



## The War on America's 2024 Elections: How U.S. Adversaries Seek to Divide Americans and Undermine Trust

October 31, 2024

*Featuring Suzanne Spaulding, Bradley Bowman, RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, and Ivana Stradner*

*Moderated by Maggie Miller*

*Introductory remarks by Max Lesser*

**LESSER:** Welcome, and thank you for joining us for today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Max Lesser, senior analyst at FDD's Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation.

It's Thursday, October 31st, and today's panel will discuss how U.S. adversaries seek to divide Americans and undermine trust by interfering in our election process, the underpinning of our democracy. We're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in person, some tuning in live, and some listening on our podcast.

I want to begin by expressing a note of optimism. In 2016, many Americans were caught off guard by the Kremlin's aggressive activity targeting our elections. Since then, America has made considerable progress when it comes to exposing influence campaigns and building societal resilience.

When Iran launched a hack-and-leak operation targeting the Trump campaign this year, mainstream reporters did not publish the compromised content, as they understood that doing so would play into the hands of Tehran. Last week, when Russia disseminated a fake video of a man destroying ballots in Pennsylvania, the video was debunked within hours by local election officials, and the next day, the U.S. government issued an official statement attributing the video to Russia.

At the same time, it's important to remain vigilant. A recently declassified report by the ODNI [Office of the Director of National Intelligence] warns that foreign malign influence targeting American elections will not end after voting ends. The report assesses that adversaries may seek to stoke violent protests in the post-election period. It cites an incident in January [2024], where Russian intelligence attempted to recruit an American to organize protests, and another incident in May and June [2024], where Iranian intelligence reached out to an American on social media, offering to send money to travel to a pro-Palestinian protest in D.C.

The ODNI also warns that Iran could use cyber-enabled influence operations to open the door to physical threats. The report cites an incident in December 2020, when the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] created a website with death threats against U.S. election officials. It also mentions that Iranian actors have tried to incite violence by exposing personally identifiable information about federal and state officials.

While Iran has certainly emerged as the dark horse of foreign malign influence targeting this year's elections, we are not only seeing activity coming from Russia and Iran. China, too, has been conducting operations targeting down-ballot candidates in apparent attempts to shape voter preferences. China also uses covert accounts on social media in attempts to cast our political system as hopelessly corrupt and chaotic. China does this not only to cause Americans to lose faith in our political system, but also likely to cause the global audience of the Internet to lose faith in American strength and leadership on the world stage as well.

Before I introduce our esteemed panelists, I want to bring up two important points.

First, it's important to put threats into perspective. Many social media botnets and fake news websites garner little engagement in America. This is largely thanks to the incredible community of open-source investigators across the public, private, and nonprofit spheres who often expose influence campaigns before their content goes viral.

At the same time, cyber-enabled influence operations that seek to stoke physical violence present a serious threat, and there are many means by which our adversaries can directly reach out to Americans in attempts to incite violence.

Secondly, the issue of foreign malign influence targeting Americans has, at times, been highly politicized. Foreign malign influence, however, is a national security issue, not a partisan one. Clearly, our adversaries target candidates on both sides of the aisle, and moreover, they seek to undermine the very foundations of our democracy, which is the cornerstone of our political system. And so, I see no better place to discuss foreign malign influence than FDD, a fiercely independent and nonpartisan think tank.

So on that note, let me introduce our expert panel.





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Bradley Bowman serves as senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power. He has served as national security advisor to members of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, as well as an active-duty U.S. Army officer, Black Hawk pilot, and assistant professor at West Point. He recently edited and published the FDD monograph, *Cognitive Combat*, which addresses information warfare waged by our adversaries. You can pick up a copy before you leave or find it on FDD's website.

Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery serves as senior director of FDD's Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation, and directs CSC 2.0, an initiative that works to implement the recommendations of the congressionally mandated Cyberspace Solarium Commission, where he served as executive director. Previously, Mark served as policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, and before that, for 32 years in the U.S. Navy as a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer.

Suzanne Spaulding serves as senior advisor for homeland security and director of the Defending Democratic Institutions Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Previously, she served as undersecretary for the Department of Homeland Security, where she led the National Protection and Programs Directorate, now called the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or CISA. She was general counsel for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and minority staff director for the House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. She also spent six years at the Central Intelligence Agency.

Ivana Stradner serves as a research fellow with FDD's Barish Center for Media Integrity. She studies Russia's security strategies and military doctrines to understand how Russia uses information operations for strategic communication. She has previously testified before European Parliament, has briefed various government officials, and also serves as special correspondent for KyivPost.

Moderating today's conversation is *Politico* cybersecurity reporter Maggie Miller. Her beat includes coverage of international threats from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, along with spending time on Capitol Hill reporting on federal cyber policy priorities.

Before we dive in, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as an independent, nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, we do not accept foreign government funding. For more on our work, please visit our website, [fdd.org](https://fdd.org), follow us on X and Instagram, and subscribe to our YouTube channel. We're everywhere.

Let's dive into our discussion.

Maggie, over to you.

**MILLER:** Thanks so much for that great introduction, Max, and thanks to everyone in the room — and everyone watching — for being here today, and to our panelists. And can I say, Happy Halloween?

(LAUGHTER)

What a fun and scary topic to discuss today. So, to just dive right in, before I open it to the other panelists, I want to start with Bradley who, as Max mentioned, has done some fantastic research on the issue of cognitive warfare. And I want to, kind of, ask you to set the stage around this idea of cognitive combat. Can you define, you know, cognitive combat, information warfare, and whether what we've seen already in this election cycle, from foreign adversaries like Russia, China, and Iran, you know, equals information warfare?

**BOWMAN:** Great. Well, thank you, Maggie. It's great to be here with you. And Suzanne, great to be sitting next to you. Really respect all your experience and work through the years, and my great friend and awesome colleague Mark Montgomery and the center he leads, and the work that he and Max have been doing. And Ivana, I just really respect you, and your piece in *Foreign Affairs* that you just published is amazing, and I recommend folks read it.



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Thanks for the question. I — you know, we all — think-tankers love to talk about our work, but, you know, the *Cognitive Combat* monograph, which I was honored to edit, and wrote the intro and conclusion for and, I want to highlight, includes three chapters: a chapter on China, Russia, and Iran.

Craig Singleton, another amazing colleague who focuses on China, wrote the China chapter. Russia chapter is written by Ivana and John Hardie. And then, an Iran chapter written by our CEO Mark Dubowitz, and our great colleague Saeed [Ghasseminejad]. So that — everything I'm saying — or much of what I'm saying — is informed by that year-plus research project that we did for that.

And one of the things I quickly discovered in looking into this, really, honestly, as a confession, really, as somebody who spends most of my time, kind of, focusing what I would call hard power, you know, traditional Department of Defense stuff, I didn't come into this, and I don't sit here now, pretending to be an expert on information warfare.

And so, I asked myself, kind of, like, a basic question, right? The beginning is, like, what is information warfare? Like, as I used to pound my cadets for, if you're going to, you know, talk about something, you better define your key terms first, right?

And so, I went on this search for a definition of information warfare where there was some sort of consensus around it in the U.S. government, or in the Beltway, or — and I didn't find one. I didn't find one.

And, you know, I found things like DOD [Department of Defense] Joint Publication 3-04 that defined it so broadly, it almost was, like, meaningless. It was, like, anything — any thought any human being has ever had in — you know, I'm exaggerating a little bit. It's like, well, that's not helpful.

