

Lifting of US Propaganda Ban Gives New Meaning to Old Song

In the age of legal, weaponized propaganda directed against the American people, false narratives have become so commonplace in the mainstream media that they have essentially become normalized, leading to the era of “fake news” and “alternative facts.”

By [Whitney Webb](#)

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Though its ostensible purpose is to fund the U.S. military over a one year period, the National Defense Authorization Act, better known as the NDAA, has had [numerous provisions](#) tucked into it over the years that have targeted American civil liberties. The most well-known of these include allowing the government to wiretap American citizens without a warrant and, even more disturbingly, indefinitely imprison an American citizen without charge in the name of “national security.”

One of the lesser-known provisions that have snuck their way into the NDAA over the years was a small piece of legislation tacked onto the NDAA for fiscal year 2013, [signed into law](#) in that same year by then-President Barack Obama. Named “The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012,” it [completely lifted](#) the long-existing ban on the domestic dissemination of U.S. government-produced propaganda.

For decades, the U.S. government had been allowed to produce and disseminate propaganda abroad in order to drum up support for its foreign wars but had been banned from distributing it domestically after the passage of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948. However, the Modernization Act’s co-authors, Reps. Mac Thornberry (R-TX) and Adam Smith (D-WA, no relation to the Smith of the 1948 act), [asserted that](#) removing the domestic ban was necessary in order to combat “al-Qaeda’s and other violent extremists’ influence among populations.”

Thornberry [stated](#) that removing the ban was necessary because it had tied “the hands of America’s diplomatic officials, military, and others, by inhibiting our ability to effectively communicate in a credible way.” Yet, given that Thornberry is one of the [greatest beneficiaries](#) of weapon manufacturers’ campaign contributions, the real intent — to skeptics at least — seemed more likely related to an effort to ramp up domestic support for U.S. military adventurism abroad following the disastrous invasions of Iraq and Libya.

Five years later, the effects of the lifting of the ban have turned what was once covert manipulation of the media by the government into a transparent “revolving door” between the media and the government. Robbie Martin — documentary filmmaker and media analyst whose documentary series, “[A Very Heavy Agenda](#),” explores the relationships between neoconservative think tanks and media — told *MintPress*, that this revolving door “has never been more clear than it is right now” as a result of the ban’s absence.

In the age of legal, weaponized propaganda directed at the American people, false narratives have become so commonplace in the mainstream and even alternative media that these falsehoods have essentially become normalized, leading to the era of “fake news” and “alternative facts.”

Those who create such news, regardless of the damage it causes or the demonstrably false nature of its claims, face little to no accountability, as long as those lies are of service to U.S. interests. Meanwhile, media outlets that provide dissenting perspectives are being silenced at an alarming rate.

The effects of lifting the ban examined

Since 2013, newsrooms across the country, of both the mainstream and “alternative” variety, have been notably skewed towards the official government narrative, with few outside a handful of independently-funded media outlets bothering to question those narratives’ veracity. While this has long been a reality for the Western media (see John Pilger’s 2011 documentary [“The War You Don’t See”](#)), the use of government-approved narratives and sources from government-funded groups have become much more overt than in years past.

From Syria to Ukraine, U.S.-backed coups and U.S.-driven conflicts have been painted as locally driven movements that desperately need U.S. support in order to “help” the citizens of those countries — even though that “help” has led to the near destruction of those countries and, in the case of Ukraine, an attempted genocide. In these cases, many of the sources were organizations funded directly by the U.S. government or allied governments, such as the White Helmets and Aleppo Media Centre ([largely funded](#) by the U.S. and U.K. governments) in the case of Syria, and pro-Kiev journalists with Nazi ties (including Bogdan Boutkevitch, who [called for](#) the “extermination” of Ukrainians of Russian descent on live TV) in the case of Ukraine, among other examples. Such glaring conflicts of interests are, however, rarely — if ever — disclosed when referenced in these reports.

More recently, North Korea has been painted as presenting an imminent threat to the United States. Recent reports on this “threat” have been based on classified intelligence reports that claim that North Korea can produce a new nuclear bomb every six or seven weeks, including a [recent article](#) from the *New York Times*. However, those same reports have admitted that this claim is purely speculative, as it is “impossible to verify until experts get beyond the limited access to North Korean facilities that ended years ago.” In other words, the article was based entirely on unverified claims from the U.S. intelligence community that were treated as compelling.

