OCCASIONAL PAPER

Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses

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Preface

If ever a paper requires such a disclaimer, this one does: the concerns, opinions, and recommendations expressed here are mine alone. They are not necessarily those of the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP), which publishes this *Occasional Paper* series and regards me as a Senior Associate, or anyone associated with that organization. Nor do these concerns, opinions, and recommendations necessarily coincide with those of any other individual or organization I work with or have worked with.

This *Occasional Paper* will be unlike any that you have read on an ostensible national security topic. It focuses on a challenge that originated outside geopolitics but now threatens national security. Because of its unique subject matter, the paper will cite authors and material not normally associated with this field. The paper may offend you at times by criticizing beliefs, people, and institutions that you may admire. It may appear foolhardy at times by questioning the behavior of leaders and organizations with immense power in society. And it will touch on incendiary topics in American public life that have no direct connection to national security.

When you are tempted to toss the paper aside for any of those reasons, please consider the following:

- For every critique of a belief, person, or institution that you admire, I trust that you will find a critique that you share. The problems described here are neither particular nor partisan, and I continue to respect the subjects of my troubling examples and to work with some of them.

- At every call-out, I trust that you will appreciate the risk involved, find it worth taking, and not attempt to cancel the author.

- At every mention of an incendiary topic, I trust that you will see that I am not attempting to break new ground on matters well beyond my areas of expertise but simply to provide effective, real-world illustrations of how we engage with information today in America.

I intend this paper as the first effort in a longer research project on post-truth in national security. For that reason, I am especially grateful for feedback of any kind. Please tell me what I got right and wrong, what I may have exaggerated or missed entirely, and above all what you believe can or should be done about it—if anything. You can reach me at post.truth.paper@gmail.com.

Gary L. Geipel
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Executive Summary and Introduction

America has a truth problem—with serious implications for our national security.

Distorted and sometimes utterly fabricated information about important aspects of public life today is consumed, accepted, and spread by millions of Americans. Such information is acted upon every day by many of us in decisions about education, finances, personal and public health, electoral politics, and other weighty matters. Most Americans now live and work in digital-information silos, which give us little or no exposure to alternative points of view or information that challenges our assumed knowledge. Opinions blur seamlessly into facts and eventually into "our truths."

Already, we stand at the door of "post-truth" on a mass scale in America, defined as "a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts."[1] And that definition describes only a way station on the path to an even more troubling future—when many of the "facts" on offer are themselves not true.

While triumphs of emotion over rationality are not unusual in human history, correctives dating at least to the Enlightenment and the rise of classical liberalism worked well to check them in the public square. Today, however, most of the traditional correctives are crumbling in American life. These include mass-consumption journalism with the goal of objectivity; civics education in schools and intellectual debate in universities; the expectation of truthfulness from office holders in business and government; respectful associations (allowing conversations) among people outside one's political or

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[1] Cambridge Dictionary: POST-TRUTH | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.

social tribe, and even the ability to challenge orthodoxies through art, comedy, and satire. Enlightenment aspirations of pluralism and rational behavior will be washed away with the rubble of these traditions, taking with them many of the restraints on what we are willing to believe and how we act on our beliefs.

It is tempting to blame this state of affairs on nefarious foreign influences in digital and social media—which certainly exist—but America's truth problem is largely homegrown. Enabled by digital platforms we created and fed by claims we readily share with each other by the hundreds of millions, we Americans made the journey to post-truth on our own.

Similarly, America's truth problem has no partisan-political boundaries and cannot be attributed to specific people or groups. Much as we would like the reassurance—depending on our political orientations—it is not a MAGA ("Make America Great Again") problem or a Woke problem or a Right problem or a Left problem. The rise of post-truth is every American's problem.

Consider these examples (culled from a much longer list) in 2021 alone, which transcend all political and social boundaries:

- On January 6, tens of thousands gathered in Washington, D.C., and angry protestors entered the U.S. Capitol illegally, based on a fabricated notion that the Vice President could overturn the results of a presidential election at will.

- Also in January, the market capitalization of a storefront game company rose to the level of a thriving multinational conglomerate, fed by viral disinformation. A large poll found that one in four American adults purchased that company's stock

or another of the so-called "meme stocks" in January 2021 alone.[2]

- The National Guard and federal agencies mobilized in preparation for further unrest in Washington, D.C., prior to March 4, based on a notion spread by the thriving QAnon movement and similar groups that the previous president would resume leading the government on that date.[3]

- For months after public-health data could have put to rest fears that children were significantly vulnerable to serious COVID-19 infections or might contribute disproportionately to infecting others, public schools remained closed to in-person contact in many American cities—depriving hundreds of thousands of children of a viable education.[4]

- Consequential decisions by large corporations about activities in Georgia (including the location of the 2021 Major League Baseball All-Star Game) hinged on easily refutable fabrications about the content of a new state election law.[5]

- For more than a year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: a handful of academics, government officials, and scientists (at times using peer-

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[2] "Going Viral: 'Meme stocks' win over 1 in 4 Americans," *The Harris Poll*.
[3]*ABC News*, "Capital Police officials say intel on possible March 4 plot being taken 'seriously,' " (March 3, 2021).
[4] See for example Avik Roy, "Estimating the Risk of Death from COVID-19 vs. Influenza or Pneumonia by Age," FREEOPP (May 18, 2020), and Margaret A. Honein et al, "Data and Policy to Guide Opening Schools Safely to Limit the Spread of SARS-CoV-2 Infection," *Journal of the American Medical* Association (January 26, 2021),
[5] See Jake Horton, "Georgia voting: Fact-checking claims about the new election law," *BBC Reality Check* (April 7, 2021).

reviewed publications) succeeded in placing off-limits to polite discussion even the hypothesis that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese laboratory.[6] In August 2021, the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) finally acknowledged that at least one IC element "assesses with moderate confidence that the first human infection with SARS-CoV-2 most likely was the result of a laboratory-associated incident, probably involving experimentation, animal handling, or sampling by the Wuhan Institute of Virology," and that other IC agencies have not ruled it out.[7]

- And the denials of the photographer and the actual images notwithstanding, video of mounted Border Patrol agents fueled a charge that they had "whipped" Haitian migrants and led the U.S. president to vow that "those people will pay" (which they did, in reputational damage at a minimum) despite their obvious innocence.[8]

Such visible examples join what most of us see (and do) in our own lives. In the author's case, recent experiences include: a QAnon-inspired office worker asking if he/she must go to work when (not if) martial law is declared the next day; the removals by their boards of a respected museum leader and a beloved library leader in a Midwestern city based on evidence-free accusations that they are racists; the friend who maintains that the January unrest at the U.S. Capitol was a false-flag Antifa operation; another who rejects a COVID-19 vaccine because "I read

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[6] See in particular Charles Calisher et al., "Statement in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals of China combatting COVID-19," *The Lancet* (February 19, 2020).

[7] "Key Takeaways," Office of the Director of National Intelligence (August 27, 2021), unclassified summary of U.S. Intelligence Community assessment of the origins of COVID-19.

[8] See the recorded statement on YouTube.com (September 24, 2021).

that it is killing as many people as the disease," and the fully vaccinated friends who nevertheless remain gripped by a fear of COVID-19 as if no other consideration in their lives still mattered.

