



Brief No. 14.5

Patriotism Divided

The Impact of Mis- and Disinformation During the Rally 'Round the Flag Effect

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MAY 2022

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The United States expects the public and domestic political opposition leaders to rally behind the president during an international crisis. This support is no longer guaranteed. The current information landscape—characterized by the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation on social media—distorts the rally ‘round the flag effect. When a future crisis unfolds, domestic actors will spread partisan misinformation to score political points while foreign adversaries sponsor disinformation capitalizing on hyperpartisanship to deepen social divisions and complicate or disrupt U.S. government responses. As a result, the United States may be unable to generate the domestic support needed to decisively respond to a threat. Recognizing this threat and preempting false narratives will help the United States avoid a situation where the intensification of popular divisions impedes U.S. responses to foreign aggression.

Introduction

For any democracy, partisan polarization is not inherently detrimental: the ability to air political discontent safeguards against impulsive government decisions, attempts to silence voices, and abuses of power.¹ However, the United States has entered an era of hyperpartisanship. Anger and distrust motivate political decisions, and U.S. citizens increasingly fall for political mis- and disinformation.²

The United States government should not expect unified domestic support during a crisis, such as the assassination of a political figure, the destruction of critical U.S. infrastructure, a major data leak, or foreign aggression against a close U.S. ally. The rise of mis- and disinformation online will change how the nation rallies around the flag.

U.S. citizens will turn to their personally curated news feeds on social media to make sense of a future attack. These users will consume news from popular partisan influencers, who politicize the crisis to score political points against the opposing party. Meanwhile, foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns will co-opt this partisan content to aggravate social divisions and discourage unity. When these actors spread false and misleading content, they reinforce each other’s narratives, eroding the integrity of democracy and jeopardizing national security.

As a result of these divisive partisan messages, the United States will see new types of rally ‘round the flag effects. These rallies will differ in intensity, including divided rallies—where the public fails to unite during a crisis—and reverse rallies—where the public turns against the executive. Weakened rallies will impair the ability of the executive to develop a cohesive response to the crisis, culminating in the gradual erosion of U.S. foreign policy credibility. At the heart of this new threat to U.S. security is the new information environment.

Social Media and the Threat of Mis- and Disinformation

Rapidly evolving technology has produced a dangerous new information environment that will jeopardize U.S. security in a future crisis. Over the next decade, increased use of social media and web-based news will amplify the rate at which U.S. citizens receive, interact with, and share false or misleading information—before, during, and after a crisis.

The Spread of False and Misleading Information on Social Media

The structure of social media and online news facilitates the rapid spread of biased and misleading content among users, influencing how the population will understand an attack against the United States or U.S. interests abroad. The production of mis- and disinformation is inexpensive, and its perceived credibility depends more on user preference, likes, and shares over evidence-based assessments.

- **Low barriers to entry.** The production of false or misleading information online no longer requires investments in writing and investigation—all users need is an internet connection and basic media literacy to produce content and build an audience.³⁴
- **New players in the political discourse.** Low barriers have given rise to an eclectic community of users that spread mis- and disinformation, including online political personalities, inauthentic accounts, bots, trolls, conspiracy theorists, media illiterate individuals, and niche celebrities, among others.⁵
- **Rapid proliferation of false content.** On Twitter, mis- and disinformation are more likely to be retweeted and travel six times as fast as truthful information.⁶ “Clickbait” titles take advantage of curiosity to drive engagement.⁷
- **Perceived credibility through social recommendation.** Social recommendation—the accumulation of likes, comments, and shares—offers news stories credibility regardless of their accuracy. These metrics propel unsubstantiated content from obscure networks to platforms used by digitally literate users.⁸
- **Ability to curate information feeds.** A defining feature of internet-based news is “selective exposure,” where users handpick content based on their individual preferences.⁹ Users tend to curate their news feeds to show agreeable political information, while limiting their exposure to counternarratives and critiques.¹⁰ Additionally, algorithms suggest self-confirming content to users in a bid to drive engagement.¹¹

The Second-Hand Nature of Information Consumption

Most individuals opt out of direct news consumption. In a survey of 1.2 million U.S. citizens, only four percent reported being “active news customers” of “front section” news.¹² Instead, most citizens receive second-hand news from online political influencers: a small group of politically

engaged individuals who package information to be entertaining and digestible. These influencers include academics, journalists, elected officials, and celebrities, among other political personalities.¹³

