

“Thought Police by Another Name”: Lessons From Biden’s Disinformation Board Debacle

By [James Bovard](#)

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President Biden’s campaign to banish (or maybe outlaw) political paranoia took a wallop last spring. In April, the Department of Homeland Security proudly announced that it had created a new Disinformation Governance Board. The following month, the board’s chairman resigned, and Biden administration officials claimed the board was being “paused.” But it remains in the wings awaiting the White House summons for an encore performance.

Thought police by another name

From the start, the Disinformation Governance Board looked like a political caricature dreamed up by people who never appreciated either Monty Python or Orwell’s 1984. Given the Biden record, it was unclear whether the new board will be fighting or promulgating “disinformation.” After controversy erupted, an unnamed DHS spokesperson told the *Washington Post*: “The Board’s purpose has been grossly mischaracterized; it will not police speech.... Its focus is to ensure that freedom of speech is protected.” Geez, why didn’t the Founding Fathers think of adding a clause to the First Amendment creating a nefarious-sounding government agency to ride shotgun on the nation’s media?

Team Biden expected applause and deference when they announced the first disinformation czar for the board, Nina Jankowicz, a 33-year-old Bryn Mawr college graduate who was hailed as an “information warfare expert.” Jankowicz had the type of resume that made the *Washington Post* swoon — a Fulbright scholar, a graduate degree from Georgetown University, and “stints at multiple nonpartisan think tanks” — all of which were coincidentally progovernment — thus proving that Jankowicz herself was trustworthy.

Team Biden’s vetting operations didn’t win any kudos on this appointment. They failed to ask a critical question: Does she sing? After Jankowicz’s name hit the headlines, activists were soon whooping up some of her greatest performances discovered online. There was her TikTok version of a “Mary Poppins” song warning “Information laundering is really quite

ferocious.” More surprising was her YouTube Christmas parody song performance, “Who do I f-k to be famous and powerful?”

More troubling was her long record of cheerleading for political propaganda. Jankowicz previously worked for StopFake, a federally funded media-influence operation that in 2018 “began aggressively whitewashing two Ukrainian neo-Nazi groups with a long track record of violence, including war crimes,” even dabbling “with Holocaust distortion, downplaying WWII-era paramilitaries who slaughtered Jews as mere ‘historic figures’ and Ukrainian nationalist leaders,” as *The Nation* reported. She also worked for the National Democratic Institute, which is heavily funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, which has spurred perennial controversy for interfering in foreign elections.

A long record of censorship

When Jankowicz testified in Britain on the UK’s Online Safety Bill, which entitled the government to ban any content with “the potential to cause harm,” she endorsed banning “misogyny” (bad news for old videos of Benny Hill shows). She also derided free speech as on par with “fairy dust.” As Paul Joseph Watson reported in *Summit News*, “Jankowicz asserted that social media platforms should utilize algorithms that would ‘allow us to get around some of the free speech concerns’ by demoting content so few people saw it.” Jankowicz assured the legislators: “You can shout in the black void, but you do not get a huge audience to do that.” And people like her should have the prerogative to covertly determine how much audience each idea deserves, right?

Jankowicz believes that “trustworthy experts” such as herself (she boasts that she is “verified” by Twitter) should be empowered to “edit” other people’s tweets to “add context.” She denounced Loudoun County, Va., parents who complained about left-wing school curriculum for “disinformation” and “weaponizing people’s emotion.”

In October 2020, after the *New York Post* exposed damning emails and other information in Hunter Biden’s laptop, Jankowicz scoffed at the laptop controversy: “We should view it as a Trump campaign product.” She supported the 50 former intelligence officials and other honchos who vouched that the laptop should not be trusted, thereby helping Biden win the 2020 election (according to former attorney general Bill Barr).

Jankowicz never complained when Twitter suppressed all links to *New York Post* articles before the 2020 election. But when rumors circulated in April that Elon Musk might buy Twitter, she fretted to National Public Radio: “I shudder to think about if free speech absolutists were taking over more platforms.”

That line is the Rosetta stone for understanding the new Disinformation Governance Board. The goal is not “truth” — which could arise from the clash of competing opinions. Instead, political overlords need power to exert pressure and pull to shape Americans’ beliefs by discrediting, if not totally suppressing, disapproved opinions.

The swamp circles the wagons

When DHS revealed that the disinformation board was being placed on hold, it also announced that former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff was brought in to review and assess the board’s mission. Chertoff was assistant attorney general helping organize the mass roundup of 1,200 Muslims after the 9/11 attacks. On November 28, 2001, Chertoff testified

to the Senate Judiciary Committee: “Nobody is held incommunicado. We don’t hold people in secret, you know, cut off from lawyers, cut off from the public, cut off from their family and friends.” That was total disinformation, and the Bush administration’s secrecy was later condemned. In August 2002, Chertoff condemned Bush administration critics: “You should not think you’re dealing with a bunch of barbarians....We need to be sober about what is a threat to civil liberties.” But, as *The Nation* magazine noted, “Chertoff is notorious for enabling some of the most egregious offenses of the War on Terrorism — from federal surveillance, to unlawful detention, to torture. Indeed, his previous governmental appointments were met with vociferous opposition from groups like Human Rights Watch and the ACLU.” When he was DHS boss, Chertoff championed REAL ID and portrayed it as a total surveillance system — even for babysitters. *The Nation* magazine declared that placing “a man as deeply tainted as Chertoff into a leadership position smacks of a particularly indolent kind of contempt.”