As even these few public and private examples suggest, America's truth problem risks becoming a national security problem with unpredictable and damaging consequences. The implications of post-truth for U.S. national security must be examined. It has the potential to:

- distort or override objective analyses of national security challenges in favor of viral "narratives;"

- encourage large-scale, adversary-instigated disinformation campaigns that sway U.S. security policy or political outcomes;

- erode basic accountability for national security decision-making and execution;

- hamper the military chain-of-command and erode military discipline in critical moments as alternative "truths" spread through the ranks;

- make the definition of U.S. national interests, based on a shared assessment of accepted information, increasingly difficult and subject to constant revision in the manner of recent domestic policymaking;

- further erode U.S. domestic-political stability and union to the point of paralyzing national security decisions, and

- place the functioning of deterrence at risk—if adversaries believe that they can manipulate U.S. responses or doubt the resolve of a nation with no shared understanding of reality.

The national security implications of post-truth emerge here in three broad and closely related categories: (1) Post-Truth and Information—considering what post-truth means for the reliability of information sources and conclusions; (2) Post-Truth and Decision—considering how post-truth could impair national security decision-making and execution; and (3) Post-Truth and Resilience—considering fundamental implications for national unity against current and future adversaries.

This paper offers context around post-truth; examines its current manifestations and potential trajectories; highlights ways in which post-truth could harm U.S. national security; and identifies broad categories of potential responses or remedies—anticipating future research and recommendations across all of these dimensions.

Background

The implications of post-truth for national security have not been examined in a systematic way. However, a strong foundation exists to analyze post-truth itself and what some are calling the "epistemological crisis" that surrounds it.[9]

Researchers at the RAND Corporation coined the term "truth decay" to describe "the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life." In a rigorous initial study, RAND characterized truth decay as having four components: "increasing disagreement about facts; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; the increasing

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[9] Former President Barack Obama is among those to have used the term. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy," *The Atlantic* (November 16, 2020).

relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts."[10]

RAND's study appeared in 2018, and more recent experience leads me to add three more aspects to the challenge:

- First, increasing amounts of widely consumed information are not facts or even fact-based opinions but instead grossly distorted or simply fabricated. Even on otherwise serious issues—from the planet's evolving climate to the organization of the economy, immigration, trade, election law, and relations between racial and identity groups, for example— demonstrably false and often extreme beliefs now drive public opinion, legislative agendas, and the behavior of businesses and other organizations in the public arena to a great extent in the United States.[11]

- Second, the proliferation and embrace of opinions, distortions, and outright falsehoods as "facts" has an equally damaging flip side: the condemnation of information and viewpoints that might clarify or correct established beliefs. Within America's hardening encampments, adherence to a certain viewpoint on virtually every issue of the day—from mask-wearing in a pandemic to the significance of a heat wave to the danger posed by a foreign adversary—is a requirement of tribal loyalty. Alternatives are rejected as ignorant, evil, or "unscientific" (as if science did not consist of examining alternatives) and the holders of such

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[10] Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, "Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Rose of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life," RAND Corporate Research Report [RR-2314-RC](#) (2018).
[11] A book-length case study of this phenomenon as it pertains to climate science is Steven E. Koonin, *Unsettled: What Climate Science Tells Us, What It Doesn't, and Why It Matters* (BenBella Books, 2021).

views—even those who offer nuance or queries in good faith—risk their careers and social standing.

- Third, truth decay and the post-truth mindset are intrinsically worrisome but become much more vexing when misleading or false information is acted upon on a large scale, as is now happening in nearly all areas of American life.

Brookings Institution scholar and former journalist Jonathan Rauch outlines the "public goods" derived from what he identifies as a well-functioning "reality-based community" at the heart of classical-liberal society:

> First, *knowledge*. The system should be competent at distinguishing reality from non-reality, and at building on previous discoveries so that knowledge accumulates, thereby generating even more knowledge. Second, *freedom*. The system should encourage rather than repress human autonomy, creativity, and empowerment. … Third, *peace*. The system should reward social conciliation, maximizing the number of disagreements which are resolvable, and compartmentalize and marginalize disagreements when it cannot resolve them.[12]

These public goods are more and more difficult to secure today in the United States. Knowledge is threatened by "troll armies" and digitally driven movements deliberately based on falsehoods. Freedom is threatened by online mobs determined to "cancel" dissent from hastily assembled orthodoxy.[13] And "peace" hardly seems to describe our public discourse on any issue of significance.

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[12] Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington: Brookings, 2021), p. 76.
[13] On the risks of that behavior alone, see Robert Kaplan, "The Tyranny of the 21st Century Crowd," *Wall Street Journal* (October 7, 2021).

Current Conditions

It is fair to ask whether post-truth as it appears today is particularly unique or severe. After all: unsubstantiated beliefs, conspiracy theories, and creed wars between groups are as old as humanity. What Rauch calls the "Constitution of Knowledge"—an informal understanding of how to sort fact from fiction and move towards truth—did not emerge until the Enlightenment and the rise of classical-liberal political orders during (roughly) the last 300 years. It coincided and almost certainly correlated with a period of spectacular growth in humanity's objective knowledge, our average health and longevity, and overall economic wellbeing—but it is not our default condition.

The Constitution of Knowledge and classical-liberal political orders have tended to rise, sustain themselves, and fall in tandem. The 20th Century, for example, provided numerous examples of how charismatic leaders and totalitarian governments can harness disinformation and a willing suspension of disbelief to their pursuit of power. Few accounts of such history remain richer and more relevant than the political theorist Hannah Arendt's reportage on Holocaust functionary Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial: "No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such."[14] Arendt defined this "safeguard" as "an inability to think"—the irrational embrace of notions never actually checked against reality.

Similarly, much of George Orwell's essay "Notes on Nationalism"—first published in May 1945 as a critique of how competing factions of the English intelligentsia processed information and made claims about communism,

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[14] Hannah Arendt, "From *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in Peter Baehr (ed.), *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 324.

fascism, and imperialism—can be repurposed as a take-down of today's political fringes with barely a wording change:

> The general uncertainty as to what is really happening makes it easier to cling to lunatic beliefs. Since nothing is ever quite proved or disproved, the most unmistakable fact can be impudently denied. Moreover, although endlessly brooding on power, victory, defeat, revenge, the [tribe member] is often somewhat uninterested in what happens in the real world. What he wants is to feel that his own unit is getting the better of some other unit, and he can more easily do this by scoring off an adversary than by examining the facts to see whether they support him. … [Controversy] is always entirely inconclusive since each contestant invariably believes himself to have won the victory. Some … are not far from schizophrenia, living quite happily amid dreams of power and conquest which have no connection with the physical world.[15]

Arendt would recognize the lost "ability to think" and grip on "reality as such" in our post-truth mindset while Orwell would see once again the preference for "scoring off an adversary" over "examining the facts." What would perplex them, however, is that Americans have succumbed to these conditions not (yet) under the authoritarian rule that Arendt examined or the "general uncertainty" of war that Orwell described. Our current post-truth environment emerged despite or perhaps even because of an endless bounty of information and ubiquitous digital technology.

A number of other conditions suggest that post-truth today poses a particularly severe and unprecedented challenge:

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[15] George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," *Polemic* (London), May 1945.

