

PERSUADE OR PERISH

*Addressing Gaps in the U.S. Posture to
Confront Propaganda and Disinformation
Threats*

Dr. Haroro J. Ingram
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Abstract: The purpose of this policy paper is to assess the U.S. government’s posture to deal with malicious ‘influence activities’ (i.e. propaganda and disinformation) by state and nonstate actors. It argues that while the U.S. government has provided inconsistent support for its foreign policy and national security information sector for decades, since 2017 an effort has been made to lay the foundations for a rejuvenated U.S. posture to address propaganda and disinformation threats. However, significant gaps remain that will weaken those foundation building efforts if left unaddressed. This paper concludes with four recommendations focusing on (i.) the need to learn lessons from the institutions’ history, (ii.) the value of an overarching paradigm through which to understand a spectrum of threats, (iii.) the important role of overt attributed U.S government messaging, and (iv.) initiatives to strategically cohere interagency activities.

The United States and its allies are facing a complex spectrum of propaganda and disinformation threats that are rapidly evolving strategically, operationally, and technologically.¹ The U.S. government’s ability to address these malicious ‘influence activities’ will depend on its adoption of an appropriately balanced, resourced, and legislatively empowered posture that will be as much a product of institutional history as contemporary strategic-policy decisions. This policy paper assesses the U.S. government’s posture to deal with these threats and outlines ways in which strategic-policy gaps, drawn from this analysis, can be tackled. It provides an historical context for the present arguing that a century of inconsistent support for the U.S. government’s foreign policy and national security information sector has deeply influenced it in a variety of ways. A persistent set of questions has driven the ebbs and flows of this history: should persuasive communications play a role in U.S. foreign and national security policy and, if so, how should it be conducted and, therefore, who should be responsible? This historical context is important because it is an opportunity for retrospective analysis from which lessons can be learned and contrasts to the present can be drawn.

Ultimately, this policy paper argues that since 2017 the U.S. government has sought to lay the foundations for a rejuvenated effort to counter propaganda and disinformation threats with the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) as its central coordinating mechanism.² Despite recent efforts to overcome decades of fluctuating support, significant gaps remain that threaten to build weaknesses into the foundations of the U.S. posture and this paper outlines ways that these issues can be remedied. To these ends, it proceeds in three parts. Part I outlines the key problems that underpin this

study while positioning it within the broader literature. Part II explores the background and policy context concerning how the U.S. government has historically postured to meet propaganda and disinformation threats while Part III builds on the preceding analyses to identify and address four crucial strategic-policy gaps.³

Part I: The Problem

Two interrelated problems underpin this policy paper. The first relates to the propaganda and disinformation threat itself. There is broad recognition by the U.S. and its allies that malicious ‘influence activities’ by a complex spectrum of state and non-state actors constitutes perhaps the most pressing national security and foreign policy issue of the time.⁴ The research field is filled with detailed analyses of various state (e.g. Russia⁵ and China⁶) and non-state (e.g. jihadi⁷ and far-right⁸) threats targeting Western nations as well as other malicious actors motivated by varying ideologies, intents, and aims.⁹ This threat focused research has been augmented by other studies that examine the intersection of technological innovation and strategic adaption across a variety of ever-evolving threats.¹⁰ The consensus amongst scholars and policymakers alike is that these propaganda and disinformation activities threaten not only the stability and security of nations but democracy itself.¹¹

The second problem concerns whether the U.S. is adequately postured to deal with these threats and, more broadly, to support allied efforts. According to the *2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America*: “U.S. efforts to counter the exploitation of information by rivals have been tepid and fragmented. U.S. efforts have lacked a sustained focus and have been hampered by the lack of properly trained professionals.”¹² This assessment has been echoed by scholars, practitioners and journalists alike for many years.¹³ To appreciate how deficiencies in the U.S. government’s foreign policy and national security information sector emerged and to place into perspective current foundation (re)building efforts since 2017 the policy paper now turns to history for context. In doing so, it applies a narrow analytical focus while acknowledging the wealth of scholarly and policy-oriented literature that covers in great depth trends and themes outside the scope of this paper.

Part II: Background & Policy Context

The answers to a set of recurring questions have driven the evolution of U.S. government information efforts for over a century: should persuasive communications play a role in how the U.S. pursues its foreign policy and national security agendas and, if so, how should this be achieved and, therefore, who should be responsible? The fluctuations in support for the U.S. government's information sector has inevitably reflected how the zeitgeist has responded to these questions which, itself, were molded by things like shifting perceptions of threat, different beliefs in the U.S.'s global role, and the executive's risk appetite. Exploring these historical dynamics is important because it offers insights into the institutional context from which strategic-policy decisions emerge and provides an opportunity for retrospection on the past and contextually considered assessments of the present. Given the GEC's central role in the present U.S. posture as a coordinating mechanism for a much larger interagency effort (e.g. public diplomacy, broadcasting, outreach by defense), this historical analysis particularly focuses on the centralized functions throughout this history and especially the GEC and its direct institutional predecessors.

From the Great Wars to the End of History

There is no better symbol of the century-long debate within the U.S. government about the role of persuasive communications as a foreign policy and national security tool than the intermittent building, dismantling, and rebuilding of the agencies centrally responsible for this function.¹⁴ The modern origins of these dynamics in the U.S., and other western nations, can arguably be traced to World War I. The U.S. contribution to allied messaging efforts was the Committee on Public Information (also known as the Creel Committee) which was established on April 13, 1917 by Executive Order 2594.¹⁵ At the war's end, allied propaganda efforts were heavily criticized for

fabrications in its messaging especially concerning 'atrocities propaganda'.¹⁶ The sentiment emerging from many allied nations after the war is perhaps best captured in Lord Ponsonby's scathing report *Falsehood in Wartime* (1928) which declared that, "the

defilement of the human soul is worse than the destruction of the human body.”¹⁷ The attitude in parts of the U.S. government at the time was that the U.S. had been both victims of allied propaganda and, once in the war, purveyors of it. Just as the British shutdown their Ministry of Information, with Executive Order 3154 the U.S. Committee on Public Information was disbanded on August 21, 1919¹⁸ setting in motion a pattern that would be replicated well into the next century.

