



# ANALYSIS

## POST-TRUTH: IMPENDING TESTS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

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### Introduction

The United States is entering an acute period in its experience of post-truth, with growing implications for national security. Described extensively in earlier work by this author and others,<sup>1</sup> post-truth is a condition in which millions of people across all segments of society lack shared notions of truth, the ability to distinguish opinions from facts, and even a common base of accurate information. During the next 18 months at least—through the inauguration of a U.S. president in January 2025 and perhaps well beyond—post-truth may test the country’s constitutional order, its ability to respond to external challenges, and its very cohesion as they rarely have been tested before in the nation’s history.

Large numbers of Americans appear unlikely to accept the outcome of an election pitting the incumbent president, Joe Biden, against his predecessor, Donald Trump—the most likely matchup barring the death or serious debilitation of one of the two men. This is true regardless of which candidate wins:

- In one scenario, an individual with a decades-long history of fabulism and visibly diminished cognitive capacity is re-elected President of the United States. Millions of Americans believe that he and his party used the full force of federal and state law enforcement in an attempt to convict his opponent on charges never pursued against other former presidents or presidential contenders. Millions of other Americans discount or remain unaware of evidence that the president-elect and his family may have enriched themselves through overseas influence-peddling crimes still under investigation.
- In another scenario, an individual with a decades-long history of fabulism and evident personality disorders is re-elected President of the United States. Millions of American believe that he and his party undermined the constitutional order to pursue false claims of election fraud after the 2020 presidential contest. Millions of other Americans discount or remain unaware of evidence that the president-elect in fact may have taken part in crimes still being tried or investigated.

The likely legal and political machinations surrounding these scenarios point to an extended period of instability. Hurdles may include the certification of election results, presidential pardons (including self-pardons), the formation of a cabinet, and the conduct of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Gary L. Geipel, *Reality Matters: National Security in a Post-Truth World, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2023), and Jennifer Kavanaugh and Michael D. Rich, “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Rose of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” RAND Corporate Research Report RR-2314-RC (2018).



basic executive and legislative business.<sup>2</sup> America’s adversaries may be sorely tempted to take advantage of these internal distractions. This is particularly true of China, which faces a narrowing window of opportunity to act on its claim to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Amid constitutional chaos, the United States also could find itself increasingly unable to achieve meaningful consensus on U.S. national security—let alone to fund and implement coherent defense policies.

To anticipate these serious internal challenges and to demonstrate that the United States is serious about grappling with post-truth, at least four responses deserve consideration:

- Written bipartisan commitment by willing U.S. Representatives and Senators to accept the state-certified results of the election barring substantial evidence of actual fraud or manipulation.
- Establishment by Congress of a bipartisan commission to examine, document, and disclose evidence surrounding America’s post-truth traumas of the last decade.
- Endorsement by private organizations involved in information dissemination of a set of principles on the processes and standards of truth-seeking.
- Release by the Biden Administration with the bipartisan endorsement of congressional armed services committees (and ideally the endorsement of the opposing presidential campaign) of a robust statement on the continuity of command and military readiness.

In the longer term, concerted efforts involving widespread public education, institutional reforms, and the bipartisan establishment of norms are long overdue if the United States is to manage the post-truth environment and avoid its serious threats to national security.

### Post-Truth: A Refresher

This paper adheres to a simple, three-part description of the post-truth condition, its general implications for national security, and the most troubling scenarios of the post-truth environment—building on previous work. These are summarized in Figure 1.

**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

<sup>2</sup> Nick Catoggio, “We’re Not Coming All The Way Back From This,” *The Dispatch* (August 2, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022).

Three conditions gave rise to post-truth and sustain it:

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

Digital technology acts as an accelerant of post-truth, actively encouraging poorly supported beliefs and outright fabrications.<sup>4</sup> As a result, post-truth is a nearly universal condition—contrary to the comforting belief that the problem only affects our tribal opponents. The embrace of conspiracy theories, acceptance of unproven narratives, and one-sided engagement with information are distributed evenly across the ideological spectrum.

