

White Paper on Weaponized Narrative

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“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

“‘I wish it need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo.

‘So do I,’ said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’”

J. R. R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, book 1, chapter 2

Introduction

There seems to be something in the air: democratic societies around the world have had a rough time recently. Some, such as Turkey, Hungary and Poland, appear to be moving towards what Hungary’s Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, calls an “illiberal democracy,” soft authoritarianism veiled in the trappings of traditional democracies. The United Kingdom votes to Brexit from the European Union, leading Scotland to request a vote so they can, in turn, exit the U.K. The European Union itself stumbles from crisis to crisis, with core members such as France experiencing the rise of strong far right and far left, highly nationalistic and xenophobic parties. The U.S. in an election that may have been tipped by Russian intervention elects an unusual candidate whose stated policies and positions contravene 60 years of American statescraft. And in many of these cases, there is evidence of a systemic and growing geopolitical conflict waged primarily or entirely in non-kinetic information and cyber modes, in a process that has been termed “weaponized narrative”.

This raises three fundamental questions. First, of course, is definitional: what is weaponized narrative? Second, as the quote from Sun Tzu at the beginning of this article suggests, information warfare has a long history, raising the question: is weaponized narrative anything new, or just an evocative term for old wine in new bottles? And third, what, if anything, can one want to do about it?

Defining Weaponized Narrative

Modern psychology and experimental behavioral economics reinforce the traditional social science and journalistic observation that all humans are built on narrative. Stories honed over evolutionary history are the major means by which the individual human frames, and then grapples with, the otherwise incomprehensible complexity of reality. Narratives, often implicit, are the core of identity, and construct and validate meaning for the individual. Narratives enable efficient and for the most part unconscious functioning of individuals and groups in wider society and in their cultures – but as internal and external system states change, they can fail. In particular, when someone is totally overwhelmed by modernity, accelerating technological evolution, and information volume, velocity, and variety – whether a Bedouin teenager newly arrived in Cairo, or an older traditional American in the rural South with no college

education – their traditional narratives may prove inadequate. Under such circumstances, individuals tend to migrate to new narratives, and especially to simple, strong ones that are easily intelligible. These are usually faith based, because faith is immune to factual critique and information overload, and historically and culturally conservative, since much of the challenge to identity arises from modernity. Moreover, because it is fear, and anger, and damage to identity that have driven many individuals into their retreats in the first place, and because so much of modern media focus on those powerful emotions in order to achieve market share and impact, they have a much stronger tendency to defend their narrative emotionally, and identify those not sharing it as alien and dangerous – as the Other. Once a defensive narrative is adopted, it tends to grow stronger, now weaker, when challenged either by facts or conditions. So, for example, in some ways the poverty and corruption of Russia reinforce, not undermine, the narratives of national power and strength (“Mother Russia”) that the state media develop and deploy – because narrative is what they have, and because it thus becomes more, not less, critical to their identity. That reactionary nationalism should arise in response to complexity and modernity is entirely predictable, albeit the forms taken in each culture will be particular and unique.

So what is “weaponized” narrative? It can be defined as the use of disinformation, fake news, social media, and other information and communication technologies to create stories intended to subvert and undermine an adversary’s institutions, identity, civilization and will by creating and exacerbating complexity, confusion, and political and social schisms.¹ This is a deliberately general definition, because the state of the art and the rapid evolution of the science, technology, geopolitical and cultural trends that are contributing to the rise of weaponized narrative argue that we are not at the end of a historical period, but at the beginning, and any pretention of certainty would simply be premature.

What we can observe at this point is that weaponized narrative is an emerging domain of asymmetric warfare that attacks the shared beliefs and values that support an adversary’s culture and resiliency. It builds on previous practices including disinformation initiatives, information warfare, psychological warfare, and propaganda, but draws on advances in fields such as evolutionary psychology, behavioral economics, cognitive science, modern marketing and media studies, and technologies such as social media and artificial intelligence.

