

June 2023

OCCASIONAL
PAPER

Volume 3, Number 6

Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World

Gary L. Geipel



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

**Reality Matters: National Security
in a Post-Truth World**

Gary L. Geipel

National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Copyright © 2023 by National Institute Press®

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by an electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The views expressed in this *Occasional Paper* are those of the author alone and do not represent any institution with which he is or has been affiliated.

National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

Table of Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements.....	v
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	7
Definition, Scope, and Major Critiques.....	13
Scenarios for National Security	33
Responses	53
Conclusion and Outlook	77
About the Author.....	85

Preface and Acknowledgements

Reality matters.

Objectively accurate information exists or can be discovered. Such information can be assembled into coherent responses to problems and questions—providing a basis for constructive action. More information and new insights will emerge, supporting or challenging initial conclusions. Increasingly correct and useful depictions of what was, what is, and what will be in the world around us are the result of this continuous process—moving us closer to the truth.

Banal until very recently, those today are the convictions of a dwindling, huddled group of Americans who can be called the “reality-based community.” The name apparently emerged as a term of derision less than two decades ago but was embraced by Jonathan Rauch in an essential 2021 book that outlines the origins, components, and astonishing accomplishments of reality-based, truth-seeking behavior in the few centuries of its grudging acceptance.¹

I identify proudly with the reality-based community.

That may sound like an arrogant claim of superior knowledge or virtue, but it is closer to the opposite. It is an unrelenting acknowledgment of possible error—and therefore of the right to dissent and the need to be challenged. That attitude is the reality-based community’s great heresy against a rapidly growing “post-truth” mindset, in which poses of conformity and utter certainty have become the poses of power in most walks of life.

Where post-truth is concerned, all of us suffer but none of us believe that we are sick. Translated into the physical world, it is difficult to imagine a more dangerous virus.

¹ Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

Allow me to share a few (more) opinions and disclosures here that could seem gratuitous but that serve a purpose, I hope. It is very important to me that this paper not be seen as underhanded support for a partisan-political or tribal agenda. As I will repeat often in the following pages, post-truth is not a party- or tribe-specific condition, and it has no partisan solutions. By their very nature, partisan and tribal responses will continue to make the underlying condition worse.

I do not want readers to read between the lines, trying to determine whose side I am on – when I do not intend to take sides. So, let me remove at least some of the guesswork.

Ideologically, I am a classical liberal – obsessed with civil discourse, free markets, free speech, political sparring, and, yes, the pursuit of truth. For most of my adult life (roughly since 1980), I believed that my classical liberalism aligned reasonably well with America’s Republican Party – and its candidates received the lion’s share of my votes. Recently, it has become harder and harder to discern classical-liberal principles in high-profile Republicans, especially one of them and his many supplicants. For its part, the Democratic Party today is farther removed than I have ever seen it from the cultural and intellectual diversity, fundamental tolerance, and respect for individual freedoms that might allow it to fill the partisan void for classical liberals. In U.S. presidential politics, the post-truth era has been the Age of the Fabulists, not surprisingly. While I enjoy some literary fabulists, I cannot abide them as political leaders. I have not cast a vote for president since 2012.

No U.S. presidential election has been stolen in my lifetime (1962+). Russian bots and trolls did not put Donald Trump in the White House. Trump and his campaign did not collude with Russia. Election fraud did not put Joe Biden in the White House. “Jim Crow 2.0” does not describe the American South of the early 21st Century.

I was among the first to receive the standard, two-shot COVID-19 vaccination, and I am an admirer of the public-private partnerships that delivered these vaccines to humanity so speedily. I also received the first available COVID-19 booster shot, in that case not because I felt that it was medically helpful but because it was the price of admission to some cultural events that I hoped to attend. The climate, obviously, is changing and always has been changing since the planet began to spin. I am interested in how it is changing now, and what can be done to mitigate any worrisome consequences. There are two distinct biological sexes.

I hope that helps.

I am very grateful to Martin Gurri and Bruno Maçães for joining me in a NIPP-sponsored webinar after the first of my papers on post-truth and national security appeared. What I learned from them in that discussion—and through their highly original and powerful writings—has helped me a great deal. Taking extreme liberties with these descriptions of their views, Gurri’s “duh” and Maçães’ “bring it on” regarding post-truth are the guardrails between which I try to drive in this paper.

Above all, I continue to be very grateful to the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP) and especially to Keith Payne and Amy Joseph for the encouragement they have given me to explore the exceedingly odd and perpetually controversial topic of post-truth—with a particular focus on its implications for national security. The ideas and recommendations offered here are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of NIPP or its board, leadership, and staff.

Gary L. Geipel

Executive Summary

This study is the third in a series of publications on the “post-truth” information environment dominating today’s public square, and its implications for U.S. national security. The first paper in the series offered a rudimentary definition of post-truth, described current conditions and examples of the post-truth environment, put forward three general implications of post-truth for national security, and began to outline potential responses.² A second, shorter publication expanded the description of post-truth to explain the intensity of its current manifestations, placed it in the context of the so-called “Information Revolution,” and highlighted some early examples of its relevance to national security.³

In this paper, I adhere to a simple, three-part description of the conditions, general implications for national security, and most troubling scenarios of the post-truth environment—building on the previous work. These are summarized in Figure 1 and will be expanded throughout the paper.

Figure 1: National Security, Post-Truth – A Matrix

DEFINITION	GENERAL THREATS	NATIONAL SECURITY SCENARIOS
Narratives	Information Accuracy	Designed Crises / Ignorance
Tribalism	Decision Quality	Epistemic Coups
Entrenchment	National Resilience	Fatal Distractions

² Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Geipel-OP-12-for-web.pdf>.

³ Gary L. Geipel, “This Changes Many Things: Post-Truth and National Security,” *Information Series*, No. 515 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 22, 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/IS-515.pdf>.

This paper introduces a set of definitions, covering post-truth itself and the three conditions that gave rise to it and sustain it:

- (1) **Narratives** now dominate public discourse and take precedence over Enlightenment notions of truth-seeking. In the manner of medieval religions, narratives establish dogma (and condemn heretics) at the expense of verifiable data, robust analysis, learning, and revision.
- (2) Intense **tribalism**—roughly determined by cultural affinity and partisan alignment—describes how more and more Americans locate themselves in the competition between alternative realities.
- (3) The **entrenchment** of post-truth continues apace, against and even *inside* the institutions that might resist it. Earlier guardians of truth-seeking behavior—including academics, professional journalists, elite members of the legal profession, and business leaders—now conform or shudder more than resist in the face of imposed “truth.”

This paper joins other analyses in arguing that digital technology acts as an accelerant of post-truth, actively encouraging poorly supported beliefs and outright fabrications. The belief that post-truth only affects “the other side” is challenged here—with evidence suggesting that the embrace of conspiracy theories, acceptance of unproven narratives, and one-sided engagement with information are distributed evenly across the ideological spectrum. I also respond to important criticisms of the notion of post-truth, namely: that objective reality does not exist or is not meaningful; that there was no Golden Age of truth-seeking; and, that new or anticipated technology will (and perhaps should) defeat any resistance to post-truth.

On that foundation, three major types of scenarios emerge here to describe the implications of post-truth for the formulation and execution of national security policy. First, “designed crises” or their counterparts of “designed ignorance” are scenarios associated with inaccurate or incomplete information—in which negligible or ill-defined problems are inflated and verifiable risks are largely ignored. Second, scenarios that amount to “epistemic coups” already have played out on a national scale and may affect national security as well in the coming years. These coups reflect and exacerbate threats to the quality of decision-making. Third, what I call “fatal distractions” include scenarios that flow from the previous types and could place the resilience of the United States in question.

The bulk of this paper then focuses on potential responses to post-truth. I outline four key principles to guide responses without making the underlying problems worse. First and foremost, post-truth is a universal challenge—not unique to “other” demographic, intellectual, partisan, or tribal groups besides one’s own. Second, fighting post-truth means challenging a claim rather than banning a claim—an essential commitment if the United States is to avoid outright censorship and confront its ongoing wave of “cancellations.” Third, overcoming post-truth means rejecting supposed oracles and instead strengthening our personal and collective abilities to evaluate and act on information. Finally, keeping post-truth at bay requires the elevation of skepticism and its companion: transparency. Credulous acceptance of information and black-boxed approaches to truth-seeking are two sides of the same dangerous coin that imperils the United States today.

This paper engages critically with early institutional responses to post-truth—including self-proclaimed “anti-disinformation” efforts and organizations—many of which are examples of the problem rather than remedies for it.

Similarly, this assessment is skeptical of technology-centered responses to post-truth, which include government-supervised content curation, the use of so-called “middleware,” and bans of specific social-media practices, individual users, or entire platforms. Approaches of these kinds are variously naïve or inconsistent with the continued functioning of an open society.

To get beyond the existing and largely failed responses to post-truth, I draw attention to lessons from the early nuclear age. Now, as then: heterodox grappling with the implications of vastly powerful new technologies, experimentation with a range of practical responses, and the development of norms consistent with higher societal values offer better long-term prospects than attempted bans or quick fixes. For example, large-scale, unbiased awareness and education efforts—including some that focus on the armed forces and other components of the U.S. national security establishment—should be much more widely pursued than has been the case so far. Institutional responses should be attempted that (1) hold fast to the professional integrity of truth-dependent occupations and the core principles of the Constitution of Knowledge; (2) learn from mistakes rather than ignoring them, through the use of ideologically balanced commissions and the like; and (3) bring concerned guardians of truth-seeking together in ways that promote self-correction rather than self-reinforcement. Finally—and this, too, is consistent with the lessons of the nuclear age—the articulation and discussion of explicit norms are needed. This paper offers a draft “Reality Convention” consisting of 10 normative statements about the importance of truth-seeking attitudes and behavior. Widespread consideration of such norms would signal basic awareness of a problem; create an objective measuring stick; and make it easier for adversaries—domestic and foreign—to find common ground and change their behaviors.

In the end, this analysis leaves open the possibility that the pace and scope of America's digital-powered transformation already preclude a return to anything resembling the *status quo ante* of truth-seeking. It acknowledges that the rise of Artificial Intelligence makes the underlying challenges and stakes more daunting. And it admits that other technologies may create digital worlds utterly beyond the reach of traditional governance and norms. But these admissions make our grappling with post-truth all the more essential for national security professionals in the United States—a nation whose very reasons for being hinge on “truths” self-evident and otherwise.

Introduction

Whenever we get an intimation of truth – whether we feel it, listen for it, sense it, or think it out for ourselves – we should expect it to talk to us and we should be able to try, if we like, to express it for others.

Felipe Fernández-Armesto
Truth, 1999⁴

Truth exists, but it is an elusive destination. Well-established institutions, instruments, and mindsets help us to navigate toward it. Sometimes the journey is easy while at other times it is slow and painful, if it can be accomplished at all. Truth can slip away or come into sharp focus quickly. Rarely can one person find it alone. When we arrive at the truth, many of us—including some who once were skeptics—will agree that we have reached our destination. Even then, however, all of us should encourage those who wish to explore further, since we may have been wrong after all, or just partially correct.

That model of truth had its origins in antiquity but did not begin to take hold in the Western world until the late Renaissance. It did not flourish—and then only in some places—until after the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries. To be sure, it is a model of *secular* truth, compatible with but not relevant to the search for religious truth or spiritual experience. Its purview is the world of testable and ultimately verifiable experiences and facts: reality. It is known by norms and practices such as government oversight, legal discovery, objective journalism, peer review, and the scientific method. It has helped the societies that embraced it to innovate, improve

⁴ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 1999), p. 229.

their material conditions, and avoid, or at least survive, threats to their national security.

Today, that idea of truth and that model of truth-seeking are wobbling in the United States to the point of near collapse. The United States increasingly embodies “post-truth,” a condition in which processes of discovery are put aside and “truth” is variously regarded as obvious, non-existent, unknowable, or (in a pinch) purely personal. Operating in this new realm: savvy purveyors can invent and propagate unsubstantiated ideas or entire worldviews on a massive scale; self-regarding oracles with large followings can declare the flimsiest propositions to be settled or the most plausible alternatives to be unmentionable; and an entire society can lose itself in fables while real and present dangers loom.

In the long span of human history, what we now call post-truth is hardly unusual. Rather, it was the norm. Numerous “digital accelerants” (more later) give post-truth particular virulence today, but its basic manifestations would surprise no student of history. It describes human intellectual sparring in the absence of the Enlightenment’s greatest achievement: the Constitution of Knowledge with its truth-seeking institutions, standards of evidence, and (mostly) civil discourse.⁵

Truth exists and reality matters – nowhere more so than in the information gathering, analysis, and decision-making of national security. That is the bizarre premise of this paper – bizarre because it apparently needs to be asserted once again.

Defined in the broadest terms, two schools of thought contended for the allegiance of international relations and national security communities in recent decades. In the United States in particular, a person tended either to idealism, focused on what can and *should* be achieved in the

⁵ Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, op cit., passim.

international system, or to realism, focused on what can and *must* be achieved in the international system. Those are my definitions, but I believe they are fair to both schools. “Should” captures the aspirational nature of idealist goals and “must” captures the hard-nosed bottom lines of the realists—but “can” is the common denominator. Idealists and realists alike grappled with actual information and sought truth, arguing fiercely amongst and between themselves, to put forward goals that could be achieved in the real world—or be discarded quickly by decision-makers if they failed.

The goals of idealists in recent decades—such as arms control, nuclear non-proliferation regimes, and global peacekeeping efforts, for example—were reality-based goals. They emerged not from fabrications or fantasies but from objective assessments of reality. Even the advocates of global nuclear disarmament generally acknowledge that its achievement cannot be willed out of thin air but would require some heretofore “unanticipated happening.”⁶ The goals of realists—such as containment, nuclear deterrence, and military interventions, for example—also were reality-based goals. Even when faulty intelligence hampered them, these goals relied on good-faith efforts to assess and act upon available information.

Today in the fields of international relations and national security, most American idealists and realists still pursue reality-based goals. We should not assume that this situation will continue, however, or that our institutions and traditions uniquely inoculate the U.S. national security establishment against the burgeoning post-truth environment that surrounds it.

