

House Armed Services Committee Written Testimony
Hearing on Crafting an Information Warfare and Counter-Propaganda Strategy
for the Emerging Security Environment
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Written Testimony By
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The Past, Present, and Future of the War for Public Opinion

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As resolutions do, [Senate Resolution 74](#) opened with a declaration of fact:

Whereas the first weapon of aggression by the Kremlin is propaganda designed to subvert, to confuse and to divide the free world, and to inflame the Russian and satellite peoples with hatred for our free institutions...

While these words sound familiar, this resolution is not of recent vintage. It was passed in June 1951 and launched several Congressional investigations into America's failing response to an expanding nonmilitary war.

Our world today is remarkably similar to that of the "cold war," before the era became a capitalized proper noun describing a bipolar order on the brink of nuclear disaster. Today, Russia, China, and the so-called Islamic State lead prominent efforts to "subvert, to confuse and to divide" their opposition while the West, and the United States in particular, remains largely unarmed in this struggle for minds and wills.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee recently, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recommended a U.S. Information Agency (USIA) "[on steroids](#)," in reference to the Cold War-era agency designed to centralize the U.S. government's international information programs. These calls should be seen as yet another indictment of an aloof State Department that is not up to the present challenge.

While suggestions for a [new agency concerned with influence and information](#) are commonly put forward, they reveal how little we know of what the USIA [was](#) and what it was not. It was not a kind of Captain America's shield against political warfare. The concerns raised in the 1951 Senate resolution persisted throughout the decade as the USIA, the State Department, and foreign aid activities failed to anticipate Soviet tactics for a variety of reasons, from a lack of training to bureaucratic lethargy. Even as the Cold War raged, the United States was never properly prepared for the cold reality of the political warfare it was embroiled in. Therefore, we have no real historical precedent to draw upon today.

Public Opinion Matters: The Origins of the USIA

You can call it “information warfare,” “hybrid warfare,” or “political warfare,” but whatever you call it, an adversary’s attempts to shape the minds and will of people toward a political end is not new to the United States. Nor will this be the first time the United States sought to wield these weapons against its foes. An April 1918 report by the U.S. Army General Staff recognized that in the “strategic equation” of war there are “four factors — combat, economic, political, and psychologic — and that the last of these is coequal with the others.” This is the early version of what we now call the DIME model of national power — diplomacy, information, military, economic. A [July 1945 report](#) from the State Department recognized that the “nature of present day foreign relations makes it essential for the United States to maintain informational activities abroad as an integral part of the conduct of our foreign affairs.” Two years later, a Joint Congressional report elucidated on the growing threat:

Europe today has again become a vast battlefield of ideologies in which words have replaced armaments as the active elements of attack and defense. The USSR and its obedient Communist parties throughout Europe have taken the initiative in this war of words against the western democracies.

Peace between nations, it was believed, came from mutual understanding. As Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower [testified in 1947](#), “real security, in contrast to the relative security of armaments, could develop only from understanding and mutual comprehension.” U.S. information programs did not operate in a vacuum, but rather they complemented policy. To counter propaganda against the West, the U.S. government needed to make known the true purpose and nature of its policies, its society, and its people. There was more to it than simply exchanging information and culture.

American foreign aid, including the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan, was directed against “hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos,” as Secretary of State George Marshall [announced](#) in June 1947. It sought to permit “the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.” In a [classified memo](#) a few weeks later, George Kennan went further, describing the goal of the program as providing:

a sense of political security, and of confidence in a future marked by close association with the Western Powers, [that] would itself release extensive recuperative forces in Europe which are today inhibited or paralyzed by political uncertainty. In this sense, we must recognize that much of the value of a European recovery program will lie not so much in its direct economic effects, which are difficult to calculate with any degree of accuracy, as in its psychological political by-products.

Foreign aid could not stand on its own. It had to be complemented by information efforts to deny the Communists from owning the narrative of the source and purpose of the aid. A few months later, Rep. Karl E. Mundt [put it this way](#):

We may help avert starvation in Europe and aid in producing a generation of healthy, physically fit individuals whose bodies are strong but whose minds are poisoned against America and whose loyalties are attached to the red star of Russia. If we permit this to eventuate it will be clear that the generosity of America is excelled only by our own stupidity.