The rise of post-truth is a mass phenomenon. It is experienced across all groups in society and enhanced by the design of online platforms. Selective, self-reinforcing information-consumption patterns (now the norm) mean that your aunt who is an Ivy League professor may be no more skeptical of unsubstantiated ideas and no less hostile to alternative explanations and viewpoints than is your proverbial "drunken uncle" who never completed high school.

Their sources of information make it so, as at least one remaining Ivy League skeptic recently argued in detail. Shoshana Zuboff (emeritus) of Harvard Business School describes a four-stage "epistemic coup," in which (1) individuals freely surrender access to information about their biases, interests, and consumption patterns online, and then (2) algorithms create an "epistemic inequality" between what individuals know and what can be known about them. This sets up what she believes is the current third stage, in which "algorithmic amplification, dissemination and microtargeting of corrupt information, much of it produced by coordinated schemes of disinformation . . . splinter shared reality, poison social discourse, paralyze democratic politics and sometimes instigate violence and death."[16] (Zuboff's projected fourth stage will be discussed below.)

Post-truth beliefs spread almost invisibly, at speeds inversely proportional to the veracity of specific information. "Experts" who believe themselves to be careful observers of public life now are routinely dumbfounded by actions and events that they did not predict and whose origins they often did not even perceive. Below the visible political tribes in the United States.— themselves more and more befuddling in their alignments

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[16] Shoshana Zuboff, "The Coup We Are Not Talking About," *New York Times* (29 January 2021).

and beliefs — the adherents of numerous subcultures engage primarily with each other and can spread information and calls to action at the lightning speed of digital platforms.

In their book on the "weaponization of social media," P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking make the essential observation that "[s]ocial networks reward not veracity but virality."[17] By (human) nature, fabulous disinformation or outright falsehoods usually will be more "viral" than sober, bias-challenging truth.

The day-to-day spreaders of post-truth often are not governments or even well-known leaders. Many Americans concerned with truth decay have spent the last several years looking for the foreign-government culprits behind digital disinformation and/or blaming successive U.S. Administrations for spreading propaganda and manipulating the public. Those malign influences certainly exist.[18] However, a key qualitative difference between contemporary truth decay and earlier phenomena is that it can be set in motion or at least accelerated by your next-door neighbor almost as readily as by a latter-day Joseph Goebbels in the service of a government. For example, the notion that GameStop could be turned into a company worth hundreds of billions spread not in the dialogues of established investors but often between the basements of obscure young men known only by online monikers.

Bad actors can make post-truth worse in its extent and consequences. While we (or our next-door neighbors) may be part of the problem where the spread of truth decay is concerned, canny individuals, organizations, and governments increasingly harness mass beliefs and

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[17] P.W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 20.
[18] A recent analysis of cyber warfare and disinformation efforts involving China and Russia can be found in Jacob Helberg, *The Wires of War: Technology and the Global Struggle for Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

proclivities to purposes unknown to us. As Singer and Brooking write, "Those who can manipulate this swirling tide [of online information], to steer its direction and flow, can accomplish incredible good. They can free people, expose crimes, save lives, and seed far-reaching reforms. But they can also accomplish astonishing evil. They can foment violence, stoke hate, sow falsehoods, incite wars, and even erode the pillars of democracy itself."[19]

Post-truth is less a bug than a built-in "feature" of digital information environments. Social-media platforms and online content creators have few incentives to share carefully verified and mostly truthful information, yet powerful incentives to remain unconcerned about veracity. An attitude of what Zuboff calls "radical indifference" is, she argues, the most efficient way to achieve digital-traffic growth and resulting financial success online: "Radical indifference means that it doesn't matter what is in the pipelines as long as they are full and flowing."[20]

It is difficult to overstate what a transformation this has accomplished in the information consumption of Americans—a transformation that occurred stealthily but quickly. As late as the 1990s and early 2000s and for decades prior to that, most Americans obtained their basic knowledge of the world outside their homes—about culture, politics, science, and national security if there were not engaged in those fields—from one or more homogenizing sources. These included their daily newspapers, a nightly news broadcast, or a syndicated radio news service in addition to a varying diet of printed books. The news sources were not perfectly objective by any means, and they variously neglected certain issues, perspectives, or trends. No information utopia existed (or

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[19] Singer and Brooking, p. 23.

[20] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Hachette, 2019), p. 512.

ever has). Americans generally shared a base of facts, however, vetted to exclude or at least correct blatant inaccuracies, and they were exposed to diverse viewpoints that they were free to accept or reject. All of that is gone.

To check in once a day on the websites of cnn.com and foxnews.com—as the author has done for several years—is to visit two different nations lacking shared standards of information let alone a shared base of facts. In place of homogeneity, the "radical indifference" of digital networks married the curated biases of contemporary journalism to produce a set of alternative realities: the information landscape of post-truth.

The institutions that might resist post-truth instead contribute to its worsening. Professional journalism, the academy, and even government agencies once regarded as operating above politics now often serve as examples rather than as resistors of post-truth. In a recent article, Martin Gurri—a retired open-source information analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency—documents at length the evolution of the *New York Times*' business model, which he argues now blurs the definition of reporting as if "opinions could be transformed into facts if held passionately enough."[21]

In 2018, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* received Pulitzer Prizes—the highest honor in American journalism—for what the Pulitzer organization described as their "deeply sourced, relentlessly reported coverage in the public interest that dramatically furthered the nation's understanding of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and its connections to the Trump campaign, the President-elect's transition team and his eventual administration."[22] Massive, multi-year federal

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[21] Martin Gurri, "Journalism Betrayed," *City Journal* (Winter 2021), pp. 12-19.
[22] "2018 Pulitzer Prizes," pulitzer.org.

investigations by special counsels, of course, found no evidence to corroborate Russia's connections to the Trump campaign or administration.[23] On the contrary, those investigations eventually demonstrated that the allegations were a political dirty trick involving operatives (themselves with connections to Russia) of the *opposing* presidential campaign.[24] Many Americans continue to believe that Trump-campaign collusion with Russia occurred, however, and the nation's leading arbitrator of professional journalism honored the perpetration of this epistemological catastrophe by the country's most "elite" news outlets rather than any effort to challenge it.

At the same time, hardly a week goes by without a new example of an American university punishing a faculty member for an unfashionable viewpoint or suppressing even the possibility of intellectual exchange on difficult topics.[25] Oxymoronic terms such as "settled science" and "believe the science"—difficult to imagine in the discourse of classical-liberal intellectuals from the Enlightenment to the rise of post-truth—now serve as blunt instruments to turn many university departments and some entire academic fields into the equivalents of medieval clerisies.

Post-truth and a collapse of confidence in traditional authority proceed in tandem*.* In a prescient study, little noticed when it was self-published in 2016, Gurri documents how a post-truth information environment (though he did not use that term) coincides with a declining willingness among the public to regard journalism, most forms of intellectual authority, and ultimately government

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[23] "Attorney General William P. Barr Delivers Remarks on the Release of the Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election," U.S. Department of Justice (April 18, 2019).

[24] James S. Robbins, "How Americans were fed a false tale about Donald Trump's 2016 campaign," *USA Today* (November 9, 2021).

