

Testimony of Matt Armstrong
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Asia, the
Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation
July 28, 2022

Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Chabot, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today. The subject of this hearing is important, and I am humbled that you asked me to participate in the discussion. It is my sincere hope that the conversations that brought about this hearing continue beyond the introduction of any bill as the current situation has been and will continue to be the “new” normal and will thus require this Committee’s persistent attention.

Let me start with a reminder that the “gray zone” idea at the heart of today’s hearing is neither new nor unexpected. We have been here before and this Committee, many decades ago, played a substantial and positive role in setting up a response to these kinds of activities, a fact ironically buried by decades of misinformation and disinformation.

As a framing device, gray zone is than hybrid warfare, which is centered on combat and the Defense Department. It is also better than information warfare which, considering information is a munition, evokes dangerously selective means, methods, and objectives. No term is perfect and considering the common understanding of the “gray zone” is the space between peace and war, or traditional uniform combat, this framing inherently separates peace into something else. However, it is the peace that others seek to disrupt, it is a starting point, and it is a place we must proactively defend.

Personally, I prefer to the term political warfare, though I acknowledge the term is not palatable to some, including this Committee, for understandable reasons. Political warfare includes all measures short of war. It is not mere rivalry or competition, but the expression of power for hostile intent through discrete, subversive, or overt means short of open combat onto another. Whereas gray zone tells us where along a spectrum between war and peace activities take place, political warfare tells us why.

Regardless of the term, these methods, sometimes updated through new technologies, are reused because they are relatively inexpensive, especially compared to the destruction wrought by combat, more enduring than open invasion, and refinable through successive iterations of effort. Whether intentionally or incidentally, these activities exploit our defective escalation ladders, the thresholds of which are distorted from over-reliance on dissuasion through the threat of waging combat. The result on our side is confusion, questioning, grasping, tactical responses to strategic threats, and being constantly reactionary.

This Committee participated in supporting establishing international organizations to further this peace and to proactively resist various malicious gray zone activities. Some of those organizations have since been subverted against us and against their original purpose.

Personally, I find it more important and interesting that this Committee helped introduce the basic legislation that provides the authorities required to respond to gray zone activities. I am referring to a bill introduced by a former Member of this Committee, Karl Mundt of South Dakota. Introduced on January 24, 1945, it was signed into law three years and three days later as the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and one of the Congress's first legislative responses to Russia's gray zone activities.

The month before Mundt introduced his bill, the State Department acknowledged the importance of public opinion, both foreign and domestic, to foreign policy by establishing the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs in December 1944.¹ The assistant secretary, Archibald MacLeish, received Mundt's bill and sought to discuss it with Mundt "not only as a Member of Congress, whom even Dean Acheson holds in awe but as a man with a long, practical experience in education." Just weeks earlier, MacLeish commissioned an internal inquiry into whether the government needed a post-war international information program. Six months later, the final report opened with this statement:

"The adequacy with which the United States as a society is portrayed to the other peoples of the world is a matter of concern to the American people and their Government... Modern international relations lie between peoples, not merely governments... International information activities are integral to the conduct of foreign policy."

Mundt's bill was initially to exchange elementary and high school teachers, but it was expanded to include broader educational, technical, scientific, and cultural exchanges, funding individuals, institutions, and agencies across the U.S. government. It was also expanded to include a broad range of information programs.

Secretary of State James Byrnes had this to say in 1946 while voicing his ardent support for the information programs to be authorized by Mundt's bill:

I am convinced an information program can contribute to our security just as can an army, a navy, and an air force; and that it can make its contribution in a manner that is vastly preferable to the threat or the use of force, and at infinitely less expense.

Secretary of State George Marshall, who succeeded Byrnes, was also an ardent supporter of the Mundt bill and traveled to the Hill several times lobbying for the bill's passage. In one public hearing, Marshall had this to say about the bill:

¹ Originally called the Assistant Secretary of State for Public and Cultural Relations, the office was renamed in 1946 to this title.

There is no question today that the policies and actions of the United States are often misunderstood and misrepresented abroad. The facts about the United States are withheld or falsified and our motives are distorted. Our actions do not always speak for themselves unless the people of other countries have some understanding of the peaceful intention of our people... [T]here are countries of the world where understanding American can best be advanced by sending a few governmental advisers, or by bringing students to the United States, or by training in our Department of Agriculture or our Weather Bureau a few foreign technicians, or by a combination of these activities. Such activities provide opportunity for contacts which develop lasting impressions of the United States.

It is important to note that the Congress neither suggested nor intended programs authorized by the pending Mundt bill or the later Smith-Mundt Act should be anywhere but in the State Department. My colleague Dr. Chris Paul and I recently wrote on how the State Department ultimately rejected this role, causing Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Marshall's successor, to form the International Information Administration (IIA) within State. We also tell how this organization was soon fragmented to create a lesser entity with fewer authorities and lacked direct integration with foreign policy making, coordination, and execution. This entity was named the U.S. Information Agency.²

Equally important is that none of the discussions in this Committee or the whole Congress ever suggested preventing Americans from seeing or hearing the international information programs authorized by the Smith-Mundt Act. This modern notion is the direct product of questions about the effectiveness of USIA as an independent agency from the State Department, which caused the adoption of the label "public diplomacy" to apply to USIA's programs and Senator J. William Fulbright's attacks on USIA in the 1960s that culminated in his 1972 amendment to the Smith-Mundt Act to purposefully isolate USIA.

