of the most important - and irregular - battlefields today: that of *disinformation, propaganda, and influence campaigns*.

In undermining the classic idea of truth, spreading harmful conspiracies, and watering political extremism, these things have become genuine threats to our national security. They also capitalize on our worst fears, grievances, and national 'pressure points', fueling open civil conflict and radicalization eerily similar to what I saw in warzones.

This is an American patriot's guidebook, written by an Army PSYOP and Information Warfare veteran, for anyone who may be the target of disinfo, false narratives, or propaganda from any direction, and wants to learn to avoid its mind traps – and better understand it for themselves. It is also a practical blueprint for educating family, friends, neighbors and peers, on how they and millions of others are being targeted by foreign nations and basement-dwelling trolls.

I break down classic propaganda techniques and mind tricks that are used against people across everyone from the midwestern conservative or rural churchgoer to the NYC liberal or hardline progressive. It goes further – it also breaks down why our minds are so prone to disinformation and lies, the cognitive science of our "political brain", and why we prefer *comforting lies over uncomfortable truths*, often to our peril. I use stories from Iraq, Afghanistan, US Central Command, and other places to explain the 'psyop process' in an unclassified, commonly understandable way: how population groups are targeted and why. There is an art and science to 'psywar' that needs to be demystified for fellow Americans.

I discuss why *disinformation is so hard to counter* – and how recent research shows *possible ways to fight back*. Finally, I lay out an idea for how we as a Nation can create a nonlethal Manhattan Project of sorts for recognizing and combating disinformation and propaganda - and helping Americans of all stripes restore our sacred ideals of truth, reason, and democracy. It starts with awareness of our own minds, and our willingness to engage in such critical thinking, becoming as much a staple of American patriotism or moral virtue as anything else across our political spectrum.

Below is a Section and Chapter breakdown.

SECTION I. A Laypersons Guide to 'Psyops', Propaganda, and Information Warfare

Chapter I.   A Primer for Patriots: *The Vulnerable Brain, Human Tribalism, and PSYOP*

I give a brief overview, in layperson terms, of the <u>neuroscience of deception</u>. Literally speaking, *why our minds are an easy target* due to our evolutionary hardwiring, cognitive bias, and motivated reasoning (mental gymnastics) to maintain comforting beliefs. I discuss human tribalism: how we often form teams and beliefs based on shared values, symbols, and moral language. How we signal loyalty to a coalition of ideas, identity, or political team, even when a narrative clearly isn't true. I also give a layperson's intro to Psychological Warfare (PSYOP), with a brief history and explanation of this commonly mystery-enshrouded word. In the Harry Potter universe, we have different factions of wizards, half-bloods, squibs, and others learning the same basic craft, but using it in different ways: some to fight the good fight, others to pursue harmful ends. 'Psyop' skills are the same way – often used for competing ends. Our Hogwarts is called the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, commonly called 'Swiks' (SWCS). This is where me and fellow Psyop'ers learned about the 'Dark Arts' of propaganda campaigns, knowledge that (in unclassified form, of course) can become immensely useful in educating our society.

Chapter II.   The 'Psyop Process' for Dummies: *A Deep Dive into How The Kremlin (or Any Serious Campaign) Targets Us*

This chapter is an unclassified, open-source, and very brief overview of how a real Psyop campaign selects its audiences and targets them. I share the steps in this highly deliberate process of analyzing different audiences and influencing them through the savvy use of targeted messages, arguments, symbols, and media. I give relevant examples along each step of the journey, to put the reader in the seat of a Kremlin infowar operative. I give examples across the political spectrum, in a non-partisan way that shows how the magician fools the crowd.

Chapter III.   Current Examples: *Targets of Opportunity, Modern Tricks of the Trade*

I use the term 'Targets of Opportunity' to describe the most common and dangerously effective ways that propaganda messaging targets people's minds by pressing certain buttons – tricks that will set people off. Rather than go directly for the 'thinking' part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex, where facts, logic, and critical thinking are used to make sense of reality), most persuasive narratives find a way in through the emotions. I explore this playbook through real life examples and illustrations, across a wide range of political views and target audiences across the spectrum.

SECTION II. *Russia vs America, Russia vs Ukraine*

Chapter IV.   Russia vs America – *Weaponing Race, Culture, Fear, and Ideology*

This is a *Russia vs America* chapter. What did the Russian-led 80s conspiracy that our government created the AIDS virus to kill people of color have in common with modern conspiracies about COVID-19? This chapter explains the grand strategy of nation-states like Russia, China, and Iran, in using disinformation as a means to attack our 'center of gravity' by attacking the very notion of truth itself. How can a nation's propaganda campaign weaken another nation without firing a single shot? I explore the disturbing history of Russian influence campaigns targeting us on race, religion, and political animosities, including soviet 'active measures' by the KGB (now the FSB).

Chapter V.   Putin's Bear Whistle: *Waging a Dehumanizing Information War Against Ukraine*

How Putin and Russia have weaponized 'Whataboutsim' ('Both Sideism'), Russian orthodoxy, Western evangelical and far-right ties, culture war fears, false Russia-Ukraine history, general half-truths and lies, and misinformation about Nazis to their own ends – specifically, to vilify Ukraine and seek to justify an unspeakably horrific war with arguably genocidal aims. I highlight the observations of black journalist Terrel Jermaine Starr and his observations about how Putin and Russian messaging use their own brand of dog whistle (or what I call Bear Whistle).

*A Psychological Warfare Veteran's Call to Arms***.** A Way Forward **-** *Where do we go from here*?

Key Terms and Concepts – A brief summary for the amateur expert

What is data mining? When you see an add pop up on your Facebook or internet feed - an add that seems eerily tailored to your own interests and lifestyle - there is often a reason for it. Someone - or something - is collecting data on you and using it to target you with an add or a message. Facebook, for example, has been known to collect data on its users, which is then sells to companies who can use the information to better target potential customers. When Target knows someone is pregnant before they do (which happened with a teenage girl over a decade ago), this is the result of data mining - collecting a bunch of information about a person from many angles (such as what products they buy, their age and family, food and medicine purchases, lifestyle preferences, etc.), and piecing it all together. This can be used to 'target' them more precisely.

Echo Chamber, Filter Bubbles, and what this means for political targeting. This kind of data mining and analysis has led to the ability of social media sites like Facebook to essentially feed people a steady diet of what they want to hear and surround them with political views and news stories that match their preferences - rather than being challenged by different views, people are increasingly drawn into their own "filter bubble" (as some political and media experts call it). What this means is that social media essentially 'filters' what they see and the political views they are exposed to, based on this data about their attitudes and views. The term 'echo chamber' has been coined as a result of this trend within social media, referring to a phenomena where people mainly hear echoes of their own opinions, their own ideas, views, and political attitudes.

PSYOP – In the simplest terms, 'Psyop' (or Psychological Operations) is about identifying and analyzing the motivations and drivers of behavior of specific ('target') audiences, for the purpose of influencing their behavior in some way. Psyop (or PSYOP, if it's a doctrinal term for a US, NATO, or other national psywar capability) is conducted in a systematic and organized way, rather than haphazardly; based on its *target audience analysis*, it constructs symbols and narratives that will resonate with the target audience, leading to carefully crafted *themes and messages*, which are disseminated in ways that are most likely to reach the audience. Advertising campaigns work in a similar fashion - much of the science and research on behavioral influence and manipulation was developed during the early days of American advertising on Madison Avenue, and used by our government during the two World Wars (both here at home and in the war zone). The Soviets used much of this knowledge as well.

Then there is the longer game, **Information Warfare,** which ties in 'Psyop messaging' to other pillars of communication and influence, such as *public affairs*, *cyber operations* (such as offensive attacks, data mining, and 'targeting' through an understanding of beliefs and social media algorithms), and *military deception* (sometimes called MILDEC in the world of psywar doctrine). In the looser sense of governments and media, it could refer to a focused, organized way of combining Psyop messaging with public affairs (such as political statements) and cyber campaigns.

On both the military and civilian side (such as corporate or political campaigns), we can also use the umbrella term **Strategic Communications**. Think, organized campaigns (such as Russian-led propaganda campaigns, or digital, targeted psychometric campaigns across social media feeds by [Cambridge Analytica](#)) influencing the populations of various countries around the world, as well as our people here at home. We are essentially talking about a series of messages and ideas that target specific audiences, in order to influence their thinking and behavior, and for a *specific goal* (or goals). In short, IO or 'strategic communications' in the political sphere is like a big political ad campaign. It works over a period of time, with a larger goal in mind. Russia has been doing this to American audiences on both ends of the political spectrum for Generations.

Author Bio

My name is John Kirbow, and I write about the nuances of information warfare and counterinsurgency. I've served in Iraq (via the US Army) and Afghanistan (via the DoD) in various capacities, with an emphasis on understanding the nuances of culture, people and how to effectively engage with them.

Since my time doing human terrain analysis in Afghanistan as a GS, I've focused on mapping the needs and skills of local communities and how veterans with SOF and CA backgrounds can find meaningful pathways to continue to serve here at home, adapting their skills in much-needed ways.

I've also focused on applying an understanding of human behavior and Psychological Warfare (and Information Warfare) to better understand and counter hate movements, propaganda, extremism, and radicalization, both domestic and foreign alike.

After Afghanistan, I spent time in Cusco, Peru, informally studying the culture and livelihoods of Andean indigenous communities. In 2013, I founded Project Fort Defiance, an initiative which began after Hurricane Sandy in order to take some of the practices of Civil Affairs, village stability operations, and ethnographic assessment, and adapt them for response and rebuilding in Coney Island and Red Hook, Brooklyn. The project has since aimed at showing how war veterans can be greater assets here in our backyard, by helping communities create maps of their own problems, solutions, knowledge, and resources ('participatory mapping').

Currently learning Greek and Afrikaans, I'm also a longtime language lover and speak (non-native) Russian, German, Spanish, Arabic, and to a lesser extent Farsi, French, Italian, Swahili, and others.

I've written articles, given talks, and engaged in podcasts to promote skepticism, science, reason, and human rights within politics and social issues, and write and speak about combating propaganda,

My longtime aim has been to bridge ideological and demographic divides based on shared values and common ground, while decisively combating and singling out dangerous, harmful ideas and movements.

Alongside co-hosting the NYC Political Forum, I've had the pleasure and honor of appeared on Malcolm Nance's Black Man Spy podcast, the KPFK Rethinking Heroes radio show, the Layer8 Podcast, Andrea With The Bangs podcast, Charles Kennedy IV podcast, The Radical Secular podcast (Ep. 4 – *The green Pill: Counterinsurgency with John Kirbow)*, the Skepticamp conference, the NYC Motion Debate, several 2017 NYC Left Forum panels, and other platforms. He has written articles for Skeptic Magazine, Areo Magazine, The Humanist, and Medium

"Unfortunately, the most useful emotions to create such conditions – uncertainty, fear, and anger – are the very characteristics that increase the likelihood a message will go viral. Even when disinformation first appears on fringe sites outside of the mainstream media, mass coordinated action that takes advantage of platform business models reliant upon clicks and views helps ensure greater audience penetration.

Bot networks consisting of fake profiles amplify the message and create the illusion of high activity and popularity across multiple platforms at once, gaming recommendation and rating algorithms."

-Weapons of Mass Distraction: *Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation*

Introduction

The word 'PSYOPS' is among the most widely misunderstood, mysterious, yet important words of our time. We are at a crossroads where the information sphere – and our vulnerable, all-too-human minds – have become the dominant battlespace. Politicians, online extremists, basement-dwelling trolls, and hostile nations have used technology to weaponize disinformation like never before in our history. This is a patriot's field manual – a guidebook for anyone who may be the target of disinformation and propaganda from any direction and wants to learn how to avoid falling into its various mind traps. It is for people who want to learn to recognize propaganda and educate their family, their friends, or their neighbors and peers. It is for anyone in policy, journalism or media circles who wants to harden this country against information warfare. I use stories from Iraq, Afghanistan, US Central Command, and other places to explain the 'psyop process' in an unclassified, commonly understandable way: how population groups are targeted and why. There is an art and science to 'psywar' that needs to be demystified for fellow Americans. I discus why *disinformation is so hard to counter* – and how recent research shows *possible ways to fight back*. As I see it, 'psyops', as a methodology, is like the Force in some respects: it is not inherently 'bad' nor 'good', but a tool that both Jedi and Sith can use for different ends. My experience working for the Jedi, so to speak, may give context for understanding how to beat the Sith.

Iraq is where I start. My second deployment there in 2005-2006 arguably stands out as my most memorable experience with Army Psychological Warfare. When I assisted MNF-I (Multi-National Forces, Iraq) in the Green Zone and Camp Victory, Baghdad, as a PSYOP Sergeant at the Division level, our team had a country-wide mission: We focused on something called Psychological Operations - how to analyze population groups and influence behaviors towards a desired end. PSYOP is foundationally built on how the science of human psychology and effective communication techniques – through various types of media, in particular – can *change behaviors*. In our case, we sought to assist the democratic process and combat instability and violence. We developed ways to counter enemy messaging and recruiting, and support locally led narratives of peace and stability. We used our messaging to reach different segments of the Iraqi population, from young military-aged males, rural sheep herders and urban shop owners, to religious clerics and tribal leaders. My ability to share this playbook with fellow Americans here at home is born out of my time in psychological warfare abroad, and later at US CENTCOM. Like fellow psyop'ers, I know how the core process works – and, like my psywar compatriots, I see it weaponized by domestic and foreign propagandists every day.

'Psyops' is not always dark and scary, nor necessarily a force for evil – often, it can be used in ways which are arguably for the greater good. Psyops has a proud tradition going back in particular to helping demoralize and combat fascism on the German and Pacific fronts during the Second World War, and has saved American and local civilian lives in many conflicts since, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is rarely understood, but a hidden gem when used properly. At the 'strategic' level, PSYOP is nested in a broader field called *Information Warfare,* which uses media, deception and cyber to reach large and diverse population segments and achieve big goals.

A major upside to my Psyop background, and longtime study of human behavior and psychology, is a far more honest and deeper understanding of how the human mind works, down to the level of cognition and neuroscience. Why the primal side of our brains can fall prey to everything from corporate ads and car salesman tricks to lies, disinformation and dangerous, insanely crazy conspiracies. As research shows, our 'political brains' are hardwired in certain ways to *prefer comforting lies over uncomfortable truths*. This opens up a vulnerability not only in the minds of millions of Americans, but in our nation's 'COGSEC' – a term some fellow vets came up with when describing the need for *cognitive security*: how to make sure our bullshit radars work against damaging lies, harmful conspiracies, and dangerous ideas. A Psyop background gave me the keys to understanding how this can be weaponized by authoritarian regimes, fascist movements, terrorist propaganda cells, corporate actors, or hostile nations, against vulnerable people or even entire populations. Knowing Psywar truly opened doors (and will demystify the crazy drunk uncle at Thanksgiving dinner for many of you).

At the same time, I had long become disillusioned with seeing the impact of political and corporate propaganda campaigns, understanding how they work, and seeing people influenced by them – I wanted to explain to fellow Americans how they were being targeted, and the tricks of the trade. After a number of years doing psychological warfare in warzone, command staff, and training environments, I saw its applications used by foreign powers against the West - and on the hearts and minds and Facebook accounts of the American people. I saw the very real way that entire nations were using disinformation and well-orchestrated influence campaigns to affect our political landscape here at home. From rural to coast, from Midwest Republican to Rustbelt Democrat, from Evangelical conservative to hard-left liberal, I saw fellow Americans being targeted by this craft, in a systematic way. Expert analysis of countless bots and fake accounts and intelligence and disinformation reports made it clear that there were larger attacks on our Democratic systems underway. The need for explaining how this process works became my new mission in life in 2016. This is my honest and transparent attempt to demystify and explain a well-established process to my fellow Americans.