Having dismantled its information sector after World War I, it took time for British and American information efforts to re-launch and start pushing back against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japanese propaganda. As Carnes Lord asserts, “Since the outbreak of World War II, there has probably been more instability in the information sector of the US national security bureaucracy than in any other.”¹⁹ With Executive Order 9182,²⁰ President Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI) on June 13, 1942 centralizing certain information functions for the war effort into this new entity. Tensions soon emerged between the OWI, the Office of Strategic Services (the OSS, forerunner of the CIA), the Armed Services (especially Army), and their allied equivalents.²¹ Interagency disputes about clashing mandates and finite resources were often rooted in different beliefs about whether persuasive communications was worthwhile and, if so, whether priority should go to overt and attributed messaging (e.g. the OWI’s remit) or covert and unattributed messaging (e.g. OSS activities). At the war’s end, President Truman dismantled the OWI by Executive Order 9608,²² despite the emerging Soviet threat, transferring some functions to the State Department. As Wallace Carroll, the OWI’s Deputy-Director, wrote in 1948: “At the height of the political struggle with Russia in the spring of 1947, Congress all but abolished the foreign information program of the State Department.... In less than six months, the majority of Congress was to regret the decision.”²³

The period of the Cold War heralds what Christopher Paul describes as the “heyday of strategic communication and public diplomacy” characterized by three distinct stages: the post-war dismantling of US capabilities, its rebuilding with new capabilities as the Cold War commenced, followed by a ‘crusading’ campaign designed to ideologically cripple Soviet influence.²⁴ With each decade came new information capabilities from the

overt and attributed, like the United States Information Agency (USIA) established in 1953 to coordinate and implement international communication and exchange activities, to the covert and unattributed actions of the intelligence services.²⁵ The perpetual question of who is most appropriate to do what was a constant driver of reflection and change. For example, when the CIA's connection to Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty was revealed in 1971, within two years significant structural change and new oversight mechanisms were implemented.²⁶ Changing perceptions of the Soviet threat and how best to confront it was also a crucial driver of change. For instance, when the Reagan administration pivoted from 'containment' to an active 'rollback' of the Soviet Union, it disseminated National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75 in 1983 to cohere interagency efforts around a framework of principles that included persuasive communication efforts.²⁷

Less than a decade later when the Cold War ended, 'peace dividend' expectations saw functions which were central to defeating the Soviets dismantled including many strategic influence capabilities. This was the fate of USIA which was dissolved in 1999²⁸ and its remaining functions and staff merged into the State Department.²⁹ Such decisions reflected more than just the end of the Cold War but, the end of the Cold War as the paradigm through which to understand the world and the U.S.'s role in it. Into this void came Francis Fukuyama's *End of History?*³⁰ and, while it is debatable the extent to which Fukuyama's paradigm shaped State Department thinking,³¹ institutional choices throughout the 1990s reflected its logic or, to be fair to Fukuyama, perhaps a misreading of it. Nevertheless, there was a sense that democracy had triumphed, that the light from that 'shining city' was burning bright and, to put it crudely, if all people 'hold these Truths to be self-evident' then why waste resources on a centralized information capacity to tell them about it? What was dismantled would soon be rebuilt, if only in part.

The Global Wars on Terror

With the September 11 attacks and the Wars on Terror, persuasive communications re-emerged as an important soft power tool.³² Yet, for almost a decade, Department of Defense and Department of State efforts to re-establish a centralized function for such

efforts stuttered.³³ The GEC is central to the purposes of this paper and its direct institutional lineage can be found in this period from the Counterterrorism Communication Center (CTCC) which was established in 2006 and replaced by the Global Strategic Engagement Center (GESEC) in 2008 which was itself replaced, in 2011, by the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC).³⁴ Established by Executive Order 13584,³⁵ the CSCC primarily focused on “countering the actions and ideology of al-Qa’ida, its affiliates and adherents, and other international terrorist organizations and violent extremists overseas.”³⁶ Explaining the CSCC’s origins and purpose its Special Envoy and Coordinator, Dr Alberto Fernandez stated:

So about a dozen years after al-Qaeda began to tell its story, to present its narrative to the world, CSCC was born. The idea was that given the huge emphasis that al-Qaeda places on media and propaganda, there was a need for a U.S. government entity that would function as a war room or operations center, like you may see in a political or advertising campaign, to push back.³⁷

Three broad categories of activities characterized the CSCC’s efforts: (i.) supporting U.S. government communicators, (ii.) working with overseas partners, and (iii.) Direct Digital Engagement (DDE).³⁸ However, with a small annual budget of around \$6million and about a dozen staff, the CSCC’s capacity was limited.³⁹ Interagency coordination and partner capacity building were the CSCC’s primary focuses but the relatively weak mandate of an executive order and recurring interagency issues made the task, as one State Department official stated, “much harder in practice [than on paper].”

What became the CSCC’s signature was its DDE activities which Fernandez described as “daily, aggressive, attributed, and overt messaging by the Department of State.”⁴⁰ With a focus on being timely and responsive, the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) team was directed to “contest the space”, “redirect the conversation”, and “unnerve the adversary.”⁴¹ Given its Arabic, Somali, and

Urdu capabilities, the CSCC initially focused on al-Shabab, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). By 2014, it had largely

pivoted to support anti-Islamic State efforts which proved a smooth transition given extant expertise⁴² and experience monitoring the group since its 2011/12 ‘Breaking the Walls’ campaign and 2013 split with al-Qaeda. While a strategy to shape DDE activities was developed in liaison with the interagency, it is not clear that this strategy was shared with the DOT members who were engaging online with violent extremist networks on a daily basis. While the details of this strategy document and its dissemination may be debated, it seems from interviews that DOT members were not aware of (or at least well-versed in) the strategy nor had been specifically trained in an overarching persuasive communications methodology.