And then, some of it is so specific, especially if you talk to people in the Pentagon — in — you say "information warfare," they think protecting cyber networks, it's ones and zeroes, it's command-and-control systems. I'm not diminishing that at all. That's fundamental to — as Mark Montgomery knows well, to combat operations. But that really wasn't what I was wanting to do with the monograph.

And so obnoxiously, arrogantly, I came up with my own, talking to my own people. And here's the definition — and I think it's helpful, maybe, I hope, for this conversation, because I believe what we're going to discuss, absolutely, is information warfare, but it's a subset — it's an important subset, but it's a subset.

So here's my definition. You can critique it or, you know, later, we can talk about it. It's the messages and means to convey those messages that nation-states use to advance political, economic, and security objectives, and to strengthen the government's foundations of power, reinforce those of allies and partners, and undermine those of adversaries.

So objectives — you're — you — military folks, you're going to hear the ends, ways, means here, right? Objectives, messages, means, protect our foundations of power, undermine yours, OK? That's the idea. It's not perfect, but I think it's a good place to start.

Spoiler alert, we argue in the monograph that our adversaries — China, Russia, and Iran — are, as we speak, waging an information war against us, whether we realize it or not. And I worry, and I — one of the reasons I'm so excited about this event is that a lot of Americans don't realize it, and I think that's a severe problem. And, you know, predators like nothing better than slumbering prey. So what I was trying to do with the monograph was, kind of, sound the alert, just as someone who is kind of coming new to this issue.

And just a few quick points, and then I — I'm eager to hear from the other panelists, who really have done amazing work digging into some of the details — is that there are — and I'm leaning heavily on Craig Singleton's work, and Ivana's work here, and others — our adversaries — China, Russia, and Iran — there really are three audiences, three general audiences, for their information warfare.

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The first audience — I — I've learned this a lot from Ivana — is their own people, is their own people. Now, it might seem kind of counterintuitive at first, because, like, why would they be attacking their own people?

Well, if you're an authoritarian, autocratic, or a totalitarian regime, and you don't get to enjoy the consent of the governed, then you have to manage and try to manipulate, in an Orwellian fashion, the flow of information to your people — their — the people, so they accept their oppression and their subjugated state, right? And so, you — of course that's going to be their focus, because that's what you would expect them to do to —

And then the second is the United States, and then the third is third country. We can talk about, why the United States? Well, I think it's because, as we talked about in the monograph, at least there's — I talk about three reasons, I'll only mention two here.

One is our existence, and the other is our power. You know, like, existence — are they — you know, is that — they hate us for who they are? Well, if you're an autocrat, or an authoritarian, or a totalitarian, and you want to maintain your grip on power, it's really not helpful or good for you to have another model of governance that looks appealing. So if you want to maintain your grip on power, you want to make that other model of governance — I don't know, I'm thinking, like, Abraham Lincoln here — of, by, and for the people — to look as trashy as possible, so that your people don't want it, and you can maintain your grip on power.

And so, you know, I'm thinking of Stephen Kotkin here out at Hoover [Institute], right? You know, our existence is a problem for them, and if you bring that democracy even closer, in the case of Taiwan, and you have a flourishing, prosperous, vibrant democracy just offshore, that's not a good look for the Chinese Communist Party, and they don't like it.

And then the other is our power. I think they see the United States, correctly, as uniquely positioned to block their aggression.

So if you're Xi, and you want to take Taiwan by 2027, or 2028, or whatever the current number is, then the United States is uniquely positioned to stop that.

If you're Putin, and you want to conquer Ukraine, or make it subservient to you as part of a, quote-unquote, "sphere of influence," then the United States is a unique impediment.

And if you're Khamenei in Iran, and you want to exterminate the world's only majority Jewish state, then the United States is a unique problem for you.

So that's why they're focusing on us. And so, what are their objectives in this information warfare? You know, when you're making a little speech, you got to come up with, like, a little — three Ds. Here's three Ds for you to remember, divide, degrade, and deceive.

They want to divide us, right, as Ivana wrote so excellently in her *Foreign Affairs* piece, so that we spend more time at each other's throats, that we're just, — we're just trashing each other, we're at each other's throat, they want to sow discord so that we're so weak, divided, and distracted that we question ourselves, and we don't have the time or the will to go and defend our interests at home and defend them abroad. So divide us at home, make us basket cases at home.

Degrade our own democracy, our reputation, our standing in our own minds, and the minds of others so, again, that we look like a less favorable alternative, so they can maintain their grip on power, and then deceive us. Deceive us, that sounds like, you know, that sounds a little, like, old fashioned. Deceive us into believing falsely that we have no core interests to defend in places like Taiwan, Ukraine, Israel. We absolutely do.

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They want us to believe that we don't. And if we don't, then that amazing American military, that I've spent my life, you know, researching and serving in, cannot matter. If you convince Americans that, hey, there's — you got — who cares about Taiwan? It's some far-off place. Then they can defeat us. They don't need to worry about our military, and they can do it without even firing a shot, by simply telling us that it's none of our business, doesn't matter, who cares?

And I'll end with this. Don't worry, I won't geek out on this, but the military folks in the room will love this. Carl von Clausewitz had the idea of “center of gravity.” It's the — it's — he defined it, “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends.” It's — some have described it as the source of power and strength, the point against which all efforts should be directed.

I would argue that our center of gravity, our American center of gravity, is our Constitution, the rule of law, free and fair and trusted elections, and the peaceful transfer of power. That's who we are. That's our center of gravity. If we want to not lose, we have to defend that. We have to defend that.

They understand that, and that's why they're going at it hard. So the answer to your great question, Maggie, yes I would classify what we're going to talk about here, what we're seeing with our elections, as part of an information warfare campaign, just one part of it, albeit a very important one.

**MILLER:** Well, thank you for that great rundown, and really setting the stage on what we're seeing. And to broaden it out to our other panelists who are all experts in different ways on some of these nations that are impacting us, you know, I'm right in the thick of reporting on some of this. In the last few months, we've really seen this drumbeat of effort, and cyberspace, and the disinformation space from Russia, Iran and China to impact our election in various ways.

So, for each of the other panelists, if you want to talk about, you know, what you've seen so far in this election cycle, what's concerning you the most and, yeah, if you have thoughts on if what we're seeing is information warfare, and maybe — because he's close to me, I'll start with Mark.

**MONTGOMERY:** So, yes, look, I think what we've seen — and Max has written two good papers here on it at FDD. In fact, we went about six months ago, a year ago now, and invested in digging into information operations campaigns, not necessarily aimed at elections, but in general. And obviously, the countries we looked at principally are these three authoritarian states.

I'm going to leave North Korea out, because North Korea, I think, spends most of its cyber time trying to figure out how to steal bitcoin or, you know, do cyber malicious activity, you know, in the name of the state.

The other three — China, Russia and Iran — are all taking a hard look at trying to undermine American democracy. The election's a great opportunity. When the elections are over, they will still be out there working very hard to undermine American's trust in their democracy. The election is just a great opportunity.

And it doesn't really matter if they change the results of the election. In fact, I personally believe they won't change the results of the election for the reasons Max mentioned. But if they undermine people's belief in a credible transfer of power, or their belief that they're vote matters, then they really take a — you know, take a hard hit at what Brad described, you know, as our center of gravity.

I think all three countries take a different approach. There's no doubt in my mind, you know, our research is clear that Russia, who runs the largest campaign, is working hard to weaken Vice President Harris's campaign and strengthen President Trump's. There's just no two ways to look at that.