Russia's lead intelligence agency, the S.V.R. (Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation - Слу́жба вне́шней разве́дки Росси́йской Федера́ции), has been alive and well in our cyber realm – and in the realm of our 'political brains', whether we see it or not. The Kremlin has apparently gone beyond the methods of interference we saw back in 2016 – they have been spreading disinformation on left and right audiences, emboldening potentially violent political LARPers such as Boogaloo groups, and pushing the insane idea of a coming new 'civil war'. They have been maliciously using fake BLM and fake Antifa accounts, amplifying white nationalist narratives, and capitalizing on our riots and protests in a time of civil strife. Their influence campaigns promote racial tensions, fear, resentment, and divisions – often aimed at sowing dissent and increasing confusion and chaos. Emboldening extremist movements, to increase violence, toxic noise, and distrust across our Nation. Promoting lies and dangerously misleading narratives to create 'alternative truths'. Supporting the spread of viral conspiracy theories such as Q-Anon and disinformation on COVID-19. Propping up alternate realities and promoting a dangerous kind of relativism to undermine the *very concept of truth itself* - the bedrock on which our democratic society rests. Ultimately, undermining our faith in the democratic process we have so long put faith in throughout our history as a Republic. This wider information war arguably seeks to weaken Western democracies and undermine their populations' faith in the democratic system we've fought and sacrificed so hard for.

From Allied propaganda campaigns in WW2, the advertising industry on Madison Ave, to modern research in cognition and neuropsychology, the science of psychological persuasion is ultimately borne out of an understanding of the human mind, and how to manipulate it. However, this same science *has also evolved a much better understanding* of how to effectively communicate with one another, dispel myths and lies, and disabuse people of dangerous ideas. An understanding of how emotionally effective communication can assist patriotic Americans to combat lies and have civil, productive conversations with friends, neighbors and strangers alike. A *science of our minds*, combined with an adaptive understanding of cyber and media, give us a possible roadmap to create alternative spaces for healthy discourse.

We can use media and conversation as a kind of ideological detox to break away from false choices between harmful extremes - what I refer to as The Green Pill. Alongside breaking down the many threats and the methodology of information war, this book lays out an idea for how we, America, can create a new Manhattan Project, nation-wide, for recognizing and combating disinformation and propaganda. A nonlethal arms race of psychology, cyber, and media expertise, for helping Americans of all stripes restore our sacred ideals of truth, reason, and democracy.

Publilius Syrus, who lived from 85 to 43 BC, was a Latin writer who was perhaps best known for his S*ententiae (moral sayings).* He was a Syrian brought to Italy as a slave, who eventually became free and helped educate others. He coined the phrase "Vincit qui se vincit" — "He conquers twice who conquers himself when he is victorious". If we are to avoid losing our Democracy, and the ideals of truth that bind us together as a country, this ethos must become our guiding light. This book is my humble contribution to this fight – a fight we can join in, together.

"Verbum Vincet!"

SECTION I

A Laypersons Guide to 'Psyops', Propaganda, and Information Warfare

Chapter I

A Primer for Patriots: *The Vulnerable Brain, Human Tribalism, and PSYOP*

The Neuroscience of Deception: Why Our Minds are an Easy Target, *Simplified*

There is a question we must all ask. Why is it so easy for demagogues and harmful propaganda to divide us, embitter us against our fellow human beings, and push us into such fear-driven and closed modes of thinking? How are armies of young trolls drinking vodka in a basement somewhere in Siberia, or a 15-year-old BANG-drinking American troll in his dad's garage, so easily able to manipulate scores of adults and potential voters into delusions, conspiracies, and paranoid, caricatured visions of their political rivals?

In short, we are hardwired to make snap decisions or form beliefs about things with emotional content (politics, religion, ideology in particular), while the smarter parts of our brains use mental gymnastics to rationalize it after the fact. The well-documented phenomenon of *confirmation bias* - found in us all, from leftwing to rightwing (and yes, *even in you*, and your uncle at Thanksgiving dinner after too much bourbon) - refers to that unconscious drive to **confirm what we believe** (or want to continue believing), and to **dismiss evidence against our beliefs**. Our brain selectively 'goes fishing' for confirmatory evidence, while erecting a protective wall against things that challenge our beliefs. **Our brains are engines of belief and rationalization. Smarter and more educated people seem to be even better at this, sadly**. Another factor is cognitive dissonance - *the mental discomfort that occurs when beliefs are contradicted by new information, leading to inner conflict.* People who are invested in a belief (or an emotionally important assumption) will go to great lengths to defend that belief against contradictory evidence, even if it means performing Olympic feats of mental gymnastics.

We reflexively take "sides" with our own Political Tribe, our own Ideology, like a team sport. In doing this, our ideology — our precious political platform — has eroded our genuine desire to see our blind spots. To try to know when we're sharing bogus information, or to even care if were wrong.

Let's take a brutally honest look at what cognitive psychology and neuroscience have long revealed about or brain's deeply unreliable ways of forming ideological beliefs and responding to evidence that challenge these beliefs. Doing this gives us invaluable insight - precisely because it looks at the roots of *faulty belief formation*, and some of the Balkanizing 'team sport' behaviors that tend to work against our own interests in seeking the truth.

One of the main scholars in the area of neuroscience, decision making, and behavior today is Daniel Kahneman, who received the Nobel Prize for research on behavioral economics. As he articulates (including in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*), we can think of our minds in terms of 'the two systems of thinking' - System 1 and System 2. Dr. Gleb Tsipursky, author of *Never Go With Your Gut* and *The Blindspots Between Us*, uses the term "autopilot system" and "intentional system" to try and describe these systems more clearly.

The autopilot system (System 1 thinking) is basically where "instincts" and fast thinking take place – this is our emotions and our intuitions. Our 'gut reactions'. It's where we get the fight, freeze, or flight response, along with our other instant reactions. To put it simply, System 1 is what Kahneman describes as *Fast Thinking*. As he explains, it is *fast, automatic*, and happens *unconsciously*. And it requires *minimal effort.* Then there is **the intentional system** (the "smart brain", aka **System 2 Thinking**). In Kahneman's illustration, System 2 is referred to as *Slow Thinking*. In contrast to System 1, it is *slower*, requires *effort*, and happens *consciously* and *deliberately.*

Brian studies and FMRI maps have shown repeatedly that the 'political brain' is not reliable as a compass for navigating the real world, unless counterbalanced by a strong love for truth and skepticism. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies such as the one done at Emory University in my hometown of Atlanta, GA, have revealed certain traits of 'the Political Brain', most notably that having a "strong commitment" to a political team or ideology can blind us to our own *confirmation bias*. In the Emory University study, 30 people - half self-described as "strong" Republicans and half as "strong" Democrats - were asked, while undergoing an fMRI brain scan, to assess statements by their respective candidates that were clearly contradictory.

The neuroimaging results revealed that the part of the brain most associated with reasoning - the *dorsolateral prefrontal cortex* - was dormant. However, other parts (the *orbital frontal cortex*, *anterior cingulate*, *posterior cingulate*, *anterior cingulate*, and the *ventral striatum*, which are all associated with things like emotional processing, conflict resolution, judging moral accountability, and even reward and pleasure) lit up when people evaluated clear contradictions by their *own candidate*. In other words, the neural circuits of the brain engaged in confirming political bias. **Our brain's reward circuitry seems to lead us to finding reasons to maintain our beliefs, and to resist changing them.** Our biases are often neurochemically rewarded.

Becoming truth-seekers. I took the Pro-Truth Pledge (PTP), and wrote at length about it here. The Pledge (found easily at www.protruthpledge.org), in short, is about truth and honesty within politics. All sides of our divisive ideological battleground can benefit from it and support it. We can share it with our friends, with our neighbors, even our Facebook political rivals. Our 'political brains' are one of our biggest vulnerabilities, as people and as a country. Now ask yourself, with as much honesty as possible – *do you feel that your side is somehow immune to this*? Even if the "other side is much worse" in its susceptibility to biases and manipulation, the point is to see the problem in the human mind, so we can help one another, as Americans, to truly see how we are targeted. To help us all see the threat. To see the Cognitive Security threat (or "COGSEC threat", to borrow a term I love) that is at our doorstep, inside the very ecosystem of our social media and our political lives. *And to harden ourselves accordingly.*

Human Tribalism: How We Often Form Teams and Beliefs

We are at a sobering moment in our country, a crossroads of sorts. We are arguably more divided than any time in our recent history, yet we share a pressing need to find a way, together,

This is one of the times where it is most essential to speak beyond the boundaries of any Left/Right divide, beyond the psychological confines of political team sport, and get to the root of certain human fallacies – *fundamental blind spots* in how we as civilized people should co-exist. Re-define a commitment to certain democratic and civic values. Reaffirm a belief in truth, facts, and reality-based thinking over ideological echo chambers. And see fanaticism and militant extremism for the threat it is to our way of life and sacred ideals. Extremism should not be seen through the lens of 'My Tribe vs Yours', which often leads to a dangerous wall of silence by far too many people on the same 'side' as the extremists themselves.

A growing number of people – perhaps even an emerging silent majority – feel that the *very lens through which we've been seeing our political world* is deeply flawed. The paradigm is broken. Understanding the roots of how we form 'tribes', alongside ideas and politics in particular, can truly help us self-examine in a healthy way and see things more clearly. Self-awareness is a pillar of good business, good warfighting, good science and innovation, good physical development (be it in martial arts, sports, or fitness), good training in any skill, and in one's self-development.

Why is *knowing ourselves* such a big part of this? Because it shows us where we are weak and where we can be attacked. We have to see our own vulnerabilities so we can fix them, and if we are more interested in saving face in front of the boss or the rest of the staff, this only covers up the very things we most need to know. The main point is to visualize the 'Battlespace', we must see both the Enemy and Ourselves. In this case, our real Enemies are dangerous ideas and propaganda from any side, **especially the kind that appeals to our own value systems to weaponize our identity and morals against us.**

No competent military leader who directed wartime combat operations against an opposing force did not take this into consideration. It applies at every level of war or conflict, from the tactical setting to the strategic levels of planning. It applies to diplomacy and statecraft. It most certainly applies to this current problem of information warfare. In fact, we would be epically foolish and incompetent *not to apply it*.

Perhaps if we examine some of the fundamental roots of our tribalistic behavior, and the evolutionary basis for it, it could help us all rethink and examine why we bond so tightly around ideas, symbols, and political teams, and why we often become so instinctively resistive to outside ideas, often seen as 'being from the enemy tribe'

We as humans timelessly bond and identity around symbols, especially symbolism which appeals to our moral emotions. The *Don't Tread On Me* (Gadsden) flag on the pickup truck or the raised fist of justice at the protest tend to demarcate modern tribalistic boundaries in America, where common ground and shared ideals are often overlooked by the rigid lens of Us vs Them, a zero-sum contest of totalizing conflict where we see one another as enemies with nothing to offer, nothing worth listening to, only a rival tribe to be conquered by culture war.

Research in human behavior and moral psychology sometimes uses the term *tribal-moral framework*: A shared set of values and ideas a group *forms strong bonds around*, while 'othering' people who are seen as a 'moral outgroup'. Due to our long-evolved instincts as humans to bond with our moral ingroups – those with whom we share a common identity of belief, ideology, or values - and close our minds to the messages of 'outgroups', we can say in some sense that this tribal glue both *binds and blinds*.

This can lead to a sense of disgust or even outright hostility to those seen as moral outsiders, easily vilified as a common enemy around which the in-group can focus their outrage, even their deeper fears and anxieties.

My time in the mountains of Afghanistan was a game-changing experience for me in the way I came to understand human nature, and the nature of how we form tribes and alliances against 'outgroups'. A central facet of this was how insurgents and Taliban would make inroads in nearby villages or mountain passes by 'speaking the moral language' of the people they were appealing to. Pashtunwali (their multi-thousand-year-old system of honor, respect, hospitality, revenge, and codes of conduct, if we are to greatly simplify it) and Islam were key part of Afghan identity, and appealing to this was often part of the Taliban's approach, especially during the period following the Soviet War in the early 90s.

At that time, a chaotic post-war vacuum of unchecked warlords and impoverishment was more easily filled by the Taliban's ability to restore order as well as offer a moral narrative of justice, purity, and religious ideology that people could bond initially around. While most Afghans hated the Taliban and continue to do so to this day, we would still see them weaponizing these moral values (especially Pashtunwali, Islam, and 'justice' or 'purity' against the 'dishonor' of outsiders like the Coalition Forces or 'moral outgroups' like coalition-backed government). We would see them making inroads and attaining freedom of movement by speaking the 'moral-tribal language' of the surrounding population, or segments of it.

We see similar dynamics with extreme movements on any side of the political map attaining a foothold among the population, from Fascism (in WWII-era Germany, Italy, Spain, the Empire of Japan, and more recent resurgent movements across the US and Europe) to various forms of Communism (Leninism in the Soviet Union, Maoism in China, Khmer Nationalism under Pol Pot) to Islamist movements around the world.

When it comes to our political tribes and ideological teams in America, this *in-group / out-group* dynamic still exists, where people are more accepted as 'part of the team' if they speak the tribal-moral language of the people they're appealing to ('freedom', 'patriotism', 'woke vs anti-woke', 'social justice', 'law and order', or ideas of religious purity). I use these terms in quotation marks simply to indicate that they are part of this appeal, whether or not they are used in a sincere or redeeming way. Concepts like 'freedom' and 'justice' at face value are of course good terms, ideals to aspire to, but easily weaponized as catch phrases to help ideological in-groups bond together more against real or perceived out-groups.

Why, then, do so many everyday people – moderates, as we might call them – tolerate extreme ideas and fringe narratives (including even political violence) within their own 'ideological community'? Fringe behavior and ideas on either side tend to be condemned almost overwhelmingly more by the 'enemy side' rather than by people within the same side of the political spectrum. One thing Iraq and Afghanistan taught me is that e*xtremist movements tend to arise during times of fear, instability and uncertainty*, rather than out of nowhere. Conditions on the ground (social unrest, cultural fears, economic hardships) help them to take root, being a catalyst for multiple brands of hate and harmful ideologies to spread much easier. Afghanistan was at a critical juncture after the Russians left it in ruins – it was a post-war 'perfect storm' for this evil movement to sweep in and provide a false sense of security and moral clarity.

This brings us to a general truth: when a group (be it legitimately or by way of self-delusion) feels cornered by the circumstances of desperation, a movement that *appears on the surface to offer stability and hope* can be an alluring choice. Especially when they present themselves as an ethno-sectarian or moral 'tribe' – i.e., "*We're one of you, we share your values and your identity*" in some way.

As author of *Our Tribal Future* David Sampson points out in a podcast with my friend and Will Ramada (a renowned DJ and critical thinking advocate), "We're these massive signalers of our coalitionary alliance, we can't help but want to find those others in our 'secret society' that are out there, so we can bootstrap cooperation with them". Will, a Canadian of Syrian heritage who's been all over the world, has spent lots of time living in the US. He describes his adventurous, 'crazy' life's journey, with his vast experiences leading him to take on many identities over time. "I'm Arab, I'm Muslim, I'm Canadian, I'm practically American", he told David, as they discussed the central importance of identity in our psyche as humans. Identity isn't inherently a bad thing, and symbols and moral values have defined us for ages.

The problem, as they explain, is when propaganda and narratives weaponize these human instincts beneath our conscious. As Will says, "It's harder to have the wool pulled over your eyes and be fooled once you know how the magician does their trick". Sampson reiterates that when we engage in fringe beliefs or follow blatant untruths (even when they're untrue and absurd in plain sight), we are often 'nodding to the sacred values of the coalition', and it *doesn't have to make sense. All it has to do is be a strong signal, and strong authentic test, that you're loyal.*
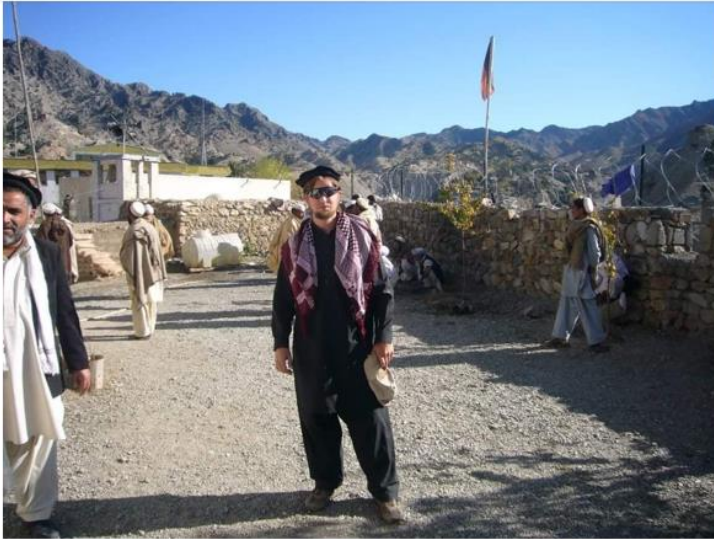
Me wearing local Afghan attire (the ever-comfortable 'manjams' and pakol hat). As part of a Human Terrain Team (HTT), my job was to apply cultural engagement and an understanding of human behaviors to facilitate discussion and see problems before they spilled over into violence against Coalition Forces or conflict among the population. This was easier said than done, but we had our share of wins amidst much frustration and shortfall.