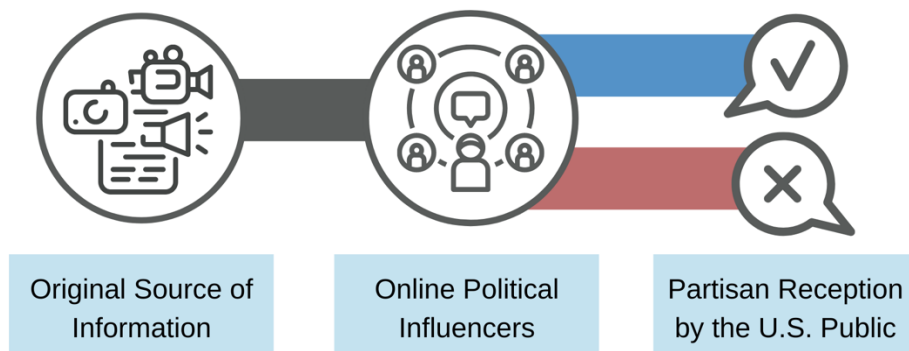
Content from online political influencers circulates among their large audiences. Given the short, entertaining nature of their political commentary, these posts diffuse rapidly—particularly when they enter closed messaging networks like WhatsApp.¹⁴ As these posts spread, they reach users who are less politically knowledgeable and therefore ill-prepared to distinguish fact from fiction.¹⁵

Who Shares the News? Online Political Influencers as Partisan Filters of Information

What is most concerning about the spread of misleading information online is not the original source of news, but rather those who share it. These intermediaries of news—or online political influencers—become partisan filters: directly consuming information, framing it along partisan lines, and sharing their interpretations to large audiences, who are primed to receive self-affirming content in their curated news feeds.

Online political influencers users have three distinct characteristics. First, they are politically engaged, which pushes them to have stronger partisan leanings and withstand exposure to disconfirming information.¹⁶ Second, these users are more likely to fall for political mis- or disinformation that supports their party or discredits their political opponents.¹⁷ Third, online political influencers often attract large followings. U.S. citizens are increasingly consulting a growing number of partisan sources for news rather than local networks or nonpartisan outlets.¹⁸

Figure 1: Partisan Filtering of Online Information



The Entrenchment of Political Identity on Social Media

Mis- and disinformation contribute to rigid partisan identities. After repeated exposure to political content, users strengthen their partisan identity and develop animosity towards the opposing party. To this end, they prime themselves to believe bias-confirming information during a future attack against the United States or its interests. Partisan entrenchment will dissuade some citizens from supporting the president.

- **Insulation of the partisan in-group.** Bias-confirming sources often highlight a party's distinct values and beliefs, which strengthens the in-group identity.¹⁹ Consumers of this content exhibit confirmation bias, where they seek out and share messages that align with their existing views, while ignoring—or even discrediting—contradictory information.²⁰ Once shared, bias-confirming content circulates rapidly in like-minded networks.²¹
- **Separation of the partisan out-group.** False or misleading content tends to stereotype and demonize the opposing party, which contributes to partisan hostility. “Us vs. them” messaging precludes partisan non-commitment and pressures individuals to reject the out-group.²² Not only do users share these toxic messages, but social media algorithms promote these posts across networks because they attract user engagement.²³

Foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns play a role in intensifying these divisions. Malign actors intentionally spread false messages to pit one political party against the other.²⁴ This trend has contributed to “partyism,” where the factor that provokes the most hostility online is partisanship—even over racial or ethnic identity.²⁵

The Erosion of Trust in Authoritative Institutions

Hyperpartisanship in the new information environment has risen alongside growing distrust in authoritative institutions. Skepticism of authority leads U.S. citizens to rely on sources with questionable reliability—particularly during moments of uncertainty, such as a foreign policy crisis.²⁶

For most of the 20th century, public institutions, including U.S. government agencies and large media companies, enjoyed widespread public trust to vet political information and offer important and timely insights.²⁷ Today, that trust is gone. Institutions' ability to foster a cohesive public discourse is waning due to rising partisanship, selective exposure, and the rise of mis- and disinformation on social media.²⁸

When citizens do not trust authoritative institutions to screen information for accuracy and relevance, three important consequences result. First, partisan filtering of news intensifies. Users increasingly substitute authoritative sources with their preferred online political influencers, who tend to present bias-confirming, misleading, or untrue statements.²⁹ Second, conspiracy theories that question the integrity of institutions flourish.³⁰ Third, citizens gravitate towards informal shadow institutions, such as militias or other alternative justice systems, which they trust to protect their interests and provide true information.³¹

The four features of the new information environment—the rise of mis- and disinformation, filtered partisan news, entrenched political identities, and the erosion of institutional trust—will change the nature of a U.S. response to a crisis.

The Distortion of the Rally ‘Round the Flag Effect

In a future attack against the United States or U.S. interests abroad, false and misleading information from hyperpartisan actors will merge with disinformation campaigns to deepen social divisions, creating a weakened rally effect that obstructs a foreign policy response from the U.S. government.

The rally ‘round the flag effect occurs when a country’s population sets aside domestic partisan quarrels and unites to address an international crisis.³² For example, after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, a surge in unity among the U.S. public and political elites allowed the government to mobilize 500,000 troops for Operation Desert Storm—the largest U.S. war effort since the Vietnam War.³³ This widespread public support is unlikely to occur, which complicates, negates, or reverses the formation of a rally.