When the CSCC was pilloried by scholars and journalists alike for its English-language video *Welcome to Islamic State Land*,⁴³ released as part of its anti-Islamic State *Think Again Turn Away* campaign, it would ultimately signal the end of DDE activities and the CSCC itself.⁴⁴ In February 2015, Fernandez departed the CSCC⁴⁵ and amidst a period of review and internal transitions there were two leadership changes at the top from Rashad Hussain to Michael Lumpkin.⁴⁶ As Greg Miller states, it was a period of “new tumult to a unit already associated with frequent changes of strategy and personnel.”⁴⁷ Then on March 14 2016, President Obama revoked Executive Order 13584 for Executive Order 13721⁴⁸ replacing the CSCC with the GEC.⁴⁹ The implicit message from the executive during this period was that its appetite for risk and public criticism was low and this impacted the mentality and culture in the GEC around decision-making. As a State Department official stated, “[moving forward] bold audacious activities were avoided.”

Two important changes in focus occurred in the transition from CSCC to GEC that have remained to this day. First, the primary focus of the GEC was coordination and capacity building across the interagency, multisector partners and international allies alongside an increase in data and analytical capabilities. Second, the GEC essentially stopped engaging in direct, self-branded messaging and focused on capacitating its partners for strategic communications. In this way, the two changes were largely seen as complementary. While the GEC’s budget in FY2016 was triple that of the CSCC at \$16million and its staff increased to about forty members, it was poorly funded given its responsibilities especially to the anti-Daesh effort.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, under Daniel

Kimmage's tenure as acting Coordinator and Special Envoy, the GEC played a key role in the Global Coalition against Daesh and forged strong links to strategic communications hubs in the UAE, Malaysia and Nigeria. Also noteworthy during this time was the GEC's outreach efforts to the tech sector which, in an internal strategy document, was described as "the US government's sole dedicated effort to identify, assess, test and implement technologies [against these threats]." The GEC's Technology Engagement Team has devised and implemented the Tech Demo Series, Tech Challenges and Tech Testbed forums for government and private sector engagement to ensure that the U.S. is up to date with technological advancements and their manipulation by foreign influence adversaries.⁵¹ Despite all this, resource, budget and personnel limitations along with ambiguities around mandate persisted. This would change, at least on paper, over the next 18 months. But with those changes would come another period of disruption within the GEC.

A Global Order in Flux

In the wake of Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential elections⁵² and growing concerns about persistent⁵³ and surging⁵⁴ violent extremist threats, 2017 emerged as a pivot-point in the US government's posture to deal with malicious influence activities.⁵⁵ Four crucial developments since 2017 signaled that the US government was actively enhancing its legislative, strategic-policy, and operational capabilities. First, the GEC was codified into law with the *National Defense Authorization Act of 2017* (NDAA2017) that expanded its focus to include state actors.⁵⁶ NDAA2017 provided much needed clarity around the GEC's role by articulating its purpose as the central coordinating mechanism of a whole-of-government effort, ten functions to that end, and budgetary projections that significantly expanded its means.⁵⁷ As one senior State Department official described it, NDAA2017 signaled the GEC's transformation "from soloist to conductor."

Internally the transformations necessary for the GEC to meet its new mandate were significant. During a time when the GEC had lost almost a quarter of its staff and their replacement was significantly delayed by a hiring freeze, its leadership was simultaneously managing significant changes brought on by NDAA2017 that included

transforming its structure, programs and staff for new Russia, Iran and China/North Korea threat teams. The GEC’s leadership group focused on laying the groundwork for this expansion while essentially waiting out the hiring freeze, the machinations of partisan politics, and waiting for the actual expansion of its budget and the appointment of a Special Envoy. It was a very difficult time inside the GEC captured by Abigail Tracy as “understaffed, underfunded, and overextended.”⁵⁸

Second, major national security strategy documents acknowledged the significance of propaganda and disinformation threats to the U.S. and its interests. *National Security Strategy 2017* (NSS2017) unequivocally identified China, North Korea, Russia, Iran and transnational threats (“particularly jihadist terrorist groups”) as primary threats.⁵⁹ As cited earlier, NSS2017 also acknowledged the use of malicious influence activities by these threat actors and the need to improve the U.S. government’s response capabilities.⁶⁰ At Departmental level, the *State-USAID Joint Strategy* similarly highlighted the importance of increasing “capacity and strengthen resilience of our partners and allies to deter aggression, coercion, and malign influence by state and non-state actors” (Strategic Objective 1.4)⁶¹ and to “increase partnerships with the private sector and civil-society organizations to mobilize support and resources and shape foreign public opinion” (Strategic Objective 3.3).⁶²

Third, amendments⁶³ to NDAA2017⁶⁴ appearing in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 (NDAA2019) reinforced and broadened the GEC’s role.⁶⁵ For example, the GEC’s purpose was amended with changes from the original text italicized below:

The purpose of the Center shall be to *direct*, lead, synchronize, *integrate*, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining *or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States and United States allies and partner nations*.⁶⁶

All amendments to NDAA2017, including those to the GEC’s functions,⁶⁷ further reinforced its coordinating and capacitating role. Furthermore, NDAA2019 introduced a

suite of legislation that signaled a move towards a full spectrum approach to confronting propaganda and disinformation threats⁶⁸ that included amendments to legislation covering military cyber operations,⁶⁹ robust frameworks for “grayzone” actions,⁷⁰ and requirements for foreign media outlets to satisfy foreign agent registration criteria.⁷¹

Fourth, the 2019 appointment of Lea Gabrielle as the GEC’s Special Envoy⁷² addressed the need for the head of the Center to be “an official of the Federal Government, who shall be appointed by the President.”⁷³ Under Gabrielle’s direction, the GEC developed a new internal strategy. Its purpose was to align ‘ends’ established in its congressional mandate with ‘ways’ that are spread across the GEC,⁷⁴ US government interagency and partners, and expanding ‘means’ that seeks to double its workforce⁷⁵ and provide access to a budget exceeding \$100million by FY2021. The author was given access to the GEC’s new internal strategy and, overall, it provides a clear and comprehensive roadmap for achieving its role as “the mission center energizing a network of US interagency, international, and private sector partners that decisively exposes and counters disinformation and propaganda.” Its role as the coordinating mechanism and “force multiplier” of US government and partner efforts is essential during this foundation building period and especially given the decades of fluctuations in institutional support.