Weaponized narrative operates at both the tactical and strategic levels. At the tactical level, the main goal is frequently debilitating potential adversaries and achieving strategic goals while avoiding conventional kinetic warfare. At the strategic level, weaponized narrative is a major means by which otherwise powerful adversaries can be weakened over time, and their ability to interfere with the attacking entity’s plans and interests thus reduced or eliminated. Russia’s use of weaponized narrative in the Ukrainian invasion are an example of the first; Russia’s broad interference in American and European elections in an on-going effort to weaken and divide the West are an example of the latter.

Many tools and techniques are part of the weaponized narrative toolkit. Some of these, such as character assassination, creation of fake news outlets, and planting false stories, are traditional but can

¹ The term “weaponized narrative” was introduced in B. Allenby and J. Garreau, 2017, “Weaponized Narrative Is The New Battlespace,” *Defense One*, http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/weaponized-narrative-new-battlespace/134284/?oref=defenseone_today_nl, January 3, 2017; see also B. Allenby and J. Garreau, eds., *Weaponized Narrative: The New Battlespace*, 2017, Center on the Future of War, Washington DC.

be much more effective given today's information technologies; others, such as waves of social media spreading false memes through botnets, and thus achieving cycle times that the assaulted entity cannot match, are new. Each confrontation or campaign is unique, and will thus call forth a different mix of techniques and tools.

Nonetheless, it is possible even at this preliminary point to differentiate between the use of tactics and operations that are a part of weaponized narrative – say, troll farms engaged in exacerbating racial, social, and ethnic tension in target societies; timed and selective release of stolen internal documents and emails to influence an election; or activities and campaigns intended to weaken reliable media in target countries – with the strategy of weaponized narrative. An example of the strategic deployment of weaponized narrative using varied and shifting social, cultural, ethnic, and disinformation tools might be the long term suborning of Baltic and Scandinavian states by Russia. Specific initiatives are how weaponized narrative is operationalized; weaponized narrative is the strategy, and is frequently long-term in both its conduct and its intended effects. It is an ideal asymmetric strategy of choice for adversaries of the United States which, unable to compete in conventional warfare, have selected conflict across the entire frontier of civilizations – call it hybrid warfare, gray zone warfare, or unrestricted warfare.

The Context: Is Weaponized Narrative New?

Espionage, dehumanization of adversaries, disinformation campaigns, and many other tactics and strategies have been part of military conflict for millennia. History is littered with examples, such as World War I atrocity propaganda used by all sides - British posters about "Huns Bayoneting Belgian Babies," for instance. And certainly information warfare was an important dimension of the Cold War, and "winning hearts and minds" is understood today as critical to counterinsurgency campaigns.

Moreover, it certainly cannot be said that the United States hasn't seen periods of turmoil and internal division that have had long term implications for the development of the country. Most obviously, the entire pre-Civil War period saw continuing tension between slave and non-slave states. Other obvious periods of conflict surrounded the Viet Nam War and 1960's racial turmoil eras, populist reactions against railroads and trusts in the late 1800's, the populist rebellion when President Andrew Jackson was elected in 1829, and on and on. Indeed, if one had something like an "internal fragmentation barometer," it is not clear that today's divisions, bitter as they are, aren't part of a long tradition rather than a violent and unfortunate outlier.

Taken together, doesn't this suggest that worrying about "weaponized narrative," or for that matter even creating the concept, is an over-reaction to quite common conditions? After all, it is highly doubtful that domestic political and social fragmentation are worse than they ever have been, and why isn't Russia's recent success with disinformation simply a winning gamble on the part of an economically and socially weak state which has always used such tools? Thus, for example, as part of their weaponized narrative campaigns in Ukraine, in Europe, and in the U.S., the Russians have sought to identify and utilize "useful idiots". This term of art, however, is often, if apparently inaccurately, attributed to Lenin and was certainly in wide use by W. W. II; the modern popularity of the term confirms the historical grounding of at least some of the Russian operations of recent concern.