In the new information environment, hyperpartisan actors will inadvertently distort rallies. Many of them will spread misinformation that discredits their political opponents, and some will unknowingly repeat tailored lies created by foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns. U.S. adversaries will boost the visibility of these messages, sowing domestic tension to suppress unity.

Driven by uncertainty, U.S. citizens will consult social media for answers. In their customized news feeds, they are then exposed to online political influencers from the left and the right, who will spread bias-confirming or false information that politicizes the crisis. Accumulating mis- and disinformation will create divergent understandings of the crisis between political rivals, pitting one group against the other. To this end, a rift in perception will lead to a rift in patriotism. U.S. citizens will choose loyalty to party over a national effort to preserve U.S. security.

Producer-end: Competing Claims Online Promote National Division

Domestic and foreign actors deliberately or unintentionally spread narratives that deepen partisan divisions. During a future crisis, false and misleading information on social media will increase dramatically.³⁴ Everyday users will spread rumors in an effort to make sense of the attack, political influencers will politicize the crisis to discredit political opponents, and coordinated disinformation attacks will target online political influencers to inflame partisan divisions. Meanwhile, social media platforms will be too slow to remove false content, and they will lack sufficient information to distinguish lies from hyperpartisan interpretations of the crisis.³⁵

- **Uncoordinated guesswork.** To avoid mischaracterization or errors, authoritative sources of information have the incentive to wait before declaring the motivations and conditions that facilitated an attack.³⁶ Rumors fill this gap. In the moments after a crisis, social media will see a dramatic increase in the volume and reach of false and misleading information.³⁷ Those who post this content—from non-experts to journalists—will share snippets of information to their networks, often neglecting to verify sources and evidence before posting.³⁸ In the throes of uncertainty and anxiety, many will make false accusations or concoct fringe conspiracy theories in an attempt to assign blame for the crisis.³⁹

- **Disinformation campaigns target online political influencers.** Contemporary foreign disinformation strategy targets U.S. political personalities—particularly controversial news hosts and podcasters—to steer them towards spreading lies or inflammatory messages.⁴⁰ Influencers like Joy Ann Reid on the left or Tucker Carlson on the right have large trusting audiences, which makes them highly effective messengers to spread an adversary’s falsehoods.⁴¹ In addition to fashioning narratives, foreign actors also amplify homegrown U.S. disinformation to deepen partisan divisions.⁴² However, not all disinformation is foreign. Domestic extremist groups like QAnon may co-opt the crisis to spread conspiracy theories that attempt to achieve racially or politically motivated goals.⁴³
- **The rise of partisan narratives.** Online political influencers are the key players who transmit partisan narratives to U.S. citizens in a crisis. Not only are these individuals targeted by disinformation campaigns to validate rumors and promote lies, but many also create their own mis- and disinformation. However, the impact of their content—jeopardizing U.S. national security—is likely unintentional. Their cognitive biases lead them to believe misinformation consistent with their prior beliefs, which they then broadcast online.⁴⁴ Additionally, a crisis is an opportunity for opposition leaders to score political points against the governing party. If they frame the conflict as the government’s mistake or a deliberate political maneuver, they can win support for their party.
- **Delayed and unclear online regulation.** Social media platforms are unable to moderate all content—especially in a time-sensitive crisis situation. During this critical period, social media companies face two major obstacles. First, automatic tools designed to monitor mis- and disinformation are unsophisticated, slow, and inconsistent across platforms.⁴⁵ Second, these platforms will be unable to judge the truthfulness of information given that the lion’s share of incoming intelligence is classified.⁴⁶ As a result, social media will only be able to remove outrageous propaganda that is unlikely to fool U.S. citizens—pernicious lies and misleading statements will remain.⁴⁷

Consumer-end: Individual Vulnerabilities Distort Political Realities

During an international crisis, the spread of mis- and disinformation does not end with producers. Given the desire to make sense of an unfamiliar situation, a flood of users will consult their handpicked selection of news sources online. Partisan filtering will expose them to skewed information and impact their attitudes towards the crisis and the president’s response.