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Iran, I think, works harder with a much smaller effort. Works harder to hurt President Trump, probably because he, you know, targeted General Soleimani and killed him. Probably because he worked hard to undermine, you know — to get rid of the Joint — the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], the nuclear deal. It would make sense that they would — that they'd go at that, although they do a little bit of both sides.

The Chinese are the most deceptive or duplicitous in this, in the sense that they don't really care who wins. They don't care which side that they may trust less. They're working both sides of the aisle. I think you can find bot networks or websites that will work one side, you know, weakening Harris or Trump, and then, three weeks later, be working the other side. Because all they care about is what Brad said, which is the undermining of the — of our core belief in the — in our fundamental institutions. So, look, all three countries are different. But all three countries, in the end, are working to weaken our — the confidence that American public holds in democracy.

And I think all three of them are successful. And collectively, this is a very bad thing for the United States. And I think that some — you know, in January or February, when all the molten lava's clear, you know, and we have a new president, that all three will still be working this issue.

**MILLER:** And same question for you, Suzanne, but interested in getting your take, especially on some of the hacking activity that we've seen, especially from China, given your background, and this focus, it seems, this election, to really target those at the top, such as presidential candidates.

**SPAULDING:** Yeah, thank you, Maggie. And totally agree with everything that's been said today.

Brad, I thought that was a terrific rundown of the landscape. Yeah, I think when we think about foreign malign interference in our election, we do have to think about cyber, straight-up cyber. Cyber-enabled information warfare, and then straight-up propaganda information warfare.

And I would say, with respect to, certainly, election infrastructure, you know, back in 2016, when I had the honor of leading the men and women who work every day to safeguard our critical infrastructure, including our election infrastructure, the assessment then was that it would be extremely hard, virtually impossible, for an adversary to — using cyber means, to change votes, or change vote tallies, in order to change the outcome of the national election, the presidential election.

And I think that is only more true today. We've gotten better at safeguard — at helping to shore up the cybersecurity of our election infrastructure. Also, you know, I think cybersecurity is about frustrating the adversaries' objective. And the adversaries' objective, as these guys have said, is as much as anything to undermine the public's trust in the legitimacy of the process.

So, how do you frustrate that objective? You make it harder for them to get in, but you also find ways to shore up public trust. And so, paper ballots was a way of mitigating the potential harm that our adversaries hope to achieve. And over 98 percent of the votes cast in this election will have paper ballot backups. And that's a really important way of undermining our adversaries' objective.

I think it's really important, as we talk about the targets of our adversaries — Russia, China and Iran — to remember that, as Brad said, there's their own population. But then, within the United States, the target is every single American, right? We are the targets. And Americans should not take that lightly. They should be demanding of policymakers that they have a vigorous response to counter this activity.



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And I'm quite concerned that, instead, what we've seen is a chilling of the kind of work that needs to be done, as our adversaries are running full steam ahead every day, improving their TTPs, their tactics, techniques, and procedures, to be more effective in the information space. We are chilling efforts to understand and counter that activity. And I think that's really troubling.

So cyber, I think we're in better shape. Cyber-enabled, I think that sort of hack-and-leak where, as you pointed out, and Max pointed out, we're in better shape, because people are sensitive now to this tactic. And as we saw, the media didn't fall for it. And it sounds like the, you know, when the Biden campaign at that time, Harris campaign today, were offered this material, they did not respond to those emails. At least, that's what the reporting shows. But there — but these efforts will continue.

And then, we've got the straight-up propaganda. And there, we are seeing you know, lots and lots of activity. And it's gotten much more sophisticated, as we know. So instead of a bunch of trolls in St. Petersburg, Russia, making stuff up, and throwing it all out, and seeing what sticks, right, we've got actors who are in the Doppelganger case, which the Department of Justice filed, talked all about how Russia is setting up these fake news sites, because surveys show that Americans trust local news more than national news. So now, they're going to spoof local news sites, right, to put their propaganda in. And make up news sites, but also — and also national mainstream media. I mean, they mocked up a *Washington Post*, you know, web page.

And so, they're doing that. We know that they paid \$10 million to a firm in Tennessee. That is a PR firm that has a number of commentators, and influencers, if you will, on contract. They gave them this money to feed their talking points to these commentators. So, using witting and unwitting American voices to get their propaganda out there.

So, for Putin, I mean, think about this. If Putin had an interest in the 2016 election, or the 2020 election, right now, one candidate supports — continues to — strong support for Ukraine, and the other, not so much. For Putin, this is an existential issue, right? This is a very big deal.

Think about Iran's interest here, right? Iran, with what's going on in the Middle East, very, very strong interest in undermining public support for that kind of activity.

So, these are very big issues to these folks. This is not just some theoretical, let's undermine democracy. These are nearly existential issues for them. And they are going to be very, very vigorous in their efforts to target Americans and manipulate our political discourse.

Last thing I want to say, Maggie, and then I'll stop, is that we are — we need to be more sensitive to the attacks on campaigns, not just our election infrastructure. And I'm going to use that opportunity to make a shameless plug for the Defending Digital Campaigns, DDC, which is an entity authorized by the Federal Election Commission, to provide — to work with companies to provide free cybersecurity services to campaigns. If anybody watching is affiliated with a campaign, and you're not already taking advantage of these free services, you need to do so.

**MONTGOMERY:** I'm afraid it's a little late for them right now, with four days to go. But yes, but I agree with you. DDC —

**SPAULDING:** Never too late.

**MONTGOMERY:** — does a — if you're — if you're planning a 2026 campaign, you should definitely be there.

Can I mention one other thing? I'm glad you mentioned CISA. You can't — I can't state enough, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency under Jen Easterly has done a fantastic job on election security. And I get she's going to take a heat round from, you know, Republicans every time she mentions disinformation. And she probably doesn't need to do that as much, let others. But the actual core work done by CISA, like in most areas, is high quality, and gets it done.



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And the end result of this election cycle needs to be that the people who come into office in the next administration, in the next Congress, continue to fund CISA at a robust level, because this is an ongoing campaign for us throughout all of cyber issues, throughout all of critical infrastructures. And I think Jen Easterly has done a great job, and CISA in general has done a good job over the last few years dealing with election security and, more broadly, infrastructure security.

**MILLER:** And we're going to come back to CISA in just a moment, but I want to bring Ivana into the conversation. You know, speaking of CISA, speaking of, kind of, election security at this, sort of, federal-focused level, really, 2016 was the year it really got put on the map, with the huge Russian interference campaign. Can you talk about, you know, from your expertise, how Russia has changed its strategy in the last eight years to target the US, and also, how they've kind of taken that playbook, and gone, kind of, global on that?

**STRADNER:** Definitely. So, whether we like to admit this or not, we are in an information war with Russia, because the Kremlin openly claims that. I understand where — that for some people in the US, they may feel uncomfortable talking about, and using the word "information war," because then you have to do something about that. So that's why, probably, some people feel more comfortable talking about information competition.

Another fact that I want to bring is that, for the Russian Ministry of Defense, information is a weapon. They openly says that, and you just — really, all you have to do is to read their military journals, linked to Russia's Ministry of Defense, to actually see how their analysts perceive information warfare.

So, let me tell you two ugly truths.

Number one is that they believe that who has information superiority is going to win this war, and for them, this war is truly about perception, and that's why they maintain — they want to maintain information superiority.