Our international information programs were never to be censored from the American public. Doing so blocks direct participation by the public and across the government, appreciation of the importance of this engagement by the public and across government, and oversight across the legislative and executive branch as well as by the press and the public. It was never to be unfit for Americans to read, hear, or know the details of. It was never to be partitioned from policy. These problems manifest in a myriad of ways, including a senior official who "very earnestly instructed" a team of researchers "that it's vitally important to hide the work of PD from US citizens in order to protect its mission." This is a subject this Committee may want to investigate. Know that this Committee, like the rest of the Congress, has a previously established entity to provide you such oversight and advice on necessary changes that should have uncovered and reported to you the above sentiment, which is broadly and historically accepted, previously. This would be the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy,

² <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/07/the-irony-of-misinformation-usia-myths-block-enduring-solutions/>

authorized by the Smith-Mundt Act by an amendment to Mundt's bill by Congressman Everett Dirksen.

The entrenched segregation – both conceptually and bureaucratically – remains today. One visible measure of dysfunction is the vacancy of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Since the office was established in 1999, administrations have repeatedly failed to consider this office for what it notionally is: the chief international information operations officer for our foreign policy. Since it was established, the office has been without a Senate confirmed under secretary four of every ten days, including 37% of the Bush administration, 22% of the Obama administration, 93% of the Trump administration, and 100% of the Biden administration.

Less visible is the shortage of Foreign Service Officers, a problem from well more than 2016. Further, if we are in an oft-labeled “information war,” why is the State Department not calling for more staff clearly in this space, the public diplomacy officers?

Telling America's story abroad is not a simple activity of simply hurling unfiltered information abroad. It is usually more about the target audience than about us. It requires understanding what they should know, why, and how to tell the story. Sometimes the story can be subtle. For example, describing how an American pays a speeding ticket or registers to vote may seem boring just as telling the story of a U.S. city declaring bankruptcy may seem self-defeating, but these types of stories convey massive unspoken information in corrupt and authoritarian countries.

Some of this work is done by the U.S. Agency for Global Media. And this agency does a lot of work in the Indo-Pacific through the Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and the internet freedom programs. Chris Paul and I discussed USAGM's role in our recent paper, a role that should be better supported and accepted for both its value and its limits:

The USAGM's operations target countries relevant to U.S. national security and that lack a free press due to censorship (such as North Korea, Russia, and China), that are historically vulnerable (like Ukraine), or lack a foundation of professional news media (like Indonesia) or resources (like much of Latin America). USAGM's networks—Voice of America, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, and others—do not, by law and on purpose, operate in or target democratic countries with a vibrant commercial press, which is the case for most of Europe. The USAGM is a surrogate news and information service to information-poor audiences providing content not just in the local vernacular, but based on their perspective, often with reporters from the area, often risking their lives in the pursuit of local journalism to inform and empower audiences. But the USAGM's power, its credibility—the backbone of which is its relationship with its audiences—would be at real risk if it were no longer operating separate from policy, if it were suddenly subject to

micromanagement from policymakers and operatives across the other international information and engagement portfolios.³

An area of discussion for this Committee may be to look at the lack of reciprocity in specific areas. For example, VOA is permitted only one bureau and only two reporters in China. A second bureau in Shanghai was promised, but the authorities refuse to follow through. Contrast that with Beijing's operations across the U.S.

We have largely abandoned defending the peace out of complacency and consistently undermine our ability to engage across the gray zone. We have placed too many eggs in the basket of dissuasion through the threat of combat.⁴ This militarization of our foreign policy creates easy opportunity for exploitation by our adversaries, hence our meeting today.

I often open my articles with quotes from 60 – 80 years ago. This is not just because the statement is relevant but also as a not-so-subtle reminder that history rhymes and what we are dealing with today is not a new as some might argue.

My conclusion takes the form of three quotes. The first is from 1953 and comes from the former IIA Administrator, Dr. Wilson Compton:

We are not really trying to win the cold war. We are putting our faith in arms and armaments to enable us to win another war should war come. Probably we can. But winning a hot war which leaves a cold war unwon will not win very much for very long.

The second quote is from Karl Mundt in 1962, when he was a Senator:

We 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.

My last quote is from 1961 and Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut:

So long as we remain amateurs in the critical field of political warfare, the billions of dollars we annually spend on defense and foreign aid will provide us with a diminishing measure of protection.

I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

³ <https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/07/the-irony-of-misinformation-usia-myths-block-enduring-solutions/>

⁴ The defectiveness of the DIME construct – Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic – to describe elements of national power is a separate discussion. A better framing is Political, Psychologic, Combat, and Economic, which can be discussed separately.