- **Vulnerability during sensemaking.** Users will scour the internet to make sense of a crisis, attempting to evaluate the danger of the threat and any motivations behind it—often before the answers are clear to anyone.⁴⁸ During this assessment period, widespread uncertainty will drive users to believe simple, bias-confirming information.⁴⁹ This vulnerability is particularly pronounced for politically disengaged users who receive most news second-hand—the majority of U.S. citizens.⁵⁰ These users are more likely to fall victim to divisive information from online political influencers who produce much of the content initially available online.⁵¹

- **Trust in in-group partisan leaders.** Facing uncertainty, users will gravitate towards sources that they perceive as credible: online political influencers.⁵² These voices earn more trust for two general reasons. First, users are more likely to trust non-experts when traditional sources are unavailable during a crisis, or when institutional trust is low.⁵³ Second, influencers present like-minded followers with information that appeals to their pre-existing beliefs and offers a simple explanation for a complex situation.⁵⁴ Initial impressions stick, so once users receive this partisan information, they resist changing their beliefs when conflicting information arises.⁵⁵
- **Emergence of distorted political realities.** Partisan narratives that feature false or misleading claims will create divergent understandings of the crisis among different partisan groups.⁵⁶ With time, they will become increasingly dissimilar.⁵⁷ On one hand, the governing party will positively interpret the administration's role in the crisis: the president will represent U.S. interests and protect citizens as commander-in-chief. On the other hand, members of the opposition will negatively portray the administration: the president is not a leader, but rather an incompetent who mishandled the crisis, facilitated its onset, or is exaggerating its danger for political goals.
- **The alignment of patriotism with party.** A rift in political realities creates a rift in patriotism. Unified support for the administration in a crisis is unlikely. When opposition elites and their constituencies perceive the president as part of the problem, they will not rally behind the administration. In fact, rallying behind the president may be seen as a betrayal of their party: it would be unpatriotic to support a leader when citizens believe this individual is inept and responsible for compromising U.S. national security.⁵⁸

When U.S. citizens align their interpretations of the crisis with false or misleading partisan messaging, the United States may not experience a traditional rally, which is characterized by an increase in presidential approval ratings and a rise in patriotic fervor. Some U.S. citizens will withhold support from the president.

Divided Patriotism: New Models of the Rally Effect

The potential for a distorted rally 'round the flag effect necessitates new models of public support during a crisis. Three types of weakened rallies will follow future crises in the United States: the reverse rally, the divided rally, and the limited traditional rally.

Type 1: Reverse Rally

A reverse rally is the worst-case scenario: an international crisis turns U.S. citizens against the government. The opposition criticizes the administration's policy response and questions its ability to protect the country's interests. In this polarized environment, many independents turn against

the president. This lack of support impairs the ability of the United States to respond to the threat, jeopardizing national security for all citizens.

Political Behavior During a Reverse Rally	
Governing Party	Most rally behind the executive.
Opposition Party	Most fail to rally behind the executive; patriotic allegiance tied to partisan opposition leaders.
Independent Partisans	Most fail to rally behind the executive due to convincing hyperpartisan mis- and disinformation.
Political Outcome	Overall public support declines, less than half of the population rallies, and partisan divisions exceed pre-crisis levels.

Type 2: Divided Rally

A divided rally occurs when an international crisis splits the country along partisan lines. False or misleading messaging prompts users to equate patriotism with acceptance of a partisan position. A lack of bipartisan consensus gridlocks foreign policy decisions, threatening U.S. security.

Political Behavior During a Divided Rally	
Governing Party	Most rally behind the executive.
Opposition Party	Many fail to rally behind the executive; patriotic allegiance tied to partisan opposition leaders.
Independent Partisans	Some fail to rally behind the executive.
Political Outcome	Half or a slight majority of the population rallies. Partisan divisions exceed pre-crisis levels, and the president remains unsupported.

Type 3: Limited Traditional Rally

A limited traditional rally features some national unity, but to a lesser extent than in the past. For this type of rally to occur, the crisis must pose sufficient danger to the country so that U.S. citizens and some partisan opinion leaders shy away from criticism of the president, creating a small boost in support. Tepid bipartisan support emerges for some foreign policy decisions, despite the continued chatter, speculation, and disinformation spreading online.

Political Behavior During a Limited Traditional Rally	
Governing Party	Most rally behind the executive.
Opposition Party	Some fail to rally behind the executive
Independent Partisans	Some fail to rally behind the executive.
Political Outcome	Half or a slight majority of the population rallies and the president remains largely unsupported.

These new models of the rally effect explain why some U.S. citizens will refuse to commit support to the president when hyperpartisan mis- and disinformation circulates on social media. The type of rally that occurs depends on the type of attack. The nature of some crises makes citizens more (or less) vulnerable to convincing mis- and disinformation.

Factors Affecting a Rally's Duration and Intensity

How U.S. citizens perceive the danger of a crisis will impact their propensity to rally. If the crisis includes conventional warfare that stirs up a historical memory of conflict with an adversary, the government is more likely to experience a limited traditional rally over a reverse or divided rally. Depending on which party is in power, the population may be more likely to split in a rally.