A post-truth environment creates risks for national security in three general ways:

- **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 may 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 when 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. “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 “fatal

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<sup>4</sup> This is described comprehensively in Shoshana Zuboff, “The Coup We Are Not Talking About,” *The New York Times* (29 January 2021).

distractions” include scenarios that could flow from the previous types and place national resilience in question.

**Designed Crises.** 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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. Unfortunately, U.S. foreign and security policies no longer are free from such designed crises or deliberate ignorance.

A previous study examined several examples, including the 2021 “Climate Adaptation Plan” (CAP) released by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in response to what the Secretary of Defense called the “existential threat” of climate change.<sup>6</sup> The CAP is an archetypal manifestation of a designed crisis. Laden with hyperbole, the dense, 30-page document offers only one piece of actual data on expected climate change, repeating an oft-cited range of possible sea level rises. It provides two trivial examples of how weather phenomena might have influenced military equipment while offering no examples of how U.S. armed forces have contended or might contend in the future with actual climate change. It fails to mention climate-related challenges that observers can agree on—such as resource and maritime boundary disputes heightened by the warming of the Arctic, or the unimpeded passage of Chinese and Russian naval vessels into waters near Canada and the United States. In place of such consensus observations or efforts at persuasion, 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 unprotected against the elements.<sup>7</sup>

The CAP joins the long list of narrative-based oaths published by corporations, universities, and other powerful institutions not to educate but to signal fealty to dogma. 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 continue to succumb in this way to the designed crises and deliberate ignorance prevailing in wider U.S. discourse.

**Epistemic Coups.** Like most human beings, Americans 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

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<sup>5</sup> Lance Morrow, “Can Freedom Survive the Narratives?” *The Wall Street Journal* (May 17, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> See Department of Defense, *Press Release on the Climate Adaptation Plan* (October 7, 2021), available at [www.defense.gov/News/Releases](http://www.defense.gov/News/Releases).

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Climate Adaptation Plan* (September 1, 2021), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Oct/07/2002869699/-1/-1/0/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-CLIMATE-ADAPTATION-PLAN-2.PDF>.

were the stakes so large and the viewpoints so irreconcilable as to spark a full civil war and rarely—the brief reign of “McCarthyism” in the early 1950s is an example—have 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 among 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. A recent study offered detailed examples covering public health policies during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, discussion of COVID-19’s origin, and coverage of incriminating emails belonging to the son of President Biden.<sup>8</sup> The third example featured the large-scale involvement of current and former U.S. intelligence officials, compounding a crisis of confidence in both the veracity and the political impartiality of that community.<sup>9</sup> No accountability has been forthcoming for America’s recent epistemic coups and so they can be expected to continue.

**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 grouping of scenarios that fall roughly into two categories: (1) the possibility of a cold or even hot civil war in the United States, which could destabilize the country from within and make consensus on national security matters nearly impossible, and (2) the possibility that exaggerated or manufactured threats consistent with tribal narratives will distract attention from actual threats.

Already, the virulent “culture wars” arising from the post-truth condition serve to poison civic discourse and distract almost constantly from the business of 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>8</sup> Geipel, *op cit.*, pp. 41-47.

<sup>9</sup> See John A. Gentry, *Neutering the CIA* (Estes Park, CO: Armin Lear Press, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Robert Kagan, “Our constitutional crisis is already here,” *Washington Post* (September 23, 2021).

(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."<sup>11</sup>

When 20% of the nation's voters across the political spectrum declare themselves open to unconstitutional power grabs and nearly half "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. As described above, the next 18-24 months present an especially acute challenge.

## Responses

The post-truth condition did not arise quickly and cannot be stabilized or reversed in a short period of time. A distinction between near-term and longer-term responses is important, therefore.