Disinformation a longtime tool of the state

“Disinformation” is often simply the lag time between the pronouncement and the debunking of government falsehoods. In early 2003, anyone who denied that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction was guilty of disinformation — until after George W. Bush’s Iraq invasion found no WMDs. It was disinformation that Obama’s drone assassination program was killing large number of innocent civilians — until Daniel Hale courageously leaked internal documents proving the killing spree. (Hale will spend years in federal prison as a reward for undermining the credibility of this particular disinformation.)

Federal agencies have deluged Americans with malarkey for decades. We don’t need a disinformation czar to hector us to submit to the latest Washington catechism.

The core of the media defense of Jankowicz was that only right-wing nuts fear the U.S. government would censor Americans. But it is already happening. The Biden White House threatened antitrust investigations against social media companies that failed to suppress “disinformation” about COVID vaccines. On March 3, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy “demanded that the tech companies turn over information about individuals who spread” COVID “misinformation,” the New Civil Liberties Alliance reported. Last year, it was “disinformation” to claim that vaccines fail to prevent contracting or transmitting COVID. But after the Omicron wave, the phrase “breakthrough infection” became almost redundant.

The Disinformation Governance Board debacle could not have occurred unless many policymakers felt entitled to control the information Americans receive. Jankowicz’s arrogance was invisible to the Biden team because that arrogance is shared by them. She is part of a niche that assumes they are so superior that they have the right to censor — or at least the right to control what other people think. In the 1960s, the “best and the brightest” had the right to lie Americans into the Vietnam War — for the good of the world. The same type of people now infest Washington and believe they have the right to censor.

The new Cold War — in Ukraine

Targeting Russian issues would have been a prime topic for the new board. After she resigned, Jankowicz touted the disinformation fight by other federal agencies: “Take a look at the recent work to prebunk [pre-debunk] Russian narratives about Ukraine. It focused on raising awareness of the falsities coming out of the Kremlin so Americans wouldn’t buy into them. It worked.”

It “worked” in the sense that the vast majority of the American media has uncritically recited what they have been told about the conflict by U.S. government and Ukrainian officials. But the U.S. government has withheld almost all information it possesses on the battlefield losses of the Ukrainian army, thus helping perpetuate “Ghost of Kiev” types of fantasies about how the conflict is going. On May 27, the *Washington Post* reported that Ukrainian military “casualties here are largely kept secret to protect morale among troops and the general public” — and American citizens. U.S. officials have also passed on information to the media regarding the conflict that was unverified or even doubtful. At the same time, many politicians have joined a media chorus to denounce as Russian propaganda any suggestion that the war is something less than a glorious triumph of good over evil.

U.S. government agencies poured money into the coffers of Ukrainian government agencies, including the office of Lyudmila Denisova, the commissioner for human rights. Denisova spurred hundreds of lurid western media reports about Russian troops on rape rampages, targeting even young babies. But on May 30, the Ukrainian parliament tossed her out of her job because there was no evidence for many of her allegations. Until the moment that Denisova was fired, denying Russian troops were mass raping Ukrainian females was “disinformation.”

Few Americans recognize how surreal the notion of “truth” has become inside the Beltway. On April 28, the White House appealed to Congress to provide another massive aid package to Ukraine, including hefty provisions to “support activists, journalists, and independent media to defend freedom of expression.” And how can we be sure that Ukrainian journalists are independent? Because U.S. government officials retain the sales receipt for their purchase. Unfortunately, the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy, and other agencies have been avidly subsidizing “independent media” in foreign nations for years, assuring that there will be an “amen chorus” for U.S. intervention in their nations if deemed necessary. The absurdity of such grants doesn’t register in D.C., in part because so many policymakers are blinded by the presumed righteousness of U.S. policy. As Secretary of State Madeline Albright said, “We are the indispensable nation.... We see further into the future.” Thus, handouts from the U.S. government are the truest source of independence — or some such hokum.

It remains to be seen if Biden’s disinformation campaigns on Ukraine and Russia succeed in dragging our nation into World War Three. The United States funds foreign propaganda operations that echo in American newspapers and cable news, and the White House exploits those stories to drag this nation further into an East European border dispute.

The federal government has long been the most dangerous source of disinformation threatening Americans. The trillions of pages of new secrets that the U.S. government creates each year is a disinformation entitlement program. In a city that already had hundreds of full-time political appointees whose task is to lie to the America public, why was another board needed? Admittedly, calling it the Disinformation Governance Board is more palatable than naming it the Keep Damn Federal Lies Sacrosanct Panel.

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James Bovard is a policy adviser to The Future of Freedom Foundation. He is a USA Today columnist and has written for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, New Republic, Reader's Digest, Playboy, American Spectator, Investors Business Daily, and many other publications. He is the author of Freedom Frauds: Hard Lessons in American Liberty (2017, published by FFF); Public Policy Hooligan (2012); Attention Deficit Democracy (2006); The Bush Betrayal (2004); Terrorism and Tyranny (2003); Feeling Your Pain (2000); Freedom in Chains (1999); Shakedown (1995); Lost Rights (1994); The Fair Trade Fraud (1991); and The Farm Fiasco (1989). He was the 1995 co-recipient of the Thomas Szasz Award for Civil Liberties work, awarded by the Center for Independent Thought, and the recipient of the 1996 Freedom Fund Award from the Firearms Civil Rights Defense Fund of the National Rifle Association. His book Lost Rights received the Mencken Award as Book of the Year from the Free Press Association. His Terrorism and Tyranny won Laissez Faire Book's Lysander Spooner award for the Best Book on Liberty in 2003. Read his [blog](#). Send him [email](#).

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