Consider that in just the last seven years—without any evidence, let alone confirmation by anything resembling a Constitution of Knowledge—tens of millions of Americans

⁶ Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023), pp. 54, 55.

publicly professed and often came to believe that a U.S. president “colluded” with an adversarial foreign government; that fraud by numerous individuals and organizations in multiple states prevented the re-election of that same U.S. president; that biological sex can be changed by declaration; that something accurately identified as a virus nevertheless defied the most basic characteristics of any virus before it;⁷ and, that the animating goal of the U.S. founding was the continued enslavement of Blacks. Consider that this is a truncated list. Consider that to dissent from these beliefs, inside the large communities that profess them, is to risk personal humiliation and professional ruin in America today. And remember that in each case, these beliefs have been used to justify consequential, large-scale actions—including “cancellations” of distinguished leaders, mass firings,⁸ multi-year school closures, costly economic disruptions, pitched legislative battles, and a mob’s storming of the U.S. Capitol—that harmed large numbers of individuals and deepened political and social conflict.

If post-truth can reach elections and politics, history, public health, and even basic biology, then it can reach national security. We have a preview of it in the behavior of Russia. In February 2022, the Russian Federation launched a large-scale military invasion of Ukraine at great human and economic cost—with no basis whatsoever in reality. Some Western realists argue that the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and various diplomatic miscues on the part of the United States

⁷ Namely: contraction of a virus confers immunity; viruses continuously mutate to counter both natural immunity and vaccinations, and the spread of a virus can be slowed but not stopped in human communities.

⁸ These include 8,000 much-needed military personnel released for refusing COVID-19 vaccinations despite facing essentially no risk from the virus.

and its European allies contributed to Russian paranoia.⁹ Externally and especially to its own people, however, the Vladimir Putin regime did not justify its 2022 invasion decision by citing actual NATO or U.S. policy, let alone actual provocations by Ukraine or the West. Instead, the Putin regime constructed and relentlessly spread narratives of grievance consisting almost entirely of manufactured claims woven into a fabric of revanchist nostalgia. Creating the fabric was a long-term effort dating at least to the 2000s, as documented among others by historian Timothy Snyder.¹⁰ Weaving in the manufactured claims took less time but required an enormous, clearly coordinated campaign.

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) analyzed more than 10,000 articles from pro-Kremlin news outlets to identify five recurring narratives.¹¹ A narrative suggesting that "Ukraine is aggressive," for example, included hundreds of manufactured stories in the weeks before the invasion—claiming, among many other things, that Ukraine had attacked a kindergarten and targeted chlorine tanks in the already Russian-dominated Donbas region. Russian opinion leaders, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, asserted and stuck to the preposterous claim that the invasion aimed to "denazify" Ukraine, which even the Jewishness of Ukraine's president did nothing to diminish.¹² In a companion report, DFRLab also documents the Kremlin's massive disinformation campaign—drawing on fabrication, forgery, and extensive

⁹ "John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis," *The Economist* (March 19, 2022).

¹⁰ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

¹¹ Atlantic Council, *Narrative Warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian news outlets justified a war of aggression against Ukraine*, DFRLab (undated).

¹² Omer Bartov, "Why Does Russia's Leadership Keep Saying that Ukrainians Are Nazis?," *Wall Street Journal* (May 12, 2022).

digital influence operations—to undermine Ukraine’s image elsewhere in the world.¹³ Russia’s disinformation attacks on Poland also are well documented.¹⁴

Inventing pretenses to justify war is nothing new in the annals of human affairs. The sheer brazenness and scale of Russian efforts to manufacture reality inside and outside its own borders are unprecedented, however, constituting what some observers already see as a separate “domain” of warfare in which Russia’s abilities (unlike its performance in other domains) are unusually good.

Russia is a post-truth threat. Russia also is a post-truth cautionary tale. It demonstrates that fabricated information and unsubstantiated beliefs can be placed into circulation, spread uncorrected on a society-wide scale, and serve to mobilize action—even military action—beyond a nation’s own borders. In the United States, let us hope that “it could never happen here.” But let us not take that for granted.

¹³ Atlantic Council, “*Undermining Ukraine: How the Kremlin employs information operations to erode global confidence in Ukraine*,” DFRLab (undated).

¹⁴ Stanisław Żaryn, “How the Disinformation Gets Made,” *American Purpose* (February 1, 2023).

Definition, Scope, and Major Critiques

The real problem of humanity is the following: We have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall.

Edward O. Wilson, 2009¹⁵

This series owes a debt to researchers at RAND, who coined the term “truth decay” to describe “the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life” – the genesis of our burgeoning post-truth environment. Writing in 2018, Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich at RAND characterized truth decay as having four components: “increasing disagreement about facts; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; the increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts.”¹⁶ I cannot improve on that definition of the core problem. Post-truth describes the larger environment in which truth decay now spreads, which in my analysis has three components that reinforce one another.

Figure 2: National Security, Post-Truth – Definition

DEFINITION	GENERAL THREATS	NATIONAL SECURITY SCENARIOS
Narratives	Information Accuracy	Designed Crises / Ignorance
Tribalism	Decision Quality	Epistemic Coups
Entrenchment	National Resilience	Fatal Distractions

¹⁵ Edward O. Wilson, quoted in a September 9, 2009, debate at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, *Oxford Essential Quotations* online edition (2016).

¹⁶ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” *RAND Corporate Research Report RR-2314-RC* (2018), pp. x-xi.

First, *narratives* dominate most public discourse in a post-truth environment. Like scientific paradigms or intellectual philosophies, narratives consist of individual contentions that cohere into a larger notion of how some aspect of the world works. Unlike scientific paradigms or intellectual philosophies, however, narratives are not collections of facts or theories put forward for questioning and reassessment. Narratives usually begin and end with rigid dogmas to which any actual evidence—if it is considered at all—must conform.

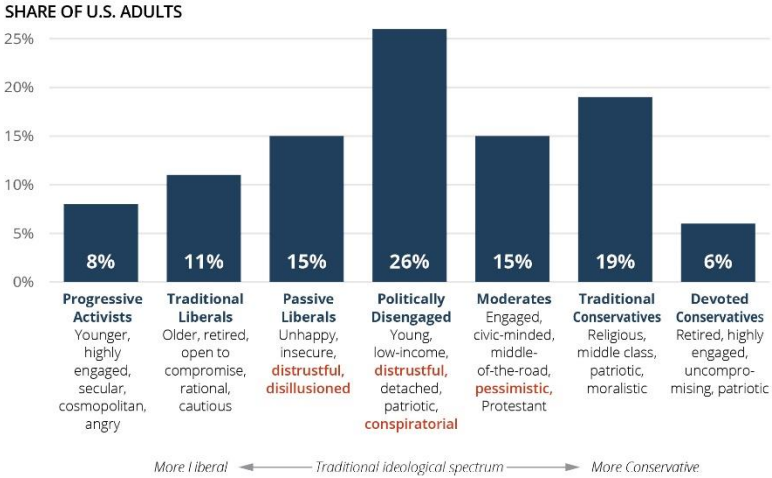
Verifiable data, robust analysis, learning, and revision are anathema to narratives and their guardians. Thus, for example, the anti-vaccine narrative is impervious to massive statistical evidence of the life-saving efficacy of vaccines. The systemic racism narrative discounts decades of progress against racial discrimination. The climate change narrative barely nods to actual data or evolving climate projections. In each case, anecdotes (at best) sustain the narrative while competing interpretations, other available information, and even alternative approaches to the ostensible concern receive no hearing from adherents in thrall to the underlying dogma.

It is increasingly difficult to identify a major public policy question in the United States that avoids the intense gravitational pull of existing narratives or does not give rise to one of its own. In addition to the issues already mentioned: entitlement spending, free speech, homelessness, immigration, policing, public-school reform, student debt—and, of course, such “culture war” topics as abortion, religious freedom, and transgenderism—all are dominated by narratives. Not surprisingly, this aspect of post-truth paralyzes civic discourse and legislative deliberation alike. Precluding dialogue and reconciliation by their very nature, narratives make problem-solving at the societal level nearly impossible.

Second, *tribalism* is a central feature of the post-truth environment: the sorting of more and more individuals into antagonistic groups on the basis of cultural affinity and partisan alignment. A highly representative study of more than 8,000 Americans conducted by a non-partisan organization called More in Common identified seven U.S. “tribes” with distinct characteristics (see Figure 3). The report highlights the diversity of actual worldviews among U.S. adults—which is somewhat encouraging—and proposes a distinction between and among tribes on the “wings” of the spectrum and those who constitute an “exhausted majority” in between. Carried out five years ago, however—an eternity in post-truth time—the report likely underestimates the growing size and outsized influence of the “wings.” Aligned on the left with the Democratic Party and on the right with the Republican Party, the tribes known colloquially as “Woke” and MAGA (Make America Great Again) today appear to dominate almost completely the media discourse, legislative priority-setting, and social media landscape on most issues of American life.

The Hidden Tribes report points to the reasons for America’s growing polarization. Several characteristics of the “exhausted majority” (highlighted in red in Figure 3) suggest why its members are more likely to succumb to the perceived dominance of the wings rather than to resist it. Various disilluminated, distrustful, pessimistic, and conspiratorial themselves, Americans who might still describe themselves as “moderates” or as political or classical “liberals” likely find increasing security in the simple answers and community solidarity offered by the most aggressive tribes. The major narratives, meanwhile, have been largely constructed by members of the wing tribes and naturally drive more and more others into their powerful orbits.

**Figure 3: America’s “Hidden Tribes”
Findings of 2018 More in Common Report**



Source: <https://www.moreincommon.com>

The pervasive daily experiences of Americans—as television news personalities hawk crowd-pleasing conspiracy theories, leaders at work declare pronouns that never had been in doubt, fellow parishioners mock last year’s conservative hero as today’s “Republican in Name Only,” and the neighbors call every hot summer afternoon “climate change,” etc.—condition us to accept the underlying tribal mindsets. The same experiences, meanwhile, leave any resistant moderates or classical liberals feeling like society’s freaks and misfits.

Finally, *entrenchment* is a key element of the post-truth environment. Put simply: there are few places left to seek redress or shelter from the narratives and the dominant tribes. Most leaders of public companies today declare their fealty and devote large consulting and staffing resources to ever-changing, narrative-based “Environmental, Social, and Governance” (ESG) goals—no matter their actual belief in these goals—to meet the supposed expectations of major

investors.¹⁷ Candidates for public office at any level of government agonize over whether or not to endorse outright fiction: lately, for example, an election conspiracy in one party and the mutability of biological sex in the other. Individuals fear exposure of their actual views on many topics so intensely that new methodologies of “private opinion” research as opposed to public opinion research have arisen to unlock actual beliefs.¹⁸ In the workforce, Americans must accept an increasing number of social catechisms, invasions of privacy, and even medical interventions as the requirements of continued employment. Students at a majority of major U.S. colleges and universities must fear anonymous reporting of any “bias” against prevailing identity narratives.¹⁹ Visitors to some arts festivals now must affirm loyalty oaths to tribal dogma before gaining admission.²⁰ And so on.

Far from standing as the final bulwarks against post-truth, the earlier guardians of the Constitution of Knowledge have been among the first to align with narratives and tribes and to shun outliers in their midst. The business models of iconic newspapers and television news networks have shifted to narrative validation and away from even the pretense of objective journalism.²¹

¹⁷ Even some observers sympathetic to ESG ratings consider them a “sham,” and ever more draconian demands on companies surely will follow. See James Surowiecki, “The Hottest Trend in Investing Is Mostly a Sham,” *The Atlantic* (May 26, 2023).

¹⁸ For example, “Private Opinion in America,” *Populace Insights* (August 2022).

¹⁹ *Free Speech in the Crosshairs: Bias Reporting on College Campuses* (Washington, D.C.: Speech First, 2022), p. 3. See https://speechfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/SF-2022_Bias-Response-team-and-Reporting-System-Report_Final.pdf.

²⁰ Gary Geipel, “The Sundance Film Festival Loyalty Oath,” *Wall Street Journal* (January 19, 2023).

²¹ See, for example, Martin Gurri, “Journalism Betrayed,” *City Journal* (Winter 2021), pp. 12-19.

Fundamental principles of the law and legal education—including aspects of the right to representation, judicial neutrality, and free expression on campus—have moved from banal to barely mentionable in elite legal circles.²² And academic departments across more and more disciplines resemble medieval clerisies in their insistence on publicly professed conformity.²³

Some observers still cling to the hope that post-truth is some sort of fever that will pass, as younger activists mature, and politics returns to some sort of antediluvian normalcy. However, the examples here point to a profound and enduring transformation of institutional conduct and professional mindsets—a transformation that is in no way limited to younger Americans. It is not teenage activists who establish ESG goals and campus speech codes, run for office endorsing obvious fiction, and turn elite news outlets into propaganda vehicles. It is the proverbial “adults in the room” who do these things.

New challenges to the Constitution of Knowledge arise faster than they can be comprehended, let alone countered. Unsuspecting organizations and individuals conform—the path of least resistance—while the guardians who might have known better simply surrender the gates. The wisdom of experience no longer seems to hold sway. The kids will not be alright (thanks to the adults). Post-truth is entrenched.

²² Aaron Sibarium, “The Takeover of America’s Legal System,” *The Free Press* (March 21, 2022).

²³ Robert Shibley, “UCLA diversity requirement threatens academic freedom, trust in academia,” *Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression* (November 9, 2018); and, Sabrina Conza, “FIRE calls on Iowa Law to nix inclusion pledge for faculty evaluations,” *Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression* (November 3, 2021).

The Accelerant of Digital Technology

A definition of today's post-truth environment must acknowledge the influence of digital technologies—and especially social media—that make all three aspects of the condition much, much worse:

- Digital tools feed the narratives in the manner of a cotton candy machine with its adhering swirl of addictive goo. They allow the creation and dissemination of information in previously unimaginable quantities and at previously unimaginable speeds—with no more than the peripheral involvement of institutions that might verify, contest, or even place the information in context.
- Complex and opaque algorithms enable social media to discern our biases and assure that we are fed a steady diet of the same—reinforcing tribalism at every online turn. No one has described this process more comprehensively and eloquently than Shoshana Zuboff, a retired Harvard Business School professor, who argues that “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.”²⁴
- The experience of social media—where we see and imitate the “likes” of what appear to be our popular and successful “connections” and “friends”—further the entrenchment of post-truth. We see no

²⁴ Shoshana Zuboff, “The Coup We Are Not Talking About,” *The New York Times* (January 29, 2021).

alternatives to conformity within our communities and can imagine no protection from punishment if we were to dissent—so we conform and do not dissent.