### Near-Term Responses (2023-25)

In the near term—in the context of the 2024 presidential election and subsequent transition of power—at least four responses may be helpful. First, America's elected representatives could signal their awareness of the impending challenges and intention to avoid the worst of them. This should include a written commitment by a large, bipartisan group of current U.S. Representatives and Senators—well before the actual election—to accept the state-certified results of the election barring substantial evidence of actual fraud or manipulation. Signatures on a common statement would be the most straightforward means to achieve this commitment.

Second, to demonstrate its awareness that broader conflicts over information and truth divide the nation, Congress should consider the establishment of a bipartisan commission to examine, document, and disclose evidence surrounding America's post-truth traumas of the last decade. To have any credibility, such a commission would require a scrupulous balance of perspectives among its members and a charter that covers America's recent epistemic coups and other conflicts over information *regardless* of their partisan or tribal origins. Public-health discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic and investigations of the pandemic's origins; the conduct of federal law enforcement, the Intelligence Community, and Members of Congress around recent, politically sensitive investigations; and the spread of election-fraud claims in the 2016 and 2020 elections all should be covered—in balanced and serious ways.

Third, private organizations involved in information dissemination (including social and traditional media companies) should consider developing and promising adherence to a

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<sup>11</sup> "New Initiative Explores Deep, Persistent Divides Between Biden and Trump Voters," *UVA Center for Politics* (September 30, 2021), available at <https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/new-initiative-explores-deep-persistent-divides-between-biden-and-trump-voters/>.



statement of basic principles covering the nature and importance of “truth” as well as the processes and standards of effective truth seeking. Such a statement of principles—anchored in norms that strengthened the United States and other liberal societies in the past<sup>12</sup>—could provide a much-needed ethical “north star” that transcends the manifestly partisan agendas of individual editors, reporters, writers, executives, and others who influence media content in the United States. Instead of threatening the freedom of speech, as legally mandated “disinformation” controls usually do, a voluntary, norms-based approach could help to reinvigorate professional integrity and promote constructive dialogue.

Finally, as a near-term measure, the Biden Administration should seek the endorsement of congressional armed services committees and the opposing presidential campaign of a detailed, robust statement on the continuity of command and military readiness during the U.S. presidential transition. Even if this repeats detailed information already in the public domain (as it surely would), the visible agreement of key players with the U.S. Government’s processes, contingency plans, and ongoing vigilance during a transition—even a disputed one—could give adversaries sufficient pause.

### Longer-Term Responses

Recent analyses examined a range of proposed technology-based responses as well as the track record of private and public “anti-disinformation” organizations in challenging post-truth. The technology-based approaches appear largely unrealistic—requiring the substantial dismantling of a business (and social) model that is almost universally entrenched. For their part and almost without exception, “anti-disinformation” organizations in recent years have been enablers of post-truth more often than they have resisted it.<sup>13</sup> Other approaches, therefore, must be considered—guided above all by a common set of principles.

**Guiding Principles.** Longer-term responses to the post-truth condition should begin with the consideration of at least four principles. First and foremost is the acceptance that post-truth is a universal challenge. While most people tend to believe that they are impervious to narratives, unpersuaded by their tribes, and clear-eyed about the entrenchment of illusions, few really are. Those who approach post-truth and its associated problems of disinformation and misinformation, tribalism, cancellation, conformity, and conspiracy theories from a heavily partisan-political perspective are not only wrong but also will make the underlying problems worse. Second, *fighting post-truth means challenging a claim rather than banning a claim*. Where post-truth is concerned, the banning of a dubious claim or its claimant often leads to something even worse than misinformation: the valorization of the supposed falsehood. Challenging a claim rather than attempting to ban it

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<sup>12</sup> A powerful recent description of these norms and their impact is Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Geipel, op cit., pp. 56-64.

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 personal and national 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. Finally, *keeping post-truth at bay requires the elevation of skepticism and its companion: transparency*. America’s coming to grips with post-truth may depend on our understanding that what we hear or read is not always true—and that we must look inside a claim before accepting it.