It is also apparent that there's a goodly amount of traditional information warfare deployed in today's conflicts. And, as always, such attacks require immediate tactical management. But the need for

effective responses to immediate disinformation challenges hides a much more troubling reality: it really is different now. And it is different in ways that current trends suggest cannot be reversed, ways that may well uniquely disadvantage heterogeneous republican democracies, wedded to the rule of law and governed by written constitutions, such as the United States.

And this suggests that weaponized narrative may be a far greater challenge than generally suspected. After all, great empires generally weaken and fall not because they are overwhelmed by superior outside force, but because their institutions and the narratives that gave them life, fail internally over time, creating weaknesses that are then easily exploited by adversaries. Similarly, for example, the Russians could deploy weaponized narrative successfully against the Ukrainians because that state was already split, with the eastern portions already being culturally inclined towards Russia even as the western portions inclined towards the West. Similarly, Russian efforts in the United States were successful, and similar efforts in Europe may well bring continuing success, not because the Russians have created social conflict and fragmentation, and the hollowing out of national will, but because they are adeptly taking advantage of such conditions. Respond as the US will in the short term with effective countermeasures, in the long term it will continue to fade, and to be vulnerable to weaponized narrative, unless and until fundamental weaknesses in American political and social culture are addressed. And if they are not, failure is likely.

An analysis of the context within which weaponized narrative is arising strongly suggests that weaponized narrative is indeed different because a number of trends are coming together to create a unique historical period, one in which weaponized narrative not only has a privileged position as a weapon of choice to use against otherwise conventionally well-armed adversaries, but in which the United States is uniquely vulnerable. To understand this, consider some of the trends, and then their implications for the U.S.

Among the major long term trends that create the opportunity for weaponized narrative and suggest that change is fundamental rather than episodic are:

1. **Rapid progress in evolutionary psychology, behavioral economics, neuroscience and related fields fuels the rapid evolution of the ability to manipulate people, communities, institutions, and states.** Advances across a wide front of disciplines, especially evolutionary psychology, behavioral economics, and neuroscience, are creating a knowledge base about human behavior, and its weaknesses, reliance on heuristics, and idiosyncrasies, that enable far more sophisticated intervention in, and manipulation of, individual and institutional behaviors. The old model of social control was the Big Lie, introduced by Hitler in 1925 in *Mein Kampf*, and used so effectively by Stalin and others. But the Big Lie technique requires large security state apparatuses, and is dependent upon state control of media and information, and is thus always subject to undermining by other information sources. Big Lies are complicated and expensive to maintain. How much more efficient, and effective, to use modern science and knowledge, which enable far more subtle control through the narratives, stories, and scripts that are fed to target audiences. Do it right, and once you have self-identified communities ring-fenced not by expensive external controls but by an exclusionary internal narrative, you can maintain it indefinitely at low cost. It is especially effective if you can identify those who don't share the narrative as not just benighted, but as morally unfit, as dehumanized "Other". After all, despite questionable numbers, it appears clear that President Putin remains one of the most popular

leaders in the world, not because of a Soviet security state, but because of effective deployment of internal narratives, especially those around the memes of “Mother Russia” as “the Eurasia power,” and, with regards to Crimea and Ukraine, “Novorossiya” (admittedly spiced with occasional state killings).

With a little judicious design work, deep human emotions and strong psychological tendencies can be used to fragment societies as a whole, especially if they are already weakened along civilizational lines (cf Ukraine), or already prone to respond to stimulation of their anger and fear responses (cf United States). The results include social fragmentation, substitution of moral condemnation for reasoned argument, the rise of ring-fenced communities that reject the legitimacy of any who oppose them, and golden opportunities for adversaries who wish to use weaponized narrative not to conquer, but to weaken and fragment – and to legitimize their own internal narratives by contrast.

