

Countering Disinformation: Are We Our Own Worst Enemy?

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INTRODUCTION

In his 2019 book, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation and What We Can Do About it*, Richard Stengel detailed the Department of State's (DoS) struggles in this burgeoning space. Stengel leaves the reader with a view of the United States Government (USG), where individual departments and agencies resist collaboration and tackle disinformation as individual departments and agencies. The result is a poorly integrated effort with limited awareness of parallel activities, significant challenges to cross-department and inter-agency collaboration, and the inability to evaluate and describe success or failure. Rather than accept Stengel's description as the only way the USG can function, this article posits counterpoints derived from direct involvement with multiple USG departments and agencies during both the Obama and Trump administrations. The counterargument is an understanding of cross-governmental authorities combined with collaborative implementation leads to greater success in combating disinformation.

To begin, Stengel's primary thesis is that, by design, democracies are naturally inadequate at countering disinformation. Inherent territorialism within a democracy is a critical weakness Stengel experienced, and is at the core of his criticism. In contrast, we propose that talent, initiative, innovative spirit, less centralized control, and ability are the real foundations of democracy and can, therefore, be collectively leveraged to both overcome territorialism and effectively counter disinformation. The greatest challenge lies in maximizing and synchronizing these strengths.

Stengel describes a widespread territorial mentality within and between USG departments and agencies. We acknowledge this mindset exists and stifles potentially successful ideas and efforts that require USG elements to work in partnership. In contrast with Stengel, our experience suggests this territorial mentality is something the USG can

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overcome. The solution? (1) Link executive leadership and action officers across departments and agencies, (2) explain the intent to work together, (3) understand existing efforts rather than creating new ones, (4) create an understanding of departmental and agency authorities and capabilities, (5) appreciate permissions to apply authorities, (6) reduce the emphasis on differences and credit for successes. The crux of intergovernmental territorialism lies in a basic discussion of authorities absent a clear understanding of permissions. To this end, a mentor once told me: *amateurs* talk about **authorities**; *professionals* talk in terms of **authorities and permissions**.

Second, Stengel only served for two years as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and was another example of the rapid rotation of key individuals throughout government. This rotation cycle occurs not only at the political appointee level but also at the executive and action officer ranks. The outside perspective brought by political appointees is essential in a functional government, and regular rotations will and should continue. However, this, combined with the rapid rotation of public servants at all levels, starves organizations of institutional knowledge and inhibits the development of coherent initiatives and the implementation of consistent policy. Furthermore, rapid rotation prevents the creation and sustainment of networks of professionals who understand cross-governmental authorities and permissions and who have the experience of cooperatively implementing them.

To achieve successful coordination in the disinformation war, USG should revisit perspectives from the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower, including his National Security Advisor Robert Cutler. Eisenhower was known for collaboration, and if you “put the right smart people in a room, they could figure out the answer to any problem” (Thomas 2012). To get those people in the room, Cutler described his role as that of an ‘information broker’ (Burke 2009). This solution, which



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is the antithesis to Stengel's argument, moved the Eisenhower administration away from territorialism and into a team mindset, which was based on a foundation of partnership.

EUCOM, RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION, AND THE 'RUSSIA INFLUENCE GROUP (RIG)'

In late 2015 and following Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the USG was concerned with additional Russian interference in other former Soviet states. Specifically, the USG was troubled by the advanced levels of Russian disinformation and misinformation which were aimed at European partners and allies. Countering Russian disinformation outside the continental US required a whole-of-government resource synchronization to support DoS and individual country teams. The U.S. European Command (EUCOM)/DoS co-led Russia Information Group (RIG) was born from a need to understand and integrate USG efforts to defeat an increasingly robust Russian campaign of disinformation and misinformation, one intended to undermine the US relationships with partners and allies. The name was later changed to the Russia Influence Group (RIG) to enable a broader focus. It must be noted here, the Russia Influence Group (RIG) described here is different than the Twitter-based Russia Influence Group described by Stengel in his book. The somewhat parallel evolution and lifecycle of the two groups is an excellent example where awareness and interagency collaboration could have and should have taken place but did not.