"Perhaps most importantly, there is a similar process of sneaking these movements into the hearts and minds of the wider population: *speaking the language of people's moral tribe allows fanaticism to gain a sneaky foothold within a growing segment of the populace.*"

-From my book, <u>Combating Domestic Extremism</u>

As moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains in The Righteous Mind, **"Morality binds and blinds. It *binds* us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle.**"** Morality can also blind us to hearing anything, however sensible, coming from a 'rival team'. It can blind us to even listen to or care about those considered 'moral outgroups'.

We tend to see things through the lens of *us vs them*, and I used to be considerably more guilty of this myself in my early youth. I recall when I felt instinctively resistive to listening to 'rival teams' or considering their points. I didn't know *why* I felt this way, but I didn't like it. I felt like I was shutting my mind off. So, I further examined it, and I've found myself doing this over the course of my life for views on various sides, albeit considerably less and less. I've certainly been on the receiving end of this from both fringes as well, sometimes in outright hostile ways.

Human beings tend to bond around common narratives that tap into their wider sense of being part of a 'Moral Tribe', that promise to protect them from enemy Outgroups and give them a sense of order and values.

This is of course not at all unique to Afghanistan: it is often how the human species finds a way to form moral tribes, regardless of the language, culture, or ethnicity they happen to be born into, whether they're an Islamist in Egypt, a Marxist guerilla in the mountains of Peru...

This is especially true when such a movement uses *culturally attuned narratives* of cosmic conflict against a **common enemy** (such as 'the West', or all things anti-Islam) and moral victory for its followers.

This is essentially the essence of a transcendental **culture war**, and it can be underpinned by true belief in terrifyingly real ways. Taliban leaders and propagandists pulled pages from the same playbook ISIS would later use amidst the chaotic vacuum of a Shia-dominated 2008 Iraq: they used 'justice' and 'moral purity' as a narrative, and it provided the façade they needed for their insidious brand of armed insurgency and extremism.

It is for this reason, specifically, that I paint this picture for readers. When a movement 'speaks your moral/ideological language', especially couching it in religious iconography and narratives of an ultimate battle with a common enemy, it is more likely to *resonate* with you on a deeper emotional level. Assuming, of course, that you have the right predisposition (personality, ideology, upbringing and environment). A potentially radicalized member of the group may be drawn to it as a way to *cope with fear and anxiety*, as an *outlet for rage and anger*, or simply as an identity-affirming route to finding *community, meaning, and purpose.*

Culture wars with weaponized ideologies and guns tend to share the same basic psychological ingredients, as well as the need for a common enemy. I've seen it abroad, and I'm seeing it more and more here at home.

A Layperson's Intro to Psychological Warfare (PSYOP)

When The Men Who Stare at Goats came out, I was likely the sole person in that entire theater who got the bulk of the inside jokes in the film, and my membership as part of the ever-mystified and oddball Psyop tribe became ever more apparent as I laughed loudly through large parts of the film (and as I soon after learned via a woman in our group, sometimes it was to the annoyance of random around me). While the reality of Psyop is not quite what many movies or internet conspiracy pop culture portray, it does have a rather interesting and provocative [history](). It's as diverse as it is ancient, with a wide range of objectives, methods, and ways of delivery. However, what matters here is the core methodology behind it.

While 'Psyop' technically implies a government-led or sanctioned operation that is methodically coordinated to achieve a specific aim, we can perhaps use the term 'Psyop' to refer more broadly to any *targeted campaign that messages people in a coordinated way*, typically over a sustained period of time, to achieve a desired behavior. By 'targeted', I mean that such campaigns analyze the psychology of their audience and create a series of messages or symbols that will specifically resonate with them based on this 'target audience analysis'.

In a recent appearance on Malcolm Nance's Black Man Spy podcast (Episode 2, [Ungentlemanly Warfare]()), I made an analogy I commonly use to explain 'PSYOP' to people: In the Harry Potter verse, magic is a reality most don't see, but can be used and tapped into for both good and malicious purposes. Hogwarts teaches people how to do this for good. Our Hogwarts is the JFK Special Warfare Center and School, where the 'dark arts' of PSYOP are taught to us. It's the same playbook that al-Qaida and Coalition Force counter-al-Qaida messaging use, the commonality being that we're both looking at a nuanced understanding of human psychology and the art of influence and persuasion (of course only Wizards are born able to learn magic, whereas anyone can learn the reality of psychological persuasion and manipulation!)

- o And as I explain in the next chapter in detail, this core process is like a game plan for understanding a target audience (or multiple target audiences) and how to reach it and influence it to act in the way that you want it to do. To elicit the desired behavior change based on understanding the TA's surrounding conditions and inner vulnerabilities, and what buttons to push with the right massaging.

- o 'Psyop', in this sense, comprises a core set of skills and techniques which can be weaponized on people of almost any demographic or political profile. Coastal liberals, rural conservatives, rustbelt democrats, feminists and MRAs, BLM activists or white young males wandering for the first time into the alt-right ecosystem. People in these groups can all be potential targets of the psyop process when its in the right hands - or in this case, the wrong hands.

What is this wider process? Let's de-mystify it right here.

The Men who Don't (for the most part) Stare at Goats: **What Exactly is 'psyop'?**

As I mentioned in my second appearance on the [Rethinking Heroes] podcast, PSYOP is like the Force in the Star Wars universe – as a process that leverages an understanding of human psychology to be effective at the art of influence and persuasion, it is something neither inherently 'good' nor 'bad'; it is something that can be tapped into. It can be used by good as well as bad people, for a virtually unlimited number of things. People across ages and empires, spanning the dawn of human history, have been using this tool – it is nothing new.

From Alexander the Great's [persuasion tactics] to get conquered peoples to assimilate and adopt aspects of Greek culture and forge mutual respect, to the terror-based psychological warfare of Genghis Khan towards pre-conquered cities, to armies lighting campfires across the land to give the impression that an army's strength was far superior to its real numbers, psychological warfare is as old as organized human civilization and conflict. It can be a multiplier for victory in military campaigns, an instrument of terror (such as by the [ancient Assyrians], who used [graphic depictions] of enemy executions in their artwork in a rather 'Game of Thrones' fashion), or the ultimate peacemaker – as Sun Tzu advocated, the best victories are those you can win without any fighting. It can destroy entire armies or save a whole village from being sacked. Proactively reaching the families of ISIS members to evacuate an area can save their lives, separating the targets from the horrific reality of collateral damage.

**Beyond the Origins: Modern Era Psychological Warfare**

- o Despite its long history and range of purposes, the means of delivering 'Psyop' or any type of psychological persuasion campaign has greatly modernized from war elephants and messengers to everyday technology. In the modern world, the art of organized psychological persuasion has mostly become the domain of print, radio, television and – especially in recent times – digital cyberspace.

- o Innovative leaders in the world of advertising and marketing ("Mad Men", 'Mad' being short for NYC's Madison Avenue where modern media gimmickry was born), as well as military operations during the Second World War against the Nazi Regime and Japanese Empire, learned to systematically organize this art into a step-by-step process of considerable sophistication.

- o It evolved into an art and science of targeting specific audiences with carefully planned messages, in order to influence them towards a desired behavior. While this sounds straight forward, there is a lot more that goes into the process than most people realize.

- o The advent of social media has been a game changer in how propaganda and persuasion spreads, with soundbite culture and algorithms drawing people into echo chambers and feeding on sensationalism and our primal tendency to react without slow, deliberate thinking.

- o Psychological warfare has obviously evolved a great deal in its level of research, knowledge and detail since the first half of the 20th Century – **though retaining the same fundamentals and core process.**

Sadly, most who use this art for political purposes in today's world tend to be on the Dark Side: political demagogues in government, foreign influence from abroad, subtle infiltration of academic and media conduits by various left and right ideologies, manipulative advertising campaigns by multinational corporations, and elite special interest groups investing in decades of propaganda to maintain their status or position of power. This should no longer be wrapped in mystery: I want to break down the way professional 'Psyops' actually works, in a way that the average person can clearly understand.

I want to give people a sense of how well it can work, and how closely it can target people's psychology – their fears, their resentments, their biases – in order to accomplish specific objectives favorable to the psyop'er. I want Americans – urban and rural, liberal and conservative, old and young – to have a real sense of this process, how it works, and why we should be concerned when it is used against us. If propaganda can shift our perceptions and cause us to change our frame of reference without us realizing it, it is worth our understanding.

I truly hope I can help bridge this gap for as many Americans as possible, no matter their demographic or 'political tribe'. *We're all better off when we understand how we're manipulated.*
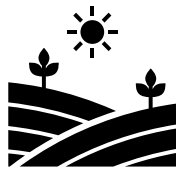
Such clarity of thinking can bring more true security to ourselves and our society than any amount of ideological posturing, grandiose symbols, or tribal signaling ever can.

Chapter II

The 'Psyop Process' for Dummies: *A Deep Dive Into How the Kremlin (or Any Serious Campaign) Targets Us*

Researchers and psywar analysts look at where these target audiences are most vulnerable. They ask, 'Where are the pressure points where we can target them with persuasive messages and memes? What buttons can we push to get them to move in a certain direction for us?'

Overview of concepts and principles

Here are what I consider to be the most important things you and your fellow Americans should know about the concepts used in - and principles followed by - information warfare campaigns that seek to target our population. We will run through these one at a time, with explanations and real-life examples. Here are the questions that every psychologically combat-ready American should be asking when larger propaganda campaigns strike, whether it is at them or anyone else -even at their political rivals.

In all my time reflecting on how to condense the enormity of the 'information warfare process[17]' down into a few main 'take home points', I came up with what I feel is an optimal way to do it. Essentially, when large segments of the population are being targeted by a sophisticated propaganda process, these are, in my view, *the six big things to think about*, in terms of how the architects of these campaigns think and operate:

- ❖ What are the Objectives?

- ❖ Who is / are the audience(s)?

- ❖ What vulnerabilities (fears, grievances, resentments, etc.) are being targeted?

- ❖ What symbols are being used or coopted?

- ❖ What value systems and moral beliefs is the message appealing to?

- ❖ What is the dissemination method? (How is the message reaching its audience?)

Here's a breakdown, in layperson speak:

First, they **Identify Objectives** – What's the big picture? What do they want to accomplish? What's their End Game?

Next, they **Select Audiences.** *Who* are they targeting, and *why are they targets?*

Then, they try to **Identify *vulnerabilities*, such as fears, grievances, and pressure points.** Are they pushing certain emotional buttons for a given group of people? Does it seem to be done by design, and working?

Often, they will cleverly **Co-Opt Symbols** – What sacred or cherished symbols, flags, or slogans are they co-opting? For what hidden purpose? Is there an agenda behind the symbols and virtue signals?

If they are good, they will be finding ways to **mirror someone's beliefs and value system.** *What values are they appealing to?* Are they using people's ideological-moral value system against them? Keep in mind that they do this to elicit a strong emotional response or even to build rapport, creating an opening for the message. I call this Ideological Pickup Art (IPA).

Finally, **what dissemination methods are they using?** As a propaganda campaign architect, you want to find the means to effectively disseminate your messaging. Through an assortment of media and platforms, you want to find the *best ways to reach your intended audience* and connect with them through an emotional 'point of entry', such as a Facebook meme or polarizing YouTube video.

Let's take a closer look at these, one at a time.

1. Identify Objectives

Any good influence campaign will have larger goals in mind – things it wants to achieve, for a reason. In military-style talk, it starts with picking very 'specific objectives' (often abbreviated OBJs). These are the things it wants to achieve to assist some ultimate goal.

- o Psychological warfare campaigns don't simply happen in a vacuum – as we saw in the opening chapter, they come about through a careful process of selecting objectives, with the architects of the campaign knowing what they want to accomplish.

- o Advertising and marketing campaigns target their intended audience using a similar process.

- o The big difference is, the influence campaigns coming from places like the Kremlin or from Iran, China, and elsewhere, have far more disturbing and broad-sweeping objectives in mind than increasing the trend line of yearly sales profits.

As various professional reports from the State Department, multiple intelligence agencies, and think tanks show us Russian's objectives, among others, are to sow discord, amplify racial tensions, promote fringe conspiracies, and weaken faith in the American experiment and democratic process.

Example 1: Philip Reeker, the acting Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, stated that "Russia's intent is to sow discord and undermine US institutions and alliances from within, including through covert and coercive malign influence campaigns." He added, "By spreading disinformation about coronavirus, Russian malign actors are once again choosing to threaten public safety by distracting from the global health response."

Example 2: The Soviet Union (currently Russia) had a history of using its information warfare against the United States by, capitalizing on our racial tensions and inequalities, and shift blame and focus away from them (create a distraction). In support of this wider aim, they promoted fringe but dangerous race conspiracies.

As documented in the *Weapons of Mass Distraction* disinformation report*, Russia helped create and spread the rumor back in the 80s that the US government created AIDs to target people of color, and many still believe this to this day. The rumor was first published in 1983 via a Soviet-backed newspaper in India. It *"appeared in Russian media in 1985 and was later published dozens of times in Russian media outlets. Broadcasts by Radio Moscow targeted at African countries claimed that America was deliberately spreading AIDS in Zaire, echoing previous claims by the outlet that the United States was developing biological weapons capable of killing only non-whites."*

(See page 15, Weapons of Mass Distraction, State Department PDF)

Here are some examples of what a typical national psywar campaign could like. I based this on updated findings, reports, and research of recent information war campaigns in general, as well as on the types of objectives that Russia has or seems to have already established for its influence operations since 2016:

❖ **Create new divisions within specific political movements, such as the movements advocating for people of color.**

❖ **Promote tensions, rifts, and divisive fissures within the Left.**

❖ **Amplify and promote the hardline fringe of the Right.**

❖ **Amplify racial tensions and animosity.**

❖ **Amplify the reach of fringe conspiracy theories.**

❖ **Promote perceptions of a 'coming race war' among far-right groups and American militias.**

❖ **Increase left and right hyperpolarization, by amplifying the fringes on both sides (fuel the flame wars).**

❖ **Promote hate, uncertainty, and fear across the political spectrum.**

❖ **Increase white nationalist radicalization and white extremist activity online.**

❖ **Undermine a belief in COVID-19, to**

(1) galvanize fringe movements on the Right, and

(2) reduce American's faith in our system's ability to report accurate information and handle a public health crisis.

❖ **Undermine the idea of truth and facts, creating alternative reality bubbles for different segments of the population.**

2. Select Audiences

Brace yourself, this part may make you mad. They determine the specific audiences* that they want to manipulate, for a specific purpose. This can be:

- People on the hard right whose hatred or disdain for liberals is strong enough to make them highly receptive to a multitude of messages and fake accounts that confirm their biases.

- Groups like members of the Proud Boys, who are drawn to conflict (where 'Us vs Them' kinds of messages tend to resonate) and have very confrontational, even extreme ways of thinking about rival groups.

- Social justice activists and radical feminists who are drawn to conflict and extreme positions (as are many of their angrier, emotion-driven, conflict-prone critics, who are also targeted – for instance, see the next example below).

- The angry online gamer, socially isolated youth, or general reactionary type who gravitates towards sensationalism and flame wars on social media.

- Ultra-divisive or hard-left-leaning voters who label Democratic frontrunners as neoliberal shills and discourage support for them are obvious targets of any campaign that wants the Democratic nominee to lose (the same would obviously be true for a campaign that wants the Republican nominee to lose – same logic).

- COVID deniers and downplayers and others who see the wearing of a mask as a symbol of oppression and leftwing (or more generally, big government or malicious agenda) encroachment, and a refusal to wear a mask as a sign of defiance and anti-liberal identity. They can be a strong target audience for objectives that aim to use the pandemic* as an opportunity to stir confusion and division and spread disinformation.