- 2. The rapid and accelerating evolution of major technology systems – nanotechnology, biotechnology, information and communication technology, robotics, and applied cognitive science – across the entire technological frontier is another contributing trend that shows no sign of stopping.** Some of the obvious impacts of technology arise from new methods of distributing information: social media that doesn’t just network people into like-minded bubbles, but enables an environment where every individual is their own broadcaster, and the test of validity is not relationship to real world events, but alignment with core community narratives. More fundamentally, however, individuals, their institutions, and their societies and cultures may be many things, but one thing they all are is information processing mechanisms. Change the information environment, and you change how they function. In 2014, for example, Susan Gunelius found that every minute Facebook users shared nearly 2.5 million pieces of content; Twitter users tweeted nearly 300,000 times; Instagram users posted nearly 220,000 new photos; YouTube users uploaded 72 hours of new video content; Apple users downloaded nearly 50,000 apps; email users sent over 200 million messages; and Amazon generated over \$80,000 in online sales – and that was three years ago.² You don’t have to accept those numbers to recognize that the volume and velocity of information flows in the past decade have exploded.

Moreover, it is not simply the volume, velocity, and variety of information, and the increased ability to hack human cognitive systems that behavioral economics and evolutionary psychology provide: it is also the integrated effect of artificial intelligence combined with big data and analytics techniques. AI/big data/analytics not only enables the fragmentation of cognition across techno-human systems – think of how memory is now offloaded onto computers and search engines - but, especially in complex environments such as political competition, cyberspace or battlespaces infested with networked minirobots, leads to new cognitive behaviors.

- 3. Technological and scientific change, and information overload, lead to increasing fundamentalism as a response.** Unpredictable and accelerating change, and the dramatic increases in complexity that emerging technologies, especially ICT, have spawned, in turn destabilize both individuals and institutions, with the predictable result that individuals flee to

² Susan Gunelius, “The Data Explosion in 2014 Minute by Minute – Infographic,” *ACI*, <https://aci.info/2014/07/12/the-data-explosion-in-2014-minute-by-minute-infographic/>, accessed February 11, 2017.

fundamentalisms of all kinds. Fundamentalisms are particularly attractive because they are both simple and emotionally satisfying, as well as providing powerful narratives. They thus provide powerful identities, and meaning, with which to oppose overwhelming complexity. Moreover, fundamentalisms provide ready-made answers that need not be tested against rationality, and thus are particularly attractive in a post-factual environment.

Not just individuals, but institutions are susceptible to pressures to oversimplify. They thus tend to perform inadequately, and at the limit fail, as their governance tasks become more complex but their personnel, and stakeholders, become more simplistic. Institutions, particularly in the United States and Europe, tend to be justified by explicit applied rationality, and develop and deploy fact-based policies (or at least policies purporting to be fact-based, an increasingly difficult and arbitrary standard as modern societies move into a post-factual environment). This can be a particular challenge for institutions such as the U.S. military, which value tradition and historical continuity, and change relatively slowly, especially compared to the cycle times of modern media and cyber campaigns.

4. **Geopolitical shifts have augmented such challenges in important ways that encourage further retreat to fundamentalism and institutional failure.** For example, after World War II few questioned the ethical principles of the victors, Europe and especially the United States, which were consequently enshrined in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But the "universal values" appearing in that document have turned out not to be so universal after all: Russia, China, and a number of Islamic entities now reject them. China, for example, in a 2013 policy report entitled "Document 9: Communique on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" calls Western constitutional democracy "an attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance," and asserts that promoting Western "universal values" is "an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party's leadership".
5. **Rejection of long dominant global structures is also seen on the institutional side.** Private military companies, large multinationals, and non-governmental organizations of all stripes increasingly function as independent power centers, while self-defining religious communities claim ideological and temporal power in many guises. Thus, large areas of the world, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, increasingly lapse into what Sean McFate calls "durable disorder," a neomedieval devil's brew of religions, ideologies, clans, governments, armed activists, and various internal and external powers.³ In short, individual commitment to larger state and social identities is weakening: the state-based Westphalian system of international law and institutions, while still dominant in many ways, is failing, and is being replaced by a complex pastiche of private, public, non- and quasi-governmental, and ad hoc institutions, power centers, and interests. Geopolitics is growing ever more complex even as the societies and institutions that must manage them are retreating into more simplistic worldviews and narratives.
6. **Another significant contribution to greater geopolitical complexity is the development of new strategies by potential adversaries in response to American dominance of conventional**