Stengel's premise that democracies are inept at countering disinformation is not entirely off base. First, freedom of speech is a great US strength and a fundamental principle, but it possesses an inherent vulnerability. Adversaries regularly exploit US freedom of speech protections by inserting protected but untruthful claims into its information environment. Second, when integrating across the US interagency, understanding departmental culture and perspectives are critical as they are

frequently at odds. Differences in culture and perspective often feed interagency territorialism. DoS and the Country Teams, for instance, naturally focused heavily on individual countries. EUCOM and the Department of Defense (DoD) view the world as regions. For EUCOM, this includes over fifty countries with multiple sub-regions where defense requires a multi-state and collective effort. Bridging the DoS and DoD/EUCOM gap to create a more collective perspective was a challenging, but essential task for the RIG.

Four years later—in March 2019—EUCOM’s Commander (General Curtis Scaparrotti) described to Congress his approach to integrating EUCOM’s counter-disinformation activities with the rest of USG (Scaparrotti 2019). The partner approach was bifurcated into two levels of integration. The first was a monthly EUCOM / DoS, co-chaired meeting at the senior action officer level. The second was a bi-annual EUCOM / DoS Senior Leader Steering Board (SLSB) to guide action officers on the whole-of-government plans and emerging initiatives.

The aforementioned RIG (now a mature entity) would present integrated plans and activities to the steering board along lines of effort, including messaging, diplomatic engagement, energy-related issues, finance, and judicial-related issues, and support to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In many cases, Ambassadors or Deputy Chiefs of Mission returned to Washington, D.C., to attend the SLSB to brief or show support for the plans. Participation in the SLSB was voluntary, but the implementation of plans required consensus. Worth noting is this integration initiative would not usurp existing interagency process led by the National Security Council (NSC) and the National Security Staff (NSS). Instead, the process supported bottom-up development in response to guidance provided by said NSC and NSS.

A separate but critical supporting effort to the EUCOM/DoS RIG partnership was the annual Europe Chief of Mission Conference. This effort assembled Chiefs of Mission from across the EUCOM area of operations, leadership from the Department of State European and Eurasia Bureau, and EUCOM Staff (e.g., military personnel, and the EUCOM J9 Interagency Partnership Division consisting of senior liaisons from across USG). The Chiefs of Mission conference empowered DoS, EUCOM, and Chiefs of Mission to share insights on current and burgeoning efforts, to include the RIG. The result was broader awareness, integration, and inclusion.

The final supporting effort was the EUCOM led Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI), which General Scaparrotti described in his 2017 testimony to the House Committee on Armed Services (Scaparrotti 2017). The RSI focused on DoD integration to balance deterrence and escalation. All three efforts (RIG, Chief of Mission Conference, and the RSI) included the DoS and the broader interagency and exemplified EUCOM’s pursuit of a whole-of-government partnered approach in Europe.

For the RIG to be successful, communication was paramount, and dedicated liaisons located in the National Capital Region (NCR) augmenting support from DoD and DoS leadership were essential to ensuring communication occurred and momentum was maintained. A critical liaison built and maintained relationships with key USG departments and agencies. Another

significant liaison worked in the DoS Europe Eurasia Bureau (DoS EUR) handling RIG scheduling and coordination. Importantly, the DoS EUR liaison communicated and translated between DoD and DoS speak. Liaisons ensured visiting senior EUCOM leadership reinforced existing and substantive conversations and aided in strengthening support. Liaisons also ensured plans and concepts submitted to the SLSB were fully coordinated and ready for senior leader approval or guidance. This was a stark contrast to the typical wave top senior leader engagements and these liaisons significantly reinforced partnerships.