The internal strategy makes it clear that the GEC is not responsible for U.S. government branded messaging and public diplomacy. Instead the GEC focuses on its role as a “force multiplier” of a broader U.S. government effort via not only coordination and looking for opportunities to drive innovation across a “system of systems” but identifying and plugging gaps.¹ After all, the US government’s strategic influence capabilities alone include the State Department,⁷⁶ Defense Department,⁷⁷ intelligence, National Security Agency, Cybercom, USAID and the US Agency for Global Media amongst others. The internal strategy also emphasized the importance of private sector partners ensuring that the GEC’s various tech forums will remain a priority.⁷⁸ The clarification of roles and the GEC’s alignment of ends, ways and means contained in the new internal strategy will be

¹ Part III: Recommendations contributes to this effort by identifying key gaps in the US government posture and suggesting remedies.

vital for not only maximizing efficiencies and effectiveness but managing risk as well as interagency, partner and public expectations. How effectively the internal strategy is implemented in practice is a separate issue and, along the way, the GEC will need to navigate inevitable intra and inter departmental tensions, ongoing budgetary access hurdles, and persistent partisan politics.

Part III: Recommendations

The picture that emerges from this complicated history is of a foreign policy and national security information sector that is, once again, resurgent as yet another wave of propaganda and disinformation actors threaten the U.S. and its allies. But the institutional history of fluctuating fidelity to persuasive communications provides important context for reflecting on past efforts

and considering the present and learning history's lessons for improved future performance. The fundamental challenges facing the U.S. government as it rebuilds its posture to deal with foreign influence threats are, broadly speaking, like those of previous years. In short, these are that the apparatus needs to be appropriately resourced and mandated, persuasive efforts across the interagency need to be coherent, and that the primary threats must be understood in such a way as to align with broader national security and foreign policy objectives. The following recommendations address crucial strategic-policy gaps that, if ignored, risk weakening the US government's efforts to confront malicious influence threats.

Recommendation 1: The State Department should commission a foreign policy and national security information sector 'lessons & best practices' report based on historical interagency reporting and interviews with current and retired staff and practitioners in partner agencies.

Such an initiative is important for more than just collating and preserving valuable lessons that can help to shape current and future thinking and practice. It is also a way to

encourage an institutional culture that appreciates the historical value of persuasive communication functions in achieving the U.S. government's foreign policy and national security objectives. Despite the brevity of the historical analysis in this paper, several important trends and lessons emerge that offer valuable frames of reference for considering contemporary challenges.

First and foremost, shifting answers to the same set of questions have been the fundamental driver of fluctuations in support for the U.S. government's information sector since World War II: should the U.S. engage in persuasive communications to foreign audiences and, if so, how and who should do it? The ebb and flow of this history and the activities that defined certain periods compared to others inevitably reflects the complex interplay of persistent strategic-policy debates (e.g. the role of the U.S. in the world, the appropriate mix of 'hard' versus 'soft' exercises of power), who are perceived as the primary threats of the time, and ever-changing policy, budget, and workforce factors. The story of this rebuilding process, especially of central functions such as OWI, USIA and the GEC, is eerily similar: US government efforts are belatedly built in response to a threat that becomes undeniable, this (re)building process is characterized by false starts, missteps, bureaucratic tensions, and all the institutional, strategic and personnel inefficiencies inherent to essentially starting from scratch with each 'new' threat. In the early stages, mandates are narrow and poorly defined, budgets and resources constrained, and the executive tending towards risk aversion. Perhaps worse than the waste of resources and time that results from the intermittent dismantling and rebuilding of the U.S. government's information sector has been the loss of institutional knowledge and expertise along the way.

There are positive trends and lessons from this history too. The most important of which is that when the U.S. government commits the full spectrum of its interagency capabilities, and mobilizes its multisector partners and international allies, it tends to be successful in outcompeting its adversaries. While there have been perpetual problems with U.S. government support for the central mechanisms of its foreign policy and national security information sector, it is also unfair to assess overall U.S. government efforts by the budget, resource, and staffing allocation to, for instance, OWI during World

War II, USIA during the Cold War, and the GEC presently.⁷⁹ Even at the lowest ebbs of support for these *centralized functions*, hundreds of millions of dollars are spread over the U.S. government interagency for the purposes of ‘soft power’ activities globally whether it is military and Defense Department training with allies, the State Department’s exchange programs and the efforts of its foreign service officers or the work of broadcasters like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Indeed, this reality underscores the importance of consistent and stable support for centralized functions that can help to practically coordinate and strategically cohere what is a complex interagency system of systems. The rest of this policy paper is devoted to three other lessons that emerge from this history that have significant implications for current efforts: the need for an overarching paradigm through which to understand state and nonstate threats, the role of overt and attributed U.S. government messaging, and the need to strategically cohere interagency activities in line with a more assertive U.S. posture.

Recommendation 2: The spectrum of state and non-state propaganda and disinformation threats targeting the U.S. and its allies should be understood as anti-democratic ‘influence activities’ due to their shared strategic logic of intents and effects.