And the second thing is they believe that they value non-kinetic-to-kinetic efforts, four to one, which tells you all you also need to know, that Putin is actually a KGB guy, not a military guy, so he can accomplish a lot of his security objectives without rolling tanks and jets in Washington, or Brussels, or any other capital in the West.

So, I recently read the latest report — actually, it was not the latest, but one from July, from the Office of Director of National Intelligence — and they actually claim that Russia is the predominant threat to the U.S. elections, and is actually working better to hide its hand. And I've been tracking Russia's activities for quite some time, and while people like to always focus on elections 2016, I believe, actually, that Russia has used similar activities even before that.

So, in 2016, as we heard before, they used bots and trolls, and a lot of authentic and inauthentic accounts, but also hack-and-leak. But nowadays, as Max had mentioned, and wrote wonderful reports exposing their activities, we have developed a lot of tools to actually find such accounts, and to expose them, even prior to a full campaign.

But Putin is a smart person in that sense, so he has adopted a strategy, and what you have just mentioned about, investing in media here in the United States, faking and planning to make all this as a — grassroot movements. So, pay attention to more and more social media influencers, whether in music, in fashion, in sport, not only in the United States, but globally, how they're actually peddling those messaging. Some of them, they are doing that voluntarily; some of them are not, and that's, you know, what also we saw with the Justice Department, how they charged, also, two employees of RT [Russia Today] recently.

The second thing is, as you also mentioned, Doppelganger, and faking those accounts — faking those websites. I don't know some of you, but, like, I rarely, actually, for every news that I read, go to a main page, and actually check whether it's *WashingtonPost.com*, or *WashingtonPosttt.com*. So — and given that we work in a very fast-paced world, that's also something that Russia has been using to exploit.





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The third thing is, people like to talk a lot today about artificial intelligence. It's really nothing new; it's just that it allows Russia to use deepfakes to just continue with its messaging, and the fourth thing that they have adopted — and this is something I would like to mention — it's actually not only about this election, so I'm confident to say, even after next week, they are going to start a new campaign, actually challenging the results of the elections. And even after that, they will go back to their favorite messaging related to gun control, or related to the question of abortion, or related to secessionist movements in the US, immigration — just fill in the blank — any contested and every controversial issues in the United States that they like to exploit.

So going back to this: why it actually matters to observe Russia's influence operations globally. We live in the United States, but the world does not revolve around Washington, DC, so something that I have been also tracking is how Russia is actually operating in the Global South, but currently, what we also see in Moldova and Georgia, which are part of Russia's more broader concept of hybrid warfare.

There are a lot of lessons that, actually, we can learn from how Russia operates in countries such as Moldova and Georgia, but the key — my key concern is actually that, for Putin, he's thinking for — for him, this is also an ideological war. This is truly, for him, democracy versus autocracy, and I understand that some people in the West may laugh about the latest BRICS summit, but if you read carefully, Russia's statements, for Putin, this is an ideological war to start a new multipolar world. And even though it's laughable to talk about Russia's economy, it's all about perception, and that's how you actually create a new world order, starting with the Global South, but also, starting with your allies elsewhere in the West.

And that's why what I've been observing with Moldova and Georgia, which is a broader concept of hybrid warfare, not only using cyber activities, influence operations, but also, there are numerous, also, reports how Russia was training some of the groups to conduct sabotage in the Balkans, for example. That tells you, really, a lot how Russia is thinking holistically about hybrid warfare activities.

So, I'm just going to stop here and, once again, I will just repeat that, truly, who has information superiority in the 21st century will win.

**MILLER:** And I'm so glad you brought up Georgia and Moldova, because we've just seen two elections in Moldova; very, very slim majority voted for moving forward with EU membership, and now, the president has to go into a runoff. In Georgia, we saw the very pro-Russian party maintain control, and now, there's questions about the legitimacy of that election. Russia, it seems, did have a very heavy hand in each of these elections. In Moldova especially, it's been described as hybrid warfare.

So, you know, I — for everyone else on the panel, are you concerned that what we're seeing in Moldova and Georgia is something that, you know, Putin, Moscow, they're all learning from, and that they might try to use towards our elections in the future?

And maybe, I don't know, Bradley, you want to start over here?

**BOWMAN:** I'd love to hear from Mark on this —

**MILLER:** Mark, potentially — yeah.

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**MONTGOMERY:** Yeah, Ivana and I, in fact, are writing on this in the next couple days — or publishing on this in the next couple days. I — yes, this should be a concern to us. Let's be clear: In Moldova, money was — you know, Russian money came in, and paid — and this is in the millions of dollars — were literally paying people to vote or not vote. And — and look, they barely — with the EU referendum, which should have passed with 55, 54 percent, it passed with 50.16 percent. The president, Sandu, she's through. She's extremely popular, but she has a runoff, I think, 3 November, right, Ivana? So in the — even before our election this weekend. I think she'll win.

But here's where we have to be worried: The Russians are good. They know that this, kind of, buying of votes, spreading of disinformation, is more effective in localized parliamentary elections, so I fully expect, next March or April, when they run their parliamentary elections, you know, the Russians are going to — and parliament's where the power is in Moldova — are going to run hard to displace the Western, EU-leaning — European Union-assessing government with one that's more loyal and empathetic to Russia.

So yes, they are absolutely investing in these, and the United States is basically — and the West, you know, we're approaching it with extremely limited economic support, hoping that's enough. It's not. We need to provide — we need to be sanctioning individuals who are involved in this. We need to be providing financial criminal support — you know, support on how to dig into financial actions, so that the Moldovans can charge people with crimes. You know, the — that is a — an ongoing criminal activity by Russia against Moldovan democracy, and we've got to be much more aggressive in supporting this.

We try to stay out — I get — you know, we try to stay out of other countries' elections. This isn't about staying out of their election; this is about helping the country ascertain illegal behavior that's going on.

In Georgia, it's more complicated, because the Russian-leaning party is actually Georgia Dream, which is in power, because it's a little harder for us to, like, support the government in investigating Russian influence since, in fact, they are the vehicle of Russian influence. But there, it's about supporting — they — they're going to come out hard protesting the election results that happened last weekend — the opposition is — and we need to fully support that opposition. You know, the European observers of this generally found this to be a fraudulent election. We need to go — and as those reports come in, we need to highlight, emphasize, and push back on this.

Russia cannot continue to operate, you know, uncontested in these environments, and I don't care the geographic proximity to Russia. It should be irrelevant. If it's a democratic opportunity, or an opportunity for transparency, being denied by Russia, we need to go confront it.

And so, we have to be much more aggressive about this, and I'm afraid that we've — we're kind of halfway stepping into this, and not fully wading into it to support these nascent democracies.

**MILLER:** Yeah.

**SPAULDING:** And Maggie —

**MILLER:** Yeah?

**SPAULDING:** — absolutely, I would say, your question, you know, should we worry that what we see over there could happen here? You know, we have, over history, seen exactly that, right? And we said that in 2016. We should have seen what they were doing overseas, interfering in elections, and anticipated that it would come here, and we need to continue to do that.

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A lot — I — I've done a lot of work looking at how Russia information operations undermine public trust in our justice system, for example. And we saw that, first, in Central and Eastern Europe, where they went after prosecutors, and they went after judges. I mean, Putin knows that their broader foreign malign influence and corruption efforts can be undone by a judicial system with integrity, and by a prosecutor with integrity, so undermine their credibility, so that that can't be as effective.