- **Striking visuals of destruction.** Attacks that are swift, feature evocative images of destruction, and are easily attributable to an adversary will encourage unity.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, gray-zone warfare—including cyberattacks—result in less physical destruction and often lack clear attribution.⁶⁰ Despite the danger that these attacks may pose to U.S. citizens, a reverse or divided rally is highly likely for gray-zone warfare. When the adversary is initially unseen, rumors and false narratives are difficult to discredit.⁶¹

- **National memory.** A conventional attack against the United States may trigger memories of past disputes with an adversary, which may increase the propensity to rally.⁶² However, there is little historical precedent for gray-zone warfare and cyberattacks. These types of conflicts have few historical parallels in the United States, making them more likely to spawn divisive narratives.
- **Which party controls the executive branch.** The reception of political information is notably different for Republicans and Democrats, which affects how likely they are to encounter and believe mis- and disinformation. There is a subgroup of conservative Republicans whose media diets are highly isolated, increasing the likelihood of a weakened rally when the executive is controlled by the Democratic party.⁶³

Adversaries are increasingly using gray-zone warfare against the United States, which increases the chances that U.S. national unity will fracture given these attacks' lack of physical destruction and historical precedent.⁶⁴ In fact, some adversaries will likely choose gray zone attacks because they exploit internal fragility in U.S. politics and decrease the potential for a rally.

Political Implications of Weakened Rallies

Weakened rally effects will have far-reaching consequences for the United States. They will amplify domestic polarization and impede attempts to craft and implement foreign policy.

Domestic Consequences: Destabilizing National Depolarization

Throughout U.S. history, partisan polarization has often declined following rallies triggered by interstate wars, such as the bipartisan consensus following World War II.⁶⁵ However, a weak rally will not only fail to foster national unity but will also deepen political divides and increase the potency of future mis- and disinformation.

- **Interruption of a moment for national unity.** U.S. history has featured periods of polarization and depolarization, with major international crises—most notably World War II—dampening partisan tensions and generating consensus about U.S. foreign policy.⁶⁶ However, a weakened rally will deviate from this trend and spoil an opportunity for the public and domestic opposition leaders to identify a bipartisan national interest.
- **Deepened polarization and the threat to democracy.** Divided patriotism during a weakened rally can amplify affective polarization in the United States.⁶⁷ Already, partisan divides have undermined U.S. democratic processes, most prominently during the January 6th Capitol insurrection to overturn the 2020 election results.⁶⁸ If partisan tensions continue to rise, they can chip away at U.S. democracy by weakening institutions, decreasing election credibility, and incentivizing power grabs by the executive.⁶⁹ In the most extreme scenario, hyperpartisanship after a reverse rally may boil over into domestic conflict.

- **Reinforcement of the golden age of conspiracy theories.** A divided rally would create a vicious cycle of false and misleading media consumption. First, partisan mis- and disinformation catalyze public distrust of the government or other information authorities. Second, this lack of institutional credibility drives users to seek out bias-confirming sources, which often feature unverified information or conspiracy theories. Third, these theories reinforce citizens' distrust of information authorities, repeating the cycle.⁷⁰

Foreign Policy Consequences: Weak National Defense and the Erosion of U.S. Credibility

Weakened rallies will complicate all stages of a U.S. response to an attack: the decision to respond, the timing of a response, the available resources for a response, and the ability to sustain the response. Mis- and disinformation not only complicate or interrupt decision-making, but also leave the United States vulnerable to a follow-up attack. Overall, a weak foreign policy response can lead the international community to discredit future U.S. foreign policy commitments.

- **Limited and delayed U.S. response.** Divided public sentiment will delay the decision to respond to foreign aggression. The lack of domestic consensus in Congress will leave foreign policy gridlocked, and a lack of support from the U.S. public will constrain the president's ability to spend U.S. tax dollars or mobilize troops, postponing any action.
- **Incentive for expanded executive power.** In a weakened rally, the president may expand executive power to skirt public or congressional support for military action. This consolidation of power may resemble the Authorization for Use of Military Force used to retaliate after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁷¹ Not only could domestic divisions encourage power grabs, but they also incentivize a lack of government transparency. In order to maintain public support, the executive may attempt to downplay negative information about a crisis, similar to politicians from both parties during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷²
- **Fewer resources available to sustain U.S. action.** A U.S. response to an international crisis is highly vulnerable to partisan politicization, particularly if the administration seeks internal political change or humanitarian intervention. The U.S. public is already skeptical of these responses.⁷³ Divided public support would wear away at the executive and potentially bring about a premature withdrawal of troops or rollback of sanctions, among other failed commitments. Domestic hostility from a weakened rally may mirror the negative public sentiment towards President Clinton's intervention in Haiti in 1994 following the Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in 1993.⁷⁴
- **Increased vulnerability to a follow-up attack.** A delayed, weak, or absent response from the U.S. government leaves the population vulnerable to continued conflict. Without swift action to mobilize troops, safeguard infrastructure, or identify cyber vulnerabilities, adversaries have an opportunity to launch additional offensive maneuvers.
- **Continued erosion of U.S. credibility.** If the United States cannot unify its citizens to address threats to its security or national interest, its status as a global leader will continue to crumble.⁷⁵ The failure to respond to a crisis or the early termination of a foreign policy

response would signal that the United States is unable to consistently deliver on its promises to allies or follow through on its threats against adversaries. Future U.S. foreign policy could become a pattern of failed commitments resembling President Obama's refusal to respond to Syria despite drawing a "red line" against chemical weapons.⁷⁶

Failed rallies and foreign policy gridlock will upend the ability of the United States to respond to a threat, including mobilization for defense. However, the government can take action to avoid domestic upheaval between the governing and opposition parties during an international crisis.