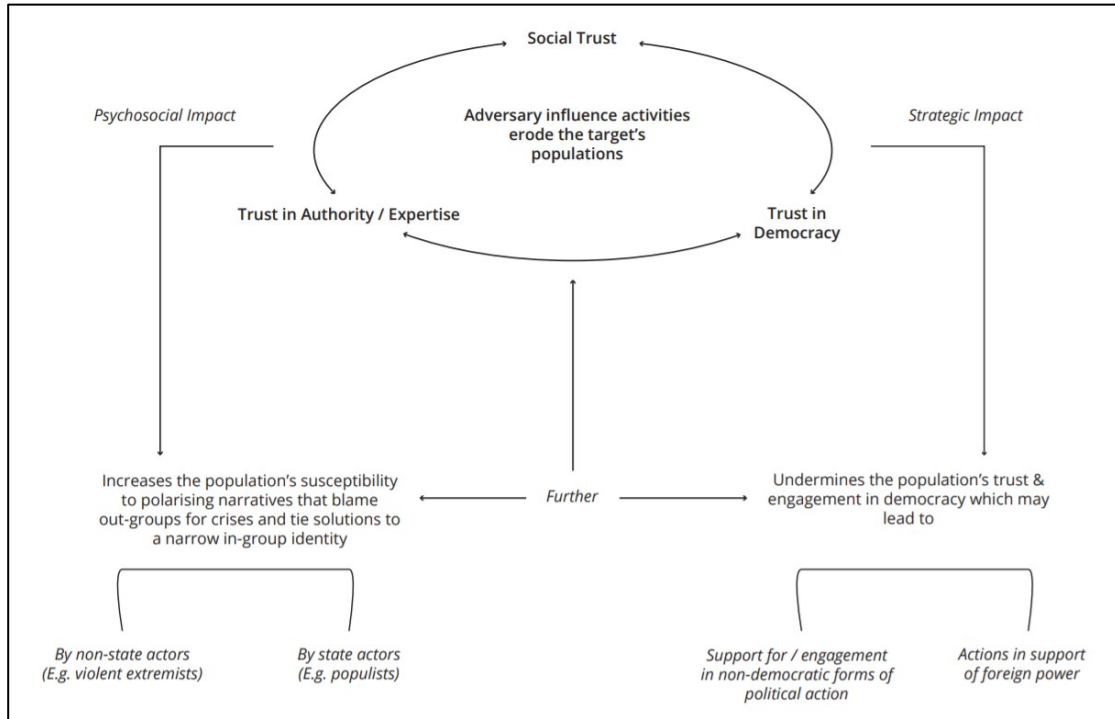
There is an urgent need, especially amongst practitioners, for an overarching way to understand the diverse array of state and non-state propaganda and disinformation threats targeting the U.S. at home and abroad. Without it, counterstrategy efforts risk becoming overly siloed around specific threats increasing the risk of potentially pertinent lessons learned confronting certain threats not being deemed transferrable to others and, as has too often been the case, strategic-policy attention shifting at the whims of the zeitgeist. This policy paper proposes that this diverse spectrum of threats are best understood as anti-democratic ‘influence activities’ due to their shared logic, intents, and effects.⁸⁰ It is, of course, essential that the unique nuances of different state and nonstate threats are understood, especially the short-medium term behavioral and attitudinal aims of propaganda (e.g. recruitment, incitement) and disinformation (e.g. diversion) activities. The model presented here, however, is focused on understanding the

overarching strategic logic of a spectrum of state and nonstate propaganda and disinformation threats and may be more pertinent for its insights into the typically catalytic and/or medium-long term impacts on attitudes and perceived norms in target populations.

‘Anti-democratic influence activities’ simply refers to the propaganda and disinformation of state and non-state actors that target democracies.⁸¹ As graphically represented in Figure 1, these malign influence activities seek to erode a ‘trinity of trusts’ in democratic populations: social trust, trust in authorities/expertise, and trust in democracy. ‘Trust’ broadly refers to a belief in the integrity and reliability of someone or something. Within this model, however, the use of social trust, trust in authorities/expertise, and trust in democracy grounds the framework in well-established conceptual and empirical literature.⁸² Anti-democratic influence activities target democratic populations with the intention of exacerbating inter-group tensions, eroding confidence in experts/authorities, and/or undermining the target population’s faith in the democratic system itself. Ultimately, this contributes to two sets of effects. The first are psychosocial whereby target populations may become more susceptible to polarizing narratives that blame perceived crises on broadly defined out-group identities with urgent solutions being tied to a narrowly defined and supposedly ‘pure’ in-group identity.⁸³ The second are strategic effects whereby target populations may demonstrate increased engagement in anti-democratic activities ranging from, at one end, attitudinal support for undemocratic forms of government or even foreign anti-democratic governments to, at the other end, engagement in politically motivated violence. These effects may further exacerbate the population’s vulnerabilities to propaganda and disinformation activities in a potentially compounding cycle. Given that propaganda and disinformation efforts tend to resonate with those who are predisposed to its themes,⁸⁴ what this model proposes is that, over time, exposure to anti-democratic influence activities, especially if unchallenged, may increase vulnerabilities in target populations and thus the pool for whom it may resonate. This strategic framework also provides a lens through which not only policymakers but politicians, the media, and civil society can understand the strategic logic of anti-democratic malign influence, how their actions may inadvertently contribute to its intents and effects, as well as provide them with the tools to recognize, report, and respond

appropriately. Having outlined the broad parameters of this model, it is important to briefly explore its nuances.²

Figure 1: The strategic logic of anti-democratic influence activities³



The ‘trinity of trusts’ & the effects of its erosion

Central to this model is the notion that anti-democratic influence activities seek to erode a ‘trinity of trusts’ in the target population. The first of these is social trust, essentially a belief in the integrity and reliability of others, that is crucial to the well-being of individuals and the stability of societies.⁸⁵ There are a variety of ways that recent malign ‘influence activities’ have sought to erode social trust in democracies. For instance, when violent extremist propaganda seeks to appeal to its imagined constituents in western societies – whether it is jihadis appealing to Muslim populations⁸⁶ or white Supremacists

² For a more detailed analysis of the model presented here see Haroro J. Ingram, 2020, “The strategic logic of state and non-state malign ‘influence activities’: Polarising populations, exploiting the democratic recession”, *RUSI Journal* (February 2020).

³ Source: Haroro J. Ingram, 2020, ‘The Strategic Logic of State and Non-State Malign Influence Activities’, *RUSI Journal* (February 2020).

appealing to the ‘white’ population (however defined)⁸⁷ – they will use appeals designed to drive a wedge between their audience and the rest of the population. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections the Russian Internet Agency’s targeting of certain identity groups⁸⁸ and both ends of the political spectrum⁸⁹ was designed to foment divisions in American society, i.e. erode social trust.