Well, they're doing it here as well, and as we look at the role of the courts in helping to ensure the peaceful transition of power, we see election cases coming through the courts already, and that is going to pick up steam after the election. What better way to ensure chaos in our country, and undermine the legitimacy of the result, than to undermine the public's trust in legitimacy in the courts?

And again, Putin leans into weaknesses of our own making, right? We have lots — there are lots of reasons Americans have some mistrust and declining trust in the courts, but the Kremlin will exacerbate that, and China is more than happy to step on that — on board that as well.

And then, the other point that Mark made about the — that they know local elections are easier to sway, you know, voters around than have an impact on the national scale. And we see both Russia and Iran, particularly, focusing very specifically on swing states and, more specifically, on swing districts, on particular districts, and particular population groups within those districts.

And it doesn't take — it's not — it doesn't require that you turn a Trump supporter into a Harris supporter, or vice versa; it — all you have to do is convince them that the system is so corrupt that they stay home, discourage them from voting, right, or after the fact, convince them that the process was illegitimate.

So yes, what we see them doing overseas, we should anticipate they will do here.

**MILLER:** And I want to stay with you for a moment. I said I wanted to come back to something about CISA. Obviously, you led what is now CISA, it was the National Protection and Programs Directorate. Have to say, I'm very glad the name's been changed, as someone who's covered it since then.

You know, what do you think that CISA's role is in terms of securing the election? They came under a lot of criticism at the end of 2020. And what's your take on, you know, is the election secure heading into Election Day?

**SPAULDING:** Well, I'm glad you asked that, Maggie, because I think it's really important to get the word out there that, yes, as Jen Easterly has been saying, Americans should have great confidence in the security of our election infrastructure.

They have been working around the clock, certainly since 2016 — we certainly did that through — throughout all of 2016 — but the relationship between CISA and the state and local election officials is so much stronger today, and a lot of that is thanks to Chris Krebs and to Jen Easterly and Caitlyn [sic, Cait] Conley, who runs the election effort there, who's been working, initially out of Harvard, and now with CISA, to build those relationships.

Really important. They're very secure. The machines are not connected to the internet. There is all kinds of redundancies built in here. There are checks and balances. There's a tremendous amount of security around this.

And so, yes, Americans should be confident about the legitimacy of that process, and the security of that process. And that's an important role that CISA plays. And CISA is in a position to help reinforce that message all across this country, both in the run-up to and in — and after the election. And I think they should continue to do that.

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CISA makes it very clear that Americans should look to authoritative sources, and to me, that is first — a source is with first-hand information about what's going on with the election security, right? If you're hearing something about a local — you know, the problems at a local election place, polling place, Americans ought to listen to the officials that are running those elections, first and foremost, and that's important.

I think CISA has an important role to play in training election officials about disinformation and information operations. And I think it's really important that we not allow those who would claim that all efforts against disinformation are really just about stifling conservative views, to prevent us from doing the things we need to do to counter this very real threat to the peaceful transition of power.

And I'm pleased to see that CISA is continuing in its work to train local — state and local election officials to — and understand what to anticipate, to detect, and how to prepare to respond effectively to that. And I think that's, really, an important piece of what CISA does.

**MILLER:** Yeah, great. Do any other panelists have thoughts on if the election's secure?

**MONTGOMERY:** Well, I just go back. I — look, my — like I said, I really support the job Jen Easterly's done at CISA. I think she's done a great job. If I were her, I'd stay away from disinformation, talking about it publicly, only because this administration screwed up disinformation.

They rolled out a board in a really bad way, where they didn't brief Congress, particularly the opposite party, of what they were doing on a politically sensitive issue, then nominated someone to run it who was not really bipartisan, and they screwed it up.

And she should stay away from that, because right now, the most important thing is that CISA have credibility with both parties. So just keep doing the great job they're doing on reinforcing the state and local election authorities, keep the election secure.

I'm going to tell you; the elections are going to be secure. I agree completely with Suzanne, and I agree with Jen Easterly on that. What they're not going to be is, we're not — is we are going to have a meltdown on November 7th or 8th, no matter who wins. That's not related to whether they were secure or not, that's related to people's perception of what happened.

And I just don't want CISA dragged into that, because I think CISA has to exist after this election cycle. CISA needs to be a — you know, as John Katko used to say, Representative Katko, a \$5 billion agency. It's currently a \$3 billion agency, and this administration's brought it up, with the help of Congress, both parties, has brought it up from a \$1.5 billion agency. We need to have that robust agency for a — a litany of reasons, one of which is election security.

So, I — it's just a personal beef. Stay away from the disinformation talk in public, because it just — it makes you catch heat rounds from conservatives, and it's not necessary.

**SPAULDING:** Yeah. I will just push back a little bit. We'll have a longer debate on another day about the Disinformation Governance Board, because I think that has been mischaracterized, and — but we'll have a longer debate on that.

I do think it's critically important, as I said, that it — because if CISA is — the state and local election officials have said, "We are ill-equipped to deal with the information warfare from our adversaries and others." And if CISA is not helping to train state and local election officials for how to deal with this threat, who is? Who is going to do that?

So that's why I think it's important. I get that they shouldn't be up there, trying to talk about every lie that every — that any politician tells, because then they would do nothing else at — from dawn to dusk, and I don't see them doing that. That is not their writ, and nobody has suggested that. But to completely disarm in this realm, I think, is a big mistake.

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**MILLER:** And Bradley?

**BOWMAN:** Just I — can't add any specificity to that, but I would just zoom out and say this: What we're — I think all of us are saying together is that our adversaries are trying to sow discord, and sow distrust, between citizens and our institutions, and we shouldn't help them do it, right? When your enemy is trying to do something to you, step one, don't help your enemy. So I — I — that would be the zoom-out, yeah.

**MILLER:** And speaking of some of this disinformation space, I know this is something you wanted to talk about a little bit, Mark. The Global Engagement Center at the State Department, my colleague Joseph Gedeon had a report out about how its authorization is set to run out. This is the organization within the State Department that helps address foreign disinformation, the US's kind of arm for doing that. There's been some pushback against reauthorizing it on the Hill.

What's the impact if the GEC [Global Engagement Center] closes? And for other panelists after, maybe, Mark addresses this, what is the impact of the US not having this arm outside of our country to help fight against foreign disinfo from Russia, China, Iran, some of our —

**MONTGOMERY:** Yeah, thanks for asking. I absolutely think we have to have a Global Engagement Center. I think the GEC under Jamie Rubin has done a very good job. I think it has to be reauthorized. I think the Senate has a good plan, a bipartisan — I think Cornyn and Murphy going forward on this — that bill needs to get in the NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act], and be conferenced through.

We have to have the tool — the GEC is one of the tools. It's a way — the Global Engagement Center goes out, finds, you know, false stories about the United States, or incorrect stories about Russia, or China, or Iran, and corrects the record internationally.

We need someone out there doing that. That is naturally — that needs to be the State Department, not the intelligence community, not the Defense Department. They need to stay out of this business. It is a wholly State Department responsibility. So, it needs to be reauthorized.

I get why the — some House Republicans are mad. The GEC made a mistake a few years ago, with who they did business with. If I were the — Secretary Blinken, I'd be the bigger man right now — or maybe it's Jamie Rubin — go out there and say, "We made a mistake, sorry, let's move on." They won't do that. The House Republicans won't let go of it.