[25] See, for example, Dorian Abbot, "MIT Abandons Its Mission. And Me." Common Sense with Bari Weiss (5 October 2021).

itself as legitimate or even credible.[26] Post-truth drives this "revolt of the public," which in turn leads more and more individuals to reject the competence, integrity, and even the positive intentions of established institutions. It is a vicious cycle that has led to virulent populism in the United States. and elsewhere.

"Narratives" exemplify and empower post-truth. The rejection of analysis—in the forms of objective journalism, historiography, or the scientific method—in favor of adherence to "narratives" is common to the examples of the post-truth mindset shared here.[27] As the term now is used in American discourse, narratives are bundles of sometimes-coherent aspirations, beliefs, interpretations of history and/or science, and occasional facts. Americans tend to embrace or reject such narratives (for example, the "Woke narrative," the "MAGA narrative," the "Black Lives Matter narrative," the "anti-vaxxer narrative," the "climate-change narrative," etc.) based on tribal affiliations rather than on careful interrogations of their individual, underlying claims, which in any case often change from day to day. Such narratives sometimes emerge over time but also can simply be declared, as in the case of "the 1619 Project" at the *New York Times*, which announced its goal "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative."[28]

Contemporary narratives can be more or less true, but their significance has little to do with their truth content. They are all-or-nothing propositions, allowing no discussion or nuance among individuals who seek

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[26] Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (Stripe Press, 2018).

[27] Lance Morrow, "Can Freedom Survive the Narratives?" *Wall Street Journal* (May 17, 2021).

[28] "The 1619 Project," *The New York Times (*August 14, 2019).

legitimacy with the associated tribe.[29] In today's post-truth environment, narratives are essential tools for obtaining power—serving to "whip" political coalitions and tribes more effectively that any parliamentary versions of such persuasion. Today's narratives reflect and exacerbate the collapse of reasoned, fact-based public debate. The 1619 Project, for example, put forward arguments about history that once might have served as the basis of a fruitful discussion of America's founding among people with a range of viewpoints. Almost immediately, however, the project's narrative nature rendered any questioning of its assertions beyond the pale for its adherents and shamed critics as fools and racists regardless of their intellectual *bona fides*. Living in post-truth, the choices of a leader in the public eye or an engaged citizen alike are increasingly the same with regard to a narrative: take it or leave it—but never question it.

Post-truth severs the connection between conviction and action. As we have seen, some people in the grips of post-truth act on the basis of disputed opinions and outright falsehoods that they believe are true. Just as seriously, however: others put forward, acquiesce to, and even act upon claims that they almost certainly do not believe. For example: sued for defamation by the voting-machine manufacturer she had stated was part of conspiracy to deny reelection to Donald Trump, an attorney defended herself by stating in a court filing that "no reasonable person would conclude that [her own] statements were truly statements of fact."[30] Meanwhile in an American public company today, even a casual observation by a C-Suite executive that there are two biological sexes knowable at birth could force such

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[29] A detailed and sober account of this phenomenon is provided by Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020).
[30] *NBC News*, "Sidney Powell's legal defense: 'reasonable people' wouldn't believe her election-fraud claim," (March 23, 2021).

an individual's termination if the observation were not promptly regretted and retracted. Well aware of this, business leaders conceal their actual beliefs and often seek what amounts to social inoculation. Thousands of corporate executives began proactively publishing their "preferred pronouns" in recent years regardless of whether these ever had been in doubt. A paper on national security is not the place to litigate matters of defamation or human biology. The point here is that it is no longer absurd to fear that a U.S. leader in any field—certainly including national security—might adopt positions or make decisions that disregard competing evidence and personal conviction alike in favor of adherence to a dominant narrative for fear of the consequences if they do not.

Far from standing against post-truth, more and more political leaders attempt to harness it to their own purposes. Two of the examples shared in the introduction— calls to action based on the notions that the vice president could overturn the 2020 election results[31] and that Georgia has erected "Jim Crow 2.0" barriers to minority voting[32]— were amplified rather than corrected by successive U.S. presidents along with other top elected officials in their respective parties. As such conduct "succeeds," it will be imitated routinely and at all levels of political life in the country. Conversely, it is almost impossible to identify recent examples in the American political arena of politicians who enhanced their influence and electoral success through superior fact-based arguments, articulation of rational policy proposals, and willingness to engage in respectful debate.

Inside some political quarters of both conservatism and especially progressivism today, classical-liberal notions such as mutual respect and ideological or religious

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[31] *ABC News* (January 5, 2021).
[32] Andrew E. Busch, " 'Jim Crow 2.0' Is Imaginary – And Divisive," *RealClear Politics* (August 20, 2021).

tolerance are mocked as naïve and dangerous to each side's causes. Far from rejecting the worst behavior of their opponents, political and tribal leaders in this environment call for its emulation in the pursuit of power.[33] In this way, too, post-truth is a race to the bottom.

Post-truth gains ground regardless of the availability of accurate information. At the dawn of the Internet era just three decades ago, it would have been reasonable to predict that ubiquitous access to all the knowledge of humankind would create more and more rational, deliberative citizens—and extinguish lies, conspiracies, coerced claims, and superstitions. Perhaps the strangest aspect of post-truth is that precisely the opposite occurred. The more verifiable that claims become, the less we seem to care about whether they are, actually, true.

Potential Trajectories

It is difficult to project the course and implications of post-truth for the United States since the situation described here has no precedents on a similar scale. The technological underpinning of today's post-truth environment creates an utterly new context for understanding human behavior unmoored from reality and its implications for national security. The near-universal digitization of experience, information, and communication on a global, population-wide scale means that there is no obvious control group of "truth-seeking individuals" living in what Rauch calls a "reality-based community." Nor, as we have seen, do demographic, partisan, or even national identifications

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[33] For example, see Sohrab Ahmari, "Against David-Frenchism," *First Things* (May 39, 2019) and Benjamin Wallace-Wells, "David French, Sohrab Ahmari, and the Battle for the Future of Conservatism," *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2019).

offer much differentiation. Nevertheless, three broad scenarios emerge from existing analyses:

1) **Soft Authoritarianism**. Some observers from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives expect the United States to succumb to at least a non-violent form of authoritarianism. In this view, ubiquitous digital technology will allow a small number of gatekeepers in government and/or the mainstream digital-platform companies to create (via the already rampant targeting of content), incentivize (via social-media's psychic-rewards structure) and coerce (via social ostracism and professional punishment) near-universal conformity to a set of beliefs. Individuals who resist this conformity will—like dissidents in previous authoritarian or totalitarian societies—be left with the choice of joining quasi-underground digital and physical networks or simply "living a lie."

The "fourth stage" of Harvard professor emerita Shoshana Zuboff's epistemic coup is a version of this scenario: "epistemic dominance is institutionalized, overriding democratic governance with computational governance by private surveillance capital. The machines know, and the systems decide, directed and sustained by the illegitimate authority and anti-democratic power of private surveillance capital."[34] The Christian apologist Rod Dreher also details a version of this scenario in a recent book, and believes it is largely unstoppable.[35]

Adherents point to China as an example of an existing soft-authoritarian order—facilitated by its digitally-enabled "social credit" system blending incentives and coercion—that will be irresistible to U.S. companies, political movements, and ultimately even political authorities seeking similar conformity. The German journalist Kai

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[34] Zuboff, op. cit.
[35] Rod Dreher, *Live Not By Lies* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020).