The second relates to trust in expertise/authorities.⁹⁰ A broad array of experts/authorities have been targeted by malicious influence activities from scientists and academics to medical professionals and the media. Violent extremists may tell their constituents living in democracies that government authorities cannot be trusted or that the media are purveyors of ‘fake news’.⁹¹ From the state end of this threat spectrum, Russian and Chinese efforts to coopt academics on a range of issues helps to not only champion state-sanctioned propaganda talking points but undermine public faith in academia.⁹²

Third, anti-democratic malign influence seeks to erode trust in democracy itself.⁹³ Violent extremists of all types will regularly use propaganda to delegitimize democracy as not only flawed and corrupt but purpose built to, at best, undermine their constituents’ interests and, at worst, destroy them. For example, this is a common theme in al-Qaeda and Islamic State English-language propaganda that argues that Muslims in the West are victims of a hypocritical democratic system that is manmade and, therefore, flawed and worthy of destruction.⁹⁴ Indeed, Osama Bin Laden often used the fact that democratic populations vote for their political leaders to justify terrorism against civilians.⁹⁵ State sanctioned media efforts backed by authoritarian regimes operating in democracies will often use that broadcasting to undermine faith in the democratic system especially amongst diaspora communities.⁹⁶

The psychosocial and strategic effects of malicious ‘influence activities’ targeting the ‘trinity of trusts’ in democratic populations are potentially reinforcing in nature. As populations become more susceptible to polarizing narratives from non-state and state actors, this acts as a catalyst for increasing perceptions of crisis that reflect growing dissatisfactions with democracy. Its strategic effects may see individuals and groups start to legitimize undemocratic forms of government or engage in anti-democratic actions.

The more that these effects are catalyzed and take hold on a population, the more susceptible that population potentially becomes to anti-democratic influence activities. The cyclical and compounding nature of these dynamics is important to understand because propaganda and disinformation threats rarely *create* the effects they seek but rather *catalyze* pre-existing psychosocial and strategic conditions.⁹⁷ This highlights the potential value of this model as an overarching framework to understand the more medium-long term effects of sustained anti-democratic malign influence activities on attitudes and perceived norms in target populations. It is still vital to acknowledge the importance of the threat/event specific behavioral and attitudinal objectives of propaganda (e.g. recruitment for violent extremists) and disinformation (e.g. diversion for malign state actors) activities that are largely short-medium term oriented. The crucial point here is that anti-democratic propaganda and disinformation contributes to conditions that may, over time, increase the pool for whom such activities resonates. Contextual factors therefore play a crucial role in understanding the vulnerabilities that anti-democratic influence efforts seek to leverage. While there are a range of important contextual factors that have contributed to the vulnerabilities in and across the world's democracies from the pace and exploitation of technological advancements⁹⁸ to perceived structural problems in some democratic systems,⁹⁹ the global democratic recession epitomizes the depth and urgency of the challenges ahead.

The Global Democratic Recession

The global decline of democracy has been analyzed by scholars for well-over a decade.¹⁰⁰ In Larry Diamond's 'Facing up to the democratic recession', he demonstrated that in contrast to the growth of both the number of democracies and the freedoms within democracies for thirty years since 1975, there has been a global decline in both measures since 2006.¹⁰¹ The breakdown of third-wave democracies across Asia and Africa certainly helps to explain this decline but it is the wilting of freedoms in first-wave democracies across North America and Europe, partnered by shifts away from democracy promotion as a foreign policy objective by these same countries, that have been perhaps most troubling for the democratic cause.¹⁰² *The Economist Intelligence Unit's* 'Democracy Index' in 2018 argued that the global democratic recession continues highlighting that

under 5% of the world lives in a full democracy.¹⁰³ Freedom House' annual report for the same year was its twelfth consecutive assessment that charted a decline in global democracy.¹⁰⁴

What this has meant within the world's democracies is low levels of trust in government and growing vulnerabilities to anti-democratic influence activities. In global polling surprising numbers of respondents living in democracies have considered non-democratic forms of government as a viable alternative. For example, a 2017 Pew Research study of 38 countries found only a quarter of respondents supported democracy and did not support non-democratic government ('committed democrats') with almost half 'less committed' and 13% supporting non-democratic forms of government.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same poll found that a minority of respondents in the U.S. (15%), U.K. (14%), Australia (7%) and South Korea (2%) answered 'a lot' when asked 'how much do you trust the national government to do what is right for our country?'¹⁰⁶ What these trends suggest is that the global decline of democracy is as much a product of self-inflicted wounds against democratic values at home as it is the failure to genuinely champion it abroad.

Slowing the Democratic Recession, Avoid the Democratic Crisis

There are four main benefits to the overarching framework proposed here for both understanding a range of malicious influence activities as part of a larger phenomenon and using that to inform strategic-policy decisions. First, it offers a way to understand how a variety of actors share broadly similar intents and engage in actions that may contribute to certain psychosocial and strategic effects. Second, it provides a frame through which budgetary, resource and personnel efficiencies can be maximized (e.g. minimize bureaucratic silos). Third, it connects efforts to confront propaganda and disinformation threats to larger foreign policy, national security, and public policy objectives. In doing so, it potentially provides a lens through which strategic-policy attention can be maintained beyond the daily news or election cycle. Fourth, it is a model through which to both understand the problem and devise solutions.

Just as anti-democratic adversaries seek to erode the ‘trinity of trusts’ and defensive actions need to be taken to address these assaults, it is equally (if not more) important for democracies to strengthen the ‘trinity of trusts’ to increase resiliencies in their populations. This requires more than just improving the tradecraft and technical literacies of partners (e.g. media training) but promoting an in-depth understanding of the psychosocial and strategic dynamics driving anti-democratic influence efforts. Indeed, adopting an overarching strategic framework through which to understand this complex spectrum of threats promises opportunities to draw on a range of capabilities across the State Department, the broader interagency, multisector partners and international allies that otherwise would not be brought into the fold. After all, a consolidated framework enables a balancing of objectives, concepts and resources across multiple lines of effort.

A significant hurdle for those wishing to genuinely champion democracy’s cause will be to overcome the cynical, defeatist, and passivist sentiments that will point to history to argue why such an approach is flawed, the present to argue that now is not the right time, and the future to argue that all things correct themselves with time. The reality is that the global democratic recession has been partnered, almost simultaneously, by the global rise of authoritarianism.¹⁰⁷ The U.S. should play a central role in the global effort to slow the democratic recession and avoid a democratic crisis. This is vital not just because the US is the world’s sole superpower but because it is itself an important symbol of democracy to the world. As Diamond eloquently asserts:

It is hard to overstate how important the vitality and self-confidence of U.S. democracy has been to the global expansion of democracy during the third wave. While each democratizing country made its own transition, pressure and solidarity from the United States and Europe often generated a significant and even crucial enabling environment that helped to tip finely balanced situations toward democratic change, and then in some cases gradually toward democratic consolidation. If this solidarity is now greatly diminished, so will be the near-term global prospects for reviving and sustaining democratic progress.¹⁰⁸

Recommendation 3: A centralized function for producing and disseminating attributed (i.e. U.S. government branded) messaging to foreign audiences would significantly enhance the coherence and responsiveness of persuasive communication efforts.