**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 and can be tailored readily to age groups based on their likely exposure to online information. Tribal neutrality is essential. 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.

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.

**Institutional Responses.** Post-truth can be mitigated by the work of institutions writ large—the professions of journalism, law, and education in particular—on which Enlightenment notions of truth-seeking hinge. Post-truth also can be mitigated by individual institutions, working by themselves and together. At least three kinds of responses remain possible. First, large-scale institutions should *hold fast to professional integrity and core principles*. It is not clear that a majority of influential academics, attorneys, and journalists still aspire to (let alone insist upon) such classically liberal notions as intellectual heterodoxy, tolerance of dissent, and the pursuit of objective truth. Some do, however, and now is the time to affiliate with them openly, and shore them up. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

Second, *we still can learn from our 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. Occasional *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.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a massive and scrupulous investigative report by the *Columbia Journalism Review* laid bare the extent to which credulousness and partisan activism on the part of most mainstream journalists created and spread the false notion that the Trump campaign “colluded” with Russia.<sup>16</sup> 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. Its membership should rotate based on the issues and would require

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<sup>14</sup> The Heterodox Academy membership roster is available at <https://heterodoxacademy.org/members/>.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Geraghty, “Three Hard Lessons from the Dominion Defamation Lawsuit against Fox,” *National Review* (April 19, 2023), available at <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-morning-jolt/three-hard-lessons-from-the-dominion-defamation-lawsuit-against-fox/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Gerth, “The press versus the president,” *CJR* (January 30, 2023), available at [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/trumped-up-press-versus-president-part-1.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/trumped-up-press-versus-president-part-1.php).

an explicit “A- versus B-Team” approach that demands serious examination of competing conclusions.

Third, *we must work together, or at least seek to interact with each other*. At a 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. Inside the government itself, the approach finally taken by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to assessments of COVID-19’s origins should be emulated more broadly.<sup>17</sup> 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.** Building on the statement of principles for private information organizations discussed earlier as a near-term measure, 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 as well. Comparisons to threats from chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are apt, in which the time for countries to recognize risks and pledge themselves to responsible behaviors was before any further large-scale damage occurred. By way of example, an earlier study in this series outlined a possible “Reality Convention” that could be widely accepted.<sup>18</sup> See Figure 2. This statement could benefit from improvement, but it is 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.

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<sup>17</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Updated Assessment on COVID-19 Origins* (October 29, 2021), available at <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Declassified-Assessment-on-COVID-19-Origins.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Geipel, *op cit.*, p. 74.

**Figure 2: 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 post-truth. 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. As standards for analysis, communication, and especially policymaking, the norms embodied in a Reality Convention or something similar 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 academic programs, research organizations, advocacy groups, and government agencies—establishing a shared bulwark against the ongoing rise of post-truth.

## Conclusion

The post-truth flood is indeed rising, which adds to the urgency of confronting it. 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. A recent analysis by a Canadian media expert concluded that today’s social media tools change “the way propositions are verified, challenging our very epistemology of truth. ... Confirmation bias is implanted in the design: we trust what we ‘like.’ ”<sup>19</sup> The already extensive effects of post-truth described in this paper occurred before the widespread application of artificial intelligence, the large-scale use of so-called “deep-fake” audio and video technology, and the expected embrace of a wholly online “metaverse.” The additional post-truth implications of these developments will be examined in a forthcoming paper by this analyst.

It no longer requires much imagination to describe an 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? These questions are no more fantastical or premature than questions about the impact of nuclear weapons would have been in 1930.

Understanding and responding in a principled way to today’s post-truth environment is essential to preserve high-quality analysis and decision-making in U.S. national security. It is essential to preserve our readiness and signal our vigilance to adversaries. And it is essential to preserve our very resilience as a nation.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrey Mir, “The Viral Inquisitor,” *City Journal* (Spring 2023), available at <https://www.city-journal.org/article/the-viral-inquisitor>.