With the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, Congress fully authorized a global public affairs program run out of the State Department. This would be short-lived as the public affairs bullhorn placed in the State Department's hands proved to be inadequate against the rising pace and tenor of Communist efforts. Moreover, the State Department was not enthusiastic about this mission. It preferred to focus on diplomacy, which – to Foggy Bottom – was not a public affair.

As he ran for president, Eisenhower [declared his frustration](#) with a State Department that was plodding along on its own course, out of touch with the requirements of international affairs. He was frustrated to find the Mutual Security Administration equally disengaged from the management of foreign aid, including the massive Marshall Plan:

We shall no longer have a Department of State that deals with foreign policy in an aloof cloister; a defense establishment that makes military appraisal in a vacuum; a Mutual Security Administration that, with sovereign independence, spends billions overseas. We must bring the dozens of agencies and bureaus into concerted action under an overall scheme of strategy. And we must have a firm hand on the tiller to sail the ship along a consistent course.

Once in office, in 1953 President Eisenhower implemented a whole of government approach through Reorganization Plans No. 7 and No. 8. In effect, Ike [reorganized government](#) around the DIME model. Plan No. 7 consolidated foreign affairs and aid activities under one organization, a hybrid of an independent agency that brought together Treasury, Defense, and State, largely under State's direction. Plan No. 8 created the USIA, centralizing America's public affairs operations under one agency, one leader, and one Congressional appropriation. State supported the reorganizations to return to what it viewed as its "traditional" role in diplomacy.

This new agency had a global impact, but not for the reasons that most people today think. It was not its radio network, but rather its "ground troops" – public affairs officers – who made the real difference. The public affairs sections in each U.S. embassy and consulate reported to the head of the USIA – not to the ambassador as they do now. The agency produced movies, books, pamphlets, posters, hosted talks and exchanges (academics, scientists, technicians, entertainers, and even bureaucrats). It worked to not just develop an understanding of America and its policies, but to develop the "political security" and confidence in the future that Marshall spoke of. An extensive network of libraries supported this work, providing a place for foreign publics to gather, read magazines and books, watch films, discuss anything, and attend classes. The USIA also produced radio programming, but this was secondary to the "ground game." As Edward R. Murrow [described the agency's](#) challenge,

The real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face to face conversation.

Amateurs vs. Professionals: The Struggle for Minds and Wills

While USIA products were used domestically in the early Cold War, the agency was not, however, focused on defending and protecting American public opinion and perception. To fill that gap, in the 1950's, after USIA was created, the United States came close to developing a research and training program to develop the necessary skills and focus on defending the nation against forms of non-military aggression. It started as a private effort and not from the world of clandestine and covert operations. A group of Floridians that named themselves the Orlando Committee, led by a World War II paratrooper and Harvard graduate who previously taught a course on the subversive tactics of a then-unknown Mao Tse-Tung, recognized a near complete absence in educating Americans on the political techniques of Communists, both at home and abroad. Congress picked up on the effort and, with broad bipartisan support including sponsors Senators Paul H. Douglas, Thomas J. Dodd, Mundt (now in the Senate), and Representatives Judd and Herlong, a bill was introduced to establish the "Freedom Academy." Students would fall into three general categories: U.S. government officials whose agencies were involved in the U.S. effort to resist communism abroad; leaders from civil society, ranging from management to labor to education to fraternal and professional groups; and, leaders and potential leaders in and out of government from foreign countries. The Freedom Academy was to be strictly a research and educational institution and would not engage in any operational activities.

Mundt explained the need for the academy:

[W]e train and prepare our military people for the war which we are not fighting and which we hope will never come, but we fail to train our own citizens and our representatives abroad to operate in the cold war — the only war which we are presently fighting.

But the Freedom Academy never came to be, though a Gallup poll showed that a remarkable 70 percent of the public knew of the bill to create it and supported it. The State Department strongly objected to the initiative primarily because it viewed the Freedom Academy as infringing on its primacy in foreign affairs. However, the State Department did not kill the Freedom Academy. No, the death blow came from a senator.