General Scaparrotti consistently emphasized that while EUCOM would appropriately lead and shape RIG efforts, too much defense influence and oversight would be counterproductive. His interaction with the US interagency process repeatedly reinforced the principle that great leaders must effectively balance between leading and following. Great leaders are also great partners. Contrary to Stengel's territorial experience, when the RIG collectively presented integrated proposals to USG leaders, one of two outcomes occurred. Either decision-makers emphatically supported implementation, or they worked out differences face-to-face, reducing potential weeks or months of staff coordination to minutes. Ultimately, participating departments and agencies viewed ongoing parallel efforts as complementary to their own goals and objectives.

Summarizing fundamentals learned from the past and reinforced by the RIG:

1. The singular problem, countering Russian misinformation and disinformation meant to undermine US credibility in Europe, required focused and enhanced collaboration. The RIG recognized and embraced this.
2. A two-tiered structure creates organizational commitment of staff and resources in addition to executive leadership obligation to supervise execution. For the RIG, this included: monthly communication and close collaboration between action officers and bi-annual forums for executive decision-makers to jointly approve or supply guidance to action officers.
3. Liaisons grow networks and reach. RIG liaisons mitigated the cost of participation by member organizations, enabled open and transparent communications, and supported face-to-face relationships.
4. Success requires an understanding of and respect for participating members. For the RIG, this meant maintaining the highest familiarity with partner authorities, and employing institutional liaisons (point 3) to bridge organizations and cultural differences.
5. Informal is often a good path. The informal nature of the RIG where cross-departmental and agency network participation was voluntary, reduced tension and pressure to participate.
6. Consider a partnership agreement upfront. This agreement was used by RIG members to develop plans through consensus, share credit, and create a forum for open discussion.

HOW TO COLLABORATE ON COLLABORATING

Collaboration is where problems and opportunity lie. Democracies can be exceedingly effective at countering disinformation. Effectiveness requires the time to understand and leverage the authorities and responsibilities of each department and agency across USG. An effective approach also requires that organizations understand and work with partners and allies, is inclusive of industry, non-profits, academia, and encourages innovation. There are three steps the USG can take right now to improve collaboration to counter adversary disinformation:

1. Train individuals how to work across the interagency.
2. Learn to develop a strategy from the bottom up. These efforts should not replace the interagency process or documents, but rather complement existing strategies and practice.
3. Maximize non-USG entities in determining the assessment of best practices and baselines.

Addressing the first point requires an investment in the education of individuals serving in government. These individuals must have a clear understanding of their department or agency, their capabilities, and their organization's authorities. Second, they require an additional understanding of how to integrate with sister departments' and agencies' capabilities and authorities. In DoD, each service possesses robust professional education systems. Additionally, gateway schools and professional development exist for promotion at each critical step in an individual's career. However, none of these schools adequately prepare individuals to effectively interact and leverage the interagency environment.

To the second point, USG must also re-consider career progression and job rotation in the military and across government. At too many departments and agencies, individuals serve only two to three years in a job before rotating to a more senior position. The focus is on the promotion of generalists rather than the creation of skilled career practitioners. Frequently moving individuals also creates a lack of continuity between policy and strategy. Tackling disinformation problems requires those most skilled at employing and integrating solutions. Relatedly, across much of USG, information professionals are respected, but collectively, are not seen as competitive for promotion to the most senior and executive ranks. Management of strategic campaigns and narratives require the skill, experience, knowledge, and intuition of an executive campaign manager.

Interagency groups need to supply better, broader, and more inclusive solutions to the existing interagency process. That being said, creating more groups is not the answer. An informed, networked approach will yield more focused and fewer ad-hoc organizations; staff will naturally realize others are working on the exact same problem.