These audiences are useful to influence, because doing so serves the objectives above. Influencing their behavior serves a purpose: these target audiences can help you, the IW operative, to achieve your objectives by accomplishing these specific things.

Example. The many reports and findings I mentioned above also show that Russia uses fake accounts and personas over social media to target specific segments of the population, to achieve its broader aims.

3. Identify *vulnerabilities*, such as fears, grievances, and 'pressure points'

Image credit

Image credit

After selecting their target audiences, they analyze them, study their values, their fears, and their broader psychology, to find vulnerabilities – *areas where they can be influenced through a strong emotional response.* These vulnerabilities can take the form of grievances, resentments, and desires to avoid certain outcomes. Often, these vulnerabilities are fears, enhanced by uncertainty and apprehension of the future. Fear and uncertainty are natural emotions, a perpetual characteristic of humankind.

We all have fears. Economic fears are very real. Apprehension about the future can consciously and subconsciously drive people to seek emotional solace in various narratives of hope, whether such stories are substantial, half true, or empty and false. Some people fear change, be it sudden or gradual, real or imagined. Immigration caravans (real, imagined, or exaggerated), fear of job outsourcing, changes in supreme court judges, rumors of certain legislative agendas, or the encroachment of rival ideologies, for example, leave many seeking answers – primed to hear narratives that acknowledge these fears and speak to them in a personal way. Regardless of how just or misguided your fears and anxieties might be, know that they can be used against you.

Playing on 'flashpoint issues', getting an emotional response, and tapping into people's 'survival brains'

As an Information Warfare Operative, you would want to amplify 'flashpoint' issues like guns and culture wars to incite fear. **Try to get people's brains into survival mode[41]** and so people will let their emotions steer the ship. *This makes them easier targets*. This is not to say that these concerns are never real. The point is that information warfare campaigns **will play on them and exaggerate them and even create outright lies about them**, to provoke those primal emotions.

Grievances – both real, exaggerated, and imagined – are common ways to galvanize people along political and ideological fault lines. They are seen as *vulnerabilities* by the information warfare architect, who uses them to create that 'emotional entry point'. The more real and deep-cutting the grievance feels (in reality or mere perception), *the better*. We can all have real or imagined grievances, things that deeply resonate with us, affect us, even impact our lives in very direct ways. In Iraq or Afghanistan, enemy insurgent propaganda would capitalize on deeper historic grievances of oppression experienced by the Shia living under decades of Sunni rule, or Afghan suffering under the neglect of a corrupt, self-enriching Kabul regime. These grievances were *real*. This made those who shared these grievances [better targets](#) for propaganda and messaging. This wider principle carries over into our streets and communities here at home: centuries of racism, inequality, economic injustice, and abuse in various forms are as real as it gets, giving millions of people genuine claims to anger and disillusionment.

      Grievances can <u>create openings for targeting people</u> with messages that resonate and connect with them on a personal level. Good propaganda can create these openings by *speaking to these grievances.*

In short, this principle of information warfare involves look at the deeper concerns and emotions that target audiences are preoccupied with. Then, they try to find the *psychological opening* where you can apply pressure to influence them:

For example,

- o Talking up the things most affecting their lives – or things they *perceive* to be affecting their lives.

- o Appealing to their sense of self, or to their *anxieties or grievances about their identity or tribe* (cultural, ethnic, racial, nationalistic, etc.), or *one's sense of their future.*

- o *Making people feel they are under attack, by finding what they are scared of, and are willing to believe lies or exaggerations about.*

Researchers and psywar analysts look at where these target audiences are most vulnerable. They ask, '*Where are the pressure points* where we can target them with persuasive messages and memes? What buttons can we push to get them to move in a certain direction for us?'

4. Develop arguments and co-opt symbols

Image credits, left and right.

Find the symbols that resonate with the audience, that have meaning with them and convey their moral values and appeal to their sense of identity. As humans, we are hardwired for stories – narrative structures about ourselves, our struggles, our history, and our sense of purpose. We organize around sacred symbols, which often tell us stories, provide us with narratives, and sometimes enshrine myths into our shared imaginations. Whether they convey history or myth (or a combination of both), they carry with them the symbolism of greater meaning that can bind people together behind common ideals, and anchor a country, state, city or political or religious 'tribe' to a purpose greater than themselves.

❖ **The key for a propaganda campaign is to co-opt these symbols**, because of the meaning they hold for people. If you can weaponize that sacred and precious meaning, you can possess the ultimate weapon pf propaganda. For many, it is the information warfare equivalent of kryptonite, because it can be used to accuse anyone criticizing your message of being in opposition to the symbol itself and the sacredness behind it.

❖ For example, far right armed extremist movements and pro-Boogaloo communities have co-opted the language and imagery of various patriotic symbols. Far-right groups, anti-vax protests, and even Charlottesville Neo-Nazis have employed (and have become associated with) the Don't Tread On Me flag, because it's a sacred American symbol that carries a real meaning to it. Co-opting this symbol of American service, patriotism, and tradition has allowed some of the most un-American groups – people with ideas that most ordinary conservatives would shirk at in disgust and horror – to appear to "be on the side of American values".

Example. The classic *Don't Tread On Me* symbolism began on what was known as the Gadsden flag (credited to Christopher Gadsden, a soldier and politician from South Carolina) – this is the classic flag that features the coiled rattlesnake on a yellow background, with the famous phrase below. The flag was first flown on a warship in 1775 as a battle cry for American independence from British rule, and a symbol of loyalty to a greater cause for freedom and self-determination of an emerging Republic during a critical juncture in the fight for our American foundations.

Pure / Original Meaning. Resilience and loyalty to a greater cause of liberty. Sticking with the idea of a free America. It commemorates, and represents the ethos of, a strategic opportunity to capture British supplies and gain an advantage against British troops. It marks a critical point in our history when the Continental Congress devised a plan to intercept these ships, which led to the creation of The Continental Navy. Originally a fledgling navy with just 7 ships, it was a start to what would become the United States Navy and the future of a Free Republic.

As part of the grand plan to create and deploy this Navy, Congress authorized the assembly of five companies of Marines. As it happened, a number of the Marines that enlisted shortly after that were carrying yellow drums bearing the image of a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike, and bearing the phrase "Don't Tread on Me."

Re-Appropriated Meaning. It has been adopted by a wide variety of people, groups, and causes across the right-leaning spectrum. While many conservatives fly it as a proud display of the above principles of loyalty to the US constitution and the founding values of our country, it is used as a symbol by the more radical shades of the right, including extremist groups and ethno-nationalist and racist communities that most self-described conservatives would not wish to be associated with.

5. Find ways to mirror someone's beliefs and value system.

If you are reading this with any desire to broaden your genuine understanding or make the world a slightly better place, you most likely have a value system. Things you hold dear, cherish, and relate to on a moral level. A *person's moral value system is like a language* – and speaking this language, so to speak, is one of the most effective ways to appeal to someone's *heart* (via the moral emotions), which can then be a gateway to the *mind*. Appealing to patriotism, rugged individualism, egalitarianism and fairness, justice, or guns are used regularly to mirror the value framework of people across the left and right spectrum. Appealing to 'working class values' has been used in campaigns around the West for ages, from left wing socialist and Marxist movements to hard right-wing BREXIT narratives.

Let's take something virtually all of us can relate to: the morality of *protecting the children.* Most all of us have a visceral reaction to the idea of children being harmed, and a strong instinctive desire to protect them – this is a very good thing, hardwired into our very moral intuitions. It is also one of the ways that fringe conspiracies like QAnon sneak their way into people's psychology, by speaking this moral language. While moral value systems are fundamental to who we are as humans, they can also be taken advantage of – in a sense, they sometimes become the 'entry points' for propagandists to elicit that emotional response. They can also be used to build a rapport with their audience over time, through messages (or ongoing series of messages, and over multiple types of media like Facebook memes and YouTube videos) which mirror these value systems.

❖ Many sinister movements and ideas - such as the hateful, misogynistic, conspiratorial narratives that we've seen lurk behind some of these Proud Boys groups, or domestic extremist groups out in the open work their way into more mainstream segments of the American population by appealing to grievances, hiding behind patriotic symbols, and speaking a moral language.

❖ Such dangerous or extreme narratives infiltrate hearts and minds by sneakily 'speaking their language' of patriotism, order, and respect for traditions, things amplified in their meaning and importance to people during times of chaos, riots, and hyperpolarization. When people hear someone who talks like them and 'sounds like them', they are more likely to think 'They're one of us'. They're 'one of the good one's'. We are more likely to listen to people who sounds like us and seem to share our values and worldview – it can create a subtle bond, even when the wider agenda is less clear.

❖ Of course, this use of 'value mirroring' to hack someone's mindset is nothing new – it is the ideological version of the pickup artist who tells a girl how much he shares her passion for panda bear activism, but with the goal of penetrating the mind (as opposed to more carnal things) of the target. The use of *moral value mirroring* by psywar campaigns is essentially *ideological pickup artistry* – and political-moral 'tribes' are the prime target.

Classic Examples of Ideological Pickup Art (IPA)

Let's look at a few examples of this approach used across a range of militant groups and movements. This method of speaking people's moral language is generally used by extremist movements and groups such as,

Hamas, successfully [using](#) the suffering and shared sense of identity and resistance by Palestinians as a way to make moral inroads during elections;

Jaish-al Mahdi, the Iraqi 'Mahdi Army' under hardline Sadrist ideology, speaking the religious language of Iraqi Shia and using Shia identity, suffering, and the symbolism of their iconography and consecrated figures in their narratives;

Militant [Marxist](#) movements in Latin America, such as Colombia's FARC or Peru's Sendero Luminoso – Shining Path – or Tupac Amara Revolutionary Group, expressing a love for 'the oppressed' and a hatred for capitalism to win over the impoverished locals;

The various 'Vanilla ISIS' white separatist factions, as well as a range of extremist groups like Proud Boys, Boogaloo (CosPatriots – Cosplay Patriots - as some call them), and fringe conspiracy movements like QAnon.

Let's look closer at the last category as it's been especially relevent for the US in recent years, in particular during the months surrounding Trump's transition out of office. As we clearly see at Charlottesville and many other places, these groups often wave Gadsden Flags (with the classic *Don't Tread On Me* snake), American flags, and (with absolutely no sense of irony) Confederate flags to show 'patriotism' and present a 'common front' against leftist enemies, like a tribal confederacy of shared symbolism. These groups tend to assert a 'back the badge' façade and use Blue Line symbols to portray camaraderie with police - signaling their love of 'law and order', despite many of them showing a clear disregard for it at *Unite the Right* rallies (or when January 6th rolls around).

Some of these groups, especially the white supremacist ones, quite obviously don't love America or its founding ideals of Enlightenment liberalism; rather, they love *their version* of America, organized around white identity with anointed select groups elevated above others, a visceral resistance to change, and rigid hierarchies and traditions left in place. However, they often use our classic American symbols and language to speak to conservative-leaning people and self-described patriots in general.

This is especially the case with the more subtle white nationalists who try to avoid any openly 'white supremacist' labels for PR purposes, instead hiding behind 'upholding the traditions of America' against unrestrained immigration and leftism – a way to speak the moral and identity language of many on the right who would never get lured into these movements if they simply branded themselves along racial lines. There is a painful irony here – in reality, these groups tend to despise classic conservatism and often openly say it (and many conservatives do clearly see this and rather harshly condemn these groups, creating an increasingly visible rift about what it means to 'be on the right').

The wider point here is that this *moral virtue signaling* – i.e., framing a message along the value system of their audience – works in formal and informal messaging, and across political lines. It can occur during *organized* psywar campaigns coming from the Kremlin as well as non-organized, informal propaganda messaging coming from a basement with the smell of Red Bull and piss. The point is the technique. It's a classic technique used by national propaganda campaigns against their own people, and against audiences in targeted countries (Iran, Russia, or China readily come to mind). It can be used by professional operatives and from clever teenagers trolling their liberal or conservative parents with a cheap laptop. Most importantly, we should understand that this is a widely used methodology by extremist groups, seeking to create effective messaging campaigns.

6. Determine the best ways to disseminate the propaganda campaign

What's the right mix of media to best convey the message? What kinds of media or platforms will most likely reach the target audience, and do so in an effective way? This often includes a creative mix of media, such as Facebook, Twitter, blog threads, and video (such as fake YouTube videos that can be shared across the above platforms). By mixing the media types, it makes it more likely that the target audience will be bombarded from different angles with the same core message, and that they will be exposed repeatedly to the same arguments (often without even realizing it).

Joseph Goebbels, the infamous chief architect of [Nazi propaganda campaigns](), understood something all too well: it is *a repeated exposure to messages* that allows them to penetrate minds and make inroads into a person's thinking. Reach the right audiences (1) from enough angles, (2) across a range of the right media, and (3) make it an ongoing campaign, and you have a much better change of influencing them – that is, *if* your series of messages properly targets their vulnerabilities. Once the right messages and arguments are crafted and aimed at the right audiences, the question then becomes how to get creative with the distribution.

This is where the age of social media – and the toxic culture of 'soundbites' and the nefarious effect of echo chambers – has allowed basement dwelling propagandists and entire nations alike to weaponize our vulnerabilities like never before. The architects of Cold War era propaganda would be jealous. We, as a nation, should be afraid. Afraid, but *not paralyzed with fear.* We must be proactive, as patriots - we can win the information war if enough of us understand how we're targeted by it.

You have the basic playbook – now what?

Now that you have some idea of how this process works, please try to reflect on it and perhaps discuss this with friends and family. Odds are, they've all seen this in action, either aimed at them or those they know. The key to hardening ourselves against information warfare operatives - as individuals, and as a country - is *to think like them.* The next chapter gives real world examples of how they do this in the modern Trump (and now post-Trump) era amidst social justice flame wars, culture wars, and hard left and hard right movements. Chapter Y is a basic 'techniques playbook' – it goes through some of the main appeals, argument techniques and tricks they use, unpacking the classic propagandists' kit bag. Chapter X gives you a more detailed tour of this process. At this stage, you know the basic playbook of an Information Warfare campaign. Now it is time to read on to harden the shield and sharpen the sword.

Chapter III

Current Examples: *Targets of Opportunity, Modern Tricks of the Trade*

The landscape of American politics has many landmines and issues that can be exploited, where reasoned conversation or truth is drowned by lots of toxic noise and reactions. Going after hotbed issues, using dirty tricks that amplify extreme positions or create fear and outrage, or exploiting half-truths mixed in with lies, all serve a tactical purpose: to create emotional openings, or 'hooks', into people's hearts as a really effective backdoor route to influence their minds - and ideally, their behaviors.

'Targets of Opportunity' - I use this term to describe the most common and dangerously effective ways that propaganda messaging targets people's minds by pressing certain buttons – tricks that will set people off. Rather than go directly for the 'thinking' part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex, where facts, logic, and critical thinking are used to make sense of reality), most persuasive narratives find a way in through the emotions, often by creating *latent emotional attention*. Let's explore the playbook.

How online radicalization takes advantage of people's emotional and cognitive weaknesses

A Psyop Analysis

- Adversarial Psyop and malicious propaganda (such as hostile trolling) often seek to capitalize on our vulnerabilities, by deliberately targeting our tribal natures and getting us to see the worst in people outside our thought bubble.

- By taking advantage of our cognitive and emotional weaknesses and exploiting our tendency to see the worst in the other side - and often, to *identify with* and *form an emotional bond around* a community that opposes them as a common enemy.

Online radicalization is a growing trend, but one need not be 'radicalized' or extreme in order to be affected and influenced by malicious propaganda or trolling; many people of all shades get drawn into online flame wars, funneled into toxic echo chambers, adopt harmful conspiracies, or fall prey to disinformation. Smart, dumb, left, right, center, young and old – even the highly educated. Many of us (yes, including you, possibly, and at times me as well!) can be vulnerable in the mind, when our cherished beliefs, hotbed issues, and pressure points of distrust or anger become *targets of opportunity* by skilled propaganda campaigns. **Knowing this through self-awareness is half the battle – it goes further than any amount of political shouting, false certainties, or grandiose self-assurances ever can.**

When a narrative has someone's [latent attention](#) (live interest in the moment) it has an entry point into their minds! In a broad sense, there are approaches like this that tend to work in any society, from insurgents in Iraq driving Shia and Sunni apart through hateful messages, to old Fascist recruiting campaigns in Germany, Italy, and Spain before the Second World War (or their modern meme-weaponizing counterparts in the cyber world), to the [Kremlin spreading anti-Ukraine disinformation](#) to spruce up Russia's recent war effort (this State Department report sorts [facts from fictions](#)).