And if we end up letting the GEC, you know, become — you know, basically, not be — lose its authorization, or expire its authorization, we are going to hurt the United States. That tool, along with things like *Voice of America*, which is a fantastic tool, and — and its associated, kind of, progeny, like *Radio Free Europe*, the Asia, Middle East networks, those are the way the United States spreads the gospel of transparency, democracy, and freedom, and tells the truth to the world.

I lived in Moscow in the early 1980s, and *Radio Free Europe* and the *BBC World News* was how we got the truth, it was how the Russians got the truth, the Soviets got the truth, about Afghanistan. These things are critical tools. Those radio networks have to be fully funded, and they're not. Across multiple administrations, we — they become part of — you know, they become budget victims.

The — across — the Biden administration's done a great job with the GEC over the last two years. It's been out there, breaking up the Russian "African Initiative." You know, they have exposed two or three different major information operations projects by the Russians in the Global South. I think they've done fantastic. They've told the truth about Ukraine.

We need to have them. And whatever it takes to get that done — this a — you know, the leadership of the State Department needs to get down there. The government makes mistakes all the time. You just go down there and say, "We made a mistake, let's move on."

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I think Representative McCaul is smart enough to take that and get this into the NDAA, 'cause if we lose this, then it's going to be really hard to recover. It'll take years to recover this capability and capacity in our State Department, and that's two or three years of the Russians, and the Chinese, and the Iranians running wild with their bullshit.

(LAUGHTER)

**MILLER:** Great quote.

I was going to say, Ivana, do you have any thoughts around, you know, what it would mean for the GEC, you know, to not be around to help counter some of this Russian disinformation that you were talking about?

**STRADNER:** There is actually very little that I would add to what Mark actually stated, because I firmly agree that we do need the Global Engagement Center, because — it's not a perfect organization, but it's a great organization that has published multiple reports on exposing foreign malign activities.

I have to admit, people across the globe are probably not going to read every single line in those reports. However, it is tremendously important, because maybe some other bloggers across the world are going to see this, and then to use their platforms, actually, to amplify the truth about Russia's, or China's, or Iran's lies, which is the whole point of having, actually, the Global Engagement Center.

And I absolutely also agree with Mark regarding the *Radio Free Europe* and the *Voice of America*, because all of us grew up in Central and Eastern Europe, our families benefited tremendously from those particular platforms.

But it doesn't mean that they are also enough. We should be also very creative, because we have social media. They should also find other activities, you know, how they can actually truly reach hearts and minds globally.

**MONTGOMERY:** And one thing I'd add is — if you should go to the — if you think the *Voice of America* is wasting money, you need to go down to where they operate out of, and see, like the 1950s, you know, building they're in, with asbestos falling off the wall kind of thing. They're running on a shoestring. Those things need budgets. We, you know, we cannot be penny-wise and pound-foolish here. We absolutely have to invest in these social media, and the — they're really social media and media platforms now — to push — not the American narrative, the narrative of transparency, democracy, freedom of action.

**MILLER:** And I was an unpaid intern at *Voice of America* about 10 years ago, so I can back this up. The halls were — they need some renovation.

Bradley?

**BOWMAN:** No, I just I want to say, I completely agree with Mark, and — one, and two, you know, we're using the term warfare here, and you hear the term warfare. Well, that's the purview of the Pentagon. The Pentagon does warfare. But what I did with my definition — or tried to do with my definition — is say, this is much bigger than the Pentagon. Most everything we're talking about here is outside the purview of the Department of Defense. And so, if we make our response just the Pentagon, we're going to — we're going to fail, because think how little of what we've talked about actually relates to the Pentagon here.

We need other agencies and departments involved. And that's got to be the Department of State to some degree. It's necessary but not sufficient, as part of what I would say is has to be an offensive campaign, in addition to the domestic defensive efforts that we're doing to protect ourselves.

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And so, you know, I spent several years advising members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that oversee the State Department and the GEC. And, you know, I remember some of these discussions. There's lots to criticize, but — as Mark said, so rightly: just because you have problems and mistakes doesn't mean you throw it out. You fix it. We need an effectively functioning GEC, now more than ever. Fix it. Don't throw it out.

**STRADNER:** And after all, one other thing that I wanted to flag. Every time when we are talking about suppression of free speech here in the United States, we should also monitor, actually, how China, Russia — and probably Iran as well — are actually weaponizing that. I know for a fact that Russia has been using that as a weapon against us. Every time when we sanction certain individuals, or media platforms, from Russia, they immediately run a campaign here in the United States, targeting specific voices amplifying those ideas that this is the end of the free speech in the United States, that this is the end of a democracy, because they understand that this is actually going to resonate with a lot of people here.

And as I mentioned, information is a weapon for the Kremlin. And that's the part of Putin's, actually, deception strategy to weaponize free speech here domestically, making sure that we do not have places such as Global Engagement Center.

And after all, one of the best strategies to defend ourselves is actually to put Russia on the defense, so — because they fear places such as the Global Engagement Center, or the *Radio Free Europe*, or the *Voice of America*. So, let's make sure that Putin actually spends time, energy, and resources defending himself and Moscow, instead of attacking democracies including the United States.

**MILLER:** So before we move to audience Q&A — and we will be getting to that shortly, so if you have questions, start thinking of them — I want to, kind of, ask for the whole panel: We've discussed a range of threats, what we're seeing, so what are, maybe, three ideas, for each of you, on what we can do to push back against this huge range of threats? You know, what can we do as a country, so that we're not quite as much of a sitting duck?

And maybe we'll just go down the line, maybe Mark, you want to start?

**MONTGOMERY:** Well, I think I've said them. First, properly fund CISA, and support it in doing its mission as the head of our election security.

Second, properly fund the State Department, and State Department-affected things, such as The Global Engagement Center, and the, you know, the media networks, *Radio Free Europe*. I recognize they're not State Department entities, but — and that positive messaging.

And third, we do need to recognize — and Suzanne and I helped create this years ago, the DNI [Director of National Intelligence] has a Foreign Malign Influence Center, and make sure that we're reading what they put out. They are not the truth teller. They are not — we — they weren't created to be truth tellers or truth sayers. They were created to collect information on what foreign adversaries are doing to us. Make sure you're paying attention to them. They will tell the story, outside the election cycle, of what Russia, China, and Iran are up to. So, if we use our natural, you know, parts of the government, the Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, and the intelligence community, we will have those supporting elements to our military portion, as Brad said, the DOD part of information warfare. So, fully fund those things properly. I think we'll be in much better shape.

**MILLER:** Suzanne?

**SPAULDING:** Yeah. Well, I totally agree, but I would also say, just as in cyber, and our Cyberspace Solarium Report had, as its first pillar, to build resilience, right? We're all about, now, not just trying to prevent the adversary from getting in, but make sure that you can mitigate the consequences the adversary could achieve, and that requires understanding what those consequences the adversary is trying to achieve, and then figure out all the ways you can mitigate it.

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The same is true in information warfare. Understand what our adversaries' primary objectives are. And one of the key objectives is to undermine the public's trust in democracy, and our democratic institutions.

How do we build public resilience against the content of that messaging, because we are never going to get rid of information warfare. And the way we do that, I believe, is to teach Americans about democracy, to teach civics, which we stopped largely, which we have allowed to atrophy after Sputnik. We put a big emphasis, I think rightly so, on STEM education as a national security imperative. And we forgot that teaching civics is also a national security imperative. And so, we have a — generations of adults, ill-served by our education system, who don't understand the fundamentals of how our system is supposed to work, what are our aspirations for democracy, and what is the role of the individual; that the promise of democracy is not some myth of current perfection. The fact that it's imperfect is not a reason to abandon it. The promise of democracy is its capacity to change, but only if we are the informed and engaged agents of that change.