Lastly and addressing the third point, the USG must think beyond industry as a means to employ contractors to fill gaps in operational needs. Industry is adept at understanding marketing, data, and social science principles, evaluating long-term trends in the environment,

and maintaining technology to quickly identify patterns in disinformation. Cooperative partnership with industry should include informal and professional relationships (i.e., advertising executives, cybersecurity officers, communications professionals, and others from the top and most innovative firms) to better analyze the disinformation problem and understand emerging solutions.

This inclusive approach also requires partnerships with think tanks, non-profits, and 501(c)(3)-type organizations that exist solely to advise and assist government in analyzing and developing innovative disinformation solutions that affect both government and industry.

Importantly, even the arguably successful RIG never conquered disinformation assessment and evaluation, specifically developing a proper baseline understanding of the current information environment to then determine success. There are still extreme barriers and outright refusals across the USG to share internal information measurement methods or to consider external assessment and evaluation. There is also a reticence to leveraging marketing and other industry skill and expertise. Collaboration in these areas remains a significant obstacle to overcome.

NURTURING FROM WITHIN TO GROW FROM BEYOND

The root of territorialism lies in cultural and institutional norms, most of all in talent management. To better manage career professionals and develop talent and utilizing input from industry, the Army created the Talent Management Task Force and developed the Assignment Interactive Module (AIM). Though not completely perfect, AIM is a significant improvement over its highly decentralized predecessor. AIM demonstrates the Army's commitment to develop true professionals and make a concerted effort to deliberately match expertise to the job. Moreover, AIM enables officers to work outside of their career field, expanding their professional skills and knowledge in tandem. The Army's implementation of brevet promotions and providing officers an ability to delay participation in key selection boards without prejudice offers flexibility. While it is nothing new for officers to serve in a billet above their current rank, the newly implemented brevet promotion policy promotes the individual to the required rank, and the individual receives pay and benefits of the higher rank for the period they hold a billet senior to their current rank. Likewise, providing officers the opportunity to delay a promotion or selection board to remain in key developmental billet an additional year is significant. This flexibility yields increased influence in Army career progression by one's supervising officers, career managers, and leadership. This also means officers can stay in critical jobs longer and gain essential experience that will significantly benefit the USG. There is no doubt other USG departments and agencies are pursuing similar talent management improvements, with best practices to learn and share.

The DoD has, for decades, required significant institutional commitment and investment in education and professional development. The Goldwater-Nichols Act, intended to fix challenges

to Joint operations such as the failure of Desert One in April 1980, recreated DoD's education, and assignment process. This, however, was a military solution that did not realistically extend to the interagency. Also, changes to education and promotion resulting from Goldwater-Nichols did not significantly affect officers below the rank of Colonel. To this day, officers lacking enough experience in a Joint environment are easily identifiable. In tandem, a whole-of-government solution must be developed to expose action officers and public servants to each other sooner. Sincere consideration of a Goldwater-Nichols Act for the interagency is therefore critically needed.

The final, persistent talent-centric problem remains collaboration and partnership beyond the USG. The rule, 'do what you are good at, and do not try to be something you are not,' still applies. Government agency professional development systems deliberately cultivate generalists, leaders, and decision-makers to manage organizations and produce and implement policy. As such, critical capabilities remain where USG is simply incapable of maturing techniques and maintaining the talent not just to be competitive, but to win.

Thus, and in some cases, contracting from traditional government contractors remains a solution. In others, including operations in the information environment, infusing current industry experience beyond the usual government-centric talent pool is truly needed. This importantly includes building relationships with industry providers to identify future needs. For example, relationships with industry leaders in marketing and evaluation expose action officers to ideas, concepts, and techniques at the leading edge of industry. Industry cybersecurity experts possess a perspective vastly different than cyber professionals within the government. Increasing industry fellowships with junior officers, captains, and majors, would expose individuals to leading technology and enable them to bring their experiences and relationships back to DoD.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis presents a significant opportunity for government and industry-wide collaboration in the information space and beyond. The crisis finds organizations like Thompson Reuters working with Facebook to identify and explain misinformation and disinformation throughout social media. The DoS Global Engagement Center's (GEC) Technology Engagement Team is now leading USG toward finding, developing, and evaluating capabilities available from industry. The National Security Innovation Network (NSIN) is yet another bright spot during COVID-19, a resource that conveys significant USG collaboration and partnership potential. Multiple other departments and agencies across the USG are looking at COVID-19 as a threat with varying levels of integration being the solution.