In *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Rauch offers an effective analogy to describe the profound impact of digital technology and social media on the pursuit of truth. He characterizes the reality-based community (once including many journalists, publishers, peer reviewers, and the like) as a network of “filtering and pumping stations” through which claims flow: “A strongly supported claim will fare better, and if it is widely accepted it will disseminate across the network and enter the knowledge base. ... [T]he pumps and filters channel information toward truth.”²⁵ The digitalization of information, Rauch argues, did not simply interfere with this network but has overwhelmed and actually reversed its effects:

Suppose some mischievous demon were to hack into the control center one night and reverse the pumps and filters. Instead of straining out error, they pass it along. In fact, instead of slowing the dissemination of false and misleading claims, they accelerate it. Instead of marginalizing ad hominem attacks, they encourage them. Instead of privileging expertise, they favor amateurism. Instead of validating claims, they share claims. Instead of trafficking in communication, they traffic in display. Instead of identifying sources, they disguise them. ... If that were how the filtering and pumping stations worked, the system would acquire a *negative* epistemic valence. It would actively disadvantage truth.²⁶

²⁵ Rauch, p. 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The demon, of course, is each one of us—consuming and embellishing the narratives, cowering inside our tribes, and accepting, if not encouraging, the entrenchment of post-truth. After the 2016 election and at other times in recent years, some Americans took perverse comfort in the notion that nefarious Russian-controlled “bots” and other influence operations in social media determined the beliefs and behavior of their fellow citizens (though not their own). But deep, peer-reviewed research found no evidence that Russian efforts actually influenced the outcome of the 2016 U.S. election.²⁷ Inside our information silos, Americans are quite capable of accomplishing for ourselves what censors and propagandists do in China and Russia—or what adversarial disinformation campaigns might aim to foment in our culture.

The Implication of Left and Right

Narrative dominance, tribal consolidation, and the entrenchment of conformity have been examined by others as separate phenomena. It is their *coexistence* that creates the dangers of our particular moment, however, and it is their coexistence that I define as post-truth. Individually, these conditions are causes for concern. Together, they make possible the increasingly confident dismissal of obvious realities in favor of curated preferences—and a growing rejection of the truth that might emerge under a Constitution of Knowledge.

I offer this definition knowing that it is disconcerting to most people who consider it. All of us suffer from the communicable disease of post-truth but few of us believe

²⁷ Gregory Eady, et al., “Exposure to the Russian Internet Research Agency foreign influence campaign on Twitter in the 2016 US election and its relationship to attitudes and voting behavior,” *Nature Communications* 14, 62 (2023).

that we are sick. For reasons that are important to consider, American elites on the left side of our political spectrum remain especially likely to reject suggestions that post-truth affects them. But it certainly does affect them, with potentially more serious consequences than similar manifestations on the right.

At the most basic level: Americans' willingness to believe conspiracy theories is spread evenly across the political spectrum. A recent academic study—based on 20 surveys carried out in the decade prior to 2021—found that about a third of the examined conspiracy theories appealed to Republicans and a third to Democrats, while the remaining third found adherents across both parties.²⁸ As British author Christopher J. Snowden points out, responses to the study on social media illustrated a fundamental problem of post-truth: “There were those who insisted that some of the theories reviewed should not have been included because they were true.”²⁹ Particularly challenging to entrenched elites on the left are what Snowden calls “high-status” conspiracy theories: “In Britain, there is no stigma attached to people who believe that the Conservatives are planning to privatize the NHS [National Health Service]. You have nothing to fear from claiming that the Russian government somehow brought Brexit about.”³⁰ Similarly among U.S. elites, there is no stigma attached to people who believe that Republicans are planning to eliminate women's rights and turn the country into some version of *The Handmaid's Tale*. One has nothing to fear from claiming that the Russian government somehow brought about the election of Donald Trump.

²⁸ A. Enders, C. Farhart, J. Miller, et al., “Are Republicans and Conservatives More Likely to Believe Conspiracy Theories?” *Political Behavior* (2022).

²⁹ Christopher J. Snowden, “The Rise of the Respectable Conspiracy Theory,” *Quillette.com*, March 23, 2023.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Due to the one-sidedness of possible correctives, recent examples of post-truth in action have been more shocking on the right but more consequential on the left. The claims by President Donald Trump and some of his advisors of a “stolen” 2020 presidential election had no basis whatsoever in fact—as Trump’s own Attorney General made clear at the time—but a mob nevertheless felt inspired to storm the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, as legislators met to certify the election. The televised scenes shocked Americans who viewed them, as they should have. So far, no manifestation of post-truth has arisen more quickly or played out more dramatically on the national stage. Under prevailing conditions, however, there was no risk that reporting of the actual U.S. election outcome would be suppressed, that the January 6 mob or sympathetic Americans would prevent President Joe Biden from taking office, or that the individuals who broke laws on January 6 would escape accountability and punishment. The prevailing conditions included a near-complete alignment of elite news reporting against the election-fraud claims made by former President Trump; the existence of truth-tellers such as Attorney General Barr and numerous state officials in the offending tribe; and, free discussion among Americans on social media and in other public forums of alternatives to President Trump’s false claims.

Those conditions rarely prevail—and certainly not in combination—on matters of post-truth embraced by the left in American life. Elite opinion formation in the United States—in academia, entertainment, and journalism alike—is dominated almost completely by individuals on the left side of the tribal spectrum. In a recent book, Chapman University scholar Joel Kotkin notes that “by 2018, barely 7 percent of U.S. reporters identified as Republicans, and some 97 percent of all political donations from journalists

went to Democrats.”³¹ Predictably, therefore, almost all elite media coverage of post-truth and its manifestations describes them as exclusively right-wing problems. The missed opportunities to build broad-based awareness and robust defenses often approach the level of farce. For example, an 8,000-word *New York Times Magazine* story on viral disinformation in October 2020 mustered not a single example of any individual or organization on the left ever having taken part in, let alone succumbing to, such a thing.³²

Similarly, where academia is concerned, Kotkin observes that “today’s universities are achieving levels of unanimity that one might have found in a medieval school of theology or a Soviet university.”

In 1990, according to survey data by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 42 percent of professors identified as “liberal” or “far-left.” By 2014, that number had jumped to 60 percent. A few years later, a study of 51 top-rated colleges found that the proportion of liberals to conservatives was generally at least 8 to 1, and often as high as 70 to 1. ... The skew is particularly acute in fields that most affect public policy and opinion. Well under 10 percent of faculty at leading law schools, such as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Columbia, and Berkeley—schools that graduate many of the nation’s leaders—describe themselves as conservative.³³

³¹ Joel Kotkin, *The Coming of Neo Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (New York: Encounter Books, 2020), p. 53.

³² Emily Bazelon, “Free Speech Will Save Our Democracy,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 13, 2020). The article appeared just as the reporter’s own newspaper accommodated one of the most egregious examples of disinformation on the left in recent years: a statement by former intelligence officials regarding the “Hunter Biden laptop” story. The statement will be addressed later in this study.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

With similarly monolithic leanings in the arts and increasingly in the C-suites of large corporations, the result is that the left's information silos are nearly impervious to challenge anywhere in the daily life of most Americans, as essayist Barton Swaim illustrates vividly:

The conservative voter who follows nothing but right-wing accounts on social media still sees CNN as a captive audience at airports. He advises his college-age children as they negotiate campus environments in which they're expected to state their "pronouns" and declare themselves "allies" of the "LGBTQ2SIA+ community." However scornful of left-wing opinion he may be, his employer still subjects him to diversity training. He attends a concert by the local symphony orchestra and has to listen to a four-minute lecture about systemic racism or climate change before the music starts. He can't watch a pro football game without enduring little pronouncements of wokeness. ... There is no bubble, no silo, for such a person. The urban-dwelling knowledge-class progressive experiences few such dissonant moments. So pervasive are the opinions of left-liberal progressivism throughout American culture that the adherent of that worldview may roam freely in it with minimal disquiet.³⁴

Readers on the left may be tempted to respond to this by saying, "Good. I have no wish to be disquieted by the ravings of the MAGA crowd." But those ravings are the least of what they are missing out on. To a large degree, America's left-leaning tribalists avoid any serious understanding of conservative positions on public policy issues—from school choice initiatives to public health to

³⁴ Barton Swaim, "Why the 'Smart' Party Never Learns," *Wall Street Journal* (December 9, 2022).

nuclear deterrence—clinging to caricatures of their opponents' supposed views, at best. They also avoid the views of many truth-tellers in their own ranks who dare to question narrative orthodoxy and therefore have fled elite newsrooms and universities—including journalists such as Matt Taibbi and Bari Weiss and the non-dogmatic scholars who enliven digital publications such as *Law & Liberty* and *Quillette*. They avoid opportunities to challenge or sharpen their own worldviews (however enlightened they actually may be) through serious engagement with an alternative. And they often remain unaware of serious ethical and legal questions about their tribe's own leaders.³⁵

The results in recent years have included the obsessive notion—hobbling a legitimately elected government—that Donald Trump “colluded” with Russia, for which a multi-year federal investigation and hundreds of newsrooms produced no evidence; the shuttering of many public schools for two years due to COVID-19—damaging the educations and mental health of millions of American children—despite mounting evidence from the earliest days of the pandemic that healthy young people were at almost no risk; and, outright bans on major social-media platforms of certain news and viewpoints uncomfortable to the left. (Examples relevant to national security will be examined later in this paper.)

Those are a few of the negative outcomes of post-truth on the left, which are not as immediately shocking as the storming of the U.S. Capitol but significantly more consequential and enduring in the life of the nation. And, in contrast to the aftermath of January 6, 2021, no accountability for them on the part of any individuals or institutions is likely to be forthcoming. It bears repeating that Americans suffer collectively from post-truth and will

³⁵ Matt Taibbi, “News Blackout in Effect,” *The Racket* (April 21, 2023).

not slow its progress—let alone transcend it—if we cannot accept collective responsibility.

Other Critiques of Post-Truth

The notion that post-truth is the other side's problem is a pernicious critique but one that can be debunked easily. Three other broad critiques of post-truth are more difficult to refute completely, and perhaps should not be, since each offers important cautions: (1) truth barely exists; (2) the pursuit of truth always has its limits; and, (3) there is no way back to the Constitution of Knowledge.

Truth Barely Exists

At an extreme, some scientists who study cognition contend that human experience is not objectively “real” but is instead, at best, a practical approximation of reality: a kind of “user interface” similar to that of a computer operating system. Donald Hoffman’s fascinating *The Case Against Reality* may be the most accessible statement of this perspective, in which everything from the noses on our faces to the rotation of the planet is a perception in place of truth.³⁶ As a practical matter, however, humans appear to share generally similar “user interfaces” and therefore should be able to sort out the meaning of what is in front of us using a shared set of tools. Considerations such as Hoffman’s should concern us more when actual user interfaces, such as Virtual Reality (VR) systems, exploit the hard wiring of humans to make us even more likely to believe things that are beneficial or enjoyable to us—regardless of their objective reality.

³⁶ Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth From Our Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).

Focused less on cognition than on the power of human invention, the Portuguese polymath Bruno Maçães is happy to leave dreary truth behind in favor of what he calls “virtualism” and its corollary in political life: “the post-truth state.” 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 In a recent *Manifesto of Virtualism*, Maçães attempts to create rules for the post-truth “stage,” including that “[r]eality ... performs the important role of preventing a virtual world from assuming the place of the real one.”³⁸ There, of course, is the rub. In the United States, which Maçães hopes will accept and model the power of virtualism, we have become quite good at asserting alternative realities (“the man in front of me is a woman”) but struggle when the alternative reality humiliates our daughter in a real-world swimming competition. Virtualism is less a rebuttal of concerns about post-truth than a guide to the burgeoning conflicts that post-truth will unleash—and nowhere more so than in the realm of national security. Today’s “rules-based international order” is tomorrow’s nuclear battlefield if the problems of post-truth are not understood and countered.

Truth-Seeking Has Its Limits

This second critique also covers a range of responses. It includes the sensible reminder that no Golden Age of truth-seeking ever existed on a large scale. In a recent essay, Louis

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

³⁸ Bruno Maçães, “Manifesto of Virtualism,” *Substack* (2021). See <https://brunomacaes.substack.com/p/launching-the-manifesto-of-virtualism?r=8bh1>.

Menand of *The New Yorker* observes that even in its heyday of public esteem, 20th Century journalism in the United States suffered from egregious biases and large blind spots, often succumbed to a pack mentality, and was anything but immune to the temptations of money and status.³⁹ Martin Gurri offers similar reminders about the scientific enterprise as well, notes the many difficulties of the “scientific ideal” (starting with the problem of how to handle uncertainty), and argues that in a competition between life serving truth or truth serving life, the latter deserves to win every time: “[a] society that places truth above all human values – love, family, decency, tolerance, dignity – would resemble the most fanatical kind of theocracy.”⁴⁰

While offering important cautions about the moral and practical limits of truth-seeking, however, these critics offer no appealing alternative to it. Indeed, even as Gurri highlights the limitations of what existed before, he paints a profoundly bleak picture of the post-truth conditions that emerged in its place:

The old regime rested on an information system that was top-down and “authoritative” – meaning, “I talk, you listen.” The digital age has ripped off the bandage and exposed what Marx might have called our “real relations” to the truth. We can’t avoid seeing that it’s partial, temporary, local. As we gaze into the abyss of our own ignorance, social and institutional bonds have begun to melt into thin air, and something akin to a cosmic panic has gripped large numbers of otherwise normal people. For the public, it’s the horror of a vacuum and the old craving for

³⁹ Louis Menand, “When Americans Lost Faith in the News,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2023.

⁴⁰ Martin Gurri, “Truth and Its Consequences,” *Discourse*, September 20, 2022.

wholeness. For the elites, who are now distrusted and dethroned, it's the desire to regain control.⁴¹

Where foreign intelligence and national security are concerned, we may be experiencing a brief reprieve. The public still appears somewhat more willing to accept expert assessments of international challenges than it is of domestic concerns. Top-down analysis and decision-making on national security matters remain generally in place. But it seems naïve to assume that this reprieve will continue. And, as we will consider below, the intelligence and national security establishments recently have done more to squander than to preserve any remaining confidence.