³ S. McFate, 2014, *The Modern Mercenary*, Oxford University Press, at 74.

military capabilities. Naturally, Russia and China in particular have emphasized a shift to asymmetric warfare, but what is different is that the strategies go far beyond traditional combat to engage across cultures and civilizations as a whole. In the case of China, for example, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui of the People's Liberation Army in *Unrestricted Warfare* write that war is now "transcend[ing] all boundaries and limits," and that "all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war, of military and non-military, will be totally destroyed."⁴ A similar perspective is offered by General Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, who writes that "the very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has . . . in many cases . . . exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness". This new form of conflict, sometimes called "hybrid warfare," relies on "the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other nonmilitary measures," with conventional force "resorted to . . . primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict."⁵ In both cases, operations tend to occur in "the Gray Zone," a portion of the conflict spectrum that does not include conventional military operations.

Again, such formulations are not completely sui generis – the Cold War and various insurgencies have included cultural and ideological as well as military confrontation, and much of the Cold War was fought in the Gray Zone. Nonetheless, especially given the new tools and weapons that cyber and AI/big data/analytics technologies make possible, the implications of large and well organized states redefining conflict to include entire cultural, financial, and political landscapes as battlespaces, are profound. China, for example, has used financial attacks to sap the strength of adversaries, and Russia – a post-modern, post-factual, media-savvy, morally relativist state par excellence - is rapidly developing significant expertise in weaponized narrative which enables it to use modern media, disinformation techniques, and information and communication technologies in order to neuter opposition from, and impose its agenda on, adversaries, and to do so without resort to conventional armed attack, or triggering a conventional military response to its initiatives.

7. **The rise of post-modern and post-factual culture combined with increasing skepticism about scientific truth, feeds a world where multiple competing narratives at all scales is becoming the norm – "narrative neomedievalism".** The Enlightenment among many other things shifted the basis of truth to the scientific method and applied rationality, and away from reliance on religious and traditional authority, giving facts and observation priority over faith. But today, concomitant with the rise in fundamentalisms, scientific truth as definitive is increasingly replaced by an *a la carte* approach to science: the facts that support one's narrative are accepted, while others are rejected. This is true across the political spectrum: those on the left reject GMOs (genetically modified agricultural organisms) and vaccinations, while those on the right may reject consensus views of climate change and evolution. While this is a very complex

⁴ See Q. Liang and W. Xiangsui, 1999, *Unrestricted Warfare* (People's Liberation Army: CIA trans.), available at <http://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>, at 7. This version is highly preferable to others which distort the original content, such as that available on Amazon.com, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*, which obviously is playing to a different agenda.

⁵ V. Gerasimov, 2013, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations," <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>, (Robert Coalson ed. & trans.), originally published Feb. 27, 2013 in *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier* (Russ.) [Military-Industrial Kurier].

process and is occurring at different speeds and in different ways depending on local culture, the validator of truth is subtly but powerfully shifting from the scientific discourse to narratives. While this new version of the Enlightenment is still in its early stages, it is already clear that it is post-factual, post-modern, complex and unpredictable, privileging narratives and emotion over applied rationality and fact-based policy – and it is in the process of replacing the society that built it, and in which all of us have grown up.

8. **Finally, it is important to remember that, while this discussion has taken an American perspective, analogous disruptions are occurring around the world, primarily in heterogeneous societies where social, political, religious and cultural splits are significant and often deepening rapidly.** In addition to the American election, examples might include Brexit; political turmoil involving community conflict in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, France, and elsewhere; continuing crises of various kinds in the EU; Russian funding of environmental and political fringe organizations, both on the right and left; religious conflict in previously stable states such as Indonesia; and much else. Not only does this add to the overwhelming complexity that stresses both individuals and institutions today, but it illustrates that the American experience, while obviously of great concern to the U.S., is only one case study of a much broader phenomenon. And that it is a much broader phenomenon suggests that we're dealing with trends which are not short term and specific to the U.S. experience, but long term and reflective of shifts in global technological, military/security, political, social, and cultural systems.