To achieve holistic coherence across the U.S. effort requires three types of coordination. The first is practical coordination across the U.S. interagency which is the focus of the GEC's strategy, i.e. getting the players into the room (see Part II). The second is strategic coordination requiring the synchronization of interagency actions and words in line with overarching principles (see Recommendation 4). The third is communicative coordination and this is perhaps best achieved by a centralized messaging function developing and disseminating a steady drumbeat of messaging around which the interagency aligns with their own messaging.

The issue of whether the U.S. government should establish a centralized capability for such a function is contested among scholars and practitioners. Those against tend towards three types of arguments: (1.) that the US government is *not* the right messenger for the types of messaging and audiences that are most important for 21st century foreign policy and national security objectives,¹⁰⁹ (2.) the interagency is sufficient and another layer of bureaucracy hampers a leaner more integrated system, and (3.) ultimately, non-government actors should message and the U.S. government should largely lead by the power of its example.¹¹⁰ In 'off the record' discussions it is common to hear all three arguments woven together. All three counterarguments make valid points that, if taken into appropriately balanced consideration, do not negate the overall case for centralized attributed messaging but instead provide useful parameters for the remit of a potential Office of Strategic Communications (OSC).

The first counterargument offers an important point of consideration with the addition of a caveat: it is true that the US government is not always the right messenger to speak to certain audiences *about certain topics*. As highlighted by the second and third arguments against a centralized messaging function, there will likely be parts of the US government's

interagency (e.g. embassies), its multisector partners (e.g. civil society), or international allies and their networks that *will be* the right messenger for *that audience on those topics*. A centralized messaging function would appropriately cede such spaces to the interagency, multisector partners and international allies as appropriate, and focus instead on larger narratives. In some respects, the activities of the Bureau of Global Public Affairs housed in the State Department is a good example of the type of space an imagined OSC could be situated thematically. However, the OSC would ideally be an interagency function canvassing foreign (e.g. State Department, Department of Defense) and domestic (e.g. DHS) agencies although its messaging would, of course, focus only on foreign audiences.

Those who are for a centralized communications function and tend to emphasize its importance for coordination and coherence purposes,¹¹¹ do not strengthen their case with comparisons to USIA given the different contextual, threat, and strategic-policy factors of the time. Rather, a potential OSC's remit and focus would ideally be narrower especially given the GEC's responsibility for coordinating the interagency. Instead the OSC would solely focus on messaging that projects the case of the U.S. and its allies to the world. Rather than getting engaged in the daily, competitive back-and-forth of the modern information environment (e.g. like the CSCC's DDE activities), the OSC would leave these efforts to the interagency, multisector partners, and international allies. OSC messaging would focus on presenting the broader metanarrative of the U.S. case to global audiences with a focus on proactively shaping discourse around issues and events. The OSC's overarching campaign efforts should be supported by the interagency via regional, national, and local sub-campaigns. Ideally, the OSC's posture would look to be assertive in projecting its core narratives and highlighting the say-do gaps, falsehoods, and malicious actions of state and non-state adversaries. For the OSC to operate as an effective messenger it will need to be aware of the executive's policy intentions but also engaged with the full interagency spectrum to have the best possible understanding of key target audiences and ground level dynamics. As challenges in the threat environment become increasingly complex and the timeliness and coherence of response increasingly important, a centralized messaging function will be crucial to creating the bureaucratic

conditions within which communicative coherence and responsiveness is more likely.⁴

In *Persuade or Perish*, Carroll reminds his audience that, “at the very birth of the American Republic, its founders were wise enough to put their case before the world out of ‘a decent respect’ to the opinions of mankind.”¹¹² There will always be those who ideologically disagree with a centralized agency that is responsible for U.S. government branded messaging. In the 21st century communications environment, such a capability seems more important than ever to help cohere and champion the U.S. case to the world in this time of global flux and crisis.

Recommendation 4: A strategic-framework similar in intent to the Reagan administration’s National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 75 should be developed and disseminated across the U.S. government interagency to cohere its ‘influence activities’ around a set of shared principles, intents, and objectives.

NSDD75 provided a set of interlocking principles for synchronizing the words and actions of the U.S. government’s interagency as it transitioned towards a more assertive posture against Soviet global influence.¹¹³ It focused on integrating military, economic, and political action to shape “the environment in which Soviet decisions are made both in a wide variety of functional and geopolitical arenas and in the U.S.-Soviet bilateral relationship.”¹¹⁴ NSDD 75 outlines a systematic approach to competing against Soviet influence on multiple levels to align ways and means to three ends: “external resistance to Soviet imperialism; internal pressure on the USSR to weaken the sources of Soviet

⁴ The idea that the OSC provides a steady drumbeat of messaging, especially to thwart potential crises, is especially important in the 21st century information environment. For example, if a deep fake video of a U.S. government official was disseminated online threatening U.S. and allied credibility in a particular region or regions then, rather than the potential incoherence of different responses from within the interagency or the delays inherent to a centrally coordinated response across the interagency, the OSC could rapidly disseminate a message the intent and themes of which could be mirrored across the interagency.

imperialism; and negotiations to eliminate, on the basis of strict reciprocity, outstanding disagreements.”¹¹⁵ The communications aspect of NSDD 75 is worth highlighting given the range of detail it provides the interagency from key talking points (e.g. “highlight Soviet human rights violations”) to appropriating certain words to outcompete Soviet narratives:

3. Political Action: U.S. policy must have an ideological thrust which clearly affirms the superiority of the U.S. and Western values of individual dignity and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy over the repressive features of Soviet Communism. We need to review and significantly strengthen U.S. instruments of political action including: (a) The President’s London initiative to support democratic forces; (b) USG efforts to highlight Soviet human rights violations; and (c) U.S. radio broadcasting policy. The U.S. should:

- Expose at all available fora the double standards employed by the Soviet Union in dealing with difficulties within its own domain and the outside (“capitalist”) world (e.g., treatment of labor, policies toward ethnic minorities, use of chemical weapons, etc.).
- Prevent the Soviet propaganda machine from seizing the semantic high-ground in the battle of ideas through the appropriation of such terms as “peace.”¹¹⁶

While NSDD 75’s ideological intent may not be entirely appropriate for the current period and the strategic conditions it was seeking to shape are different to now, its intent is worthy of replication and the GEC is ideally positioned to be the agency to coordinate the formulation and dissemination of such a document emphasizing the synchronicity of words and actions as central to effective persuasion.