There Is No Way Back

Perhaps the most fundamental critique of concerns about post-truth is that they lament the loss of conditions that simply cannot be restored. In this view, the digital “demons” described earlier have barely begun their work of reversing and eventually destroying the “filtering and pumping stations” that sustained the Constitution of Knowledge. Indeed, audio and/or visual “deepfakes” already extend our credulity to new levels.⁴² Augmented (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) will allow us to enter alternative realms with all five senses and almost no challenges to the “truth” before us, whether we have chosen it or it has been imposed on us. Artificial Intelligence systems will manufacture propaganda more sophisticated than a latter-day Joseph Goebbels could imagine.⁴³ And all

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Daniel L. Byman, et al., *Deepfakes and International Conflict*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2023).

⁴³ Renée DiResta, “The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite,” *The Atlantic* (September 20, 2020).

of this will occur in “real-time,” if not “in reality,” at speeds that may leave ponderous systems of fact-checking, peer review, and professional analysis helpless to engage.

Author and former Silicon Valley executive Antonio García Martínez holds this view and summarizes its implications where responses to post-truth are concerned:

In the car of society we’re all riding in, the liberals are trying to slam the brakes, the techies are flooring the gas, the conservatives are looking for a reverse gear that doesn’t exist. The most reasonable people inside that metaphorical car might just be the techies stomping on the gas. The only way through is through, and the thought we’re going to maintain physically defined bubbles of political and moral consensus while also migrating even more into the metaverse is a delusional belief.⁴⁴

The history of technology development offers a mixed response to this advice. On the one hand, it is difficult to point to technologies that were controlled or frozen in their tracks, let alone reversed in an effort to limit their wider effects on society. The one obvious and partial exception, however—nuclear weapons technology—is a highly relevant exception in its national security implications. I will return to it. In any event, the “no way back” critique reinforces rather than erases the need to consider the implications of post-truth for national security.

⁴⁴ Antonio García Martínez, “You’re Already Living in the Metaverse,” *The Free Press* (November 9, 2021).

Scenarios for National Security

Early evidence exists of how post-truth may affect the formulation and conduct of U.S. national security. To encourage further consideration of the challenges, I offer here some general scenarios for national security in the grips of post-truth—drawing on existing evidence and examples. These scenarios build on the risks identified in earlier installments of this study and aim to set up a robust discussion of plausible responses and safeguards.

As outlined in the earlier reports, a post-truth environment creates risks for national security in three general ways. It places the reliability of information, the quality of decision-making, and the ability to form strategic consensus into question:

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 could become as difficult as it is in other arenas.

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—or even if they are perceived to exist by Americans, our allies, or our adversaries.

Post-Truth and Resilience. The United States in years ahead will test whether a nation divided into competing “realities” can maintain its resilience and ultimately its unity, the foundational requirement of national security.

Three types of national security scenarios flow from these general threats, as outlined again in Figure 4. What I call “designed crises” or their counterparts of “designed ignorance” are scenarios associated with the problem of inaccurate or incomplete information in post-truth. “Epistemic coups,” or their attempt, reflect and exacerbate threats to the quality of decision-making. And what I call “fatal distractions” include scenarios that could flow from the previous types and place national resilience in question.

Figure 4: National Security, Post-Truth – General Threats and Scenarios

DEFINITION	GENERAL THREATS	NATIONAL SECURITY SCENARIOS
Narratives	Information Accuracy	Designed Crises / Ignorance
Tribalism	Decision Quality	Epistemic Coups
Entrenchment	National Resilience	Fatal Distractions

Designed Crises and Designed Ignorance

As a prominent essayist argued recently: “The Age of Information is the era of hysterical storylines. Twenty-first-century technology supercharges feelings, not thoughts, and registers them instantaneously on hundreds of millions of screens and minds.”⁴⁵ The opposite outcome also can occur, in which a story is ignored or obscured under the influence of the same technology. Whether exaggerated or ignored, reality and the pursuit of truth give way to something intensely curated, at best, if not altogether false.

Recently I received a webinar invitation from a prominent Washington think tank specializing in international relations, which is worth quoting at length.

⁴⁵ Lance Morrow, “Can Freedom Survive the Narratives?” *Wall Street Journal* (May 17, 2021).

Called “The Great Displacement: Portraits of Climate Migration,” the event focused on a supposedly neglected and rising problem of “climate refugees” lacking “legally recognized status—and thus no legal right to asylum.” The invitation asserted that “climate change is already driving migration today, even in prosperous countries like the United States. We see it reported regularly in the news: American homes swept away by record-breaking storms and surging seas or burned to ash by uncontrollable wildfires.”⁴⁶

This is post-truth in every aspect—from its embedding in a powerful narrative (“climate change”) to its reliance not on data but on anecdotes (“portraits”) to its leaps over history and logic. Hardly a word or phrase in the text is “true” in the sense of being verifiable or generalizable. Recent storms broke no intensity records, recent wildfires covered much less ground in total than those of a century ago, and people have been displaced by such natural disasters for as long as there have been people. Americans who lost their homes recently to a Florida hurricane or California wildfires are not migrating in search of communities that will accept them, in the manner of actual “refugees,” but in almost all cases are using insurance settlements and/or government aid to rebuild in their previous communities or in new places of their choosing. Yet the invitation acknowledged no nuance and no openness to dialogue, let alone dispute.

Heads may have nodded during the webinar while proposals for new foundation funding and government bureaus were inspired. As a practical matter, however, the notion of “climate refugees” manages simultaneously to diminish the serious global challenge of refugee flows and to distract from the international security implications of warming in some parts of the world (such as the Arctic). It

⁴⁶ Carnegie Events (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), “The Great Displacement: Portraits of Climate Migration” (March 20, 2023).

is an example of a designed crisis that compounds ignorance of actual risks. My purpose is not to pick on a single institution or topic. As post-truth thrives, however, we can expect much more of this – to no good effect where readiness for reality-based security challenges is concerned.

For its part, the climate change narrative and the designed crises associated with it already have surfaced in a much more consequential institution than a think tank: the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). In an October 2021 statement at the release of DoD's "Climate Adaptation Plan," Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin declared:

Climate change is an existential threat to our nation's security, and the Department of Defense must act swiftly and boldly to take on this challenge and prepare for damage that cannot be avoided. Every day, our forces contend with the grave and growing consequences of climate change, from hurricanes and wildfires that inflict costly harm on U.S. installations and constrain our ability to train and operate, to dangerous heat, drought, and floods that can trigger crises and instability around the world.⁴⁷

Hyperbolic terms such as "existential threat" are used with abandon in our post-truth environment but Pentagon officials previously managed to reserve such language for threats with the actual potential to destroy the nation – nuclear war being chief among them. The Austin statement pulls down this high bar but then leaves actual readers of the Climate Adaptation Plan to scratch their heads in search of evidence or explanation.

The dense, 30-page document ventures only one piece of actual data on expected climate change, repeating an oft-cited range of possible sea level rise. Far from describing

⁴⁷ Department of Defense, *Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Department of Defense Climate Adaptation Plan* (October 7, 2021).

U.S. forces' "everyday" contention with "grave" consequences and "costly harm on U.S. installations," the document offers only two modest examples: Hurricane Michael's 2018 disabling of an F-22 simulator at Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida and the lessened "seeing" ability of the Naval Observatory Flagstaff Station in recent years due to atmospheric changes. (The document fails to mention that Michael was the first Category 5 hurricane to make landfall in the United States in 30 years, compared with four in the six earlier decades, and does not attempt to describe the possible relevance of the Flagstaff telescope to national security.) And it offers no examples or even scenarios of "instability around the world" with which the U.S. armed forces have contended or might have to contend as a result of climate change. In place of such detail, the document describes various "assessment tools," "performance metrics," and interagency structures to which DoD pledges itself, and coins risible jargon such as a commitment to building "climate-ready installations," as if previous military facilities were exposed to the elements.

Surely no U.S. national security threat—let alone a purported "existential threat"—ever has been outlined by the Department of Defense in less persuasive terms. That lack of effort to persuade may be the strongest warning sign that post-truth has entered the Pentagon. The Climate Adaptation Plan joins the long list of narrative-based oaths published by corporations, universities, and other powerful institutions not to educate or to persuade but to signal fealty to dogma. So complete is the Climate Adaptation Plan's rejection of reality that it fails to mention relevant threats that observers can agree on. For example, even climate change skeptics imagine problems heightened by the obvious warming of the Arctic—such as resource and maritime boundary disputes or the unimpeded passage of Chinese and Russian naval vessels into waters near Canada

and the United States – but these threats never appear in the Climate Adaptation Plan.

Climate change is a particular obsession in our post-truth information environment, but a growing list of other issues affecting national security already fall under the “designed crises” and “designed ignorance” labels, with potentially serious consequences for America’s international relationships and domestic stability:

- In October 2021, the U.S. Government released a “national gender strategy to advance the full participation of all people . . . in the United States and around the world.”⁴⁸ Several of the claims outlined in the strategy – drawn from one U.S. tribe’s narratives about abortion, gender identification, and other contentious issues – will be welcomed by most of America’s current and potential allies even less enthusiastically or universally than they are in the United States itself. As culture wars undermine America’s own unity, it is important to ask whether post-truth assertions should be exported as implied litmus tests of vital U.S. relationships abroad.
- A record 890 migrants died while attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexican border in the U.S. Government’s 2022 fiscal year, a 58% increase over the previous record in 2021. Hundreds more are reported missing. The U.S. Border Patrol arrested 2.2 million migrants along the border with Mexico in 2022, again up significantly from 1.65 million arrests in the previous fiscal year.⁴⁹ Acting as if he were

⁴⁸ Fact Sheet, “National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality,” The White House (October 22, 2021).

⁴⁹ Santiago Perez and Alicia A. Caldwell, “It’s Like a Graveyard: Record Numbers of Migrants are Dying at the U.S. Border,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 17, 2023).

oblivious to this data, gathered by his own department, the most senior cabinet member responsible for border security testified under oath in April 2022 that the United States has “operational control” over its southern border. For their part, the President and Vice President rarely acknowledge a question on the matter. The claimed ignorance of senior U.S. officials regarding a staggeringly inhumane and longstanding security problem would be a matter of profound embarrassment in a country not gripped by post-truth. In the United States now, it is something closer to business as usual.

- Official U.S. obfuscation also is business as usual on a subject closer to farce than to tragedy: the significance of “Unidentified Flying Objects” (UFOs). *The New York Times* reported in 2020 on “a small group of former government officials and scientists with security clearances who, without presenting physical proof, say they are convinced that objects of undetermined origin have crashed on earth with materials retrieved for study.”⁵⁰ Three years later, the Pentagon has yet to contradict this “small group,” leading one sober, longstanding observer to conclude that the U.S. military is effectively stirring the pot to conceal its own technology.⁵¹ The Pentagon certainly would have more straightforward options with which to maintain such secrecy. Meanwhile, Washington’s designed ignorance further exacerbates a post-truth environment in which large numbers of people

⁵⁰ Ralph Blumenthal and Leslie Kean, “No Longer in Shadows, Pentagon’s U.F.O. Unit Will Make Some Findings Public,” *The New York Times* (July 23, 2020).

⁵¹ Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., “UFO ‘Mystery’ Shouldn’t Drag On,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 28, 2022).

already believe almost anything. When balloons that may have been launched by a foreign government with actual nefarious intent appear overhead—as occurred this year—it should surprise no one that half of all Americans do not trust explanations offered by their own government.⁵²

- Nowhere is America's veering between manufactured ignorance and crisis greater than in its assessments of Russia, which serve as a bellwether of the worsening post-truth problem. In the most influential precincts of American academia, business, and policy: narrative-driven "wisdom" moved in just four years from President Barack Obama's comedic sendoff of challenger Mitt Romney's concerns about Russia ("the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back") to the notion that Russia had determined the outcome of a U.S. election. Neither of those assessments described reality. The first one prevailed almost undiminished under the Obama Administration, however, while an actual nation called Russia managed to occupy Crimea with hardly a whimper from the United States and NATO; to deploy what became known as "little green men" (what else to call "military troops" in a situation of designed ignorance?) in Ukraine; to shoot a packed civilian jetliner out of the sky without consequence; and to lay the groundwork for Europe's largest military invasion and land war in 80 years. And even after the malign assessment took hold circa Election Day 2016, another American president could hold an untroubled summit with Russian President Putin and openly side with him against the U.S.

⁵² Giulia Carbonaro, "Joe Biden Can't be Trusted on Chinese Spy Balloons, Americans Say," *Newsweek* (February 22, 2023).

Intelligence Community on Russia's interference in U.S. politics.⁵³ One of America's most popular cable television hosts could reinforce narratives of Russian grievance so congenial to the Putin regime as to earn replays on Russian state media.⁵⁴ And the notion that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a billionaire thanks to Western largesse and other ill-gotten gains became a staple of online media.⁵⁵

As noted earlier, many analysts and observers of national security—perhaps even most of them—still attempt to maintain a foothold in reality. Their footing will get less and less secure, however, as the pathologies of post-truth spread. The so-called “fog of war”—describing the lack of definitive information that often exists on a live battlefield—could become a much more pervasive “fog of reality” if national security professionals succumb to the designed crises and deliberate ignorance prevailing in wider U.S. discourse.

Epistemic Coups

Like most human beings, Americans always have tended to disagree with each other on big and small matters alike. Enlivened by a longstanding culture of pluralism and “live-and-let-live” independence, however, the United States generally managed to encourage debate among diverse perspectives and avoid coerced conformity. Only once were the stakes so large and the viewpoints so irreconcilable as to spark a civil war and only rarely—the brief reign of

⁵³ *BBC News* (July 16, 2018).

⁵⁴ “Kremlin memos urged Russian media to use Tucker Carlson clips - report,” *The Guardian* (March 14, 2022).

⁵⁵ “Fact Check: No evidence Ukrainian President Zelenskiy is a billionaire,” *Reuters* (April 20, 2022).

“McCarthyism” in the early 1950s is an example—did powerful interests move to muzzle certain information or viewpoints on a society-wide scale. That situation has changed.

In our current post-truth environment, the United States in just a few years experienced a series of remarkably successful efforts to place wholly legitimate information and viewpoints beyond the reach of public discussion. Generally, these efforts required consensus between prominent public officials and opinion leaders in academia and journalism—and the cooperation or at least the acquiescence of social media companies and traditional news sources. Once almost unimaginable, such consensus and media acquiescence today emerge readily from the general conditions of post-truth—with its ubiquitous narratives, powerful tribes, and entrenched frames of reference. “Epistemic coups” now can be pulled off in America on a regular basis and to considerable effect.