Moreover, it also suggests that the current environment is not a result of incremental advances in any particular trend, from science and technology to geopolitics and strategy. Rather, it is the chaotic combination of unpredictable and accelerating evolution in all these domains, coming together in a fraught global environment where major belief systems clash by night, Russia strikes out with weaponized narrative even as it fails internally, and China is determined to rise against the reigning superpower, the United States. None of these trends look likely to reverse absent some sort of catastrophic global collapse. Each outbreak of fundamentalism, or nativistic nationalism, reflects its own idiosyncratic environment, yet the tides are global and inclusive.

It is not that the original Enlightenment has failed. Indeed, the problem is the opposite: the original Enlightenment, with its emphasis on scientific observation and experiment, and applied rationality, has succeeded spectacularly – so spectacularly that it has led to a world of economic and population growth, technologies, geopolitics, accelerating change and complexity, institutional strategies, and psychological and social adjustments that have, in turn, rendered its tools, beliefs, worldviews, and assumptions increasingly obsolete and even dysfunctional. This is the context of weaponized narrative. And yet at the same time incremental and immediate responses to cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns is required and important. The challenge is to stand up responses that are robust in the short term, effective in the medium term, and supportive of the fundamental changes required in the long term.

It may also be the case that the US faces a unique challenge because is the world's leading Enlightenment power, founded on the principles of applied rationality, balance of power, and individual rights voiced by such philosophes as Voltaire, Locke, and Montesquieu. The founding fathers of the American experiment were philosophes deeply influenced by, and committed to, Enlightenment though.

America is thus uniquely susceptible to the passing of the original version of the Enlightenment or, to put it in terms that some adversaries might embrace, bringing down the curtain on Enlightenment ver. 1.0 is the ultimate form of asymmetric warfare against the ultimate Enlightenment power.

What Is To Be Done? Defending Against Weaponized Narratives

Defending against weaponized narrative must operate at three levels: short, medium, and long term.

At the short term, operational level, we need to continue to create institutional cyberattack immune systems that will provide short term protection. At this level, defensive measures will be generally responding to the tools or methods that are being employed by an adversary, not the strategy of weaponized narrative itself. Moreover, we can't wait for a deeper understanding of the implications of weaponized narrative, or for theory to catch up with threat, because this is a conflict that has already started.

But even in the near term, the challenges are significant: weaponized narrative combined with hybrid or unrestricted warfare strategies is not just a military, or a governmental, function: by design and adversary choice, it cuts across all aspects of our society, from finance to infrastructure to personal information to more traditional military or security targets. The fallacy involved in regarding the current conflict involving weaponized narrative as primarily military or security is demonstrated by the weapons that are being used. Wikileaks, RT, internal media, Cambridge Analytics, theft of personal data, integration of criminal and state cyberespionage assets, media spoofs and sock puppet sites – all are non-military. That's part of why the West doesn't understand weaponized narrative, and is having a hard time responding – it jumps our legal and operational domains.

It may also be premature to suggest that U.S. military and security organizations understand at this point how to effectively deploy weaponized narrative either defensively or offensively. Indeed, it is likely that the Russians, who currently seem to be the most adept, are experimenting and learning as they go as well.⁶

Moreover, simply responding effectively to specific tactical weaponized narrative initiatives is inadequate. One would also want to develop offensive capabilities in order to deter continuing aggression. But in this case, the information challenges that the U.S. faces from Russia, China, and others are designed to be asymmetric, and are part of longer term, integrated, asymmetric strategies. Thus, because such strategies are asymmetric, it should come as no surprise that responding in kind will generally be inadequate, and that deeper understanding of what's actually going on is necessary. For example, the kind of disinformation campaign that Russia has run so effectively in the U.S. and Europe wouldn't do that much damage if we tried to turn it against them, because Russia is already a regime that's better practiced in these dark arts than we are, and is already awash in alternate facts and