Options to Manage a Divided U.S. Public

When democratic governments pollute the information space with manipulated content, they risk eroding these ideas and the authority of their own institutions.

—Jessica Brandt, 2021⁷⁷

The U.S. foreign policy community can discourage reverse and divided rallies before and after a crisis. Before a crisis, the United States government can release intelligence that exposes what false or misleading rumors that are likely to emerge. Immediately after the onset of a crisis, any statements from the government must be transparent and appeal to universal values (e.g., national defense and the safety of democracy), in order to minimize partisan fallout.

Prebunking Mis- and Disinformation with Intelligence

If U.S. citizens receive warnings about the rumors or propaganda they may encounter online, they will be less likely to believe such content when it appears on social media.⁷⁸ This strategy—prebunking—can help inoculate the population against information operations during a crisis.

In the future, the United States intelligence community can replicate its unprecedented intelligence sharing that occurred before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁷⁹ This intelligence exposed false narratives that the Kremlin planned to use to justify its invasion, and it successfully thwarted some of Putin's plans while strengthening NATO unity.⁸⁰ For adversaries planning information operations, prebunking can deter them from spending resources to proliferate false narratives.

To restore trust and preserve unity, the U.S. government must balance its efforts to share intelligence with the need to protect classified information. Washington must also avoid the perception that it is doctoring the facts for political aims. To safeguard against perceptions of information manipulation, friends and allies can coordinate intelligence releases to corroborate claims from the U.S. government.⁸¹

Prebunking is a powerful defense against false information but is ineffective for biased or misleading information—prebunking exposes lies, not partisan slants. Bipartisan messaging can help the executive avoid the perception that it is doctoring up a self-serving narrative.

Filling the Information Vacuum with Universal Messaging

The administration can promote universal U.S. values in its messaging to boost its credibility and steer citizens away from questionable sources of information that confirm their partisan biases.⁸² This approach requires calculated steps to avoid misperception from the opposition party.

- **Defending the nation.** When issuing a statement about a crisis, the U.S. government can communicate that partisan attacks undermine the interests of both Republicans and Democrats and endanger national security. To appeal to hawks, the administration can emphasize that an unwillingness to approve funding constrains the use of U.S. military force. To appeal to doves, the White House can argue that divided rallies undercut the ability of the United States to issue credible statements in diplomacy with other states.
- **Establishing a timeline of domestic costs.** To dampen the intensity of a reverse or divided rally, the United States can manage and galvanize the public's patriotic commitment to a crisis. First, the executive should promote transparency and signal the necessary domestic costs for a U.S. response, including the commitment of troops or spending of tax dollars.⁸³ Second, the executive must stress the urgency and patriotic responsibility of these domestic sacrifices to uphold U.S. democracy. Otherwise, opposition leaders and digital political influencers can discredit the administration for downplaying future public burdens.

For both pre-bunking information and universal messaging, the U.S. government can increase its chances of creating unity by using multiple channels of information to reach users according to age, technological literacy, partisan identity, and political involvement.⁸⁴

Conclusion

When responding to a crisis, public unity is essential for the United States to create an efficient and decisive response to an urgent security threat. In the new information environment, the United States cannot expect unified domestic support. With a divided or reverse rally, the executive will face a dual challenge: trying to defend the nation, while simultaneously battling upheaval among domestic partisans spurred by mis- and disinformation. Partisan mis- and disinformation will dog the administration, complicating the response to an attack against U.S. territory, citizens, or interests. Understanding the nature of reverse, divided, and limited traditional rallies is essential to safeguarding U.S. security in moments when national unity is imperative.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Daniella Marx for her extensive research and editorial assistance, and Lt Col Jon Ratchick for his invaluable feedback and mentorship throughout the drafting of this paper. The author greatly appreciates feedback provided from Professor Matthew Baum, Emerson T. Brooking, Professor Larissa Doroshenko, Lisa Kaplan, Dylan Kolhoff, Robert Montaña, Professor Joshua Tucker, and the 2021-2022 PIPS cohort, who helped to shape the project. The author wishes to show his appreciation to the Global Research Institute at William & Mary for supporting and promoting the PIPS program. Finally, the author wishes to extend his most sincere gratitude and appreciation to Professor Amy Oakes and Professor Dennis Smith, whose unwavering support, meticulous edits, and genuine belief in this project from its inception made this white paper possible.