“I represent science,” White House COVID-19 advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci told an interviewer in late 2021, explaining why it was “dangerous” to criticize the conclusions he reached and the federal policies he helped to devise during the pandemic.⁵⁶ The notion that one individual could “represent science,” of course, defies science as practiced for centuries since the Enlightenment. Fauci’s most cogent critics were physicians and scientists themselves, with comparable credentials and accomplishments. His observation nevertheless captures the post-truth ethos that one set of believers—consistent with a desired narrative and aligned with a dominant tribe—can and should be able to blacklist discussion of reasonable alternatives.

During the pandemic, one such alternative was the Great Barrington Declaration—a global effort by prominent

⁵⁶ “Transcript: Dr. Anthony Fauci on ‘Face the Nation,’” *CBS News* (November 28, 2021).

epidemiologists to challenge draconian lockdowns and other public policies that they argued were ineffective and likely to cause serious harm.⁵⁷ Fauci and other public health officials agreed to discredit the Great Barrington Declaration in a concerted campaign, which largely succeeded.⁵⁸ The declaration received passing attention only in a handful of mainstream news outlets while its lead author, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a professor of medicine at Stanford University, was placed on a literal “Trends Blacklist” at Twitter.⁵⁹ For all practical purposes in America’s digital information siloes, he and the views of the Great Barrington Declaration ceased to exist at the moment when they could have been most constructive in influencing public policy.

Taking their cues from the top, academic and professional organizations of many kinds not only aligned themselves with hastily assembled pandemic orthodoxy but also moved to punish dissenters. Stanford faculty closed ranks against Bhattacharya, for example. More pervasive censorship efforts took place after vaccines against COVID-19 became available—whose use in children and in several other patient groups remained clearly within the bounds of legitimate medical debate. The Federation of State Medical Boards—echoed by the American Board of Family Medicine, the American Board of Internal Medicine, and the American Board of Pediatrics—warned their members that “[p]hysicians who generate and spread COVID-19 vaccine misinformation or disinformation are risking disciplinary action by state medical boards, including the suspension or

⁵⁷ *Great Barrington Declaration*. See gbdeclaration.org.

⁵⁸ “How Fauci and Collins Shut Down Covid Debate,” *Wall Street Journal* (December 21, 2021).

⁵⁹ Phillip W. Magness and David Waugh, “Twitter Files Confirm Censorship of the Great Barrington Declaration,” *American Institute for Economic Research* (December 9, 2022).

revocation of their medical license.”⁶⁰ In their statements, the boards offered no examples of what might constitute “misinformation or disinformation.” Such ambiguity—a common denominator of epistemic coups—has the dual effect of inoculating its practitioners from future criticism of their own mistakes (“oh, we didn’t say *that*”) while leaving others to err on the side of conformity. The clear message to doctors was that they should not analyze data themselves, make distinctions between patients, or otherwise exercise their professional judgment where pandemic responses were concerned—but simply follow the prevailing narratives and oracles.

A related example closer to national security involves the consideration of COVID-19’s origins. The possibility that the virus emerged from a Chinese laboratory was for more than a year—from 2020 to at least mid-2021—placed beyond the realm of most public discussion through a combination of familiar factors: Anthony Fauci’s engagement as the government’s senior COVID-19 authority, the abuse of peer review by self-interested scientists,⁶¹ and the acquiescence of most traditional and social media outlets. Facebook, for example, banned outright the suggestion that COVID-19 might have emerged from a laboratory,⁶² a possibility since accepted by at least two components of the U.S. Intelligence Community and the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The origins of the virus may never be known conclusively but the silencing of discussion around this obvious global security

⁶⁰ Federation of State Medical Boards, *Spreading COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation May Put Medical License at Risk* (July 29, 2021).

⁶¹ 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).

⁶² Robby Soave, “The Media’s Lab Leak Debacle Shows Why Banning ‘Misinformation’ Is a Terrible Idea,” *Reason* (June 4, 2021).

question ranks among the most sobering of America's recent epistemic coups.

Another is the public statement in October 2020 of 51 former U.S. intelligence officials regarding a *New York Post* story about the discovery of a laptop and emails belonging to Hunter Biden, son of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden. Several of the emails raised the possibility of lucrative influence peddling by the Biden family. Though the signatories of the public statement acknowledged that "we do not know if the emails ... are genuine or not" and "we do not have evidence of Russian involvement," they nevertheless asserted that "our experience makes us deeply suspicious that the Russian government played a significant role in this case."⁶³ The emails have been shown to be entirely authentic and no evidence of Russian involvement in any form has been found.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, testimony under oath before Congress claimed in April 2023 that the statement was suggested by, and its media release strategized with, representatives of the Biden campaign, including the current Secretary of State.⁶⁵ A Congressional investigation found evidence that an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency's Prepublication Classification Review Board (PCRB) helped to solicit signatories of the statement.⁶⁶

⁶³ "Public Statement on the Hunter Biden Emails," *Politico* (October 19, 2020). See <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000175-4393-d7aa-af77-579f9b330000>.

⁶⁴ For example, "Copy of what's believed to be Hunter Biden's laptop data turned over by repair shop to FBI showed no tampering, analysis says," *CBS News* (November 21, 2022).

⁶⁵ "Joe Biden and the 51 Spies of 2020," *Wall Street Journal* (April 23, 2023).

⁶⁶ "The Hunter Biden Statement: How Senior Intelligence Community Officials and the Biden Campaign Worked to Mislead American Voters," Interim Joint Staff Report of the Committee on the Judiciary, Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government,

Until recently in the United States, such blatant interference by current and former intelligence officials in the final weeks of a presidential campaign—if even imaginable—would have set highly skeptical professional journalists to work in large numbers to examine the credibility of the underlying story and to test the group’s speculations. Instead, in our time of post-truth, the letter provided a pretext for almost all other news organizations to ignore, and social media platforms to ban, any mention of the *New York Post* story. Among recent epistemic coups, none proved more successful in keeping relevant information out of public discourse during a pivotal period—with potentially far-reaching consequences. One need not be a supporter of Donald Trump (and this author certainly is not) to be concerned about how such eleventh-hour election interference further exacerbated the distrust that millions of Americans already feel about their nation’s “elites” and the fairness of national elections.

In the three examples cited here, it remains possible to say that “the truth did come out,” eventually. With regard to the impact of these coups and the likelihood of their replication, however, that small comfort is irrelevant. The coups held together as long as they were needed to prevent the policy alternatives, public discussions, and political outcomes feared by their participants. Meanwhile, the participants in these epistemic coups suffered not even small reputational consequences in their powerful tribes—on the contrary—and so left behind no “cautionary tales” to dissuade similar efforts in the future. Indeed, in the case of the former intelligence officials’ statement on the Biden laptop, news coverage of subsequent revelations has been subject to a fresh news “blackout” of its own.⁶⁷ Millions of Americans who believe themselves to be diligent followers

and Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives (May 10, 2023).

⁶⁷ Taibbi, “News Blackout,” *op cit*.

of political news have no awareness whatsoever of information that would have been known universally and considered scandalous less than a generation ago.

If reasonable alternatives to prevailing public health policy can be kept out of sight during a pandemic, then reasonable alternatives to prevailing defense and security policy can be kept off the table during a war. If an adversary's potential culpability in a laboratory leak can be placed off limits by scientists who fear the story, then an adversary's potential role in a future terror attack can be suppressed by well-connected individuals who stand to be embarrassed by its discussion. If a handful of highly partisan former officials can raise the false odor of foreign meddling to protect a political ally in a critical moment, then the actions of adversaries can be exaggerated or ignored to distort all manner of beliefs and decisions about national security as well.

Fatal Distractions

The pattern of designed crises or designed ignorance and the growing ease of epistemic coups soon may combine in one or more "fatal distractions" from the actual business of national security. This is a broad category of scenarios, and my intention is not to offer specific predictions so much as to highlight two general risks of America's growing obsession with things other than the objectively real world. These are the possibility of a growing "creed war" inside the United States, which could destabilize our society from within and make consensus on national security matters nearly impossible, and the possibility that exaggerated or manufactured threats consistent with tribal narratives will distract us from actual threats.

In his recent defense of the Constitution of Knowledge, Rauch elaborated on the nature and implications of creed wars in a passage that warrants extended quotation:

Mass alternative realities are common and resilient, and they tend to end badly. ... Creed war—violence and repression organized around ideas—is an all too familiar human trait. History’s most searing example may be the long religious war between Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation. ... Many other conflicts have been creed wars in whole or in part: for example, the American Civil War, World War II, the Cold War, and the conflict with radical Islamism. ... But creed war can also take low-grade, simmering forms whose result is not violence but ungovernability.⁶⁸

Rauch argued that the United States already may have reached such a point of “ungovernability” early in the 21st Century, as “religious conservatives believe they confronted ... a relentless campaign by secular liberals” while “secular liberals thought they faced a war on women, ... a relentless campaign by religious conservatives to take physical control of women’s bodies.”⁶⁹ The post-truth environment surely has exacerbated this conflict, however, and many elected officials from local school boards through state legislatures and the U.S. Congress today devote their most visible efforts to competing narratives that make the supposed “war on women” seem quaint. In my home state of Indiana this year, for example, the part-time legislature consumed untold hours in debates about whether parents should be allowed to know the genders and names asserted by their children at school.⁷⁰ If these were nothing but occasional political sideshows, then the business of the nation might proceed in spite of them. But the post-truth

⁶⁸ Rauch, *op cit.*, pp. 38-40.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷⁰ Niki Kelly, “Parental rights championed by Republicans, except when they’re not,” *Indiana Capital Chronicle* (March 24, 2023).

sideshows now threaten to overshadow what until recently were the main attractions of American political life: funding governments, maintaining public health and public order, and ultimately defining and protecting national security.

Predictions of civil disturbances verging on civil war have been staples of the last two election cycles and are particularly ominous where 2024 is concerned.⁷¹ A large University of Virginia survey carried out in late 2021 found that “[s]ignificant numbers of both Trump and Biden voters show a willingness to consider violating democratic tendencies and norms if needed to serve their priorities.” More specifically, “[r]oughly two in 10 Trump and Biden voters strongly agree it would be better if a ‘President could take needed actions without being constrained by Congress or courts,’ and roughly four in 10 (41%) of Biden and half (52%) of Trump voters at least somewhat agree that it’s time to split the country, favoring blue/red states seceding from the union.”⁷² When nearly half of a nation’s voters across the political spectrum “at least somewhat agree” that it should split apart, then the nation’s very resilience is at risk. Consumed by its own feuds, the United States will remain distracted from external threats, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Even when Americans do cast their gazes abroad, they increasingly wear the lenses of post-truth. In a recent book, former National Security Agency (NSA) Director Michael Hayden described the impact on the intelligence mission:

[T]he stress points are no longer the traditional issues of how intelligence *acquires* information: debates about surveillance, interrogations, privacy, secrecy, oversight, and the like. The new

⁷¹ See for example, Robert Kagan, “Our constitutional crisis is already here,” *Washington Post* (September 23, 2021).

⁷² “New Initiative Explores Deep, Persistent Divides Between Biden and Trump Voters,” *UVA Center for Politics* (September 30, 2021).

issues have to do with how intelligence *uses* information, or, more accurately, how intelligence and other fact-based analysis will fare in a world in which even a sophisticated society like our own is trending toward decision-making anchored on a priori, near-instinctive narratives—decision-making based on that which can be made popular or widely held rather than on that which is objectively true.⁷³

Earlier in this section, I summarized a variety of narrative-based beliefs that already encroach on U.S. foreign policy and national security decision-making. We lecture foreign governments on our freshly asserted conceptions of human biology instead of seeking common ground. We all but invite dangerous human migrations to avoid any compromises with reality at our own border. We assess Russia not on its statements and actions but on its relevance to our domestic-political feuds.

Just as seriously, the fatal distractions of post-truth can take the form of misplaced priorities. The first Commander-in-Chief or other U.S. national security official on the left who states publicly that deterring China from attacking Taiwan or dominating the developing world are much higher defense priorities than the “existential threat” of climate change will need considerable courage. And the first such individual on the right who states publicly that assuring our European allies against Russia and thwarting its military aims in Ukraine are much higher defense priorities than increasing the Europeans’ contributions to NATO will need similar fortitude. In the absence of such leadership—if control of the U.S. Government continues to shift between competing realities rather than competing policies—it will be increasingly difficult for the United

⁷³ Michael Hayden, *The Assault on Intelligence: American National Security in an Age of Lies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 4, 5.

States to sustain any sort of long-term strategy or persuade either allies or adversaries of our seriousness.

Responses

The truth is different these days. It's more like a hunch you're willing to die for.

Homer Simpson (2022)⁷⁴

The gathering post-truth storm will not spare U.S. national security. Analysis, consensus building, decision making, priority setting, and resource allocation in our field will become steadily more difficult in a society that struggles to agree on reality or even on a means of ascertaining reality. Understanding the problem – as this study attempts to do – is the first step in responding to it. Actual responses, let alone solutions, will be harder to come by. Nevertheless, as students and practitioners of national security, we have little choice but to engage with post-truth and to consider responses that do not make the underlying problems worse or violate U.S. constitutional freedoms.

In this section, I will make my guiding principles clear from the outset – in the hope of holding myself to them. I will examine responses to date that manifestly do not meet the “first, do no harm” criteria, gathering lessons from failed or struggling anti-disinformation efforts and other early engagement. I will consider the limited prospects of technology-based responses before turning to more encouraging (if slow) efforts to build awareness and education. I will examine how invigorated and new institutions might help against post-truth in our own society. Finally, I will consider the usefulness of norms to which Americans, our allies, and perhaps even some adversaries might align themselves – going so far as to suggest the rudimentary outline of a “Reality Convention.”

⁷⁴ “Habeas Tortoise,” *The Simpsons*, No. 729, Season 34, Episode 1 (released September 25, 2022).

Principles

Based on a careful examination of post-truth, and how it affects us, I have come to a small number of conclusions about the problem and how it should be addressed. These will surprise no reader who has come this far in the paper but warrant summary statements, nevertheless, as I pivot to consider some responses to post-truth.

First and foremost, *post-truth is a universal challenge*. As much as all of us would like to believe that we are impervious to narratives, unpersuaded by our tribes, and clear-eyed about the entrenchment of illusions, none of us really are. Pretending otherwise is not only smug but also pushes away potential allies in the preservation of the Constitution of Knowledge. Those of us who approach post-truth and its associated problems of disinformation and misinformation, tribalism, cancellation, conformity, and conspiracy theories from a partisan-political perspective are not only wrong but also will make the underlying problems worse.

