

Manipulating Reality: Shaping Threats, Destroying Democracy

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In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Over the past few decades in America, reality has been put in play as never before, with powerful interests using sophisticated “perception management,” the shaping of how the public perceives the outside world, a threat that Lawrence Davidson says is again leading the nation to destruction.

In mid-February, an array of top U.S. [intelligence chiefs appeared](#) before the Senate Intelligence Committee to give their annual report on “current and future worldwide threats” to national security. Those testifying included CIA Director David Petraeus, National Intelligence Director James Clapper, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. General Ronald Burgess, and FBI Director Robert Mueller.

Their presentations on what is and is not a real threat to the nation, as well as the reaction of the senators holding the hearings, turned out to be an exercise in one dimensional thinking. What is real? Well, what comports with your point of view. Here are two examples from their testimony:

1. *The Enemy Within* – Rogue individuals operating “within the ranks” of the intelligence community and armed forces now constitute a major threat to U.S. security. According to Lt. General Burgess these people are “[self-radicalized lone wolves](#).” He pointed to the “recent massive WikiLeaks disclosures.”

Everyone involved in these hearings agreed with this assertion even though it is based on a dubious, yet unquestioned, assumption – that the behavior of U.S. government forces is a model of acceptable normal military and intelligence behavior. Those who work for the government but find this behavior unacceptable, and indeed a criminal betrayal of all that is humane, and then do something about that conviction are “self-radicalized” dangers to national security.



Director of National Intelligence James Clapper talks with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office. (Photo credit: Office of Director of National Intelligence)

But what if the support of oppressive and racist regimes, the invasion of other countries based on lies, the killing of thousands upon thousands of civilians, and the official use of torture and “extraordinary rendition” constitute radical and unreasonable behavior? Then those who expose such extremism would not be the radicals at all. They would be champions of a more reasonable norm and also heroes.

My suggestion is that this is exactly the case. The country’s pursuit of its alleged national interests is being directed by a bunch of thugs in suits who have taken it upon themselves to label as “radicals” those citizen heroes who point out this fact. They are afraid that more and more citizens might see the real barbaric nature of their policies and call them to account. So, to prevent this, they criminalize (and demonize) the truth-tellers.

2. *The Iranian Threat* – [According to James Clapper](#), the Director of National Intelligence, “despite the hype surrounding Iran’s pursuit of nuclear technology, the country’s leaders are not likely to develop weapons unless attacked.” In addition, the Iranians are unlikely to initiate or intentionally provoke a conflict, he said.

How was this news greeted by the senators on the intelligence committee? Most of them refused to believe it, which is par for the course for Congress as a whole and most of the U.S. news media. In this case the norm was laid out by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who told Clapper that “I’m very convinced that they’re (the Iranians) are going down the road to developing a nuclear weapon.”

Wait a minute. These are your boys, Sen. Graham. You and your ilk are the ones who claim that the nation’s intelligence services are the best in the world and know what they are talking about. All of a sudden you don’t believe them! Why not? What other source of information on Iran do you have that you consider better, more reliable than the CIA, the DIA, the NSA, etc.?

[Try the Zionist lobby](#). Graham and his fellow senators’ main source of information on anything touching on Israel (and the Iran business is a prime example of Israeli paranoia) is an American Israel Public Affairs Committee briefing book.

These politicians will never cross this Lobby even when it tells them things that contradict U.S. intelligence. That is because the Lobby financially contributes to their campaigns and threatens to work to unseat them if they do not follow its lead. The U.S. intelligence community simply cannot compete with that.

So once again we are confronted with definitions that are designed to support idiosyncratic views. What is “radical”? Exposing the government’s crimes is what is radical. And, what is “real” when it comes to Iran? What the organization that funds your reelection campaign says is real.

What Is Real for Everyone Else?

Just about everyone thinks he or she knows what is real. And in some important categories we truly do know. We all know that if you jump off of a high building the reality of gravity takes over with dire consequences. More generally, most of us know what is real within the immediate environment in which we live. What do I mean by this?

Most of us live most of our lives within a relatively small local space. Within that space we have direct, interactive, day-to-day experiences and through these come to accurately know what to expect. Our experiences have good predictive value. If someone comes along and says something ridiculous, like the next town over is developing atomic weapons and is determined to use them to blow up your neighborhood, we will know that this is crazy.

But what about things going on beyond the horizon? Most of us don’t go to those places, don’t have day-to-day experiences with them. Nothing in our lives allows us to make a judgment on what is real or not real about activities there.

So what do we do? Well, we ignore those places unless there is some reason to believe they can impact our lives. Then most of us rely on those we are led to believe are “experts” on things foreign – usually government officials or media “talking heads.”

This can be a problem. How do we know that they are experts and can be trusted? How do we know that they don’t have some undeclared agenda that skews their judgment? As the two examples given above suggest, government officials can work on assumptions which, when looked at dispassionately, are just anti-human. And government officials, allied to special interests, can dismiss what their own intelligence experts tell them is real. What are we locals suppose to believe?

When one cannot determine what is real or is not real, there are perhaps some rules that can be followed so as to encourage policy-makers to act in ways that will minimize mistakes. For instance, in cases of uncertainty citizens should:

1. Be very skeptical of what the government and media tell them is real. Remember the past disasters (most recently the invasion of Iraq) that easy acceptance of such portrayals of alleged reality have caused. Concerned citizens owe it to themselves and their nation to seek multiple sources of information.
2. Demand that policy-makers initially act on the basis of a best-case scenario even as they prepare for the worst. Most of the time the “expert” advice we get on foreign threats is either ideologically driven and therefore exaggerated or just plain wrong (for instance, the case of Vietnam), or is driven by the agenda of some lobby or special interest (for instance, the case of Iraq, the threat from Iran, or the “sainted” status of the Israelis and the “terrorist” status of the Palestinians).

The resulting worst case depictions of reality are almost always inaccurate and generally lead to unnecessary death and destruction.

3. Demand that, in foreign relations, diplomacy always be pursued first and foremost. War should be the very last resort because it is truly a radical and extreme undertaking of which few policy-makers have any direct experience. If they did, they would be much more hesitant to commit their fellow citizens to it.

4. Demand punishment for those who knowingly lie and break the laws governing international relations and human rights (such as the Geneva Conventions and laws prohibiting torture). There are good reasons why these laws exist. Not to enforce them is to condone a return to barbarism.

Oddly enough, in a democracy, citizens who do not participate in political discussion, who do not attempt to influence policy, end up having responsibility for whatever policies their government takes up. This is true because in a democracy if a citizen chooses not to be political he or she abdicates their potential influence to those who do act politically.

It is only those who fight for what they think is right and real yet do not win who can say they are not responsible for the behavior of a government they actively opposed. So if you want to be able to say this, you cannot retreat into a wholly private existence. If you do so others, who you might find to be thugs in suits, will more likely succeed. And in the end, they will act in your name.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of [Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest](#); [America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood](#); and [Islamic Fundamentalism](#).

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