Strittmatter, a longtime observer and resident of China, documented that country's version of soft totalitarianism in his 2020 book *We Have Been Harmonized*.[36]

2)   **The Post-Truth State**. If there is a positive or at least opposite direction in which post-truth might lead the United States, then it is best captured by the political theorist Bruno Maçães in his highly original analysis *History Has Begun*, published in 2020. Maçães argues that the historical options of a "traditional state" that "pursues a conception of the good life that is always and everywhere true" or a "liberal state, which refrains from affirming the truth of any specific way of life," will give way to "the post-truth state"—which he sees nowhere more likely to emerge than in the United States He writes: "Like the traditional state, it pursues a specific view of the world or rather a number of specific views, but it does this with no illusions about their truth and without taking them too literally. It is fragmentary and composite, a vast stage where different possibilities may be concurrently staged."[37]

It is difficult to imagine how a post-truth state might function alongside existing U.S. political institutions or remain stable in any form—and Maçães offers no blueprint. However, his vision echoes the actual behavior of recently successful politicians across the ideological spectrum, who aim to be taken "seriously, not literally" in the apt formulation of the journalist Salena Zito.[38]

3)   **Disunited Decline**. A third general trajectory—and the one hypothesized in this paper—is a future in which control of "truth" remains fragmented (unlike Soft Authoritarianism) but the public arena remains a pitched

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[36] Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (New York: Custom House, 2020).

[37] Bruno Maçães, *History Has Begun: The Birth of a New America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 141.

[38] Salena Zito, "Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally," *The Atlantic* (September 23, 2016).

battlefield of incompatible "narratives" rather than a tolerant panoply of alternative truths (unlike the explicit Post-Truth State). A United States of Disunited Decline can expect a whipsawing of national partisan-political control, increasingly active bids for political autonomy or even separation on the part of some states and regions, and the multiplication and hardening of incompatible world views made worse by false or misleading information.

A U.S. version of soft authoritarianism would coincide with a *de facto* or *de jure* overthrow of our current constitutional order, and (hopefully) remains the least likely scenario in the immediate future. However, the definition, planning, and execution of U.S. national security policy under the remaining scenarios also will be much different—and in many ways more difficult—than at any time in the country's history.

National Security Implications

Initial Categories

Further research will evaluate the components of post-truth, its potential trajectories, and its impact on national security more deeply. For purposes of this initial paper, however, consider the following three broad categories of concern:

Post-Truth and Information. Reliable and widely trusted information is the cornerstone of analysis and policy recommendations in national security. As notions of truth and the institutional guardians of objective information wobble in our larger society, however, distinguishing between facts and opinions or between truth and emotions in U.S. national security affairs will become as difficult as it is in other arenas.

The so-called "fog of war"—describing the lack of definitive information that often exists on a live battlefield—may soon become a much more pervasive "fog of reality" if national security professionals sacrifice evidence standards, lose trust in their sources, or simply succumb to narratives in the wider society. The results could include manipulated or neglected analyses as well as irresistible pressures to act against exaggerated threats, or conversely to ignore manifest threats.

Consider the narratives that already have shaped perceptions of Russia on the part of top U.S. leaders in recent years—at the expense of objective analyses. On one side of the post-truth ledger: a narrative about the 2016 Trump presidential campaign's ties to Russia—assembled by political operatives of the other party and eventually demonstrated to have been utterly false—created a years-long drag on the legitimacy of a sitting president.[39] That same president, meanwhile, staked out his own narrative on Russian leader Vladimir Putin—reportedly absolving him and his government of disinformation activities around U.S. elections[40] and praising his skills as a leader.[41]

A fog of reality already obscures efforts to prioritize national security threats in a rational way. For example, in the face of manifest and severe security challenges from China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia—which are directly in the wheelhouse of a military organization—the Pentagon recently labeled climate change an "existential threat to our nation's security"[42] and issued a 30-page "Climate Adaptation Plan" committing the Department of Defense among many other things to "climate literacy,"

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[39] Robbins, op cit.

[40] "Trump sides with Russia against FBI at Helsinki summit," *BBC News* (July 16, 2018).

[41] "Trump tweets praise of Putin," *Politico* (December 30, 2016).

[42] Department of Defense, Press Release on the Climate Adaptation Plan (October 7, 2021).

"environmental justice" and the application of "climate intelligence."[43] The degree to which climate change is an existential challenge is the subject of legitimate debate. Compared with the other entities of government and civil society concerned with climate change, however, the Pentagon has no brief to carry and little ability to bring about change. If narrative-driven priorities nevertheless dominate (and to how many other threats would Pentagon leaders affix the adjective "existential"?), then the U.S. response to actual military challenges may be degraded proportionately.

Domestic policy serves as a canary in the coal mine of post-truth once again. Businesses and charitable foundations lately pledge fortunes to address problems such as "systemic racism" before even attempting to define them in ways that would permit meaningful responses. Legislators demand trillions to fund legislation (recently on "human infrastructure," for example) before it is even written. The larger narratives appear to matter more to many of the leaders involved than the prioritization of societal needs or the availability of effective responses.[44] Meanwhile, tangible social crises such as drug addiction and homelessness soar without commensurate responses from private philanthropy, and basic obligations of sovereign government such as the formulation and enforcement of a coherent immigration policy go largely unaddressed in the United States despite the grave risks created by such abdication.

Previously, the relative openness and rationality of U.S national security analysis could be considered an American strength in comparison with our authoritarian adversaries. We sacrifice this advantage at our peril.

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[43] Department of Defense, *Climate Adaptation Plan* (September 1, 2021), pp. 5, 6.
[44] See, for example, The Center for Effective Philanthropy, *Foundations Respond to Crisis: Toward Equity?* (December 2020).

Post-Truth and Decision. National security decision making will be less effective and decision execution will be less reliable if post-truth mindsets and behavior gain ground anywhere along the chain of command.

Here as elsewhere I intend no insult to the many national security professionals and Americans in general who lean to a political side (as I do). But neither the current nor the previous Administration provides comfort for a belief that national security is off-limits to alternative realities on consequential matters. President Trump's claim that the 2020 election was "stolen" joined other reported exaggerations and distortions that he shared—often via social media—in the 2016 election campaign and throughout his term in office.[45] Fears that the president might augment his chosen reality as the reelected Commander in Chief by starting a war with China reportedly were taken seriously enough by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he offered unsolicited reassurance to his Chinese counterpart.[46] And in early 2021, incoming Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin ordered a series of military "stand downs"—in this case discussions of military loyalty, the risks of extremism, and disinformation—in response to media reports that a number of the individuals arrested in the January 6 riot had military ties.[47] There is no evidence that significant numbers of military personnel shared President Trump's views on the election let alone were prepared to act on them, but

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[45] See for example: from Arizona, "Hand count in audit affirms Biden beat Trump, as Maricopa County said in November," *Arizona Republic* (September 23, 2021); from Georgia, "No evidence of fraud in Georgia election results," *USA Today* (June 1, 2021); and Wisconsin, "Wisconsin Supreme Court upholds Biden's win, rejects Trump's lawsuit," Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel (December 14, 2020).

[46] "Milley defends calls to Chinese at end of Trump presidency," *Associated Press* (September 29, 2021).