The appropriate stance is not to surrender our beliefs or partisan-political alignments—which is neither desirable nor possible—but to metaphorically “check them at the door” of efforts to contain post-truth. In practice, this may be as straightforward as ensuring that organized responses to post-truth are bipartisan efforts in which we can keep eyes on each other (hopefully developing a positive intellectual environment in the process) rather than hatching plots to shut each other down from the inside of yet more epistemic silos.

Second—and this flows directly from the first principle—*fighting post-truth means challenging a claim rather than banning a claim*. This is the difference between, “Allow me to share another view or set of facts for you to consider,” and, “You cannot say or think that.” Where post-truth is concerned, the banning of a dubious claim or its claimant

leads to something even worse than misinformation: the valorization of the supposed falsehood. Powered by the tribal component of post-truth, this pattern now repeats itself constantly. The sidelining of a viewpoint or the “cancellation” of a high-profile exponent of contrarian notions serves as confirmation for millions that the disfavored notion must have been correct.⁷⁵ Challenging the entrenchment of a claim rather than the existence of the claim avoids the obvious risks to freedom of speech while keeping open the possibility of learning on both sides of an exchange.

Third, *overcoming post-truth means rejecting oracles and instead strengthening our personal and collective abilities to evaluate and act on information.* To break the fever of post-truth, we do not need self-anointed wise men to “represent the science” and would be much better served by contending wise people who debate and practice science openly. Checks and balances are important not just in science but in all competitions over truth—as any civil litigant, criminal defendant, minority-party legislator, or remaining news editor can attest. And the rest of us must learn again to be effective patients, juries, citizens, and news readers—not necessarily the experts but at least wise to the ways of what is playing out before us.

Finally, *keeping post-truth at bay requires the elevation of skepticism and its companion: transparency.* Historically, we have not been known for that attitude in the United States. Writing two centuries ago in his *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville argued that “Americans have all a lively faith in the perfectibility of man” — which suggests a high level of credulity. In the next passage, however, he noted that Americans “judge that the diffusion of knowledge must necessarily be advantageous, and the consequences of ignorance fatal.” Our coming to grips with

⁷⁵ Matt Taibbi, “America, the Single-Opinion Cult,” *Racket News* (April 27, 2023).

post-truth may depend on our understanding that not all “knowledge” is true—and that we must look inside a claim before assuming that it is “necessarily advantageous” to accept it.

Failed Responses

Several high-profile individuals and organizations ostensibly concerned with the spread of disinformation and misinformation have faced significant embarrassment in the last year—further complicating understandings of the post-truth problem and effective responses. Far from invalidating the possibility of post-truth remedies, however, these cases highlight important lessons.

On a numbingly routine basis in recent years, self-styled anti-disinformation advocates have shown themselves to be oblivious to the problems of post-truth in their own tribes if not actual contributors to the creation and spread of disinformation beneficial to those tribes. Former NSA Director Michael Hayden—quoted respectfully in this paper for post-truth concerns expressed in a 2018 book on the intelligence mission—was a lead signatory of the October 2020 “Public Statement on the Hunter Biden Emails,” as effective a work of disinformation as America has seen in its post-truth era. Former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper, another signer of the “Public Statement,” claimed two years later that “*Politico* [which published the letter] deliberately distorted what we said,” though he offered no such clarifications at the time.⁷⁶ Author and journalist Anne Applebaum—regarded as a courageous truth-teller for her coverage of rising populism in Eastern Europe—took part in a 2022 conference on “Disinformation and the Erosion of Democracy,” no less,

⁷⁶ Kimberley A. Strassel, “James Clapper’s Disinformation,” *Wall Street Journal* (February 16, 2023).

where she dismissed the story of Hunter Biden's laptop as "irrelevant."⁷⁷ The Biden Administration named a high-profile proponent of the utterly debunked "Russia collusion" narrative as senior counsel of the Department of Justice's national security division.⁷⁸ And it attempted to install as head of a short-lived Department of Homeland Security (DHS) "Disinformation Governance Board" a partisan activist who thought it helpful to upload a blatantly political, disinformation-themed parody of a *Mary Poppins* song to the TikTok platform.

More broadly, the standard profile of self-proclaimed anti-disinformation organizations in the United States and Europe is one of relentless ideological bias. The multinational Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), for example, has published nearly 20 so-called "Explainers" to outline the claims and goals of various online conspiracy theories – originating exclusively on the far right, as if no other sort were possible. Since conspiracy theories and misinformation on sensitive issues cover the full spectrum of political leanings, as discussed earlier, such blatant bias allows ISD to be written off by at least half of its potential users while the others remain utterly unchallenged. The net result may be that such groups do more harm than good.

Similarly troubling is the growing embrace of "mal-information" as a legitimate target of anti-disinformation efforts.⁷⁹ Described in sterile jargon as "information that is based on reality but is used to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country,"⁸⁰ mal-information can only be defined in the eye of the beholder. Translated into English,

⁷⁷ Daniel Schmidt, "The Question Anne Applebaum Refused to Answer," *Compact* (April 10, 2022).

⁷⁸ "A Dangerous Pick at Justice," *Wall Street Journal* (May 12, 2021).

⁷⁹ Andrey Mir, "Mal-Information and the Wrong Truth," *Discourse* (March 16, 2023).

⁸⁰ "Misinformation, Disinformation and Mal-Information," *MediaDefence.org*.

it is truthful information that does not suit a desired narrative or outcome. Translated into large-scale practice, its suppression would amount to raw censorship.

Efforts to reliably identify and track online disinformation originating abroad also took an embarrassing blow in early 2023. In the course of the large-scale public release of internal Twitter emails (which became known as the “Twitter Files”) after the platform’s ownership change, journalist Matt Taibbi unearthed the results of Twitter’s investigation of a tool called “Hamilton 68,” launched in 2017 by the Alliance for Securing Democracy as part of the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Hamilton 68 claimed to be “A New Tool to Track Russian Disinformation on Twitter” that “provides a near real-time look at Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts online.”⁸¹ In practice, the tool soon legitimized what Taibbi calls “hundreds of fraudulent headlines and TV news segments,” and served as a misleading source for prominent fact-checking sites. Far from tracking actual Russian propaganda or Russian-controlled Twitter accounts, Hamilton 68’s “dashboard” mainly tracked English-language users (86% of the total) – most of them actual Twitters users with no ties to Russia but clear sympathies for Donald Trump.⁸² Unfortunately, in what approaches another epistemic coup, reporting on the Twitter Files has been almost nonexistent in traditional media outlets. Hamilton 68 continues in operation (ostensibly with a modified algorithm). And most media outlets have not corrected, let alone retracted, the countless “news” articles based on its discredited claims.⁸³

⁸¹ “Hamilton 68: A New Tool to Track Russian Disinformation on Twitter,” *Alliance for Securing Democracy* (August 2, 2017).

⁸² Matt Taibbi, “Move Over, Jayson Blair: Meet Hamilton 68, the New King of Media Fraud,” *Racket News* (January 27, 2023).

⁸³ Matt Orfalea and Matt Taibbi, “Eleven Minutes of Media Falsehoods, Just On One Subject, Just On One Station,” *Racket News* (April 25, 2023).

The reputations of many journalists on the “disinformation beat” should be similarly discounted among objective observers. These writers’ highly partisan, narrative-driven stories often appear more as contributions to post-truth than as challenges to it. As one observer noted—in the epitome of a “vicious cycle”—they “also frequently rely on the insights of a small number of disinformation ‘experts’ who share their political views and are willing to overlook the harms of disinformation so long as it benefits their side of the aisle.”⁸⁴ Prominent among these is the Research Director of the Stanford Internet Observatory, who in a previous role was part of a team that “launched a conscious campaign of disinformation” —including the creation of fake Russian Twitter and Facebook accounts—to influence a U.S. Senate campaign.⁸⁵ For their part, professional “fact-checkers” stand credibly accused of advancing rather than correcting distortions that confirm prevailing narratives. With regard to the ubiquitous media mentions of climate change, for example, fealty to narratives appears to be of greater interest to self-appointed fact-checkers than verifiable facts.⁸⁶

In summary: with few exceptions, organizations set up to expose and counter disinformation in the United States itself have achieved no broad-based credibility — and do not deserve to.

The lessons are straightforward, and buttress the principles offered earlier. Organizations and many individual activists and professionals focused on disinformation typically are highly partisan in orientation — consistently left-leaning and convinced that only their

⁸⁴ Christine Rosen, “How Disinformation Journalists Practice Disinformation,” *Commentary* (January 2023).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Bjorn Lomborg, “Partisan ‘Fact Checkers’ Spread Climate-Change Misinformation,” *Wall Street Journal* (January 26, 2023).

opponents suffer from post-truth problems. Far from challenging the entrenchment of false claims on the right, they have too often attempted simply to ban them from public discourse. And far from operating transparently to allay skepticism and build trust, they have passed off disingenuous statements and indefensible, black-boxed algorithms as useful tools. All of this demonstrates what *not* to do in response to the risks of post-truth in national security.

Technology-Based Solutions

It seems reasonable to assume that a problem greatly exacerbated by information technology also might be mitigated by such technology. That assumption has been largely dashed, however, and it is not clear that any technology-based proposals remain that would be effective, practical, and consistent with basic rights.

Some in Silicon Valley and Washington clearly believed—and still may believe—that a curated reprogramming of social media’s algorithms would weaken the flow of false or misleading information and thereby reduce the effects of post-truth. In practice, such efforts during the coronavirus pandemic and the last U.S. presidential election cycle produced something closer to outright censorship than to an elevation of “truth.” In the examples shared in this paper, and many others, the problem of unchecked bias overwhelmed whatever good intentions the re-programmers of social media might have brought to their task. In his mining of the Twitter Files, journalist Matt Taibbi described what he uncovered as a “Censorship-Industrial Complex: ... a bureaucracy willing to sacrifice factual truth in service of broader narrative objectives.”⁸⁷ One’s willingness to countenance such a

⁸⁷ Matt Taibbi, Twitter (March 9, 2023), Twitter Files #33.

bureaucracy will have much to do with one's tribal alignment to its powers that be. But such alignments change, of course, and so there is little comfort down this path for anyone but authoritarians (who indeed have chosen just this way in China⁸⁸ and Russia⁸⁹) intent on enforcing their particular view of the world.

Similarly, efforts to ban certain platforms outright are fraught with legal and practical implications in free societies. Few national security professionals would lament the disappearance of the TikTok platform, for example, owned as it is by investors in an adversarial China and practiced as it has become in mining sensitive information on millions of American users. Of course: a platform pervasive, powerful, and therefore lucrative enough to justify its banning would also be certain to justify its imitation. Market gaps tend to be filled quickly. Americans would be left to play a game of legal "whack-a-mole" or to contemplate the fanciful notion of shutting down an entire industry to which it is utterly addicted.

In an effort to reconcile free market and free speech rights with a pursuit of truth, some propose the use of "middleware"—a new layer of self-chosen algorithms between the chaos of social media and the information feeds of individual users. Barak Richman and Francis Fukuyama elaborated on this approach in a 2021 essay:

A spate of third-party companies would create and operate software to curate and order the content that users see on their digital platforms, according to the users' preferences. Users could insert their preferred middleware as plug-ins to the platforms and thus choose their own trusted

⁸⁸ Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State* (New York: Custom House, 2020).

⁸⁹ Snyder, *op cit*.

intermediary to sort their news, rank their searches and order their feed of tweets.⁹⁰

Since most Americans appear convinced of their own ability to discern truth, however, it is difficult to see how a business model involving paid intermediaries would gain a foothold. And even if it did, the use of such middleware – literally by design – would heighten the narratives, tribalism, and entrenchment of post-truth at every turn. Purveyors would offer Woke and MAGA middleware even if they did not market their products in precisely those terms, and any developers foolish enough to employ prim classical liberals such as Richman and Fukuyama in the design of their algorithms would be out of business quickly. If millions of Americans actively sought to have their views of the world challenged by rigorous epistemology, then the underlying problems of post-truth would not exist in the first place.

The banning of specific social-media practices – either across the board or in a more targeted fashion – may be a more effective technology-based response but carries enormous economic and political implications. For example, proposals exist to ban “microtargeting:” the practice of using the interests and preferences we reveal online to drive us in countless ways to yet more relationships and transactions of a similar sort.⁹¹ Microtargeting is at the heart of what makes the digital economy so efficient, of course – guiding us before we realize what has happened to that perfect pair of new shoes or those fresh doses of social affirmation and political validation. It allows social media and search tools to remain “free of charge” while their owners become fabulously wealthy. Even highly focused bans on microtargeting in the

⁹⁰ Barak Richman and Francis Fukuyama, “How to Quiet the Megaphones of Facebook, Google, and Twitter,” *Wall Street Journal* (February 12, 2021).

⁹¹ For example, Ellen L. Weintraub, “Don’t abolish political ads on social media. Stop microtargeting,” *Washington Post* (November 2, 2019).

United States—perhaps limited to its applications in the media and politics—would meet with furious industry resistance (not to mention popular rejection), prove unimaginably difficult to implement in a globalized economy, and ultimately provide little relief from algorithmic workarounds with the same bad outcomes.

With regard to the technology itself, we may be left with no better options than constant questioning, experimentation, and intellectual fortitude. Two recent essays capture this “realist” approach to managing the technology behind post-truth. Former social media executive Antonio García Martínez argues that “[w]e might have to start thinking about a world where politics follows the disembodied digital bubbles we construct for ourselves, rather than thinking we’re going to ‘content moderate’ the digital into conforming with the politics of physical counties and states.”⁹² And human rights advocate Suzanne Nossel concludes:

The notion that there is a single solution to all or most of what ails social media is a fantasy. The only viable approach, though painstaking and unsatisfying, is to mitigate the harms of social media through trial and error, involving tech companies and Congress but also state governments, courts, researchers, civil-society organizations and even multilateral bodies. Experimentation is the only tenable strategy.⁹³

This may sound familiar to readers in the field of national security. What Martínez and Nossel describe is remarkably similar to the mindset that prevailed in the early nuclear era. The (accurately) imagined horrors of physical

⁹² Martínez, *op cit*.