A crisis also often leads to the creation of new organizations and working groups who are focused only on a single problem. The COVID-19 crisis—like its highest-profile counterparts—transcend every societal boundary and organizational proclivity to focus on 'the current problem.' With disinformation accompanying the crisis, there are two choices: (1) to either view

adversary sponsored COVID-19 disinformation and misinformation as a separate information campaign, or (2) to realize that COVID-19 disinformation and misinformation are opportunistic adaptations by adversaries who aim to reinforce existing narratives. The COVID-19 disinformation is clearly an opportunistic adaptation and provides a common motivation across the USG to rapidly strengthen and integrate existing efforts. The opportunity to leverage this crisis to fundamentally improve the way we collaborate to counter disinformation and misinformation is one we cannot afford to miss.

As the ‘solution’ noted above, far from being incapable of countering disinformation, the decentralized collaboration of the USG’s amalgamation of authorities, capabilities, and the professionalism and initiative of dedicated public servants is more than capable of countering the adversary’s centralized and focused approach. Overcoming USG territorialism is the most significant roadblock, but the RIG proved that this is anything but insurmountable. Developing professionals across the interagency to understand cross-departmental capabilities, authorities, and permissions are feasible. Creating networks of action officers and executive leadership across the interagency are attainable. It is essential that executive leadership and actions officers adopt an attitude of partnership.

In closing, and to both acknowledge and counter Stengel; The US must become comfortable owning its narrative and through collaboration across and external to the USG. When founded on collaborative partnership, without a doubt, democracies are exceedingly more capable of countering disinformation.♥

RECOGNITION

Throughout this article, we reinforced the importance of an inclusive partner approach, and with it leveraging a community of experts and professionals. To that end, it is essential to recognize the leaders, practitioners, and partners essential to making the RIG successful. These individuals included: General (R) Curtis Scaparrotti, Mr. Wess Mitchell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Laura Cooper, General Timothy Ray, Lieutenant General Stephen Twitty, Lieutenant General Patrick White, Major General (R) Skip Davis, Major General David (Oscar) Meyer, Ambassador Susan Elliott, Ambassador Philip Reeker, Ambassador Dennis Hearne, Ambassador Eric Rubin, Ambassador Kyle Scott, Mr. Ben Ziff, Me. Lea Gabriel, Ms. Sharon Hudson-Dean, Ms. Yaryna Ferencevych, Ms. Meghan Gregonis, Colonel Sonny Legget, Colonel (R) Josh Burgess, Colonel Paul Matier, Colonel (R) Bo Clayton, Colonel Vic Garcia, Colonel Rob Kjelden, Colonel (R) Bryan Sparling, Colonel Brian Mellen, Lieutenant Colonel Dan Welsh, Mr. Patrick Fetterman, Mr. Austin Branch, Mr. Jeff Trimble, Mr. Gary Thatcher, Mr. Daniel Kimmage, Ms. Adele Ruppe, Mr. Chris Dunnnett, Ms. Alicia Romano, Ms. Tonia Weik, Ms. Marta Churella, Mr. Oscar DeSoto, Mr. George Franco, Ms. Patricia Watts, Mr. Hunter Treseder, Ms. Lauren Protentis, Mr. Al Bal, Ms. Wendy Bartley, Ms. Christina Madrid, Ms. Alden Burley, Ms. Rohina Phadnis. The excellence of these individuals and other not named resides in those after them who follow their examples.

NOTES

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