As Martin told *MintPress*, many of these government-friendly narratives first began at U.S.-funded media organizations overseen by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) — an extension of the U.S. state department.

Martin noted that U.S.-funded media, like Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe (RFE), were among the first to use a State Department-influenced narrative aimed at “inflaming hostilities with Russia before it soaked into mainstream reporting.” Of course, now, this narrative — with its origins in the U.S. State Department and U.S. intelligence community — has come to dominate headlines in the corporate media and even some “alternative” media outlets in the wake of the 2016 U.S. election.

This is no coincidence. As Martin noted, “after the ban was lifted, things changed drastically here in the United States,” resulting in what was tantamount to a “propaganda media coup” where the State Department, and other government agencies that had earlier shaped the narrative at the BBG, used their influence on mainstream media outlets to shape those narratives as well.

A key example of this, as Martin pointed out, was the influence of the new think-tank “The Alliance for Securing Democracy,” whose advisory council and staff [are loaded](#) with neocons, such as the National Review’s Bill Kristol, and former U.S. intelligence and State Department officials like former CIA Director Michael Morell. The Alliance for Securing Democracy’s Russia-focused offshoot, “Hamilton 68,” is [frequently cited](#) by media outlets — [mainstream](#) and [alternative](#) — as an impartial, reliable tracker of Russian “meddling” efforts on social media.

Martin remarked that he had “never seen a think tank before have such a great influence over the media so quickly,” noting that it “would have been hard to see [such influence on reporters] without the lifting of the ban,” especially given the fact that media organizations that cite Hamilton 68 do not mention its ties to former government officials and neoconservatives.

The ridiculous, opaque joke from Bill Kristol & Democratic hawks called “Hamilton 68” – mindlessly treated as Gospel by US media – claims that unnamed Russian bots & pro-Russia accounts spent yesterday talking about Ronald Reagan and Antonin Scalia. pic.twitter.com/lKmoNyxt00

— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [February 7, 2018](#)

In addition, using VOA or other BBG-funded media has become much more common than it was prior to the ban, an indication that state-crafted information originally intended for a foreign audience is now being used domestically. Martin noted that this has become particularly common at some “pseudo-alternative” media organizations — i.e., formerly independent media outlets that [now enjoy corporate funding](#). Among these, Martin made the case that VICE News stands out.

After the propaganda ban was lifted, Martin noticed that VICE’s citations of BBG sources “spiked.” He continued:

One of the things I immediately noticed was that they [VICE news] were so quick to call out other countries’ media outlets, but yet — in every instance I looked up of them citing BBG sources — they never mentioned where the funding came from or what it was and they would very briefly mention it [information from BBG sources] like these were any other media outlets.”

He added that, in many of these cases, journalists at VICE were unaware that references to VOA or other BBG sources appeared in their articles. This was an indication that “there is some editorial staff [at VICE News] that is putting this in from the top down.”

Furthermore, Martin noted that, soon after the ban was lifted, “VICE’s coverage mirrored the type of coverage that BBG was doing across the world in general,” which in Martin’s view

indicated “there was definitely some coordination between the State Department and VICE.” This coordination was also intimated by BBG’s overwhelmingly positive opinion of VICE in their auditing reports, in which the BBG “seemed more excited about VICE than any other media outlet” — especially since VICE was able to use BBG organizations as sources while maintaining its reputation as a “rebel” media outlet.

Watch | VICE’s Fall From Counterculture Hipster Rag To Neoliberal Mouthpiece

Martin notes that these troubling trends have been greatly enabled by the lifting of the ban. He opined that the ban was likely lifted “in case someone’s cover [in spreading government propaganda disguised as journalism] was blown,” in which case “it wouldn’t be seen as illegal.” He continued:

For example, if a CIA agent at the Washington Post is directly piping in U.S. government propaganda or a reporter is working the U.S. government to pipe in propaganda, it wouldn’t be seen as a violation of the law. Even though it could have happened before the ban, it’s under more legal protection now.”

Under normal circumstances, failing to disclose conflicts of interests of key sources and failing to question government narratives would be considered acts of journalistic malice. However, in the age of legal propaganda, these derelictions matter much less. Propaganda is not intended to be factual or impartial — it is intended to serve a specific purpose, namely influencing public opinion in a way that serves U.S. government interests. As Karl Rove, the former advisor and deputy chief of staff to George W. Bush, [once said](#), the U.S. “is an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” This “reality” is defined not by facts but by its service to empire.