⁹³ Suzanne Nossel, “There’s No Quick Fix for Social Media,” *Wall Street Journal* (January 20, 2023).

destruction from nuclear weapons did not lead to bans of the technology itself, which would have failed. Instead, the existence of nuclear weapons gave rise to relentless grappling with their implications and, ultimately, to practical accommodations that preserved the higher values of liberalism. Today, where digital tools and the acceleration of post-truth are concerned, the dangers are “mental” rather than physical—at least initially—and the dangers are at our fingertips rather than locked away in well-guarded facilities. But our most effective responses likely will be similar in kind to those that followed the Manhattan Project. We can build awareness and educate as many people as possible to contend with the dangers. We can strengthen and build new institutions to help avoid the worst outcomes. We can propose and debate norms—globally to the extent possible. We can observe each other and learn from experience—again globally. And we can try to preserve our proven values above all by acknowledging their continued relevance.

Awareness and Education

America’s “duck and cover” drills of the 1950s and early 1960s are subject to ridicule now, to the extent that they are remembered at all. Covering one’s head under a writing desk at school offered no meaningful protection against a nuclear explosion. Nevertheless, such drills and the many other public awareness and public safety efforts of the early nuclear age served a vital purpose: they left little doubt even among the young that nuclear-armed conflict posed serious dangers and that public officials and private citizens alike could reduce the risks of such conflict. In a similar way, open acknowledgment of the post-truth environment and the encouragement of basic defenses could be helpful today.

Online information sources and social media in particular are akin to chemistry sets or medicine chests.

Used in certain ways, their contents can produce benign or even beneficial outcomes. Used in other ways, their contents can produce dangerous or even disastrous outcomes. As a society, we should equip each other—beginning with our children—to evaluate the contents and understand the dangers of the online environment in which we spend so much of our lives. Such “digital literacy” is as vital as traditional literacy and yet is badly neglected in U.S. education systems at all levels, and in public health. Effective curricula do not need to be complex—the basics of the Constitution of Knowledge are no more difficult to grasp than the basics of a political constitution—and can be tailored readily to age groups based on their likely exposure to online information. Tribal neutrality is essential. The risks of post-truth—I repeat once more—are universal, and digital literacy must be something close to the opposite of ideological indoctrination. Done well, the creation and deployment of digital literacy programs could serve as a modest antidote to America’s culture wars rather than as a component of them.

It is never too late in anyone’s life or career to build awareness of post-truth and its dangers. In the national security professions—and especially in the armed forces—such training should be ubiquitous. And it must be scrupulously objective. One-off training drills that highlight acute or trendy concerns—such as the “stand-downs” that occurred in the armed forces following the January 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol—may do more harm than good. They suggest that epistemic threats to national security are unusual and specific when, in fact, they are constant and wide-ranging. Recurring training programs should engage analysts, planners, soldiers, and other national security operators alike as intelligent watchdogs in understanding and avoiding post-truth threats—rather than as naïve victims who need to be cured.

In addition to frequent, objective awareness and training efforts, U.S. Government agencies and departments in national security—certainly including the armed forces—should consider how to include adherence to the Constitution of Knowledge (as they already do where the U.S. Constitution is concerned) in promotion and retention decisions. This will be hard to accomplish without controversy and, indeed, has the potential to be counter-productive if tribal criteria intrude. However, the national security professions face the highest stakes in avoiding what—with all due respect—might be called “General Flynn Syndrome.” A retired lieutenant-general who little more than a decade ago still led the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, and later became the U.S. National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn succumbed utterly to post-truth beliefs—going so far as to advocate military intervention and the use of martial law to affect the certification of the 2020 presidential election.⁹⁴ A national security bureaucracy already at risk from post-truth must consider how to evaluate and counsel future leaders against credulity of all sorts.

Institutional Responses

Post-truth can be mitigated by the work of institutions writ large—the professions of journalism, law, and scholarship, for example—on which the Constitution of Knowledge hinges. Post-truth also can be mitigated by institutions as individual organizations—working by themselves and together. Drawing on the wider assessment of post-truth offered in this paper, I offer three general recommendations for institutional responses of both kinds.

⁹⁴ Robert Draper, “Michael Flynn Is Still at War,” *The New York Times* (February 4, 2022).

Hold fast to professional integrity and core principles.

The large-scale institutions that make up the Constitution of Knowledge in the United States have reached inflection points. It is not clear that a majority of influential academics, attorneys, and journalists still aspire to, or insist upon, such classically liberal notions as intellectual heterodoxy, tolerance of dissent, and the pursuit of objective truth. A recent study by Arizona State University's (ASU's) Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, for example, sought out opinions on "objectivity" from the leaders of elite newsrooms throughout the United States and found that the concept today is deeply suspect if not utterly derided. In the words of these professionals, objectivity is "the view from nowhere," "news through the lens of largely white, straight men," "wrong, a failed concept," and "not even possible."⁹⁵ The ASU study quoted a senior *Washington Post* journalist to describe the rising alternative: "There is a generation of folks coming into the newsroom ... seeking more advocacy for their views of the correct side in stories. ... They say we should not be reflecting both sides, but what they see as reality. They object to objectivity as morally bankrupt."⁹⁶ The consequences of this mindset already may have swayed the outcomes of recent national elections—ironically not always in the directions favored by the "correct" side.⁹⁷

Similarly, among a rising generation of lawyers, the belief that one side no longer deserves a hearing—and that certain defendants no longer even deserve representation—soon may be the norm. At the very least, in the usual pattern of post-truth, there may be fewer and fewer individuals

⁹⁵ Leonard Downie, Jr. and Andrew Heyward, et al., *Beyond Objectivity: Producing Trustworthy News in Today's Newsrooms* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2023), pp. 7-10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11.

⁹⁷ See Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., "Finally, Can We Ask Who Really Colluded With Russia?," *Wall Street Journal* (May 26, 2023).

willing to risk professional humiliation to stand up publicly for the preservation of a heterodox approach (even if they still believe in it privately).⁹⁸ In their responses to the perpetual shout-downs of dissent in American law schools, for example, deans may bring up the first principles of civil discourse and tolerance but seem increasingly unable to instill them in their students, and rarely discipline students for even the most egregious violations of such principles.⁹⁹

As the institutions (writ large) of America's Constitution of Knowledge teeter, individual institutions have arisen to fill the breach to some extent. These organizations provide at least two critical supports: (1) otherwise scarce intellectual nurturing of the Constitution of Knowledge and (2) modest safety in numbers through their memberships and subscriber bases. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and the Heterodox Academy, for example, focus in particular on the preservation of open inquiry and free expression in academia. The latter publishes its large faculty membership roster online, thus identifying scholars who still support "viewpoint diversity, open inquiry, and constructive disagreement" and allowing informal support networks to emerge. The Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR) and Counterweight provide Americans with intellectual escapes from the conformity of entrenched narratives. Not surprisingly, the former includes a belief that "objective truth exists" in its five core principles while the latter promotes "reason" and "freedom from unjustified coercion," focusing in particular on corporate environments in the United States. Observers may struggle to comprehend that faculty organizations devoted to "open inquiry" now must establish themselves off campus if they

⁹⁸ Sibarium, *op cit*.

⁹⁹ Karen Sloan and Nate Raymond, "Stanford law official who admonished judge during speech is on leave, dean says," *Reuters* (March 22, 2023).

exist at all, and that America now needs support groups to protect employees of public companies from “unjustified coercion” on matters of conscience. Such has been the progress of post-truth, however, and the United States remains fortunate that these individual institutions have stepped up against the pressure to conform.

Meanwhile, a growing number of highly successful independent, online publications have emerged in just a few years—often founded by journalists and scholars who decided that their professional integrity precluded further employment by mainstream news organizations and universities. These include (selectively and in alphabetical order) *The Dispatch*, *Free Black Thought*, *The Free Press*, *Racket News*, and *Quillette*. Unlike their mainstream counterparts, the authors on these platforms range widely in their ideologies and party-political sympathies while sharing a bedrock commitment to the “classical liberal” principles of open inquiry, tolerance, and truth-seeking.

Learn from mistakes. In recent years, objective news reporting, constructive discussion, and even scientific discourse have failed the United States in real-time—allowing potent national fables to emerge. Selective, *post hoc* acknowledgments of truth appear to be the best that we still can do—and such efforts should not be discounted. Through its legal discovery process, for example, the lawsuit of Dominion Voting Systems against Fox News brought sobering transparency to the egregious blurring of fact and opinion at the cable news network in its coverage of President Trump’s 2020 claims of election fraud.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, a massive and scrupulous investigative report by the *Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)* laid bare the extent to which credulousness and partisan activism on the part of most mainstream journalists distorted public perceptions of

¹⁰⁰ Jim Geraghty, “Three Hard Lessons from the Dominion Defamation Lawsuit against Fox,” *National Review* (April 19, 2023).

the Trump campaign's supposed "collusion" with Russia.¹⁰¹ Of course: while the lawsuit's takedown of falsehoods on the right receives extensive, ongoing coverage and commentary across most media, the *CJR* report and similar revelations of the left's contributions to post-truth languish in obscurity.

Precisely because they tend to be comprehensive and highly deliberative efforts undertaken by people who take pride in accuracy over partisan point-scoring, traditional "bipartisan commissions" (used in the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination, the 9-11 attacks, and the U.S. Government's Hurricane Katrina response, for example) could be more useful than ever in post-truth America. Their results tend to be far more credible and enduring than those of Congressional investigations or U.S. Government after-action reports. Investigations are usually partisan and theatrical (see the "January 6th Hearings") while the in-house reports (see the Pentagon's April 2023 report on the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan)¹⁰² are often selective and self-serving. Topics ripe for bipartisan examination include the aforementioned events around the U.S. Capitol and the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, claims that the last two U.S. presidential elections were fraudulently manipulated, the manifest failures of public-health decision making during the recent pandemic, and the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

If (and only if) founding legislation could devise a legal framework that forces objective deliberations, involves a wide range of public- and private-sector expertise, and accommodates dissent, then the establishment of an ongoing, commission-style body to evaluate fraught issues in American life could be a helpful response to post-truth.

¹⁰¹ Jeff Gerth, "The press versus the president," *CJR* (January 30, 2023).

¹⁰² "READ: Pentagon's Afghanistan withdrawal report to Congress," *TheHill.com* (April 6, 2023).

Its membership should rotate based on the issues and would require an explicit “A- versus B-Team” approach that demands serious examination of competing conclusions. Our German allies manage a version of this through what they call “Enquete Commissions” – involving Members of Parliament but supported by a professional staff – that examine nuanced but politically volatile issues in a credible way.

Work together, or at least keep an eye on each other. As discussed earlier, professed “anti-disinformation” and “fact-checking” efforts so far have failed almost uniformly in the United States to gain credibility let alone to mitigate post-truth outcomes. Indeed, they have worsened the post-truth environment in most cases due to their selective and blatantly partisan approaches. Commissions cannot replace them since plodding efforts of that nature are not suited to real-time engagement with fact and fantasy. However, negotiated or even informal networks of truly diverse watchdogs could be an effective and practical response.

At the most basic level, for example, competing research organizations in national security and other fields should consider partnerships when evaluating issues caught up in the post-truth fog of reality. The media attention that think tanks and academic organizations crave would be no less forthcoming in a partnership. In the worst case, tribalized news platforms simply would emphasize one set of conclusions over another. Ideally, however, efforts to challenge each other and move closer to the truth in a partnership would produce more robust and useful findings than the work of individual groups.

Where news organizations and social media are concerned, an informal network may work, similar to one suggested by the anti-disinformation activist Maria Ressa of the Philippines. Winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to “safeguard freedom of expression,” Ressa created a four-layered “pyramid” of individual

organizations to short-circuit false information in her home country's digital environment, called the #FactsFirstPH process:

I set three goals: scale, impact, deterrence. At the foundation is the core of journalism, largely present no longer: fact-checking. Four major news groups in the Philippines anchor the coalition. ... They're joined by rural and provincial news groups for geographic and hyperlocal distribution. Once each news group finishes a fact-check, it moves to the second layer, which I nicknamed "the mesh." Every member of the group can take each fact-check and repost or repurpose it, attributing the work to the original news group. ... Layer two of the ... process involves civil society groups, human rights groups, NGOs, business groups, and the Church. ... The collaborative mesh not only would allow us to discuss and work together in real time; it would also strengthen algorithmic amplification, which would help all of us rise together, ensuring greater distribution of the fact-checks. Layer three is composed of at least seven disinformation research groups that take the data, make sense of it, and release a weekly report that tells us how the public sphere is being manipulated. ... Finally, there was the last crucial layer that had been silent too long: the lawyers, groups dedicated to maintaining rule of law and demanding accountability.¹⁰³

For such a network to be effective in the U.S. context, the organizations involved would need to represent a range of

¹⁰³ Maria A. Ressa, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022), Kindle Edition, pp. 255-257.

ideological perspectives and include at least some groups credible to each of the major political parties.

Inside the government itself, the approach finally taken by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to examine assessments of COVID-19's origins should be emulated more broadly.¹⁰⁴ Component agencies reached their own conclusions at varying levels of confidence, and an unclassified summary of the resulting analysis became public information. A similar combination of agency independence, cross-comparison, and transparency should prevail on a growing range of issues as a response to post-truth. Administrations may dislike their lack of complete "message control" under this approach. However, the avoidance of a single narrative where contested facts are concerned is of deeper importance than political enforcement—especially on matters of national security.

Norms

The challenges of post-truth to awareness, decision-making, and resilience in national security are serious enough to warrant widespread acknowledgment and a set of public commitments—in a word, norms. Comparisons to threats from chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are apt; it is time for countries to recognize risks and pledge themselves to responsible behaviors before large-scale damage occurs.

Figure 5 offers a draft 10-point "Reality Convention"—based on existing principles from the Constitution of Knowledge—that could serve as the rough foundation for individuals and organizations willing to call out the risks of post-truth and separate themselves from it. This statement could benefit from substantial improvement, but it is

¹⁰⁴ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Updated Assessment on COVID-19 Origins* (October 29, 2021).

intended at this stage simply to model the sort of norms to which corporations, governments, research organizations, universities—and of course, government agencies in the national security field and otherwise—could commit themselves without regard to ideological or partisan orientation.