This same targeting playbook is used here in America no less, just for different goals and audiences. This is *why understanding the fundamentals* is so important. There are ways to target people - often based on beliefs, race, religion, ideology, and old-fashioned fears, resentments, moral outrage, and anxieties - that have historically been used by propagandists of all stripes. Let's run through them. **Simply put, 'targets of opportunity' refers here to the ways that propagandists – from teenage trolls to political campaign strategists to high-level information warfare operatives - try to seize on a nation's psychological weaknesses and exploit their vulnerabilities.**

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I use the term 'vulnerability' here in a broad sense - such as *where a society or a segment of its people can be taken advantage of by pressing the right buttons* - rather than referring merely to a specific target audience's vulnerability (though that's encompassed here as well). These targets of opportunity can be, for example, the reality of racial inequality and racial tensions in the US, both today and during the height of the Cold War, when Russia would exploit our very real issue of race and segregationist traditions. There is the infamous conspiracy that AIDS was created by the US government to depopulate people of color has roots in disinformation - [spread during the 80s by Russia](#) in a targeted disinfo campaign. Real issues of race relations were weaponized, by exploiting this deep-seated vulnerability in our unequal American system. Disinformation has long been integral to Soviet operations, through the doctrine of "[active measures](#)" - their art of political warfare.

Targets of opportunity can also be more specific to a sub-group or segment of a population (such as creating online flame wars within feminist or men's rights circles or targeting subgroups within these communities). Hitting the pressure points of Evangelical conservatives by fueling an 'Us vs Them' culture war narrative has been used by Russia for several decades. It uses targets of opportunity (such as *Capitalize on people's Fears and Flashpoints, Appeal to Identity*) in order to foster bridges within American rightwing religious circles, through international conferences and targeted messaging that appeals to the moral emotions of religious identity. Leftists were targeted during the Cold War by appealing to their hatred of Capitalism and the Vietnam War, by *exploiting half-truths* about life in the Soviet Union. The list goes on.

Ultimately, it is about knowing <u>what buttons to push</u>, and <u>what will generate a response in the intended audience</u>. These operatives have a set of tried-and-true techniques that actually target intended audiences with *specific propaganda messaging* in order to get the intended message past their skeptical radars and into their heads. This section breaks down key examples of this. This will hopefully help you (and others you know or engage with) make sense of much of the psywar and disinfo attacks we see around us in America, from fake BLM accounts and exploiting racial divisions to lies, conspiracies and confusion across social media. You have already seen the basic step-by-stop Psyop process for targeting people – now learn the specific tricks of the trade for what buttons to push. Or, *how to not let it push you.*
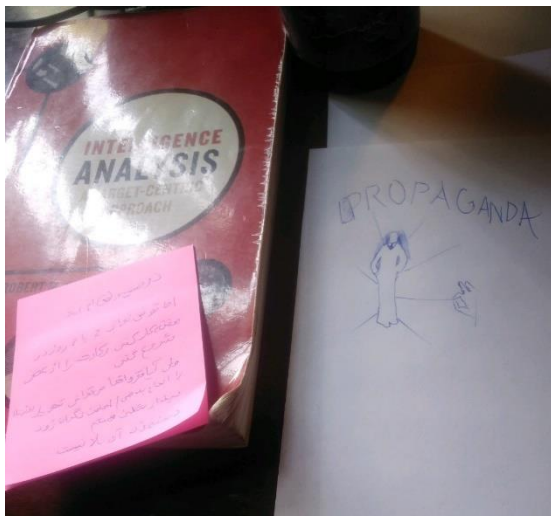
"We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of."

-**Edward Bernays, the father of modern American propaganda**. He became an advisor to corporations and governments during the WWII era, enshrining many of the techniques in advertising and marketing that we take for granted today. His 1928 book, Propaganda, famously details this. One cover shows a seemingly self-assured man in a suit being pulled by 'strings' - his unconscious motivations and biases, easily manipulated. I drew a sketch of this (left) while editing this chapter.

Image credits. Bacon's Rebellion (left), in which thousands of Virginians across classes and races rose up in common cause. In response, the Virginia plantation rulers hardened the racial caste of slavery to further divide whites and blacks and weaken future unity in rebellions.

Right, Leninist propaganda. Lenin was an early innovator of propaganda techniques, often weaponizing poverty and working-class grievances and using ruthless personal attacks and vilification tactics.

Here are a few 'targets of opportunity' for IW campaigns, both in warzones as well as here at home. For each of these, I draw a parallel between what I saw in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Europe, with what we are currently seeing in America.

Capitalize on people's Fears and Flashpoints. Some fears are imaginary, others are very real, and many are partly real, but exaggerated and misused. The point here is that **fears can be used to create emotional reactions and make people easy targets for lies and propaganda**. Take advantage of 'flashpoint' issues (charged, emotional, culturally sensitive issues), especially when fear and anxiety is built into them. Immigration, guns, and culture wars are easy targets in this sense – just spread a bunch of lies and amplify half-truths, Americans will do the rest. This is not to say that these concerns are never real. The point is that information warfare campaigns **will play on them and exaggerate them and even create outright lies about them**, to provoke those primal emotions. They want to get people's brains into survival mode, pushing them into a group mentality that is easier to fool with well-crafted lies.

Politicize the truth **by associating it with a Political Team.** Associate certain truths or reasonable points (things that shouldn't be partisan per se) with the 'rival team'. It hyper-politicizes things (such as a non-partisan investigation into corruption or accusations of a crime…or simple facts and numbers about Covid, for example) so that people to only see them through the lens of 'The Enemy Tribe'. **It frames factual or reasonable, logical statements as being indicative of the rival team, making conversation combative and needlessly difficult.**

Amplify the Extremes *(selective exposure to bad noise).* Sometimes it's very difficult to tell the difference between what's real and what's fake; what's mainstream, vs just the crazy fringe. By amplifying how often we see extreme examples of crazy, extreme, or ridiculous political voices and agendas, it can scare and enrage people, making them think 'the other side' is regularly doing it. Find the worst of any side and make it look mainstream. When the fringes of political discourse become indistinguishable from satire or pranks – something I call the Babylon Bee Effect, of B2E - disinformation thrives almost effortlessly.

Use real cases of violence and extremism to exponentially exaggerate the threat a group or movement poses. This approach is perhaps the most effective in a time of crisis, and it overlaps with the tactic of stoking new fears and of capitalizing on existing fears. Sharing videos of street violence next to a #BLM sign so that people start labeling BLM is an organization that mainstreams violence, for example.

Promote the extremes, by drawing out the crazy fringes. This is a dirty game that relies on people *over-reacting, and attracting those who are most extreme on a given topic – or who simply tend to embrace argument for its own sake*. The aim is to incite an emotional reaction, and get people to just react, not think. The idea is to get people to take the bait, and keep lashing out at anything that looks like it might be racist, sexist or extreme.

Fuel Violence and Embolden Extremist Groups. Divisive Information Warfare (IW) campaigns seek to identify 'key fissures' within a society's civil infrastructure that can embolden violent actors – for example, the topic of a 'race war' or a 'civil war'. Or the need to form street militias to defend against a growing threat of lawlessness that's coming for us all. Find groups and individuals who are promoting extremism and violence along these fault lines, and *increase paranoia and fear to embolden them.* As an Arabic-speaking psychological warfare sergeant in Iraq for example, I noticed how the more insidious and skilled forms of extremist propaganda often focused on stoking fears of Shia or Sunni violence, drawing out the militant factions of both sides and amplifying their infighting.

There are many other 'targets of opportunity' that I should mention as well, which I expand on in different parts of this guidebook. Here are some of the most prominent, summed up below as well.

Conflate Sinister Motives with Valid Concerns ('The Bait and Switch') – In short, this is when they use a good thing as cover for a bad thing. With this technique, very general, catch-all ideas like Freedom, Justice, Patriotism, or Western Civilization are used as place-holders for more specific, narrower, more partisan messages and aims. In a sense, they are *glittering generalities* (a propaganda technique I will break down in the Appendix section at the end) used to sneak in specific ideas. "Who doesn't believe in (freedom / love of country / justice / equality)?" can be cover for specific agendas.

Create Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt – Use insinuation, exaggeration, and panic to get people's brains into a kind of fear and anxiety state, a sort of survivalist mode where the limbic system urges us to react rather than stop, breath and think through a situation. This is not to say that these concerns are never real. The point is that information warfare campaigns **will play on them and exaggerate them and even create outright lies about them**, to provoke those primal emotions. They want to get people's brains into survival mode, pushing them into a group mentality that is easier to fool with well-crafted lies.

Fuel Resentment and Otherize by creating Outgroups – An age-old technique of creating a sense of Us vs Them, via labeling people as The Other. By Othering, the 'outgroup' ('the Libs', 'ACAB', 'the Globalists', etc.) is not to be listened to, reasoned with, or even in some cases humanized. The rise in Balkanization and hyper partisanship has fractured this country alongside a new Tribalism, defined by in-group affiliation to an ideology or moral i-group and a vilification of The Other. **This is especially used to demonize racial and ethnic groups or non-citizens**, such as immigrants, 'the inner city' black neighborhoods, Muslims, Jews (who can be vilified by extremes within both the right and the left alike), or others who make convenient scapegoats. Resentment and Othering is a powerful tool to bind people around shared narratives or identity-tribal movements, blinding them to facts and reason (and sometimes, humanity) outside their bubble.

Create so many Lies that Confusion becomes the norm – This essentially overloads the brain and makes the 'computing cost' (the energy the brain must expend to deal with complexity) of sorting truth from lies to be too much, making it easier to simply filter the information one wants to believe based on their preexisting political biases. This is an energy-saving habit of the human mind, as we discussed earlier. Overloading social media, YouTube, and political narratives with enough lies acts to normalize lying, making it dangerously common. When this occurs, confusion and lies simply become the norm, and most people are too busy with their lives to expend the time and energy to fact check and sort everything out. Many people's brains basically 'give up', allowing lies to go relatively unchecked.

Exploit issues that already have a lot of confusion and noise built into them. This is very effective for issues that a large segment of the American people already find complex or confusing (CRT, American history, crime and policing, trans rights and gender identity, immigration, or the science of pandemics and Covid), where cross talk is guaranteed to occur more often. *Some issues are simply not easy to pin down into a black-and-white narrative.*

Rather, they are complicated, with many moving parts and multiple things can be true about them at once. When we don't process these nuances, when our brains turn off and tune out to avoid complexity, we tend to see things in simplistic terms. Issues with confusion built into them (such as the teaching of Critical Race Theory, a university-level field focusing on critical analysis of race and the legal and structural aspects of American society, vs fringe examples of the outright indoctrination of children in middle school) are ripe for exploitation by propaganda campaigns. Or as I call them here, *noise campaigns*. Make lots of noise to take advantage of 'noisy issues', so that social nuance becomes *even more confusing*.

Exploit Half Truths. The hardest lies to detect are the ones that are at least half true. And they take a lot of annoying effort to debunk, because people see the part that's true as lending credibility to the rest of it. The part that is true acts as sort of an anchoring point, to then sneak in the bullshit. If they feel an emotional attachment to the part that's true – for example, billionaire child sex trafficking is obviously real, and there is no doubt much of it that we haven't discovered – and this acts as a sort of mental springboard to get them to buy into the lies. They often see your criticism of the lies as an attack on the part of the message that is true.

Political hyperpolarization leads to Out-grouping. We create these strict lines between us vs moral outgroups, by 'othering' people we see as ideological enemies. This can prime us to see anything said or offered by the 'rival team' as something to fight and resist, often through visceral reactions like anger, disgust, or outrage. Suffice it to say that trolls and propaganda campaigns play on this quite effectively.

In a nutshell, the overall approach tends to be effective because we play into it. This is a problem that is being increasingly [discussed and debated](), showing some common ground amongst centrists, liberals, progressives, even many moderate conservatives, and others who see our state of ultra-divisiveness and social media bubbles as a lose-lose situation where no one (nor the country itself) is better off.

What we arguably need is a readily deployable playbook to educate millions of curios Americans from all backgrounds, and across diverse political leanings, about how these tactics work, and how the tricks of our own minds plays into them. Videos, infographics, tutorials, apps, and simple field guides like this one can be crowdsourced through a convergence of skillsets and fields of expertise – cyber, psychology, information warfare, and emotionally effective communication practices. The ultimate aim of this would be to equip our population to truly understand what's going on, by sharing the tricks of the trade and the tools to understand them.

We spend ample effort, time, and money on securing our homes and our properties, through guns, alarms, and security systems, so that people don't break in. Let's secure our minds, so that propaganda and disinformation doesn't break in.

An illustrated breakdown of 2 real examples

Now, we'll examine these Targets one at a time, in illustrated detail, rooted in recent real examples (some of which you'll probably be somewhat familiar with). Specifically, I think it would be helpful to really focus in on these seven, below.

- ❖ **Capitalize on people's Fears and Flashpoints**

- ❖ *Politicize the truth* **by associating it with a Political Team**

- ❖ **Amplify the Extremes** *(selective exposure to bad noise)*

- ❖ **Use real cases of violence and extremism to exponentially exaggerate the threat a group or movement poses**

- ❖ **Promote the extremes, by drawing out the crazy fringes**

- ❖ **Fuel Violence and Embolden Extremist Groups**

- ❖ **Exploit Half Truths.**

ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE 1: Amplify the Extremes (Selective exposure to bad noise)

Fringe! ←——————————————→ Fringe!

❑For a moment, let's **give this tendency a name**.
Specifically, the tendency of conversation and argument to move towards the fringes, and for people to associate all opposing argument *with these fringes*…and to become *increasingly resistive* to people outside their community. Simply put, to resist good and sensible noise due to the bad noise – let's call this the **Bad Noise Effect**.

❑This effect, **this *priming*, already sets the stage for the pipeline to work its magic** by exposing you, the inductee, to a *very filtered* version of opposing views or movements. Even if you are not being attacked by the fringes of the other side, the videos and tweets and stories and headlines you are exposed to by your community and its likeminded websites and YouTube channels will *disproportionately expose you to the fringe* of an opposing side.

How it's Done: Using Fear and Distrust, and Outrage to *attract* the Extremes

❖ A video of a 'feminist pouring bleach on men' in the subway went viral, but was debunked as being staged* (the woman was actually Russian). Fake Twitter accounts promoting political agendas have been well documented, but fake news on YouTube can go viral faster than A-Train in The Boys on a good dose of Compound-V.

❖ Countless memes, posts, and short clips on social media* (such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as TikTok increasingly) are showing both real as well as fake (or half-truths, via taking things out of context) examples of extreme, fanatical, or outright ridiculous opinions or alluding to very fringe agendas. Sometimes it's very difficult to tell the difference.

ILLUSTRATED EXAMPLE 2. Use real cases of violence and extremism to exaggerate the threat a group or movement poses.

This approach is perhaps the most effective in a time of crisis, and it overlaps with the tactic of *stoking new fears* and of *capitalizing on existing fears.* It is about creating false Boogeymen out of much smaller problems. Any large movement (BLM included) will obviously not be without debate, problems, bad apples, or extreme offshoots. BLM, for example, is not a centralized organization but a wider movement, with local organizations and a few founders of its original, larger organization. Any large movement rooted in historic grievances is bound to have violent and extremist supporters – this is human nature, especially when millions of people are part of the equation. However, if propagandists take clips or stories of fringe violence and amplify it, it can exponentially inflate the degree to which violence exists in such a movement. They can also falsely attribute criminal violence with the movement by pointing to skin color, the presence of graffiti, etc. (just because a random person sets something on fire and spray paints '#BlackLivesMatter' on the side of a building doesn't mean BLM as an organizational entity wanted it to happen, much less coordinated it).

- o The key is to use fake accounts and disinformation (such as videos of street beatdowns that can be blindly attributed to BLM or Antifa (which has countless fake posts and accounts attributed to it) with no evidence to back up the claim) to exaggerate and amplify the degree of violent incidents, in order to stoke fears, fuel racial resentment, and promote civil conflict.