J. William Fulbright, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, pulled the Freedom Academy bill out of the Judiciary Committee and into his committee to let it die. He then [admonished his colleagues](#) that we "must learn to overcome our emotional prejudices against Russia" so that in time the Communists will learn to trust us. "[I refuse to admit](#) that the Communist dogma *per se* is a threat to the United States."

Fulbright did not stop there. Never a fan of USIA, by [1967 he was actively opposing](#) the agency, and by 1972 was waging an all-out war against it, including replacing its permanent authorization with a requirement of an annual [reauthorization](#). That year, Sen. James L. Buckley, showed a USIA film about Czechoslovakia on his monthly television show in New York. The U.S. attorney general held this activity to be permissible under the Smith-Mundt Act. Fulbright reacted by amending the law to block Americans – including the press and the Congress – from accessing USIA material. In doing so, he reframed the legislation into the “anti-propaganda” law many have thought of it since, tainting public diplomacy and other international information efforts.

In a perverse twist, by blocking the development and deployment of civilian and overt activities, Fulbright’s actions on the Freedom Academy and the Smith-Mundt Act have done more to militarize American foreign policy than any other single act by denying Congress, policymakers, and practitioners critical experience, methods, and historical precedent to properly defend the nation through nonmilitary means. Further, it denied what would have been a shove to the State Department to lean into foreign policy and to adopt a culture of professional training.

The End of the USIA

The Cold War ended and the USIA came to be seen by some as obsolete. In 1999, it was abolished and broken into pieces. The bulk of its operations returned to the State Department. The broadcast operations, however, were spun out into an independent agency, currently named the [Broadcasting Board of Governors](#) (BBG). The BBG is a news organization purposefully distant from political messaging. It only partially fulfills Murrow’s “electronic problem” as it strictly engages countries that have a severely limited or absent free press and is prohibited from operating in countries where it would compete with Western news media. These are markets that require a physical presence to provide local reporting and have high operating costs with limited to no commercial potential. It is far from a bulwark against the political warfare of American adversaries, especially when they operate inside the territory of America’s closest allies in Europe and Asia.

The majority of the former USIA – whether measured in terms of staff, budget, or nations reached – exist today in the State Department. These are the public affairs sections in the U.S. embassies and consulates abroad, the [Bureau of International Information Programs](#) (IIP), and the [Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs](#) (ECA). All of these are under-resourced, under-staffed, poorly tasked, and usually lacking appropriate leadership. The foreign service officers and civil servants working in these areas are poorly supported professionally, denied essential training, and often prevented from focusing on the “last three feet”— face-to-face conversation. They tend to be occupied with administration and management functions. The State Department’s public affairs sections abroad are under the authority of the ambassador, in contrast to the former USIA’s public affairs sections that were under the Director of the USIA. The USIA equivalent of IIP, arguably the second largest group of functions of the late agency, provided integrated media development in support of public affairs sections. It also supported an extensive library system, [now severely restricted](#) under the State Department’s security requirements. The

products included publishing books and magazines, producing movies, and printing maps and posters. The USIA also offered speaking tours abroad of U.S. professionals and cultural icons to meet with locals directly. These continue today, but as the IPP's primary role shifted to develop social media packages for embassies, including an "all-hands" effort to promote tourism, its legacy as the core of USIA is all but forgotten.

The ECA, which manages overseas exchanges of all kinds, seems to be on auto-pilot, seemingly focused on exchanges for the sake of exchanges. Its decades old "Interagency Working Group," created to better coordinate exchanges sponsored by a myriad of government agencies, does little but create more busy work for the already overworked public affairs sections. While many officials realize that exchanges are essential in developing mutual understanding, its role in developing local capacity and building networks against adversarial politics is too often forgotten.

Whether it is a lack of strategic focus or empire-building within the State Department, or both, some of the former USIA roles have been distributed to yet other offices in the State Department, or recreated.

However, if you look closely today, you may see that Congress did "recreate" the USIA. They just call it the [Global Engagement Center](#) (GEC) and they placed it in the State Department. The GEC was previously established under an Executive Order until Congress made it "permanent" through [legislation](#). It is charged with developing, planning, and synchronizing, "in coordination with the Secretary of Defense, and the heads of other relevant Federal departments and agencies" programs to identify and counter foreign propaganda and disinformation directed at "United States national security interests." Like any effort, the GEC's success depends on the quality of its staff, most of whom are contractors and detailees from the Defense Department. There are few foreign service officers inside the GEC, being both too few in number to spare and generally untrained in the necessary skills.