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- ⁸ For example, a fake image of an Israeli jet bombing Iran has gone viral multiple times. On one occasion, a flood of social recommendations allowed the photo to reach Britain’s Shadow Home Secretary, who shared it while criticizing the use of airstrikes against Syria. Kate Ferguson, “Diane Abbott Is Caught Out Posting a Fake Image of an Israeli Fighter Jet Bombing Iran in a Tweet Slamming Britain’s Airstrikes on Syria,” *Daily Mail*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5620881/Diane-Abbott-posts-FAKE-image-Israeli-fighter-jet-bombing-Iran.html>. For more, see: Kevin Munger, “All the News That’s Fit to Click: The Economics of Clickbait Media.”
- ⁹ Motivations include the desire for self-confirming information, political information, entertainment, or accurate information. See: Kevin Arceneaux, Ryan J. Vander Wielen, “The Effects of Need for Cognition and Need for Affect on Partisan Evaluations,” *Political Psychology* 34, no. 1 (February 2013): 23–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00925.x>.
- ¹⁰ Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, and Lada A. Adamic, “Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook,” *Science* 348, no. 6239 (May 7, 2015): 1130–1132, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>.
- ¹¹ Discourse about social media has overemphasized the role and effect of algorithms in indoctrinating users. Contrary to the fear that algorithms create “echo chambers” that surround and indoctrinate users with a certain perspective, algorithmic exposure does not guarantee to influence a specific user. Personal motivation is the main motivator: a user is more likely to interact with algorithmic suggestions granted that these media fit into a user’s pre-existing beliefs. Ultimately, the decision lies with the user. See: Will Oremus, “Who Controls Your Facebook Feed,” *Slate*, January 3, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/cover_story/2016/01/how_facebook_s_news_feed_algorithm_works.html; Arceneaux and Vander Wielen, “The Effects of Need for Cognition and Need for Affect on Partisan Evaluations.”
- ¹² Roughly six out of 10 of U.S. citizens reported that they opt out of direct news coverage, reading no more than a headline. See: “How Americans Get Their News,” *American Press Institute*, March 14, 2014, <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/how-americans-get-news/>; Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, Justin M. Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (2016): 298–320, <https://5harad.com/papers/bubbles.pdf>. <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/how-americans-get-news/>. Moreover, in a study on Facebook, only 13 percent of posts shared by users came directly from news outlets, and only seven percent of users clicked on this content in their news feed. See: Eytan Bakshy, Solomon Messing, Lada A. Adamic, “Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook.”
- ¹³ Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, Justin M. Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption.”
- ¹⁴ The spread of false information in online messaging networks is particularly strong among immigrant and minority communities in the United States who use large group chats to communicate with family members across the globe. See: Markus Prior, *Post-broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan,

"Information disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking," *Council of Europe*, October 2017, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

¹⁵ Amy Mitchell et al., "Americans Who Mostly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable," *Pew Research Center*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/>.

¹⁶ Shira Dvir Gvirsman, "It's Not That We Don't Know, It's That We Don't Care: Explaining Why Selective Exposure Polarizes Attitudes," *Mass Communication & Society* 17, no. 1 (2014): 74–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2013.816738>; Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, Cristina E. Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2015): 24-844, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12234>.

¹⁷ Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust."

¹⁸ A Pew Research Center poll of over 12,000 U.S. adults found that Fox News and CNN have emerged as the most popular sources of political news. See: Elizabeth Grieco, "American' Main Sources for Political News Vary by Party and Age," *Pew Research Center*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/americans-main-sources-for-political-news-vary-by-party-and-age/>; Jonas Heese and Vishal P. Baloria, "Research: The Rise of Partisan Media Changed How Companies Make Decisions," *Harvard Business Review*, October 30, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/10/research-the-rise-of-partisan-media-changed-how-companies-make-decisions>. Social media algorithms assist this process, boosting the visibility of users who share engaging content.

¹⁹ Giampaolo Bonomi, Nicola Gennaioli, and Guido Tabellini, "Identity, Beliefs, and Political Conflict," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136, no. 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab034>.

²⁰ Amy Lerman, Daniel Acland, "United in States of Dissatisfaction: Confirmation Bias Across the Partisan Divide," *American Politics Research* 48, no. 2 (2018): 227-23, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1532673X18799274?icid=int.sj-abstract.citing-articles.3>.

²¹ In these networks, the driving factor for in-group identity is more strongly linked to the pursuit of partisan identity over the avoidance of opposing information. See: Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic, "Exposure to Ideologically Diverse News and Opinion on Facebook." For more, see: Yosh Halberstam and Brian Knight, "Homophily, Group Size, and the Diffusion of Political Information in Social Networks: Evidence from Twitter," *Journal of Public Economics* 143 (2016): 73-88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2016.08.011>.

²² Christopher A. Bail et al., "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 155, no. 37, 9216–9221; Emily Kubin and Christian von Sikorski, "The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45, no. 3 (2021): 188-206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070>. See more: Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The Rise of Negative Partisanship and the Nationalization of US Elections in the 21st Century," *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016): 12-22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.11.001>.