[47] See "The Military Confronts Extremism, One Conversation at a Time," *NPR*.com (April 7, 2021) and

media reporting and commentary created a troubling narrative nevertheless.[48]

For his part—during and after the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan only a few months into his Administration—President Biden made numerous, reportedly false claims about the military situation in Afghanistan, U.S. preparations for withdrawal, the options he had been given as Commander in Chief, and other issues.[49] Top military commanders testifying under oath attempted to correct the record in some cases—offering another post-truth spectacle to Americans and their adversaries alike.[50]

Post-Truth and Resilience. The United States in the years ahead will be a test case of whether a nation divided into competing "realities" can maintain its resilience and ultimately its unity—the foundational requirement of national security. With growing urgency, sober legal analysts and scholars with diverse political backgrounds have published warnings since at least 2020 that irreconcilable political divisions, secessions, and even a civil war are at hand.[51] In a recent *Washington Post* essay, historian Robert Kagan went so far as to contend that a U.S. constitutional crisis already is underway in slow motion, likely to culminate in civil unrest and a presidential

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[48] See for example Carol E. Lee, "In secret Facebook groups, America's best warriors share racist jabs, lies about 2020, even QAnon theories," *NBCNews.com* (April 16, 2021), and Christina Bembenek, Conspiracy Stand Down: How Extremist Theories Like QAnon Threaten the Military and What to Do About It," *War on the Rocks.com*, (March 10, 2021).

[49] Jim Geraghty, "The True Extent of Biden's Lies about Afghanistan," *National Review Online*, (August 20, 2021).

[50] General Milley and Others Testify on Afghanistan Withdrawal, *C-SPAN* (September 28, 2021).

[51] See for example David French, *Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).

legitimacy crisis after the 2024 election.[52] Kagan assigns blame primarily to former President Trump and predicts that the unrest will arise on the Right when Trump is defeated (in Kagan's view, inevitably) for re-election. As other observers were quick to point out, however, a mirror-image scenario is no less likely to arise if Trump or an acolyte is legitimately elected (as early polls suggest is quite plausible) and progressive activists put their earlier "resistance" back into play.[53] The potential for cyber-driven meddling by America's adversaries in situations of this nature will be very high.

Warnings of civil unrest leading to disunion variously attribute the problem to charismatic and social-media-savvy leaders such as Trump or Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to extreme gerrymandering that has eliminated most incentives for political compromise and paralyzed the U.S. Congress, or simply to the pervasive tribalism of "red-versus-blue" America. These conditions certainly have not helped matters. Post-truth, however, undergirds all of them. Unprecedented political-personality cults, irrational legislative meltdowns, and the willingness to believe anything of one's fellow citizens could not be sustained if millions of Americans did not inhabit separate information universes with no shared understanding of truth.

Considering Adversaries

It is important to draw a figurative line under the three sets of national security implications just identified and to note that none of them necessarily involve or require the nefarious engagement of America's foreign adversaries. The underlying conditions arose from within the United

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[52] Robert Kagan, "Our constitutional crisis is already here," *Washington Post* (September 23, 2021).
[53] For example Gerard Baker, "Democrats Destroy Political Norms to Save Them," *Wall Street Journal* (5 October 2021).

States and the examples did not hinge on external meddling. Where national security is concerned, however, the grease fire of post-truth could turn into a much larger conflagration if adversaries take advantage of our unprecedented information environment. They already are trying to do so in at least two, broadly defined ways:

Seeding disinformation. Russian (and previously Soviet) efforts to interfere in the domestic politics of the United States and its allies are long-standing and well-documented.[54] The anonymity and ubiquity of the internet make the introduction of disinformation into U.S. discourse on almost any topic relatively straightforward. As post-truth erodes the available correctives, the likelihood grows that disinformation campaigns sponsored by Moscow or other adversaries could take hold—even against stiff competition from home-grown narratives or perhaps in tandem with those.

Leveraging narratives. For its part, China appears increasingly willing to take advantage openly of America's self-imposed, vise-grip narratives to blunt U.S. foreign policy goals. In high-level diplomatic talks held earlier this year in Anchorage, for example, China's most senior foreign policy official responded to U.S. accusations of rampant human-rights abuses in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and elsewhere by charging that black Americans are being "slaughtered" in the United States.[55] If American leaders will not vigorously reject comparisons between an ongoing genocide against China's Uygher population and our nation's remaining race-related challenges, then China's

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[54] See for example Seth G. Jones, "Russian Meddling in the United States: The Historical Context of the Mueller Report, *CSIS Briefs* (March 27, 2019) and Susan Davis (General Rapporteur), "Russian Meddling in Elections and Referenda in the Alliance," NATO Parliamentary Assembly Science and Technology Committee (November 18, 2018).
[55] "US and China trade angry words at high-level Alaska talks," BBC News (19 March 2021).

efforts to avoid sanctions and other foreign pressures will be more likely to succeed. Far from rejecting efforts to use our home-grown narratives against us, however, U.S. foreign policy today appears to invite them. In October 2021, the Biden Administration released a "National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality"[56] with standards that the White House itself admits "no country in the world has achieved."[57] Bundling everything from abortion on demand to transgender rights into a prototypical narrative, the "strategy" tars the United States itself—Texas comes in for a particular severe critique—more than any adversary and leaves conservative allies such as Ukraine to reflect on whether their destiny lies with an America demanding radical cultural transformation or a Russia espousing tradition.[58] Many more examples of this challenge are on the horizon, beginning with an objective reckoning about the origins of COVID-19.[59]

Post-truth does not play out on a level playing field where America's long-practiced illiberal adversaries are concerned. Narratives that are offensive to the regime of Vladimir Putin stand much less chance of gaining large numbers of adherents in Russia, where state-controlled media act as a perverse if widespread countervailing influence. For its part, as discussed earlier, China already operates under a "soft authoritarian" version of post-truth, in which a regime-controlled reality is widely enforced through social and technological levers.[60] This makes China's leaders far more adept and recognizing, creating,

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[56] National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, The White House (Released 22 October 2021).

[57] Fact Sheet, National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality, The White House (22 October 2021).

[58] See Jakus Grygiel, "Woke Imperialism Harms U.S. Interests," *Wall Street Journal* (23 November 2021).

[59] See Gary Saul Morson, "Partisan Science in America," *Wall Street Journal* (11 October 2021).

[60] Strittmatter, op cit.

and manipulating a post-truth landscape than most Americans in positions of responsibility.

Responses

Current Policy Debate

RAND's 2018 "Truth Decay" paper and the recent Brookings Institution study by Jonathan Rauch effectively establish the stakes for U.S. public policy and the serious risks to our national cohesion from post-truth. However, almost no research so far has grappled with the policy implications of post-truth or potential responses—let alone the challenges to national security. To the extent that they occur at all, policy discussions about post-truth focus on defining truth and controlling information, and tend to be fractured, naïve, and incomplete.

Fractured. Existing policy debates themselves almost invariably take place in the context of post-truth. With increasingly rare exceptions: academic institutions and think tanks have been captured by one or the other post-truth tribe. As a result, their discussions and publications rarely attempt a neutral assessment of the causes, implications, or potential counters of post-truth. Too often: left-leaning discussions dwell on ways to control the flow of "disinformation" via digital channels—usually exempting the experts' own unchallenged biases and dismissing the consequences for free speech of what amounts to censorship. Right-leaning discussions often dwell on the need to prevent government, technology companies, and educational institutions from "cancelling" information and people—usually ignoring the dangerous challenges that truth decay poses to (not least their own side's) credibility and to the functioning of institutions. A serious grappling with the implications of post-truth must bring ideological

and partisan perspectives into dialogue or transcend them in view of the larger stakes.