Figure 5: A Reality Convention

We agree:

- 1 A shared, objective reality exists and, when understood, is the most reliable basis for action.
- 2 Reality consists of discrete elements of truth.
- 3 Truth can be approached and sometimes known but cannot simply be declared.
- 4 Truth must be subject to revision if new information (fact or insight) becomes available.
- 5 Fact and insight (opinion) are not the same and must not pose as one other.
- 6 Transparency about sources of information and other aspects of truth-seeking is essential.
- 7 Perceived deceptions or mistakes by others must be challenged rather than silenced.
- 8 Humility, openness, and skepticism about truth increase the likelihood of peace.
- 9 Deception, lies, and uncontested truth increase the likelihood of conflict.
- 10 These beliefs and commitments do not conflict with any culture or religion.

In a post-truth environment, a set of norms such as this could have a range of useful effects. First, norms signal basic awareness of a problem, which is overdue where the current fog of reality is concerned. Second, norms create an objective measuring stick, apart from the passions and temptations of the moment—of which there are many in a post-truth context. Third, norms make it easier for adversaries to find common ground and change their behaviors without appearing to concede to the other side. This is as true in domestic-political conflict as it is globally, allowing tribes and competing powers alike to “play by the rules” that all have accepted rather than appearing to give in to criticism or pressure.

Significantly, informal adherence to something like the Reality Convention already appears to distinguish otherwise similar countries in their ability to avoid the worst manifestations of post-truth. As a follow-on to its original study of “truth decay” in the United States, for

example, RAND in 2022 assessed the situation in Europe. Though it found “pockets” of disengagement, failing civil discourse, tribalism, and other manifestations of post-truth, the RAND team concluded that Europeans still seem better equipped to navigate information flows and retain more trust in institutions than their U.S. counterparts:

[W]hile it is clear that there is room for improvement in people’s media literacy and preparedness to make a judgement about information they find and use to form an opinion and make decisions, the role of the education system in driving Truth Decay is not as prominent in Europe as it is in the United States. European educational systems also seem to have made more progress towards leveraging the education system as a tool against Truth Decay.¹⁰⁵

RAND credits civic education and media literacy efforts in European education systems, which hinge in both cases on the acceptance (or at least the awareness) of higher-stakes norms. In the United States, we cannot hold ourselves or our fellow citizens accountable to standards we have never been exposed to. At the very least, some form of a Reality Convention would provide such exposure as well as a set of expectations against which organizations could evaluate their own performance and that of their information sources and partner institutions.

As standards for analysis, communication, and especially policymaking, the norms embodied in a Reality Convention could help to ameliorate the most serious manifestations of post-truth on the part of individuals and organizations involved in national security. Such norms could be taught and discussed, consistently applied to existing work, and adopted as common commitments by

¹⁰⁵ Axelle Devaux, Sarah Grand-Clément, and Stijn Hoorens, *Truth Decay in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: RAND, 2022), p. 74.

academic programs, research organizations, advocacy groups, and government agencies—establishing a shared bulwark against the rising tide of post-truth.

Conclusion and Outlook

“... reality is what *we* know, not what you or I know.”

Jonathan Rauch

The Constitution of Knowledge, 2021¹⁰⁶

Studying post-truth is but one path that I might have taken to a similar set of concerns, which are, in the end, concerns about whether Americans—despite our vast material wealth and extraordinary technological progress—still possess the common ground and resilience to meet the myriad national security challenges before us. I might have focused instead on our corrosive identity politics; our widespread retreat from face-to-face civic life—churches, service groups, and even physical neighborhoods—to online worlds; our unprecedented levels of alienation and social breakdown; our growing disdain for the role of elites and traditional institutions; our ever-worsening failures of basic governance; our civic illiteracy and floundering education systems, and our deteriorating mental and physical health. All of these conditions make it more difficult, and ultimately less likely, that the United States will cohere on national security priorities and strategy, reassure like-minded allies, or even field armed forces of adequate ability and size in the decades ahead.

Compared with the other possible paths, studying post-truth recommended itself for two important reasons. First, post-truth is a common denominator in all of the other current conditions. The narratives, tribalization, and entrenchment of post-truth are among the most consistent and recursive manifestations of America’s other 21st Century malfunctions. Second, I chose the path of studying post-truth because it is wide enough to accommodate

¹⁰⁶ Rauch, *op cit.*, p. 131.

almost all concerned parties—whatever their cultural, ideological, or partisan-political inclinations. The tribes disagree profoundly about the severity and significance of America’s other current maladies—let alone the responses to them. But we still may be able to agree that truth is important. As a diverse nation, we arrived at post-truth together. We can only ameliorate it together—if we can do so at all. And by taking post-truth seriously, we may help to break the other fevers as well.

Unfortunately, post-truth is a moving target—entering even more challenging terrain. This takes at least three forms. First, the sheer proliferation of information via digital platforms, the collapse of mediating institutions that sought objective truth, and the ubiquity of algorithms that determine what information most of us even lay eyes on, already may have combined to transform notions of “truth” and “truth-seeking” in ways that cannot be stopped. Cited earlier, Martínez likens this to a white-knuckled, one-way trip in a car with no reverse gear,¹⁰⁷ while Mações sees it as a barely controllable joyride.¹⁰⁸ Both are outdone by Canadian-based media theorist Andrey Mir, however, who describes a quasi-evolutionary transformation of humanity’s engagement with reality. No longer the benign “Viral Editor” that customized content for its users, today’s social-media tools have morphed into a “Viral Inquisitor” that, in Mir’s view, “changes the way propositions are verified, challenging our very epistemology of truth.”¹⁰⁹ He suggests that current engagement with the truth already bears more resemblance to pre-literary forms of “orality” (information shared verbally by tribe members) than to anything in the teetering Constitution of Knowledge: “Before literacy, a truth was confirmed by how well it

¹⁰⁷ Martínez, op cit.

¹⁰⁸ Mações, “Manifesto of Virtualism,” op cit.

¹⁰⁹ Andrey Mir, “The Viral Inquisitor,” *City Journal* (Spring 2023), p. 86.

comported with nature and its divine moving forces.”¹¹⁰
Today:

In the digital world, the truth of a given statement can be confirmed once again by the practical outcomes that it generates. But these practical outcomes now happen in digital, not physical, reality. Since digital reality presents the world through the views of others, the truth of everyone is defined by the truths of others. ... Wrong information is tolerated when it allows the right attitude. And the right information is ignored if it supports the wrong attitude. Confirmation bias is implanted in the design: we trust what we “like.”¹¹¹

Before dismissing the possibility of such a regression, consider the burgeoning communities of what are called “Very Online” people or “red-pilled” people (referring to a means in the *Matrix* films by which individuals can know reality), whose truncated social lives hinge on digital affirmation.¹¹² Consider the success of contemporary political leaders who exemplify the power of “orality.” In the last two presidential contests, the United States has elected individuals known throughout their adult lives as fabulists capable of reinventing their views constantly. Neither would have been imaginable as president a generation ago and yet today it is becoming difficult to imagine that any *other* sort of person can win a U.S. national election. The coherence, logic, and truth of their claims are nearly irrelevant to the tribalized supporters who simply “like” the ever-evolving narratives they represent. And consider how many ideas of the moment—including ESG

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.

¹¹² Jack Butler, “The Myth of the Red Pill,” *National Review* (September 12, 2021).

claims, climate change, and transgenderism—hinge not on evidence or truth but precisely on their “practical outcomes”—popular validation and social acceptance for those who conform. If Mir is correct, then “[o]ne can mourn absolute truth and the culture based on it, but society must learn to adapt to conditions of crowd-sourced, negotiated truth.”¹¹³ Where national security is concerned, the implications of “crowd-sourced, negotiated truth” would be (will be?) profound.

A second moving target around post-truth is the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In its current and near-term applications, AI is a vastly powerful technology to aggregate digital information into coherent forms. Unlike search engines, which merely unearth discrete bits of information, AI tools such as ChatGPT can assemble the bits into bespoke analyses, summaries, and even recommendations based on the prompts of users. AI systems do not (yet) have minds of their own; their biases for certain types and sources of information are literally pre-programmed and the digital knowledge that they can draw upon is similarly defined by their designers. As more and more human professionals in all fields—certainly including national security—come to rely on AI tools to mine information, prepare assessments of problems, and develop decision options, the biases and knowledge bases of these systems will take on vast importance. Their designers and programmers—as well as the business leaders and/or governments overseeing them—will have the power to rule entire belief systems, data sets, and scientific paradigms in or out of bounds. If they take an expansive approach, AI tools may leverage the full breadth of existing knowledge to achieve powerful insights. If they pick winners and losers, the result will be pervasive post-truth on a nearly inexorable scale.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Early evidence already points to the second scenario. Psychologist Robert Henderson recently made otherwise identical queries about the desirability of fascism and communism to ChatGPT: “Write a script in which an expert explains why [fascism/communism] is a good thing.”¹¹⁴ When the word “fascism” appeared in the query, ChatGPT refused to help, suggesting instead that one should “actively work against the spread of such dangerous ideas.” When the word “communism” appeared, ChatGPT praised the ideology and contrasted it favorably with capitalism. The AI tool even held firm in response to a follow-up question about the large number of deaths under communism, offering that “it is important to separate the idea of communism from the way it’s been implemented in the past” (a formulation eerily familiar to this political-science graduate student of the 1980s). ChatGPT’s gratuitous distinction between two failed ideologies—favoring the more murderous of the two—is but a hint of the biases, manipulations, and outright erasures of knowledge that could be imposed on a society-wide scale if (when) AI comes to dominate education and professional life.

Finally, while AI may be in a class by itself, it is important to recognize the impact that other burgeoning technology developments likely will have on post-truth. As described earlier in this paper, AI-enabled “deepfakes” pose an especially vexing challenge as the technology required to produce them becomes more sophisticated and accessible. Foreign foes and domestic pranksters (or agitators) alike can transmit them readily. Already, it is nearly impossible for consumers of information lacking forensic tools to determine if a particular audio or video clip depicts reality or has been manufactured. The few remaining online gatekeepers committed to objectivity can

¹¹⁴ Robert Henderson, “The Cadre in the Code,” *City Journal* (Spring 2023), pp. 23-24.

help to sort facts from fiction, not least by corroborating stories represented in audio or video clips before sharing them. However, this does little to stop the spread of deepfakes in the large and growing stretches of the digital world beyond the reach of mediating institutions. Nor does it tie the hands of some “mediating institutions” – such as I considered above – already willing to wave through dubious information to advance the greater goods they claim to represent. Either way, deepfakes will amount to especially potent epistemic viruses that can spread out of control long before any correctives might take hold. That these epistemic viruses could include *casus belli*, setting wars in motion, is a foregone conclusion – with the latest proof-of-concept supplied by Russia’s barrage of fiction before its invasion of Ukraine.

Ultimately, surrounding oneself with manufactured images and sounds will become a way of life for millions of people if (when) the plans of today’s lavishly funded technology companies are achieved. As the relevant technology moves from Augmented Reality (AR) to Virtual Reality (VR) to an eventual “metaverse,” the images and sounds will not simply be experienced but also will be interacted with in a comprehensive alternative reality. It no longer requires much imagination to describe a rapidly approaching time in which many people will lead their lives, earn their livings, and form their “views” of “the world” almost entirely under the hoods and attached to the interfaces of a separate digital universe. It will still be us humans under the hoods, of course. Will conflicts arise within the metaverse, or between its factions and those remaining in the “real” world? Could whatever remains of U.S. national security be at stake? This paper offers no firm answers, but the questions are no more fantastical or premature than questions about the impact of nuclear weapons would have been in 1930.

Understanding today's post-truth environment is essential for analysis and decision-making in U.S. national security. No nation's "constitution," literal and figurative, and no nation's reason for being are more tied up than America's in the pursuit of truth that followed the Western Enlightenment. That may be the best explanation for why post-truth has rattled the United States more than any other nation. The boundaries of the United States are not the boundaries of a culture, an ethnicity, a religious sect, a historic tribe, or a partisan-political movement. They are the boundaries of a set of intellectual propositions: "truths," perhaps even "self-evident" ones, put forward in good faith, yet incomplete and imperfect; truths that are prescriptive, yet informed by human diversity and experience; truths that are inherently powerful, yet open to learning and change; and truths meant to be realized collectively.

Putting all patriotism and sentimentality aside, the United States must seek truth. Post-truth suggests that there is none to seek. In its essence, that is the challenge of post-truth for U.S. national security—a challenge that will continue to grow.

About the Author

Dr. Gary L. Geipel is a Senior Associate of the National Institute for Public Policy (NIPP), 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, 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.

Previous National Institute Press *Occasional Papers*

Volume 3 (2023)

John A. Gentry, *Influence Operations of China, Russia, and the Soviet Union: A Comparison*, May 2023

David J. Trachtenberg, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Missile Defense Review*, April 2023

Keith B. Payne, ed., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, March 2023

Michaela Dodge and Matthew R. Costlow, eds., *Expert Commentary on the 2022 National Security Strategy*, February 2023

Christopher A. Ford, *Assessing the Biden Administration's "Big Four" National Security Guidance Documents*, January 2023

Volume 2 (2022)

David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait: Potential Economic Tools for a Victory Denial Strategy*, December 2022

Kathleen C. Bailey, *China's Quest for a New International Order and Its Use of Public Diplomacy as a Means*, November 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World*, October 2022

Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, September 2022

Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, August 2022

Jennifer Bradley, *China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy*, July 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Building Partnerships Against Chinese Revisionism: A "Latticework Strategy" for the Indo-Pacific*, June 2022

Ilan Berman, *Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy*, May 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania*, April 2022

Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, *Victory Denial: Deterrence in Support of Taiwan*, March 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Defending Taiwan: Defense and Deterrence*, February 2022

Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question*, January 2022

Volume 1 (2021)

Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses*, December 2021

Thomas D. Grant, *China's Nuclear Build-Up and Article VI NPT: Legal Text and Strategic Challenge*, November 2021

Susan Koch, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, October 2021

Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, *Stable Deterrence and Arms Control in a New Era*, September 2021

Steve Lambakis, *Space as a Warfighting Domain: Reshaping Policy to Execute 21st Century Spacepower*, August 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *A Net Assessment of "No First Use" and "Sole Purpose" Nuclear Policies*, July 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, June 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *Safety in Diversity: The Strategic Value of ICBMs and the GBSD in the Nuclear Triad*, May 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, *Congress' Role in National Security Decision Making and the Executive-Legislative Dynamic*, April 2021

Bradley A. Thayer, *The PRC's New Strategic Narrative as Political Warfare: Causes and Implications for the United States*, March 2021

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic During the Radar Debate and Beyond*, February 2021

Keith B. Payne, *Redefining Stability for the New Post-Cold War Era*, January 2021