- o All of the above can be used to radicalize Boogaloo groups as well as get Antifa to take the bait and over-react, fueling a 'pendulum of violence' that helps radicalize yet more people. It stirs a vicious cycle.

Here's the methodology, in a nutshell. Fake BLM accounts troll the far reaches of cyberspace to convince millions of whites, conservatives, centrist and even liberals that BLM is out to get them through every form of violence and racist retribution one can think up at 2pm from behind a laptop.

- There are cases of real violence, and the BLM hashtag or label sometimes accompanies such violence. There are of course some violent people and ideological extremists within BLM. This is used as rocket fuel to amplify and exaggerate BLM's threat as a violent movement. False stories like a 2020 fake news post in Culpeper County are shared.

- Fake messages, or fake screenshots of their tweets and Facebook messages are shared so that they will go viral at the click of thousands of people who see them and share them with their political ecosystem, or with friends and friends of friends, until it is trending and looks like a mainstream story. An example is the fake, debunked manifesto below.

- Fake news and accounts, and the *reactions* (articles, videos, posts, etc.) to this disinformation makes the violent fringes who identify as BLM supporters* look mainstream. The image this portrays is one of open lawlessness, and chaos: that BLM itself is centered in lawless street violence and indiscriminate harm to whites.

- Videos of street attacks and cruel actions by people who were black - often simply tagged as 'BLM supporters', or who in some cases may have been BLM supporters on the violent fringes – go viral and are shared across family and friends' political circles. 'LOOK WHAT BLM IS DOING!!' becomes the narrative

Real Example. Fake Antifa accounts during the 2020 riots. As protests were taking place in multiple states across the U.S. Sunday night, there was a newly created account, @ANTIFA_US. It tweeted,

"Tonight's the night, Comrades," with a brown raised fist emoji and "Tonight we say 'F--- The City' and we move into the residential areas... the white hoods.... and we take what's ours …"

After experts looked closer at it, it was discovered to be a fake account. From the NBC article,

> A Twitter account claiming to belong to a national "antifa" organization and pushing violent rhetoric related to ongoing protests has been linked to the white nationalist group Identity Evropa, according to a Twitter spokesperson.

> The spokesperson said the account violated the company's platform manipulation and spam policy, specifically the creation of fake accounts. Twitter suspended the account after a tweet that incited violence. According to the spokesperson, this is not the first time Twitter has taken action against fake accounts engaged in hateful conduct linked to Identity Evropa.

The fake antifa Twitter account used in these posted screenshots was, according to Twitter, created by the white nationalist group Identity Evropa. The group was trying to stoke fears of looting in residential and suburban areas, likely to promote racial animosity and anxiety among whites and fuel civil conflict. To make things worse, the false antifa tweet was boosted in part by NASA scientist and Socratic rocket surgeon Donald Trump Jr. as he posted a screenshot of the tweet to his Instagram account, amplifying its reach enormously.

Bottom Line: Propaganda and the science of human influence and psychology is like The Force – it will always exist, and it can be used for Good or Evil. Sadly, there are too many Sith and not Enough Jedi. The path to becoming the latter in the modern age of information warfare is to humble ourselves, step out of our protective ideological bubbles, and realize that we are often wrong. Our minds are vulnerable, and our emotions tend to govern our thinking far more than we would like.

Learning our own vulnerabilities will help us understand how we are attacked. Much like the nuanced art of Brazilian Jujitsu, good defense – and the underrated ability to *relax, stay calm, and breath* - is a prerequisite for becoming good on the offense. As both Socrates and Sun Tzu emphasized, Know Thyself. The former advocated it in the inner pursuit of wisdom and truth, and the latter, in preparations for battle. Knowing our weaknesses is a cornerstone of any effort, of any battle, of *any forward progress*: from a political campaign, corporate boardroom, personal journey, athletic training strategy, or a military operation, seeing our blind spots matters.

Now imagine a couple of majestic, furry lions on an Instagram motivation poster, and go forth with COGSEC!

SECTION I Rehash

There are noteworthy [patterns behind self-deception](#), including the release of chemicals such as dopamine. It not only helps us reinforce existing beliefs by helping us feel good when we maintain them, but can also contribute to us seeing false patterns (connecting dots that don't actually need to be connected).

Cognitive Dissonance. This refers to the discomfort we feel when the things we see around us don't match what we want to believe. Put another way, it's the discomfort we sometimes feel in changing our minds about things we're emotionally invested in, like political views or religious ideas. People who are invested in a belief will go to great lengths to defend that belief against contradictory evidence, even if it means performing Olympic feats of mental gymnastics

Intelligent People Are Vulnerable Too. Ironically (and to the immense frustration of political scientists everywhere), the *smarter people are*, the more capable they often become at defending their preexisting emotional beliefs. They do this by selectively fishing for any evidence that furthers their confirmation bias, and filtering out anything that goes against it.

Fishing for Confirmatory Evidence (Mental Gymnastics). People tend to gravitate around data and evidence (such as articles or stories that seem to confirm their biases) in their favor, while repelling away from data and evidence that seems to contradict it. Adopting the mentality of Team Sport Politics (TSP as I call it) will have this effect on people, especially when political polarization is strong.

Polarization, Team Sport Politics, and Ideological Bubbles tend to amplify these tendencies greatly, leading to people living in a different world in how they think and process information. Understanding this is central to seeing the big picture, in how propaganda can manipulate us and exploit our vulnerabilities.

SECTION II

Real Life Examples: *Russia vs America, Russia vs Ukraine*

CHAPTER IV

Russia vs America – *Weaponing Race, Culture, Fear, and Ideology*

"A growing number of states, in the pursuit of geopolitical ends, are leveraging digital tools and social media networks to spread narratives, distortions, and falsehoods to shape public perceptions and undermine trust in the truth."

- *[Weapons](#) of Mass Distraction: Foreign State Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age, page 2*

Sometime before the 2016 elections, a pivotal moment occurred over the internet, revealing something quite malicious that few in our government seemed to understand and appreciate until after the big picture became clear. In NJ, a 17-year-old girl was being radicalized by Nazi propaganda by her so-called boyfriend online. These were actual, genuine neo-Nazi ideas, propagated by a man from that community. The girl's parents had reached out to perhaps one of the few people who could help - a man named Christian Picciolini. A public figure with a compelling life story, Christian is a former leader and prominent figure in the Neo-Nazi skinhead movement during part of the 80s and 90s. As a defector and long-reformed anti-hate activist, he is well-known in anti-extremism and counter-radicalization circles.

Christian reached out to this girl at the request of her parents, trying to diagnose the risk of radicalization and what was influencing her. He started asking questions to find out how far she might be down the rabbit hole of white supremacy, as he commonly does in these interventions for troubled youth sliding down a dangerous path. As he knows from his long history of de-radicalization and intervention with white supremacists, this path is not inevitable – oftentimes people see the error of this lifestyle and abandon these movements. He was telling me this particular story several years ago, as I sat across the small table at the Mid-Manhattan bar listening intently to the interesting details.

I had gotten acquainted with him through a vibrant exchange with counter-radicalization circles – consisting of some of the best minds we have on combating various forms of extremism across religion and race, from former radical Islamists to former black and white extremists. Christian and other former white extremists have long helped racists and violent extremists turn away from the lifestyle and find a better path. However, this particular one a challenge in its own way – something was off about the girl's so-called boyfriend.

This interesting (and quite unsettling) story was also told later in more detail on Sam Harris' *Waking Up Podcast.* As Christian [explains](#),

> "We know that she's being influenced by this 23-year-old boy who lives in Idaho…supposedly he was a German-American boy who was a devout Neo-Nazi, and recruited her, and was her boyfriend. And started to get compromising photos from her, and…I could tell you, after many hours and days of research, he was not a 23-year-old German living in Eagle, Idaho. He was a 35-year-old Russian man living in St Petersburg."

Upon digging deeper, after days of effortful and long research, he and his friends discovered that the same Russian who was running this neo-Nazi account was behind other online facades – and in a way that, at first glance, seemed to make no sense. This was not the only account he had. In addition to his neo-Nazi account, he had a fake Black Lives Matter account. As well as a fake ISIS account. All fake. All perhaps used to stir up trouble or deceive people from many different walks of life - and perhaps all part of the same type of operation?

The sinister answer was that these accounts were all used as a *front* for something greater. They were used for the malicious purpose of influencing segments of the human population to some end. But what end? Why would a Russian Twitter operative living in St Petersburg have 3 different accounts of groups that hate each other? There was obviously something sinister going on here. Christian reached out to the FBI and warned them that something wasn't right. He tried to go public with it after he was ignored, and all of his websites and accounts were hacked, immediately. Russian operations were being prodded by too much curiosity, it seemed. The question remained – *what are they up to*?

Beneath the Tip of the Iceberg: Russia's Methodology in Full View

This incident was a foreshadowing of what was to come – a storm of misinformation, fake accounts, Twitter bots, and a strategy to play on our polarization. A strategy aimed at exploiting our tendency, especially among emotionally-charged liberals and conservatives, for reacting and jumping to false conclusions. Fanning the flames on all fronts, from supporting white supremacist movements to using BLM accounts and exploiting tensions within communities of color, this was revealed to be a deadly and volatile information war that could have consequences well beyond the keyboards and chat rooms. According to reports (with seven American officials being briefed on recent intelligence), these step-up efforts were part of Russia's bid to influence November's 2020 presidential election. This happens to include attempts to incite violence by white supremacist groups as well as to stoke anger among African-Americans (something to be expanded on later in this book).

As some will recall in 2016, operatives tried to stoke racial animosity by creating fake Black Lives Matter groups in order to try and fan the flames of racial animosity. They used fake accounts to caricature people's perceptions of BLM and get real BLM accounts to respond to the increased noise, baiting people on all sides into a trap of sensationalized disinformation. They even spread disinformation to try and depress black voter turnout.

Russia's lead intelligence agency, the S.V.R. (Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation - Слу́жба вне́шней разве́дки Росси́йской Федера́ции), has apparently gone beyond the methods of interference we saw back in 2016 – they have been amplifying white nationalist narratives across cyberspace by 'prodding them' (through fake accounts, posing as people in their community as well as their enemies) to be more aggressive in their messaging. Russia has even attempted to influence overtly white supremacist groups. As of me writing this paragraph, the Russian government has stepped up efforts to inflame racial tensions in the United States as a continuation of the strategy we see above. The 35-year-old St. Petersburg operative behind the fake neo-Nazi, Islamist and BLM accounts was just the tip of the iceberg – and the iceberg goes quite deep.

While Russia's influence efforts in 2016 were a surprise to many people, Russian disinformation campaigns against the United States are nothing new. As author and seasoned intelligence operative Malcolm Nance writes and talks about frequently, the Soviet Union deployed similar strategies called "active measures" during the Cold War era.

These were [coordinated efforts] by Soviet organizations and intelligence agencies that sought to influence opinions in foreign countries. As all experienced Cold Warriors know all too well, propaganda in the old Soviet Union was a key element of statecraft, as integral to their strategy as the work done by military and intelligence agencies. The 2016 influence campaign was simply an extension of this old strategy, adapted to the new era of social media and political echo chambers. As [we saw] in numerous intelligence and research reports, the extent of the campaign was quite significant. Over a million tweets and hundreds of thousands of Facebook and Instagram posts were created by human operatives and automated bots, [backed by Russia], while more than 1,000 YouTube videos were uploaded. As shown in reports, the [Facebook posts] reached 126 million US accounts, and the tweets on Twitter managed to gather 288 million views!

From AIDS conspiracies to racial divisions: Playing Dirty during the Cold War

A classic example of propaganda as a form of statecraft by the Soviet Union (as it was then referred to, before the disintegration of Russia's communist empire after the fall of the Berlin Wall) came in the late 1980s, for example, the Soviet Union coordinated a global disinformation campaign to convince the world's public that the [AIDS virus had been created] by none other than the United States as a biological weapon.

The intent of the campaign was one distraction and deflection: to stir up anti-Americanism in the developing world (which already wasn't hard, in part due to our many misdeeds and blunders in foreign policy) and distract the public away from accusations by the US that the Soviet Union was *itself* developing biological weapons. Finger-pointing as a means of diversion and distraction is as old as human deception itself. It is as common in the modern era as it ever was, whether we see it done by children in a grade-school classroom or by seasoned communicators on the international political stage.

As documented in the *Weapons of Mass Distraction* disinformation [report](#) (see page 15), the rumor was first published in 1983 via a Soviet-backed newspaper in India. It *"appeared in Russian media in 1985 and was later published dozens of times in Russian media outlets. Broadcasts by Radio Moscow targeted at African countries claimed that America was deliberately spreading AIDS in Zaire, echoing previous claims by the outlet that the United States was developing biological weapons capable of killing only non-whites."*

The Dirty Trick of Half Truths: Why the Most Effective Propaganda is Partly or Mostly True

Russia has long understood that the most effective propaganda is the kind that is partly or mostly true. Half truths have a way of sneaking in past one's skeptical radar and making easy inroads into the brain. We focus on the part that *seems* true, and probably is true (or may be undoubtedly true), while ignoring the lies and distortions. While used during the Cold War, Russia has [greatly improved](#) since.

Exploiting half-truths

The hardest lies to detect are the ones that are at least half true. And they take a lot of annoying effort to debunk, because people see the part that's true as lending credibility to the rest of it. The part that is true acts as sort of an anchoring point, to then sneak in the bullshit. If they feel an emotional attachment to the part that's true – for example, billionaire child sex trafficking is obviously real, and there is no doubt much of it that we haven't discovered – and this acts as a sort of mental springboard to get them to buy into the lies. They often see your criticism of the lies as an attack on the part of the message that is true.

The lies of effective propaganda have a way of sneaking into our minds by hiding behind the smoke screen of the stuff that's true. In short, half-truths allow BS to sneak in much easier. A great way to showcase this is the example of conspiracy theories currently spreading throughout the American political psyche.

Here is an example below, from my book, *Combating Domestic Extremism*, Chapter 2:

For example, you might say,

"There is no good evidence that this Satanic cabal of celebrities and Democrats is harvesting the blood of children for Adrenochrome, nor that Trump is anointed to take them all down, nor that Q is communicating with you through secretive messaging".

They may then reply,

"QAnon is bringing light to international sex trafficking that we had previously ignored, how can you deny that billionaires like Jeffery Epstein have been doing this for years? You know that high level politicians went to his island and probably some of them took part with his underage girls he was using. Are you really denying that?"

- Notice here that they substituted a credible claim of real sex trafficking by billionaires like Epstein (and others yet to be discovered, who surely do exist) for the unevidenced claims. The *credible claim* is based on some verifiable truth: The Epstein was running an illegal underage sex ring, and that some high-level figures most likely did partake in Epstein's illegal activities on his private island. We no doubt have yet to discover the full extent of it. This is all perfectly reasonable.

- Yet it does *nothing* to verify the **specific claims** by conspiracy theorists about Adrenochrome harvesting or a Satanic cabal or Tom Hanks and Barack Obama. The point here is that the true or credible parts of the message act as a way to smuggle in the lies.

The messages conveyed through disinformation are not all outright lies. More accurately speaking, they fall along what could be described as a 'spectrum of truth'. Sometimes the message will be a half-truth, or even (and especially in many cases) a message that is *mostly true* but hides an important piece of BS. Soviet propaganda machines during the Cold War became masterfully skillful at this particular tactic, as it is most readily ingested due to its ability to use a cover of credibility to hide and smuggle in a small but impactful lie. Such lies *need not always be big* – they can be small, all the more easily concealed by the mostly credible message. These lies are often the most dangerous, because they are the easiest to sneak in under the cloak of open media and open discourse, and the hardest to convincingly debunk in any large scale.

Overall, messages conveyed by systematic disinformation campaigns tend to range from biased half-truths to (from mild to outlandish) conspiracy theories, and of course, to outright lies. The intent behind disinformation is to manipulate popular opinion (especially on Ukraine). As we learn when we study effective Psyop, there is a main purpose here: to **effect behaviors.** It is not necessarily to 'change minds' as a prime objective - rather, that is a means to an end.