Naïve. Truth decay behaves like an organic virus in some ways. In the current form I have described here: it is nearly impossible to contain, easily manipulated by the unscrupulous, able to take on new, mutated forms, and almost impossible to remove completely from a system. Most current policy debates ignore these characteristics and therefore end up putting forward responses wholly inadequate to the challenge.

For example, focused on what might be called the "supply side" of information flows, the U.S. Congress and much of the Washington think-tank community lately obsess over the future of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, under which interactive Internet service providers (Facebook, Google, and Twitter are the best-known examples) are treated as conduits rather than as originators of the information that appears on their platforms.[61] If these providers were held accountable for the accuracy of the information they make available, one side believes, truth would prevail online. Others argue that much of what remains of serious public debate could be shut down if providers enforced one version of the truth. Whether one encourages them from the left or decries them from the right, however, codified regulation by the U.S. Government, self-regulation on the part of social-media companies, or even technological solutions such as the use of "middleware" to curate information flows[62] are finger-in-

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[61] The policy statement of Section 230 reads as follows: "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider." 47 U.S. Code § 230.

[62] Barak Richman and Francis Fukuyama, "How to Quiet the Megaphones of Facebook, Google and Twitter," *Wall Street Journal* (12 February 2021).

the-dam responses against the massive flow of false information.

What might be called "demand-side responses" suffer from an equally serious problem. Calls for "media literacy" campaigns in schools, businesses, and the military; improvements in America's civics curricula, and the modeling of ethical journalism and respectful academic dialogue are admirable. However, they resemble vaccines produced in tiny numbers while a virus rages: too late to stop too much of the damage. The consequences of civic illiteracy, academic indoctrination, shoddy journalism, and other ethical collapses are vast but were long in coming and cannot be undone in a span of less than a generation—if at all.

A serious grappling with the implications of post-truth must proceed with eyes wide open, in the manner of military strategists confronted by an attack out of the blue that already has done grave damage.

Incomplete. Ultimately, the current policy debate on post-truth suffers from being incomplete in at least two respects. First, as highlighted here throughout, it devotes little attention to U.S. national security. Public-policy analysis and discussion rarely consider the implications of post-truth for the formulation of national security strategy in a nation with fewer and fewer shared reference points. Nor do they consider the implications of post-truth for the conduct of U.S. foreign and security policy. Second, the current policy debate too often focuses only on politics (charged with fomenting the problem) and the law (expected to resolve the problem) while genuine insights and meaningful responses almost certainly lie elsewhere. Truth decay is an unprecedented and largely unexpected problem, and so far, our efforts to make sense of it resemble fictional portrayals of people reacting to the arrival of an extraterrestrial spaceship. We apply conventional

frameworks and consider conventional responses while likely missing the real dangers entirely.

Significantly, the most useful analyses of post-truth so far come from eclectic sources of the sort cited here: a former intelligence analyst, a retired business professor, a Christian writer, an obscure but well-read diplomat, and the like. Current policy debate on post-truth is immature and incomplete because, by its very structure, such debate is blinkered. Congressional hearings and reports involving the creators, purveyors, and potential regulators of content themselves—organized by partisans in what many perceive as a fight for political survival—are not likely to produce rich explanations, objective projections, or enlightened responses regarding post-truth.

Potential Responses

The search for public-policy panaceas or indeed anything resembling traditional "policy solutions" regarding post-truth likely will prove elusive. Recalling the comparison to a biological virus: truth decay exists, it has taken hold on a large scale, and in a world of pervasive digital technology it cannot be willed out of existence. Especially from a U.S. national security perspective, the keys are acknowledgement of the problem, sober analysis, and open-minded consideration of options for working amidst the challenge. Building on this paper in a follow-up project, the author intends to consider such options in much greater detail, together with collaborators from various disciplines. At this stage, three broad sets of responses appear to offer the most promise against post-truth—grouped under "norms," "learning," and "alliance considerations."

Norms

A norm is something that is usual and typical: a standard. While the rational pursuit of truth is less and less typical in most public arenas and walks of life today, simply declaring that it *should* be typical is a vital first step in responding to post-truth. Acknowledging the problem and pledging to behave differently—as individuals, institutions, and even global alliances—will provide much-needed frames of reference.

Individuals. Individuals face daily choices in professional life about whether and how to respond to post-truth. While it would be foolish to seek out conflicts with others and endanger one's professional prospects through purely contrarian behavior, strategic decisions to stand firm against the most serious manifestations of post-truth can be liberating, engender respect, and encourage emulation. Academics and journalists in recent years often have faced the most consequential personal tests, and some of the outcomes are encouraging.[63] A growing number of ideologically diverse journalists including Andrew Sullivan, Bari Weiss, and Kevin Williamson—often refugees from elite publications that succumbed to post-truth—have earned loyal followings by conspicuously adhering to the norms of free speech, open inquiry, and respectful discourse. In a field less infected (so far) by post-truth, national security professionals may be able to help stave off the most serious manifestations of the problem by taking principled stands as individuals and establishing precedents in favor of reality-based analysis and publication.

Institutions. As important as individual stands can be, it is helpful that a small number of media and academic

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[63] For example, Abbot, op cit.; and Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity*, op cit.

institutions have declared their adherence to norms that make them intellectual havens "at scale" against post-truth. Several recently formed online publications (including *TheDispatch.com* and *Quillette.com*) established and advertise themselves consciously as reality-based journalistic endeavors. In the national security field, the *WarOnTheRocks.com* platform is an analogous bastion— openly "realist" in its general orientation but encouraging of discourse across ideological and political affiliations. In academia, the so-called "Chicago Principles[64] protecting free expression emerged in 2014 at the University of Chicago and have gained some traction among college and university leaders at several dozen institutions—a small but significant beachhead. At the same time, voluntary associations of individual professors such as the Heterodox Academy[65] and legal-defense groups such as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)[66] model the norms on which post-truth can be resisted. Similar public declarations and adherence to standards on the part of think-tanks and other private and public national security organizations would position them ahead of a growing problem.

Global Understandings. The importance of clearly articulated and openly embraced norms should not be discounted at the international level either. Once again, there is greater assurance amid greater numbers. The U.S. Government could not rely completely on what might be called a "Reality-Based Knowledge Regime," any more than it has relied completely on a "Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime." However, even simple declarations that the United States will commit to the rigor of facts, reject

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[64] Free Expression – The University's commitment to free expression (uchicago.edu), University of Chicago, accessed on December 12, 2021.
[65] See https://heterodoxacademy.org, "Tools and Resources," accessed December 12, 2021.
[66] See www.thefire.org, "About Us," accessed December 12, 2021.

disinformation campaigns, and expect the same from trusted partners would provide a helpful standard and a basis for censure—inside our own political culture and globally. Such a regime could gain adherents quickly, at least among countries that remain democracies committed to broader classical-liberal norms.