⁶ Among the many excellent books on Russia as an exemplar of the practice of weaponized warfare are Charles Glover, 2016, *Black Wind, White Snow* (Yale University Press, New Haven); Arkady Ostrovsky, 2015, *The Invention of Russia* (Viking, New York); Peter Pomerantsev, 2014, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible* (PublicAffairs, New York); Bobo Lo, 2015, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Brookings Institution Press, Baltimore); and Anne Garrels, 2016, *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York).

theories. The idea that we'd defeat the Russians by hacking them and releasing facts about, e.g., their investments and under the table deals is fanciful, a remnant of obsolete thinking. In fact, it is quite likely that the Russians would not only neutralize anything we released or said quite easily, at least for their domestic audience, but that our participation in such a fact free post-modernist cynical mud wrestling contest would only advance their post-factual worldview even more rapidly. American policy in the arena of weaponized warfare needs to become much more sophisticated if it is to be effective, and thus requires significantly more analytical attention than it has received to date.

One obvious mechanism for developing deterrence in the short term would be to deploy asymmetric weapons ourselves. One might, for example, threaten to implement a subsidy for fracking in the domestic U.S., which, because of our status as a swing producer, could reduce petroleum prices around the world. This would have a potentially significant impact on Russia, which is a petrostate that has failed to invest in a diversified economy, and thus is vulnerable to falling oil and gas prices. Another alternative might be to support the publication in Eastern Europe and the Balkans of satirical comics or graphic novels that ridicule Putin: since much of his stature in Russia depends on his carefully constructed "strong man" persona, this would be asymmetrically effective against a critical asset. And while Putin's government would certainly not care about information regarding its funding of various political factions and NGOs around the world, the countries such organizations are based in may well care, so identifying those fellow travelers and useful idiots would be a worthwhile exercise. Identifying the domestic causes and movements that bot armies deployed by adversaries are supporting would also be another way of reducing the effectiveness of such methods and tools.

In the medium term, the U.S. and Europe need to address the vulnerabilities that are being exploited so effectively by weaponized narrative techniques. Large troll factories pump out blogs, comments, and Internet memes that exacerbate the economic, racial, and religious tensions in Europe, the U.S., and around the world – but they generally don't create them, they just take advantage of them. Islamic fundamentalism has used weaponized narratives platformed on social media – oppression of Islam by Christianity, pious and socially conservative identities as opposed to immoral and evil Western options, and so forth – to develop and deploy effective global recruitment tools. Weaponized narrative, like other weapons used against dominant powers, cannot destroy them at their height, but can certainly exacerbate any weaknesses that such powers allow to fester. Developing and supporting mainstream media can be an important counter to the alternate facts that support confusion, and thus vulnerability, in target societies, although in the Internet era where many people get their "news" from social media and the use of bot armies to keep false facts circulating it may not be as effective as during the Cold War.

It is the longer term, however, where the real challenges lie. There are three of them. First, we need to understand weaponized narrative. It is a set of new weapons, and new strategies, and it would be a mistake to simply continue business as usual, either conceptually or institutionally. Remembering that it took years before analysts developed a stable strategic framework for managing nuclear weapons, we should not expect this to be trivial.

Second, the source of American power has historically not been just economic, or military. Rather, it has been the soft power of the American Dream, the attractiveness of a culture that within its clear and explicit laws let you be whatever you wish, and accomplish what you can. The energy, the optimism, and the simplicity of American soft power, underlain by a trust in American institutions and essential

goodness, have been fading since the Viet Nam War. No great power stays great without its exceptionalist narrative, and ours is in sorry shape right now. In short, the Shining City on the Hill must be rebuilt.

But it cannot simply be reconstructed, because, as the discussion of the context supporting weaponized narrative has shown, the world is emerging into a new cultural age. Old assumptions have been overthrown, and as Marx famously noted in the *Communist Manifesto*, all that is solid melts into air. Incremental responses to foundational change are deck chairs on the Titanic. Our fundamental challenge is to create the institutions, and the country, and the culture that can prosper in a New World, just as the founders of the United States did centuries ago. If we can do that, and only then, will weaponized narrative lose its power over us.