Meanwhile, counter-narratives, however fact-based they may be, are simultaneously derided as conspiracy theories or “fake news,” especially if they question or go against government narratives.

The revolving door



Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former CIA Director John Brennan appear on CNN to discuss allegations of Russian influence in the presidential elections. (CNN Screenshot)

Another major consequence of the ban being lifted goes a step further than merely influencing narratives. In recent years, there has been the growing trend of hiring former government officials, including former U.S. intelligence directors and other psyops veterans, in positions once reserved for journalists. In their new capacity as talking heads on mainstream media reports, they repeat the stance of the U.S. intelligence community to millions of Americans, with their statements and views unchallenged.

For instance, last year, [CNN hired](#) former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. Clapper, a key architect of RussiaGate, has [committed perjury](#) by lying to Congress and [more recently](#) lied about the Trump campaign being wiretapped through a FISA request. He has also made [racist, Russophobic comments](#) on national television. Now, however, he is an expert analyst for “the most trusted name in news.” CNN last year [also hired](#) Michael Hayden, who is a former Director of both the CIA and the NSA, and former Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence.

Former top US officials who now are analysts for CNN:

- Michael Hayden, director of CIA/NSA
- John Kirby, State Dept spox, Pentagon press secretary
- James Clapper, DNI
- Lisa Monaco, homeland security advisor
- Spider Marks, head of US Army Intelligence Center <https://t.co/7AejlAfi8p>
- Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [February 8, 2018](#)

CNN isn't alone. NBC/MSNBC [recently hired](#) former CIA director John Brennan — another key architect of RussiaGate and the man who greenlighted (and lied about) CIA spying on Congress — as a contributor and “senior national security and intelligence analyst.” NBC [also employs](#) Jeremy Bash, former CIA and DoD Chief of Staff, as a national security analyst, as well as reporter Ken Dilanian, who is known for his “[collaborative relationship](#)” with the CIA.

Stand by for propaganda! NBC hires CIA director! <https://t.co/HTcD5xIYRQ>

— Defectio.com (@DefectioLive) [February 7, 2018](#)

Remember when new NBC analyst John Brennan blatantly lied to NBC's Andrea Mitchell about using the CIA to spy on Democratic staffers investigating torture? <https://t.co/ZaetE53gcs> <https://t.co/y7fybCi3Dt>

— Trevor Timm (@trevortimm) [February 2, 2018](#)

This “revolving door” doesn't stop there. After the BBG was restructured by the 2016 NDAA, the “board” for which the organization was named was dissolved, making BBG's CEO — a presidential appointee — all powerful. BBG's current CEO is [John Lansing](#), who - prior to taking the top post at the BBG - was the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing (CTAM), a marketing association comprised of 90 of the top U.S. and Canadian cable companies and television programmers. Lansing's

connection to U.S. cable news companies is just one example of how this revolving door opens both ways.

Media-government coordination out of the shadows



Defense Secretary James Mattis chats with Amazon founder and *Washington Post* owner, Jeff Bezos , during a visit to west coast tech and defense companies. (Jeff Bezos/Twitter)

Such collusion between mainstream media and the U.S. government is hardly new. It has only become more overt since the Smith-Mundt ban was lifted.

For instance, the CIA, through [Operation Mockingbird](#), started recruiting mainstream journalists and media outlets as far back as the 1960s in order to covertly influence the American public by disguising propaganda as news. The CIA [even worked](#) with top journalism schools to change their curricula in order to produce a new generation of journalists that would better suit the U.S. government's interests. Yet the CIA effort to manipulate the media was born out of the longstanding view in government that influencing the American public through propaganda was not only useful, but necessary.

Indeed, Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, who also worked closely with the government in the creation and dissemination of propaganda, [once wrote](#):

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country."

While this was once an "invisible" phenomenon, it is quickly becoming more obvious. Now, Silicon Valley oligarchs with ties to the U.S. government have bought mainstream and pseudo-alternative media outlets and former CIA directors are given prominent analyst positions on cable news programs. The goal is to manufacture support at home for the U.S.' numerous conflicts around the world, which are only likely to grow as the Pentagon takes aim at "competing states" like Russia and China in an increasingly desperate protection of American hegemony.

With the propaganda ban now a relic, the once-covert propaganda machine long used to justify war after war is now operating out in the open and out of control.

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