Learning

Short-term mass awareness and education efforts in response to post-truth are neither practical nor realistic, as discussed earlier. Americans did not succumb to the problem of post-truth quickly or as a result of a single cause or failing—and cannot quickly be "educated" out of it on a significant scale. It also is by no means clear that most schools and other relevant organizations would embrace and deliver such an education in the current environment. The unlikelihood of mass, one-size-fits-all education efforts does not mean that learning has no role to play, however, especially in organizations that grapple with information and carry out analyses of national security issues.

Career Training. Truth-seeking and truth-detecting should be explicit and deeply developed goals in the on-the-job education of national security professionals, including the rank-and-file military. Canned training programs—such as the "stand downs" and other curricula the Pentagon raced to implement following the 2021 presidential transition—will not be sufficient and likely will be viewed with suspicion in the larger environment of tribalism, particularly if those programs themselves are captured by post-truth offenders. However, rigorous curricula tailored to the professional level and roles of people working in the national security establishment stand a better chance of being effective and embraced. If such programs make clear the particular responsibility of defense, foreign-policy, and security operators to avoid succumbing to groupthink,

narratives, outright false information, and other aspects of post-truth, then they may be a source of pride rather than of grumbling acquiescence. Here again, the scrupulous avoidance of cultural or partisan bias will be essential. The intelligence analyst or officer coming to a new role from an elite university today is no less subject to predispositions and no less likely to have inhabited a post-truth silo than an enlistee who arrives from a public high school.

An "Outside-In" Mindset. The United States should explore robust information protections that are in some ways the opposite of traditional classification regimes—and would require a mindset shift. Rather than just worrying (inside-out) about how revelations of secret information might harm national security, the United States also should be concerned (outside-in) about how post-truth conditions could "contaminate" the information on which national security decisions are based. Such an approach has diverse implications for technology acquisition, information collection, and information-dissemination policy in the U.S. Government as well—but it hinges on the willingness to learn a new response to a new challenge.

Alliance Considerations

Adversaries will continue to use the conditions and levers of post-truth to weaken the United States in global competition. It remains to be seen whether U.S allies can provide relief and support where post-truth is concerned, analogous to their role in helping to prevent or respond to traditional military conflicts. Certainly, the challenge of post-truth is no less severe among most of America's allies

than it is at home.[67] The relevance of allies in response to post-truth likely will fall into two broad categories.

Reality checks. The classical-liberal inheritance of current democracies is real. It is no coincidence that America's post-World War II allies were or became liberal democracies that largely embraced Enlightenment notions of rationality in pursuit of objective truth. To the extent that a global version of Rauch's "reality-based community" still exists, its membership consists almost entirely of countries organized under liberal principles—most of which share alliances or treaty obligations with the United States and none of which are officially antagonistic. In the manner of close friends who manage to talk us out of our worst misconceptions or gently chide us for our biases or our embrace of conspiracy theories, liberal-democratic allies may act as reality checks on one another—at least at the leadership level—offering perspectives outside national or tribal information siloes that have a chance of being taken seriously. Alliances also may provide the most effective locations for multinational efforts to detect and counter disinformation campaigns and other organized threats against truth. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, for example, already conducts research, training, and exercises against threats to the security of digital technology network.[68] A similar approach to post-truth—perhaps linked to the Cyber Defence COE—could institutionalize the reality checks on information envisioned here.

Testbeds. Countries—known for various historical traditions, political cultures, and social norms—are as

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[67] See, for example, Lionel Shriver, "The Most Frightened Nation: Why the United Kingdom will never be the same," *City Journal* (Autumn 2021), pp. 23-31.
[68] Background on NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence is at www.ccdcoe.org.

different as individuals. These differences transcend liberal-democratic similarities and mean that even countries closely allied with the United States often approach problems in diverse ways. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, policies on lockdowns, quarantines, and vaccinations ranged widely across the societies of Europe, North America, and the Pacific Rim. Where post-truth is concerned, these differences could create a range of testbeds for political and social responses—especially if the failures of allies are studied and the successes captured and replicated. This will not guarantee uniform outcomes—a "solution" in one place may not work in another—but it may be as close to a laboratory environment as we will be able to devise in the race against post-truth.

These are modest initial responses, highlighting how much more attention to post-truth is necessary. This attention should include broader understandings of the problem, projections of how it may unfold, and considerations of how post-truth can be mitigated or reversed in ways that enhance basic freedoms of association, conscience, and speech.

Conclusion

There is nothing new under the sun, as folk wisdom rightly reminds us. But in rare instances a challenge appears that is sufficiently different from its precursors to warrant heightened attention. Post-truth is such a challenge. It is the blurring of opinion and fact, the growing unreliability of information offered as fact, and the erosion of attitudes and institutions that might provide correctives. As large and increasingly powerful segments of the population now act on the basis of post-truth—confined by no intellectual or partisan boundaries—its impact on America's economic and social wellbeing as well as our national security will continue to grow.

History provides many examples of people accepting false information on a large scale because human nature makes us vulnerable to it. Rationality is part of our biological hardwiring—but so are quick decisions based on what is in front of us, and adherence to the expectations of our tribes.[69] Today, however, digital technology makes post-truth different in quality and quantity from previous experience, by not simply allowing but actively encouraging information silos into which alternative viewpoints and even basic facts struggle to penetrate. The resulting belief systems can be self-curated, manipulated by individuals or organizations, and in some cases imposed by authoritarian governments: an enormous arena in which wholly unexpected dangers and transformations can emerge.

Little attention has been paid to the implications of post-truth for U.S. national security. This study identifies risks to the reliability of information pertinent to national security, risks to the quality of national security decision making up and down the chain of command, and risks to national resilience in a political culture with few shared reference points. But grudging or tentative acknowledgement of these risks so far has produced few "treatments" that are not worse than the disease.

The community of national security professionals can do better. The development or reassertion of norms will be a vital response, along with awareness and education efforts that assume the intelligence and good will of their participants. America's allies will be important in recognizing and responding to post-truth as well, since it poses a severe threat to the notions of liberal democracy we jointly defend.

Ultimately, a nation-state with no shared understanding of truth will be unlikely to define an effective national

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[69] See Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What it Is, Why it Seems Scarce, Why it Matters* (New York: Viking, 2021).

security strategy let alone implement defense and foreign policies backed by reasonable consensus, withstand the probing of adversaries, and ultimately preserve its unity. May the United States not become that nation.

About the Author

Dr. Gary L. Geipel is a Senior Associate of the National Institute for Public Policy, a professor and coordinator of the doctoral program in Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, and a corporate-communications and external-affairs consultant to industry.

Dr. Geipel began his professional life as an analyst for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency while completing his own doctoral studies. He then moved to the think-tank community, working as a Research Fellow, Director of Research, and eventually Chief Operating Officer of the Hudson Institute from 1990-2003. During that time, he also taught courses in U.S. foreign policy and European politics at Butler University. In 2004, Dr. Geipel affiliated with the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP), where he has collaborated on studies of tailored deterrence, terrorism, and transatlantic relations.

From 2004-19, Dr. Geipel worked primarily in the biopharmaceuticals industry as an executive in corporate communications and public affairs. He holds a bachelor's degree in international relations and journalism from the University of Southern California, and a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University in the City of New York. Dr. Geipel also studied at Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich, Germany, as an ITT International Fellow.

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