The end state – the objective, so to speak – is to influence people and move them towards changing their behavior. In some cases, this means persuading them towards *inaction,* such as not voting during a critical election. During my Psyop tour in Iraq with 4th POG 8th Bn, this was a vicious enemy psywar aim that we had to try and counter: using fear, intimidation, Islamist ideology, and messages of apathy to dissuade locals from exercising their newfound right to vote, or from proudly displaying their purple finger in public after they did so).

In recent times, the aim of disinformation is to sway policy or inhibit action, by – as one study put it – 'creating division and blurring the truth among the target population.' In the State Department report titled *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age*, they describe the scale of this problem on the level of both individuals as well as entire nation-states who wish to 'hack' the mindset of targeted audiences.

> "The proliferation of social media platforms has democratized the dissemination and consumption of information, thereby eroding traditional media hierarchies and undercutting claims of authority. The environment, therefore, is ripe for exploitation by bad actors. Today, states and individuals can easily spread disinformation at lightning speed and with potentially serious impact."

What is a Foreign Influence Campaign?

When we hear about 'foreign influence campaigns' and Putin's army of professional cyber trolls, many people envision a room or basement full of half-drunk Russian keyboard pushers working for minimum pay somewhere in Siberia, gleefully passing along political memes at random to liberals and conservatives, with no particular rhyme or reason.

While it is true that most of these trolls are paid operatives working at the lower levels, this is far from the big picture. Behind these troll factories is a sophisticated and terrifyingly pinpointed process, designed to influence behaviors by identifying and analyzing target audiences, and reaching them with the right message through the right mode of dissemination. This process is known in many circles as *psychological operations*, often termed 'Psyops' (or 'Psyop', in Army parlance). It is a part of a broader arena called *strategic communications* and *information warfare*.

> *Revelations of Russian interference in the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election heightened the public's awareness of disinformation attacks against the United States. A 2017 report by the US Director of National Intelligence concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign that combined covert cyber operations (hacking, troll farms, and bots) with overt actions (dissemination of disinformation by Russian-backed media) in an effort to undermine public trust in the electoral process and influence perceptions of the candidates. -*[Weapons of Mass Distraction](#)*, pg 16*

At levels above these paid internet trolls are planners who carry out this sophisticated process, planning its details and disseminating its crafted messages on down the line. At the top levels of the Kremlin (yes, this will be discussed and documented in more detail later), Russian leaders look at their larger aims – how to affect [Western democracies](#), influence elections, and shape the future of the NATO alliance (see [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#)).

At the [bottom levels](#) of this process, in the basements and buildings of Saint Petersburg and countless other locations around the world, Russian keyboard operatives are disseminating this coordinated propaganda, using carefully crafted templates and scripts they were given - and if they're really into their work, laughing as they sit back and watch the results of throwing fuel on our political fires. In most cases, they are common folks doing a job that comes down to them from higher up. From top to bottom, this is a very real process - one in which I am actually well trained and experienced at myself. Not on behalf of Russia, of course, but on behalf of the United States military. I know the game. And I intend to help Americans across the political map understand it as well. It is my sincere hope that this can be a start.

Chapter V

Putin's Bear Whistle: *Waging a Dehumanizing Information War Against Ukraine, it's History, and it's People*

"Look at the way Putin talks about Ukrainians: He says they're not a legitimate state and not a legitimate people. That's the way to dehumanize folks. When you dehumanize them, it justifies you harming them."

- Terrell Jermaine Starr, host of the [Black Diplomats](#) podcast and author of the upcoming book, *Black Man on the Steppes: My Odyssey From Detroit to Eastern Europe*.

Reading daily reports over freshly brewed (and much needed) coffee in the SCIF (secure compartmentalized information forum) of the US Army European Command's USAREUR (US Army Europe) branch, I was digesting a firehose of information on how various forms of psychological and cyber warfare were being waged not only against Ukraine, but NATO countries. My days in the SCIF were punctuated by visits to the massive gym, rolling around with the base's Jujitsu training group, and enjoyable time in Wiesbaden, Germany.

While many of the details I came across were classified, this general reality is not secret – Russia's infowar campaign against the US and NATO countries has been well documented for years. A daily walkthrough of the endless hallways will have you casually pass by high-ranking US and foreign military personnel, and officials from NATO countries we're in abundance. Some of the most high-level training exercises are traditionally conducted in these higher commands to help the US and the NATO alliance better understand global threats and how they would respond to them. I was there with a team of Psyop experts working with the Information Warfare section, to help wargame the way the NATO Alliance would respond in the events of a full-on Russian attack in the information space.

While the details of these exercises are certainly classified, the fact that they exist is nothing new. It is standard protocol for the US, NATO, Russia, and other spheres of influence to conduct these wargame exercises and simulated scenarios (informed by real-world events and hypothetical inputs by a 'White Cell', somewhat akin to the Dungeon Master in D&D) so they can better understand adversarial capabilities and their own response. In this case, we got an especially sobering look at the ways that Russia is working to try and destabilize the NATO Alliance by attacking various *centers of gravity* – ideological, political, and especially ethno-sectarian – in order to foment multiple forms of dissent, unrest, chaos, confusion, civil conflict, and breakaway movements within the US and European countries.

At the current heart of this is of course the recent war with Ukraine, where disinformation flows in endless supply. However, Russia's strategy is also looking to target the wider global stage with a massive campaign of false narratives. Having spent considerable time doing deep dives into this in and out of these high-level exercises, something became painfully apparent: the urgent need to show everyday people the specific patterns and trends.

With that, I will try and give a digestible overview of how Russia targets Ukraine with an onslaught of psychological warfare.

Framing the Narrative: Russia's Disinformation Campaign against Ukraine.

A video fabricated by Russian intelligence was set in place to be used by the Kremlin, painting a picture that it wanted the world to see. Staged but graphic scenes of dead bodies amidst a background ripe with explosions, rubble of destroyed buildings, and the presence of military equipment. Alongside the destruction were actors pretending to be mourning their dead. This was not a movie set but a well-crafted piece of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem. Among many other things, this propaganda network also falsely accused Ukraine of terrorism, speculatively claiming that Ukraine would conduct a "**crushing strike** " on the Zaporizhzhya nuclear plant.

Evidence of war crimes and mass graves started coming to light in **Bucha** after the withdrawal of Russia's troops in that area. These horrifying revelations evoked an outcry around the world, and Kremlin disinformation and propaganda responded in systematic fashion. Their first step was **denying** that their forces were even involved; when that failed, they challenged the credibility of the reports, while re-amping the "denazification of Ukraine" narrative as a deflection tactic. Russia's Ministry of Defense falsely **claimed** that "the photos and video footage from Bucha are another hoax, a staged production and provocation by the Kyiv regime for the Western media." Falsely accusing Ukraine of employing the very disinformation tactics of staging that Russia uses, Russia's Foreign Ministry falsely pointed to "signs of video fakes and other forgeries."

Despite being **easily debunked** conspiracies, including false claims Ukraine used **fake corpses** which "reanimated" after the cameras stopped filming, these narratives were spread and amplified by Russia's embassies and some mainstream and social media outlets around the world (in particular, through the ideological echo chambers of hardline anti-NATO wings of the far left and far right). There was plenty of evidence furnished to essentially disprove Russia's claims (and show its involvement in the staged propaganda), notably from **Bellingcat,** the **BBC,** and the **New York Times.** In spite of this, the Kremlin's disinformation pipeline continually pushed their efforts to conceal this and promote their own narrative.

The amount of disinformation used by Russia in the Ukraine war is far too wide and deep to summarize in this chapter – such would be an entire book. For the moment, I will attempt to pick some of the most succinct and relevant pieces of it, summarize them, and provide helpful links to numerous reports and deep dives that can help the reader explore this further on their own.

From a State Department report, titled [Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War - United States Department of State](#),

On February 24, 2022, millions in Ukraine awoke to a chorus of **air raid sirens** that had not been heard for **80 years** . Russia had launched a full-scale invasion. Leading up to that fateful morning, and in the year since, **Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem** deployed an array of false narratives to deceive the world about the Kremlin's neo-imperial intentions, portray its war of choice against Ukraine to the people of Russia as a necessary response to purported threats from the United States and NATO, and attempt to justify an unjustifiable war.

The beautiful Ukrainian city of Lviv, a hub of trade and culture for hundreds of years. It was one of the most beautiful cities I've seen, a true tapestry of architecture and vibrant life as well as an R&R destination for people fighting in the International Legion and an absorption point for refugees from the eastern parts or Ukraine most affected by the war.

A Web of Disinformation supporting Russia's War against Ukraine: A Summary.

 "**If Russia stops fighting, the war ends. If Ukraine stops fighting, Ukraine ends**

- U.S Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking to the United Nations Security Council on September 22, 2022

A comprehensive or deep dive into Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns against Ukraine and towards shaping global opinion on the Ukraine war is well beyond the scope of this guidebook, much less a single chapter. Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake.org, for example, has debunked arguably thousands of stories. To fully grasp the sinister and well-planned nature of Putin's campaign for retaking Ukraine, it is necessary to understand the way narratives are crafted, how history is manipulated (or outright denied), and religion and spiritual traditions are coopeted and weaponized. All of this has been going on in the open and behind the scenes, and we need to explore it one major piece at a time.

The attack on Ukraine's right to exist as a self-governing people arguably takes (in no particular order) a multi-front approach, in broad terms.

(1) **One of the most prominent in Western discourse is the use of the 'Nazi' label** to categorically vilify Ukraine and even Ukrainian people themselves, prompting occupation of Ukraine under the guise of 'de-Nazification'.

(2) **A distortion and denial of Ukrainian history and identity, through attempts to distort or re-write it**, with the full arm of Russian propaganda, Orthodox clergy ([heavily influenced](#) by the Kremlin), and State media.

While these two lines of propaganda are used to deny Ukrainian history and dehumanize Ukrainian identity, there are several other lines of attack as well for justifying the invasion and ongoing war:

(3) Weaponizing moral values and promoting a zero-sum culture war with the West, appealing to Christian identity and ultra-nationalism. This includes the philosophy of Alexander Dugan, a prominent influencer.

(4) **The claim that Ukraine and NATO are the primary aggressors**, using claims of widespread abuse of against ethnic Russians and pro-Russian separatism (fueled by Russian-backed insurgency and disinfo) as additional argument. This involves commonly invoking 'Whataboutism' comparisons with Western foreign policy ("What about what NATO / the US did…").

   o   This comprises several distinct but interrelated claims, which are summarized here for brevity; a detailed look at them is beyond the scope of this chapter and guidebook.

   o   A major wing of this is the use of *Whataboutism*, a classic propaganda tactic of deflection commonly used on various sides of an issue (and by pro-Russia messaging in particular, amplified by Russian social media psywar campaigns).

Let's examine these one at a time, from the perspective of propaganda and psywar.

Use of the 'Nazi' label to categorically vilify Ukraine and even Ukrainian people themselves, prompting occupation of Ukraine under the guise of 'denazification'.	**Aim:** Create a pretext for war and occupation, using false moral justification through a disinformation campaign
Narrative: "Ukraine is run by Nazis, and Russia must de-Nazify it for security and the greater good" **Appeals:** *Appeal to History* (Russia vs Nazi Germany), *Appeals to Fear and a Sense of Justice', Othering / Moral Out-grouping, Name-calling* ***(1) Appeal to History, (2) Appeal to Fear, (3) Appeal to 'Greater Morality', Moral Disgust, and Justice.*** **History.** Russia's massive sacrifice and defeat of Nazi Germany (in particular at Stalingrad) is rightly remembered and commemorated, known as the Great Patriotic War. Putin uses this sacred day of historical memory in fighting off Nazi Germany as a political weapon. **Fear.** Russia is appealing to fears of Nazi resurgence and aggression towards ethnic Russians in Ukraine. This leads to an appeal to **morality** by evoking **moral disgust** at Ukraine and those defending it, by tying it to the alleged Nazi threat. This allows Russia to also appeal to **justice**, thus framing it as a just war against an historic enemy (Nazis).	**Reality:** Putin is weaponizing Russia's history with Naziism and Fascism in WWII in order to vilify Ukraine (including its government and its people) and create a justification narrative for ongoing war and occupation. He ironically uses it as a political weapon, while invading and engaging in mass destruction of civilians and infrastructure (in similar fashion to what the Nazi Regime did in Europe). As the National WWII Museum website explains, "*Russian President Vladimir Putin appeals to memories of the Soviet Union's Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany to justify his invasion of Ukraine.*" Further, he has "*appealed to the rhetoric and themes of the Soviet Union's massive struggle against Adolf Hitler's Third Reich on the Eastern Front during World War II.*" As explained by Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War - United States Department of State, These **crimes against humanity** did not occur in a vacuum. They are part of the Kremlin's **widespread and systematic attack** against Ukraine's civilian population. The Kremlin's "denazification" disinformation narrative and **methodical rhetorical dehumanization** of the people of Ukraine have played a role in these unconscionable abuses. Survivors of Russia's occupation of Bucha described Russia's forces going door to door searching residential buildings as they "**hunted for Nazis** ."

(5) Othering, Moral Out-grouping

Create a sense of 'The Other' by vilifying Ukraine and Ukrainians, labeling them as Nazis in order to vilify and *erect a moral wall between 'us' and 'them'*. The 'Nazi' label can be used as a Rhetorical Device, where any opposition to Russia's war (or even any defense of Ukraine) can be **reframed** as 'support for Nazis'. Russia seeks to **Control the Narrative and the Frame using (and weaponizing) the Nazi label.**

(6) Name Calling

A sub-set of Othering and Moral Out-grouping, above. Use "Nazi" as a name calling technique to solidify a sense of rival Moral Tribes.

This appeals to human moral psychology by using the Nazi label to elicit a *moral disgust reaction* against Ukrainians, making it easier to de-humanize them. When you vilify, you can more effectively de-humanize and by extension, justify invasion, occupation, and atrocities.

When Kherson city was liberated by Ukraine, witnesses **recalled** life under Russian occupation, "If the Russians hear you speak Ukrainian, they think you are a Nazi. They check social networks, tattoos, if you have Ukrainian symbols on your body, you are in trouble."

Another use of the "Ukraine is a Nazi State" (or, "We're doing De-Nazification") narrative is to help deflect and distract world opinion and diplomatic pressure away from the invasion.

'Deny, Deflect, Distract' is a common term for how propaganda campaigns play *'Whataboutism'* (for example, deflecting valid criticism or questions by saying "well what about NATO / /The Iraq War / The US / etc."). An article titled ['Deny, deflect, distract': How Russia spreads disinformation about the war in Ukraine | CBC News](#) lays much of this out.

My recent training exercise at USAREUR HQ in Wiesbaden was a reminder of my several years in Europe – predominantly, in Germany – with the US Army when I was an active-duty soldier. It was personally fulfilling to revisit the lively multicultural city of Wiesbaden, speaking fluent German, drinking good beer, talking to a wide range of people, and seeing amazing architecture encapsulating Historicism, Classicism, Art Nouveau, and Baroque.

It was a window into both old memories and a newfound appreciation for the traditions of freedom of democracy we're trying to preserve.

A denial of Ukrainian history and an attempt to re-write it completely, with the full arm of Russian propaganda.	Aim: Delegitimatize Ukraine as a nation with an historical and political right to exist, in order to legitimatize invasion and occupation.

Narrative: "Ukraine and Russia are bound by common paths and tied to a shared future, and Russia must reclaim her rightful place as the true descendants of the Kievan Rus"
 	
Leading up to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin gave the world a televised address that specifically rejected the idea of Ukraine as an independent country.
 	
He claimed that it never had the "stable traditions of real statehood". Rather, modern Ukraine was "entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia."
 	
Appeals:
 	
    (1) *Appeal to History*
 	
    (2) *Appeal National Pride.*
 	
    (3) *Appeal to Religious Identity (Russian Orthodoxy)*
	Reality: Putin uses historical fabrications and distortions to downplay Ukraine's distinctness as its own country and its claim to self-determination.
	
	A major wing of Putin's pre-war, invasion, and occupation narrative involves erasing Ukraine's distinctness as a sovereign nation with its own unique history, culture, and destiny.
	
	In the modern era of legally recognized nation-states, it was forcibly annexed into the USSR at gunpoint in 1922, along with many other neighboring satellite states.
	
	Another part of Putin's pro-war, anti-Ukraine narrative is the idea is an ahistoric erasure of Ukraine as a descendent of the Kievan Rus (the spiritual roots of Orthodoxy in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus), with Russia as the rightful historic inheritor of this tradition, superseding Ukraine's.
	