And that's what we need to do, I think first and foremost, to frustrate the objectives of our adversaries.

**MONTGOMERY:** So, we need more than Schoolhouse Rock?

**SPAULDING:** Well, that's a good start. Bring back Schoolhouse Rock.

**BOWMAN:** Don't disrespect Schoolhouse Rock.

**MILLER:** Bradley, your thoughts?

**BOWMAN:** Amen. Oh, my goodness, that was well said. My wife's done a lot of work on education and national security, and sometimes, we treat these things as very different. And they are not.

We have something here worth defending. And we have to tell the next generation that what we have here, in the scope of history, is pretty darn amazing. And if we don't defend it, we'll lose it. Period.

So that — and then, hey, our adversaries are waging an offensive information warfare campaign against us. OK. There's take-home message number one.

Take-home message number two is — that I've observed in looking at this, that we have a reflexive habitual tendency to not go on the offensive ourselves, for fear of provoking our adversaries, right? Oh, you know, do we really want to do offensive [information] warfare inside China, Russia, and Iran? Oh, I don't know, we might provoke them. OK. We might provoke them. That's a little bit like having two combatants in a war, and one combatant is launching rockets, missiles, drones, mortars at you, already. You're being pummeled, and you're saying, "Well, I don't think I should fire back because I might provoke them."

Well, newsflash, they're already launching salvos at you. You're under attack. So, provoking them, what are you talking about? We're under attack.

And, you know, you study military history. If you're only on the defensive, sooner or later, your defenses are going to break. There is no deterrence. Our adversaries are not deterred in this offensive war against us. We have to create deterrence where none exists.

And there's two types — there's deterrence by denial, defense, CISA, and there's deterrence by punishment, offensive operations, inside China, Russia, and Iran. We might provoke them. They're already firing at us. Create the deterrence, and if they don't like it — oh, Putin, you don't like me exposing your corruption? Oh, Khamenei, you don't like me saying what a totalitarian, theocratic thug you are, you know? Xi, oh, you — you know, you don't want us talking about concentration camps. Well, you know, maybe you should stop attacking our election. And then, I'd recommend we keep doing those things but, you know, let's start there.



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So — I think we have to — Americans don't like being told what to do or to think, right? I love that. I don't like it; you don't like it. It's kind of — I — dare I say, it's an American trait. Don't tell me what to do or think.

I'm not saying government telling Americans what to do, but at least, the U.S. government should be involved in telling Americans about what our adversaries are doing to us. We should defend our centers of gravity, and we've got to go on the offense.

And if we don't go on the offense, folks, I humbly predict it's going to get much, much worse, because our axis of aggressors adversaries are working together, they're sharing intelligence on us, they're going to share best practices. It's going to be with increasing ferocity and AI-empowered effectiveness.

They're coming at our Abraham Lincoln center of gravity, 'of, by, and for the people', and if we don't do something about it, we're in trouble.

**MILLER:** Ivana?

**STRADNER:** I absolutely agree with you, Brad. Actually, the best defense, in my view, is offense in the information space. And let me tell you, also, the ugly truth, what Putin believes. He already believes that we are actually waging information war inside Russia. So, they believe — so maybe we should —

**BOWMAN:** So, let's do it!

**STRADNER:** Exactly, exactly. So, I don't believe that something like that would actually provoke them. As a matter of fact, they have already launched this war strategy in the information space, overwhelming our DOD and intelligence agencies in information space.

So, we spend our time, energy, and resources defending ourselves. And having those type of panels, and having all those type of reports coming from the U.S. government, instead of using our time for other reasons — so maybe it's time, really, to turn the script.

Second thing that I would like to emphasize is that, yes, we are in an information war, and it's not going anywhere, as — as you mentioned. And actually, we should actually perceive it as a protracted war, where you can have information superiority on a day one, but maybe not on a day two. So, we should not worry about a question if we are winning or losing. That's a poorly, actually, framed question.

And the third thing that I would also like to emphasize — we love to talk about the effectiveness of influence operations. First of all, our government should not assess the effectiveness, because that's going to dive deep into the question of a free speech question. However, one particular message may not be important, but the compound effect of those influence operations are actually important, and that's precisely why they're having such effect.

So, my last point to that is, indeed, going on the offenses. My full support.

**MILLER:** Well, on those thoughts, I think we're going to move to audience Q&A now. So, yes, if you have a question, put your hand up. Someone will come to you with a microphone.

Yes, here? If you could just say your name, and who you're with, and — yeah.

**FILIPETTI:** Sure. Hi. My name's Carrie Filipetti, I'm with the Vandenberg Coalition. Thank you so much to FDD, as always. Suzanne, thank you for what you said about civics. I think that's a key part here.

But something that I'm, sort of, mindful of is, the incentives in today's culture are actually really problematic for what we're trying to do. They're all about getting votes, getting clicks, doing things quickly, versus getting accurate information out there.

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And so, over the last few years alone, we've seen some things that have been disinformation, been described by people in positions of responsibility as truth, and things that are true being described as disinformation. The more we get it wrong once, the more we start to lose faith and trust by the American people.

And so, my question is, how can people in positions of responsibility — so that's political candidates, that's political leaders, that's the media, most importantly, and that's well-known business figures — really, kind of, handle disinformation in a way that's better than what's being done now?

Because, frankly, I see it as just people using the term “disinformation” to describe the thing that they don't like, as opposed to the thing that's actually inaccurate for some kind of political purpose.

**MONTGOMERY:** I'll start by saying, that's really hard. You know, I do think in general — I mean, I think — very specifically, I think retired senior people shouldn't sign letters, saying whether they think things are or not disinformation, because they're no longer — they have the credibility of the job title they had without the access to the material, and I think that that's, really, one of the most significant cases we've had in the last few years.

So — but what I would say is that, you know, I — while the government can't be the arbiter of truth, they have to be aggressively out there, pointing out things they know are disinformation. So, I think, in that regard, you know, the — you know, the — there is a role for government in this.

I think the second group is that there are, you know, a — I want to call them white hat, but, you know, activists, you know, internet activists that are out there, identifying disinformation. And look, I think you need to have trained newsrooms that know how to use this information properly, take a balanced view.

I don't expect, like, polarized newsrooms, like *Fox* or *MSNBC*, to be able to — to do this in the — in an appropriate way, but I do expect the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, people who are on a slightly slower timeline, to be able to do this in a thoughtful, meaningful way.

And, you know, I think that's happening a little more frequently now, but it's still something that needs to be worked on. And I think the media needs training on it, and we definitely need to re-establish the journalist-versus-opinionmaker on TV, because it's very hard now to tell who's who, and they have very — two very different ethical relationships to the facts. And I think it gets very confused on TV now, and it's hard for the American public to understand what's a fact, and what's an opinion.

**SPAULDING:** Yeah. And I blame a lot of that on the 24/7 cable news, where they needed to fill airtime, and so they pulled in their journalists who were inevitably drawn into, you know, giving their opinion on things. I do think that's a real problem.

But I also think, you know, we've got — I think the Microsoft reports that have come out on a periodic basis about what they're seeing — in terms of foreign election interference, for example — have been hugely helpful. I think they have a lot of credibility, because people know, again, that they have firsthand knowledge. They are in systems, they have access to the kind of data that general researchers today no longer have access to, that we had in 2017 for a brief, golden period, but a lot of that is not there anymore. But Microsoft has the ability to get at that kind of data, and speak authoritatively about that.