It is easy to charge the department with being "aloof" yet again: when was the last time a Secretary of State or Under Secretary went to Capitol Hill and asked for more public diplomacy staff? Or, more training and resources for public diplomacy?

While the USIA excelled at that "last three feet," it did not have the personnel, the funding, support, training, or mandate to match the vast Communist efforts to undermine democratic societies. It is unrealistic to imagine that creating a new organization will magically manifest the necessary staffing levels with the required skills, tactics, techniques, and procedures necessary to pre-empt and counter today's political warfare. Indeed, history shows that when we did create a new organization – USIA – that the development of the necessary capabilities and leadership to be effective in the struggle of minds and wills was not included.

Preparing for the War We Want or the War We Are In

If confirmed, Rex Tillerson, President-Elect Trump's nominee for secretary of state, will have a challenge ahead of him to get our State Department to reorganize and accept the role of information in international affairs. History is not on his side.

The new secretary of state will need to deal with not only the marginal role the State Department allows for "public diplomacy," but also the lack of professional training of the Foreign Service on the role of public opinion in international affairs. Where professional education is required in the military for advancement, with the exception of language or cultural training for the next assignment, it is a derogatory interruption of a career path in the Foreign Service. More specifically, issues related to political warfare are not framed in terms of foreign policy but national security, placing them squarely in the domain of the military. It is the military that supports the detailed analysis and discussion of these issues as they look to learn from the past and present to prepare for the future in a professional education system that includes many schools (which the Foreign Service does attend) and many more journals. It should also be noted that the Congressional Armed Services Committees spend significant time on subject of political warfare and it is here that the GEC legislation originated (as well as the rollback of Fulbright's perversion of the Smith-Mundt Act). If we are to de-militarize our foreign policy, we must look to raise the capacity of the nonmilitary foreign affairs community to delve into these topics. Inquiry by the appropriate oversight committees in Congress must also increase to better understand the requirements to train and fund efforts to pre-empt, mitigate, and negate the political warfare waged against us. We cannot afford to continue to rely on the Defense Department to compensate for an "aloof" State Department

I recently attended a conference at King's College London on the informational aspect of "hybrid warfare" that was attended by Russian professors teaching the current and future foreign service of Russia. The Russians were interested in what they described as our militaristic view of foreign policy. They cited as examples the writings of Frank Hoffman on hybrid warfare that are published in military-centric journals with military-centric themes for military-related audiences. There are strikingly few non-military options that support and publish national security writing for thoughtful thinkers like Hoffman. More to the point, there is virtually no professional education for our foreign service to grant the time and money to dig into these topics, nor are they prepared before entry into the foreign service by the schools that focus on preparing them for the foreign service. These realities contribute to a further militarization of our approach to national security. The Russians, meanwhile, appear to working on their own "Freedom Academy."

The stakes today are higher as the cost of failure has increased as public opinion, influenced by both increased transparency and disinformation, has an increasing influence on domestic and foreign policy. Societal, economic, and political disruption no longer requires the resources of a national government, while phrases like "self-radicalization" masks the effectiveness of foreign (ideological, geographical, cultural, or political) agents. "If a country is lost to communism," George Gallup wrote in 1962, "through propaganda and subversion it is lost to our side as irretrievably as if we had lost it in actual warfare." Through political warfare, the enemy not only gets a vote in the

success of our policies, but they can rig the public opinion against us. We covered this ground before and the solution was not creating a new agency.

We should ask ourselves if we want to fix our State Department, or bypass it? Policies rely on information programs to not just be known, but to be effective, especially in the contemporary high-speed and transparent world. We disregard fundamental truths described by the Army nearly one hundred years ago, the State Department in 1945, and repeatedly by Members of Congress at our peril.

In their 1963 surrender letter following Fulbright's "success" in killing the Freedom Academy bill, the Orlando Committee held out hope. "Someday this nation will recognize that global non-military conflict must be pursued with the same intensity and preparation as global military conflicts." That day has yet to come.

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