	All of these shared aspects of history give Putin something to draw on in his propaganda campaign. He uses symbolism and appeals to history and national pride to amplify and spread Russian ultra-nationalism, while denying Ukraine's identity and history in favor of Russian supremacy.

Appeal to History. This involves appealing to the Russian sense of history and historic identity, and its place in the world, both past and present. The Russian government and its proxy voices deny [historical events]. distort historical narratives (such as denying Ukraine's ties to the historic Kievan Rus culture), and bend truths to frame Ukraine as an aggressor and Russia as a victim.

Appeal National Pride. Aside from a general appeal to national pride (a widely effective appeal) and patriotism amidst historic and current hardship, this can also involve drawing on the historic expansionism and identity of the USSR as an [empire]. Russian thinker and Putin's [ideological ally] Alexander Dugan advocates a [version of ultraconservatism] and Russian identity that overlaps with fascism, but also draws on the old Soviet identity and expansionism. As Dugan [states], "*We are on the side of Stalin and the Soviet Union*",

Appeal to Religious Identity (Russian Orthodoxy). This appeal draws on religious-moral sentiments of believers as well as the cultural values of more secular people who nonetheless identify with Russian Orthodoxy (much the way many on the American Right identify with the concept of Judeo-Christian values as a backstop to liberalism or leftists values).

This tactic is essentially the *weaponization of history and national pride*.

Putin's historical revisionism (especially in his essay), and his weaponizing of traditional values), are well documented (see [Russia's Top Five Persistent Disinformation Narratives - United States Department of State]).

The **appeal to Russian Orthodox religious identity** is often fused with an [extreme] nationalism and traditionalism, where extreme measures are needed to preserve Russia's values (including spiritual values) and identity against the [incompatible] world order of the West and its globalist, liberal agenda (a weaponization of culture war, essentially).

Weaponizing moral values and promoting a zero-sum culture war with the West, appealing to Christian identity and ultra-nationalism.	**Aim:** Create a narrative of zero-sum culture war and weaponize Russian Orthodoxy, giving a moral and spiritual justification for war. Enable Russian narratives to target Russian Orthodox at home as well as right-leaning Christians in the West
Narrative: "Ukraine and The West threaten our identity" **Appeals: Appeal to Identity, Appeal to Cultural/Spiritual Values** *This appeals to Russian spiritual/cultural identity and a fear of losing its place in the world, and with itself.* This appeal involves a zero-sum view of 'the West' and the 'liberal world order': that they are incompatible with Russia, its economic flourishing, its cultural, and spiritual identity, and its ultimate future. *Part of this is an appeal to Eurasianism,* which is the view that Russia has a unique identity (neither Western nor Asian per se) and place in the world. In Dugan's extreme version, it's Eurasian identity is incompatible with Western civilization and values. As such, it must be protected through authoritarianism and expansion of empire reminiscent of the USSR's 'glory days' (this overlaps with the previously discussed *appeal to national identity*).	**Reality:** In far-right white nationalist and neo-Nazi circles, Russia is becoming increasingly seen as the last stronghold of 'white Christian tradition' and a safeguard against the floodgates of multiculturalism, immigration, and liberalism. It has been said to be 'the key to white survival', with many white nationalist ideologues online saying "I'll stand on the side of Russia" amidst their war against Ukraine, as pro-Putin sentiment spreads online.

The claim that Ukraine and NATO are the primary aggressors, using claims of widespread abuse of against ethnic Russians and pro-Russian separatism.	Aim: Create a pretext for invasion under the guise of "protecting its own" and combating genocide and Nazism. Demonize Ukraine in the eyes of not only the Russian public and the world stage.
Narrative: "Ukraine is committing genocide against the Russian people in its territory, and we must protect our own" **Appeals:** *(1) Appeal to Fear and Victimology* *(2) Appeal to Moral Disgust and a sense of Justice.* *(3) Appeal to Ingroup vs Outgroup (Othering, Moral Out-grouping)*	Reality: Independent media, multilateral international human rights organizations, as well as disinformation experts, studies, and groups have debunked this narrative. The **BBC's fact-checking team** pointed out "there is no evidence of genocide." Russian officials "had loosely used the term genocide" against Georgia during Russia's 2008 invasion of the country. A centerpiece of this "genocide" narrative is the "**Tragedy of Donbas**" website (arguably run by Russia's military intelligence service). The Kremlin leveraged a host of Russian government-backed influence actors and a network of **websites** and **blogs** to promote messaging against Ukraine and the EU, the 'West', NATO, and the United States, including amplifying disinformation - falsehoods and half-truths as well as deceptive language (such as "de-Nazification", or equating criticism of Russia's actions as "Russophobia"), to propagate this wider **narrative**.

Ukraine art from my friend
Michale D'Antuono of Art
and Response.
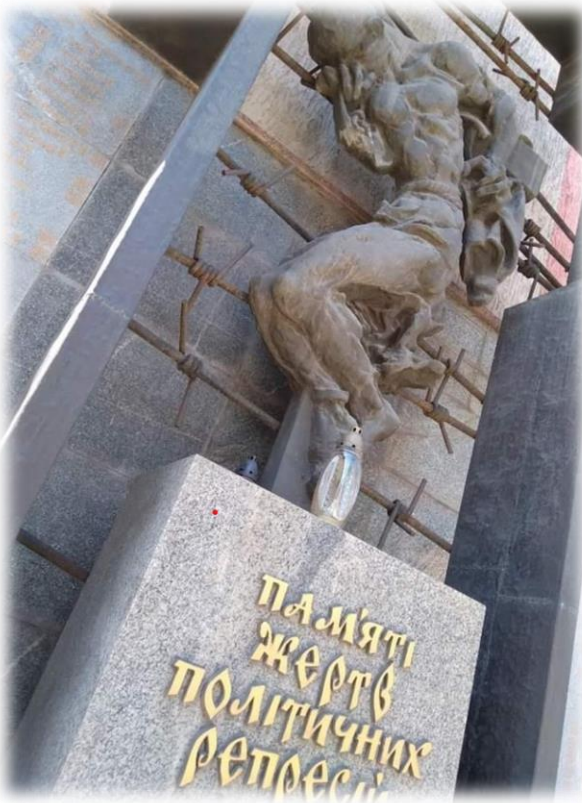
Monument in Lviv for political dissidents who paid the ultimate price. The Ukrainian on the left photo says, "Monument to those who died as a result of political repression".

Victims are memorialized but the countless dead are far too many to list. Historical memory of their suffering and sacrifice live on. Ukrainians have never forgotten.

A piece of improvised art I made, using the Ukrainian language and imagery. The Ukrainian says, "*I am an American who loves Ukraine. Most of us do not understand that freedom is not free. We must never forget what it means*".

Ukraine's fascinating language split off within the Slavic family tree branch well over a millennia ago, despite closeness to Russian and Belarussian (I speak Russian and use Ukrainian to an extent, having stated to learn it shortly after the 2022 invasion. It's close but very distinct, bringing it richness and beauty in its own way, and linguists have long classified it as a distinct language, not a Russian dialect).
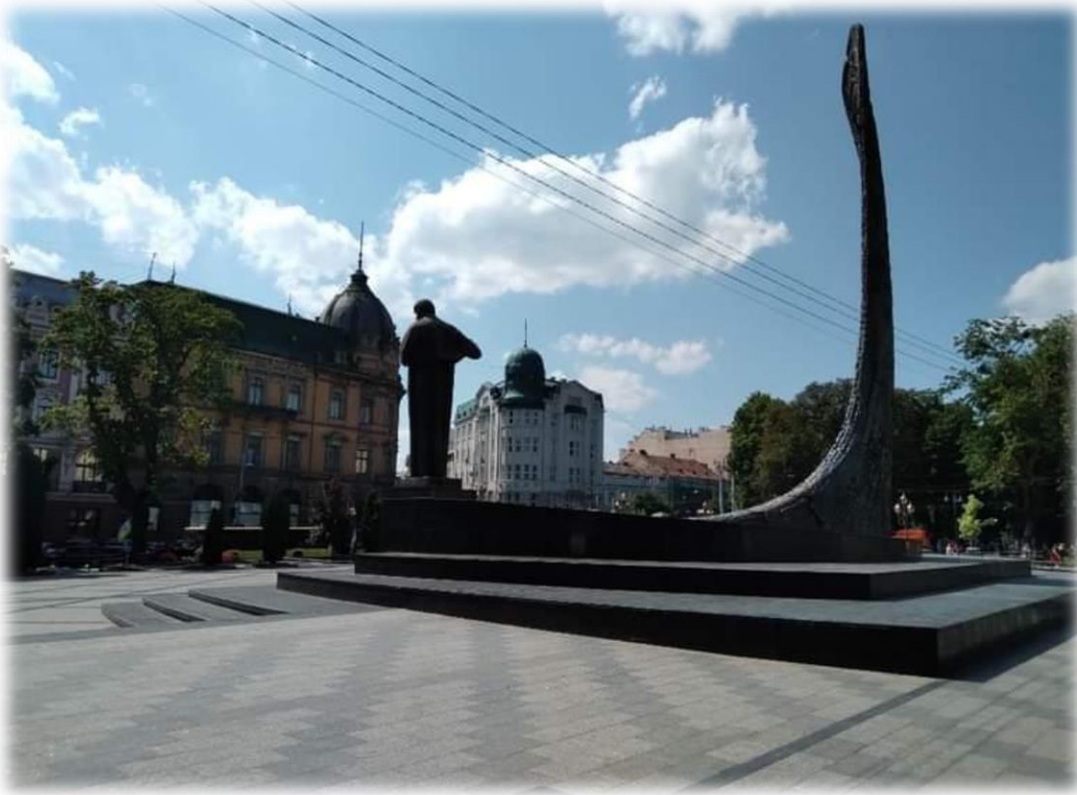
Top and bottom: Pics of Lviv. Right: a decorative symbol of the Ukrainian Coat of Arms at a local Ukrainian Orthodox Church

As I discussed with best-selling author, career Sailor and spy, and Ukraine war vet Malcolm Nance, **NAFO**, or *North Atlantic Fellas Organization* (French: *Organisation des Fella de l'Atlantique nord*, **OFAN**) is an internet meme and wider social media movement devoted to combating Russian propaganda about its war in Ukraine. In a contest of narratives, 'memetics' can be one of the best tools. Like the Force, this power can be used for good and evil alike, by both Sith and jedi.

The idea of using humor and memes to combat disinformation and false narratives is well established, and can be surprisingly effective.

My artistic rendering. Meet the NAFO Psyop Dog. Who is actually a Beagle disguised as a Shiba Inu, to add a degree of MILDEC (Military Deception). In actuality, it's a Beagle sketch I did a few years back, via a photo of the original, and modified to be a NAFO fella.

Additional Useful Links to Russia, Ukraine, and PSYWAR

Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War - United States Department of State

Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age

White Nationalism in the United States and Russia: Transnational Ties, Domestic Impact (harvard.edu)

Russia Could Push US Election Violence Through Far-Right Ties: Experts (businessinsider.com)

Disinformation – Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya) (jstor.org)

AFTERWARD: A Psychological Warfare Veteran's Call to Arms

This is one of the truest tests for our love of country: how much are we willing to understand our weaknesses and confront them, to be better? To harden our minds against the viruses of lies and propaganda, disinformation and divisive conspiracies that seek to weaken us from within?

Being a patriot is so much more than flag waving and taglines. It means being willing to defend truth even when it flies in the face of our ideology, our belief, our political tribe. The willingness to put truth above *all else* and to have the moral courage to understand when we're being manipulated. The willingness to draw a line in the sand to say that we *will not be influenced by those who would seek to do us harm*, especially not those seeking to cause our collapse from the inside in order to make us the authors of our own demise. Those seeking to maliciously influence us beyond our borders.

No matter what direction propaganda comes from, the ability and willingness to recognize it, understand it, and cultivate critical thinking and independent ways of reasoning for ourselves is arguably the biggest step we can take in hardening our country against these kinds of threats. No amount of assault rifles, bunkers, or bumper stickers and flags can be a substitute for hardening our minds against propaganda and disinformation. **When our minds are vulnerable – when our brains are literally a soft target – we must harden ourselves so as not to become our own worst enemy.**

It's easy to fly a flag, brandish a gun, or shout at political rivals; it's difficult, however, to harden our minds from being targeted. This is a true sign of patriotism, and it should be the next revolution in our country: the recognition that independent thinking is our best nonlethal weapon, and that putting principles of democratic institutions and love of country over our own political tribe and ideology is one of the surest signs of being a true American.

We can start with small things – the willingness to change our minds in the face of evidence, or to question our beliefs and recognize even the most seemingly insignificant signs of propaganda influence. From any direction. We can teach ourselves to embrace the kind of thinking Carl Sagan advocated in his famous Baloney Detection Kit, while cultivating or renewing a profound sense of intellectual curiosity.

These small things can help us learn to recognize the bigger things. The desire to critically think most ideally starts as a child, but it's *never too late to learn.* Intellectual curiosity and humility are far more powerful and virtuous than all the political certainty and arrogance we see so proudly displayed across our political landscape from coast to coast. One of the best things we can do to harden our country and be better patriots is to start with an understanding of how we are manipulated, and what 'psyop' can teach us about ourselves.

I invite fellow Americans to become amateur psyop'ers, for the betterment of our country and our civil society. It will take some discomfort and brutal honesty as we can't pick and choose when to apply these tools and when to perform our own mental gymnastics and remain in the comforting confines of our own beliefs. We must consistently learn to understand how propaganda and lies affect us.

Sun Tzu, arguably the most profound military strategist and philosopher of war in human history, has a brilliant and often-cited quote: *Know thyself, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories*.

What does this quote truly mean? Essentially, it means that a military – or in our case, an entire country, and its civil society – needs to be aware of its strengths and weaknesses, and how it is positioned relative to those who would do it harm. It is about asking, *where are we strong,* and *where are we weak?* This timeless quote actually applies to modern psychological warfare as much as to any period in human history.

Hardening our heart and Minds: A True Act of Resistance

If we don't change the way we think and start having conversations about how to respond to this problem, it may ultimately become our undoing. Our ability to discern truth is what upholds our 'cognitive infrastructure' in place, which is a pillar of our Constitutional Republic and its form of Democracy. The tools to discern truth from falsehood – and the *desire* to do so - is also the precursor to the Enlightenment ideas that birthed modern Western free societies.

It is how we managed to avoid the ultimate path of Fascism, Communism, racial identitareanism, theocracy, and other authoritarian ideologies still competing to this day for the hearts and minds of our people. It is how we reject the toxic extremes on both the Right and the Left, and remain rooted in a moral and intellectual foundation. Truth is an indispensable part of this, as is the *distortion and demise of truth* in any transition into these competing systems.

If we lose the tradition of reliable journalism, factual accountability, and passion for truth-seeking, we may one day lose our Republic. Collapse from within has been a defining feature across the death of great Kingdoms and Empires, as well as Republics and Democracies. From the dawn of Ancient Greek Civilization to the demise of Venice's status as a vibrant hub of commerce, to the failure of countless modern States in the 20th century, the threat of freedom and prosperity's *demise from within* is often a greater threat than any enemy from without. We must decide what we cherish most – the blind fury of political tribalism, our salvaging the very foundations of America.

Our minds are the new center of gravity for the enemy, and this gives us all, as everyday citizens, the unique ability to *directly defend against some of their most dangerous forms of attack*. All the guns and ammo and solidarity with our political tribe *will not* protect us from having our minds targeted by effective psyop. Only awareness, education, and a *bold desire* to think independently and escape some of the entrapments of our political tribalism can do this. A physical arms race will no longer give our Nation a true sense of security - we are in a new type of Cold War against state-sponsored disinformation and influence campaigns, from multiple countries and various non-state actors around the world. Our new arms race must be *our own willingness* to understand the nature of this modern enemy, even if just enough to equip ourselves with the cognitive tools to avoid its traps. And to help our fellow Americans do so as well.

We must defend our liberty and our nation through this new *non-lethal arms race* of awareness and dialogue. This path *can start with you*, the reader - understanding how propaganda woks, how the trickery of our minds work, how we are targeted, and *how to respond.*

"Vencit qui se vencit!