The transition from “soloist to conductor” is an apt way to think about the institutional and strategic-policy evolution from the CSCC to the GEC. To harness its mandate and growing capabilities, the GEC’s new internal strategy provides a clear roadmap for getting the U.S. government interagency and its partners into the room with its diverse array of players organized into their appropriate sections. But it is only the start because, without shared music and, ideally, shared training in a methodical approach, the sound produced

by these players will lack coherence and timing; at best, being melodic by chance, at worst, clashing and causing confusion (even tensions) amongst the players, ignored by key audiences, and scorned by critics. The ‘new NSDD75’ would be the basic ‘sheet music’ for the interagency and so a significant step towards cohering the efforts of the US government and even allies around a set of shared principles, intents and objectives. The guiding principles of its communications guidance could include:

- Expose the say-do gaps of anti-democratic state and non-state adversaries.
- Engage the private sector to support pro-democratic initiatives.
- Demonstrate transparency about the shortcomings in actions and rhetoric of democracies and show openness about addressing those issues.
- Develop strategic communications plans to appropriate terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, ‘fact’, ‘truth’, and ‘authoritarian.’
- Strengthen political, military and economic relationships between the world’s democracies.¹¹⁷

In addition to a new NSDD75, it would also be beneficial if those agencies directly responsible for engaging in persuasive communications across the interagency adopted a shared method of strategic communications. Such a method should be grounded in conceptually and empirically sound research, have a track record of practical application, and in-built evaluation mechanisms. A cohering methodology or framework for guiding strategic communications activities is necessary not only to ensure that a consistent, methodical, and persuasively oriented approach is adopted but that evaluations occur before, during and after campaigns. Such an approach is important for measuring important indicators of efficacy, providing decisionmakers with a frame of reference for justifying and rationalizing decisions, learning lessons from previous campaign and managing risks. This is only possible if both the strategic communications methodology and its evaluation mechanisms are complementary.

Conclusion

The title of this policy paper is taken from *Persuade or Perish* (1948) written by the legendary deputy-director of the OWI Wallace Carroll in which he reflects on his experiences during World War II, draws out lessons for practitioners, and reflects on the coming conflict with the Soviets. Many decades later its lessons remain pertinent but so too does its calls for an assertive posture, an attitude of humility in the face of evidence, and the urgent necessity for the U.S. government to clearly and frankly communicate with friends and foes. The following passage seems especially pertinent now:

We have known for a long time that an unarmed nation invites armed attack. We can now add a corollary – that a nation which lacks the means of political defense invites political attack. There were many reasons why the Soviets chose to wage a war of wills against us, but I wonder whether they would have taken the decision so light if they had not seen since the days of Vichy that we did not know how to defend ourselves against hostile propaganda.¹¹⁸

This paper has argued that since 2017 the US government has pivoted towards a more assertive posture to deal with state and non-state malign influence activities. After a century of fluctuating support for its national security and foreign policy information sector, it is hardly surprising that in 2020 the foundations of that posture are still largely being rebuilt.

The retrospective that this paper offers is designed to give greater perspective and the benefit of hindsight to decisions and actions that were taken during high pressure times characterized by limited resources, funds, and staff. Of course, this is not to dilute problems that clearly need to be addressed *within* the agencies responsible for how the U.S. government persuasively communicates with the world such as the dominance of intuition over method, inadequate evaluation mechanisms, and the recruitment, retention and development of in-house expertise. Nevertheless, the trajectory of strategic-policy focus, budgets, resource allocation, and staffing is currently tracking in the right

direction. Persistent gaps remain that, if left unaddressed, will not just hamper efforts to confront propaganda and disinformation threats but lead to the executive, once again, questioning the necessity of this function.

The recommendations offered by this paper are designed to not only address specific gaps and facilitate a more assertive and proactive U.S. posture. They are equally designed to break the ebb and flow pattern of support for the national security and foreign policy information function by encouraging an appreciation of its historical value (recommendation 1), providing a new framework through which to understand the spectrum of threats and inform strategic-policy decisions (recommendation 2) as well as bring communicative and strategic coherence to those efforts (recommendations 3 and 4). The 21st century will be a time of perpetual competition for not just influence but meaning, how people understand themselves and the world in which they live, with seismic repercussions for communities, nations and the international global order. Some of the greatest minds of the 20th century, such as Viktor Frankl¹¹⁹ and Zygmunt Bauman,¹²⁰ highlighted the profound challenges of such a world for the average citizen to policymakers. The U.S. government's foreign policy and national security information sector will need to be a central and consistent feature appropriately funded, resourced and staffed if the world's democracies are to survive the challenges ahead.

Endnotes

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mission efforts. Nevertheless, a coherent persuasive communications methodology with in-built evaluations is vital not just for shaping campaign, message, and rollout planning but justifying decisions and managing risks especially when scrutinized by the executive. It seems that this has too often been absent from persuasive communication efforts throughout history but especially during the Global Wars on Terror.

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⁷⁴ The GEC's four core areas of focus are 'science and technology' (to 'increase the reach and effectiveness' of US government communications), 'interagency engagement' (by coordinating across national security departments and agencies), 'partner engagement' (to 'identify, cultivate, and expand a global network of partners'), and 'content production' (via 'programming across multiple platforms').

⁷⁵ By September 2019, the GEC had around 80 staff.

⁷⁶ Public Diplomacy, Global Public Affairs, Regional Bureaus, broadcasting agencies, embassies, media hubs, education and academic exchanges, conflict and stabilization operations, CT bureaus.

⁷⁷ Joint MISO Web Ops Center (JMWC), PSYOPS teams, overt advisory and training missions, overseas exercises, show of force, freedom of navigation events, public affairs, cyber operations.

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