So, I do think it's really — it's one of the reasons I feel so strongly that it's important not to chill third-party, non-governmental research in this area. So, I do — I take Mark's point, that the government is not viewed as the most trustworthy source by at least half of Americans, depending on who's in office.

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Introductory remarks by Max Lesser

**MONTGOMERY:** Hey, if I could add one thing, too — now that I think about it, the — you know, first of all, Max, your two reports have been great. But there's the NCRI [Network Contagion Research Institute] at Rutgers University. We would not have caught out TikTok, if it weren't for detailed work by that organization, pointing to the bias in the algorithms and, just mathematically demonstrating that, at some point, this was a bias in the algorithm at TikTok. It was — it didn't look like Meta.

I also want to point out that the *Journal*, the *Post*, the *New York Times*, *Politico*, have all, you know, kind of, mainstream media, have run really thoughtful pieces on this. And then, even the trade journals, like *CyberScoop* — you get into *CyberScoop*, *Inside Cybersecurity* — you see reports on this, where they properly cover the reporting of the Microsoft report.

I really think, you know, that print journalism has really done a good job this cycle. I get that if you go on *MSNBC* or *Fox*, you kind of get just a blast of one version of the truth. But in the print media, I think there's a reasonable discussion of the Microsoft reports, the Google, the Mandiant reports, and then the independent reports like Max's, and a lot of other private organizations looking at this.

So, I — that is a cause for, you know, possibly, for optimism that over time, they can do it. But because of the 24/7 cycle, I'm not sure the cable news networks will ever get there.

**MILLER:** Do we have any other questions in the room? Oh, over here.

**RYBKA-IWAŃSKA:** Hello. My name is Katarzyna, I'm from the Polish Embassy. I have a question regarding the Hurricane Helen (sic.) — or Helene, from a couple of weeks ago. It was often said that the disinformation that was happening around the hurricane was fitting the script of the Russian interference in previous catastrophes, natural catastrophes, in the United States and elsewhere. Has this been confirmed yet, that Russia was taking part in these disinformation activities that were really, really broad, and much broader to — as far as we were tracking them down the — during just the next hurricane, Milton? Thank you very much.

**MILLER:** Actually, I'm going to answer that very quickly, and go here. I had a story out just a couple days ago. We had a — an official in the — who remained anonymous but did confirm that the U.S. government is attributing Russia to some of this, alongside — I believe it was Cuba, and I think it was China or Iran — one of them. It was a few days ago, but Russia was definitely one of the main culprits there. So, the U.S. government has formally attributed that.

But any other panelists?

**STRADNER:** Yes, I would like to actually add to that.

**MILLER:** Yeah.

**STRADNER:** It was recently in Poland. So, you actually also had a very similar situation, where Russia was flooding the information space with similar messaging, you know. But here also, there is an interesting thing. This is not the first time that Russia — if they claim it's Russia; let's, you know, assume that — was behind that, because they've been — there are numerous, actually, campaigns about so-called HAARP [High-frequency Active Auroral Research Program] program, and how the United States is controlling the weather. So, this campaign is not only for the United States; they love to peddle such messaging, also in the Global South, and that's something that I've been tracking for quite some time, so I'm so glad that you brought this question up.

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**MONTGOMERY:** And there's two angles to this. One is creating a story; another is amplifying a story. And the Russians are at their best when there's a kernel of truth in their bullshit, right? And so, in this storm, there's a kernel of truth, their slow response. And then, they amplify it, and they highlight it, as if that is the nexus of the story, when in fact, it's maybe one or two percent of the overall government effort failed in this one area, and 98 percent successful. But the Russians are very good at amplifying, taking a kernel of truth, distorting it, and then amplifying it.

Now, in this case, they may have also created the truth. I'm not going to — I haven't seen the intelligence on that. But for certain, they amplified it and, you know, that — again, that's interference in our country, and that's not legal, it's not appropriate, and we need to push back on it, defend against it. But I agree with Brad that, eventually, we have to take our own truth, and talk about it in Russia, China, and Iran.

**SPAULDING:** And amplification is really — can have a huge impact, and I think about it in my own, you know, scrolling through on social media. If I see something, I only have to see it three or four times repeated, and I think, "Wow, this has really gone viral," you know? And it hasn't. But it doesn't take a lot of amplification to take — to move something from fringe to appear to be mainstream.

**MILLER:** Do we have any other questions here in the room, possibly? I thought I saw one other hand. Oh, yeah, we have here.

**BREAUX:** Hi. Reece Breaux, research intern with the China Program. Going off on Carrie's question, how do we distinguish disinformation from partisan discourse, and how do we disentangle it from that and, kind of, expose it, and attack it without getting mired into that quagmire?

**MONTGOMERY:** Are you trying to get Max out of a job? I mean, you know, the —

(LAUGHTER)

**MONTGOMERY:** Look, I think that's hard. I mean, that's the hard — I mean, this is where education comes in. I don't believe you're going to regulate, or even incentivize yourself, towards that. The only way you're going to do it is to have a more discerning customer of the news. I mean, one of the things we can do is, when something's totally inappropriate, like TikTok, we can say, hey, we cannot have a country of concern operate a platform that delivers that much news media to kids — you know, people my kids' age, right? They need to have — that needs to be owned and operated by someone who is not from a country of concern. We can do small things like that.

But to correct this issue, you have to do it — as Suzanne said, you have to go back to the basics, educate people, not just on civics, but on how to be a discerning — how to be able to understand the social media platforms being delivered to you as a child. And I will tell you, this means you have to start in — you know, probably before middle school, because by middle school, they — the platforms are already proliferated throughout — you know, throughout the neighborhood — you know, throughout the children, so that you really need to go back to the basics on this, so —

Which means this is a generational problem. You're not going to solve this problem, and — with a — in the next two or three years. There is no regulatory or incentivization program that's going to get us there.

**BOWMAN:** I would just say — you know, Mark said, "go back to basics". I agree. I think we should go back to some old-fashioned ideas that fellow citizens of good faith, with whom we disagree, are not our enemies, and if you are viewing fellow citizens — I'm using the term 'good faith', right — good — fellow citizens of good faith as an enemy, then you're doing the work of our adversaries, who want you to believe that.

So, you know, there's a lot of people I really, really disagree with. I think they're just dead-wrong on policy, but they're a fellow citizen. They're not an enemy. We have real enemies. We don't have to invent them here at home. And so, I think you start there.



## The War on America's 2024 Elections: How U.S. Adversaries Seek to Divide Americans and Undermine Trust

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And I think if you're relying on one source for your news, you're making a mistake. I don't think you should rely on one source for news, and I think you should go out of your way — methodically, systematically, daily, weekly — to go to a credible news source that you disagree with, and read it, or you're just going to be in an echo chamber, and you're going to be susceptible to these foreign efforts.

**SPAULDING:** And you're going to contribute to these foreign efforts. I — we've got to find a way to make the stigma of forwarding false information greater than the prestige of being the first to share.

**MILLER:** Well, on that note, I want to thank our panelists for an absolutely — at least to me — fascinating conversation on a range of topics, and thank our audience for being here, both in person and online.

For more information on FDD, and the latest analysis on these issues and more, check out [fdd.org](http://fdd.org), and we hope to see you again soon. Thanks so much.

(APPLAUSE)

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