²³ Christopher Mims, "Why Social Media Is So Good at Polarizing Us," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-social-media-is-so-good-at-polarizing-us-11603105204>; Giampaolo Bonomi, Nicola Gennaioli, and Guido Tabellini, "Identity, Beliefs, and Political Conflict," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136, no. 4 (September 2021): 2371-2411, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjab034>; Javier Serrano-Puche, "Digital Disinformation and Emotions: Exploring the Social Risks of Affective Polarization," *International Review of Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2021): 231-245, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2021.1947953>; Sarah Shugars and Nicholas Beauchamp, "Why Keep Arguing? Predicting Engagement in Political Conversations Online," *Sage Open* 9, no. 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019828850>.

²⁴ In 2016, a foreign disinformation campaign imitated U.S. Twitter users after a police shooting sparked a response from the #BlackLivesMatter movement. These false accounts promoted partisan hostility to undermine the credibility of large media outlets during the BLM demonstrations. See: Ahmer Arif, Leo Graiden Stewart, and Kate Starbird, "Acting the Part: Examining Information Operations Within #BlackLivesMatter Discourse," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, no. CSCW (2018): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3274289>.

²⁵ Marc Hetherington, Jonathan Weiler, Chapter 4 in *Prius or Pickup?: How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2018); Shanto Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (2019): 129-146, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

²⁶ Matthew Capala, “The Psychology of Online Trust,” *Forbes*, April 28, 2021,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2021/04/28/the-psychology-of-online-trust/?sh=b0b26b64a392>.

²⁷ After the era of yellow journalism in the early 1900s, state-led information regulation and high levels government trust led to widespread support for public institutions and news outlets—particularly after World War I. In a set of public opinion polls from 1964, 71% and 61% of respondents believed that news programs were fair and did not generally favor one political party over another respectively. In this period, political parties, large media outlets, research institutions, and bureaucratic branches of the government controlled the political discourse and topics of discussion. They refrained from spotlighting conspiracy theories in high-level political discourse. However, some authoritative institutions have begun legitimizing these theories by introducing them to political discussions. See: Jonathan Ladd, Chapter 3 in *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011),

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt7spr6.7.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A19840815ff9aa64333d51982a0c913d4&ab_segments=&origin=; W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, Chapter 4 in *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628>.

²⁸ In 2020, 74% of U.S. citizens in a study of 20,000 people reported that news organizations they distrusted were trying to push a targeted political agenda. See: “American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy,” *Knight Foundation*, August 4, 2020, <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/american-views-2020-trust-media-and-democracy/>.

²⁹ Yariv Tsfati, “Online News Exposure and Trust in the Mainstream Media: Exploring Possible Associations,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 54, no. 1 (2010): 22-42,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002764210376309>.

³⁰ Support for conspiracies does not emerge from evidence validating the theory, but rather the rejection of the consensus view held by scientists or politicians in institutions. For example, the conspiracy theory that global warming was invented for financial reasons did not become popular for its presentation of evidence to suggest this conclusion. Rather, it emerged from a distrust in the claims made by government officials and scientists. See: Bennett and Livingston, Chapter 4 in *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*.

³¹ Globally, a distrust of institutions leads members to form informal militias that threaten national stability. In addition to the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, other countries such as the Netherlands have experienced the rise of militant groups due to COVID-19 restrictions. See: Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “Conspiracy Thinking: A Scapegoat Is Always Useful,” *UNESCO Courier*, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2021-2/conspiracy-thinking-scapegoat-always-useful>; Mary B. McCord, “Congress Can and Should Address the Threat from Unauthorized Paramilitary Activity,” *Just Security*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.justsecurity.org/79951/congress-can-and-should-address-the-threat-from-unauthorized-paramilitary-activity/>.

³² An indicator of the strength of a rally is the presidential approval rating, which temporarily swells after the crisis. While these crises are often violent, the rally effect also applies to other situations that threaten a country’s interests, such as the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik in the space race against the United States. During these events, strategic intelligence is limited to the president, and political opponents and other key opposition leaders lack the ability or motivation to criticize the executive. See: Brian Newman and Andrew Forcehimes, ““Rally Round the Flag” Events for President Approval Research,” *Electoral Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 144-154, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2009.07.003>; Matthew Baum, “The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon,” *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2002): 263–98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3096071>.

³³ Toby Craig Jones, “America, Oil, and War in the Middle East,” *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 2012): 208–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jas045>.

³⁴ After the mass-shooting at a South Florida high school in 2018, not only did rumors emerge about the identity of the shooter, but there was also an influx in imposter tweets. Those seeking to spread disinformation shared photoshopped images of journalists’ tweets to increase their chances of accumulating likes and shares. See: Daniel Funke, “Imposter Tweets Made It Even Harder for a Reporter to Cover Florida School Shooting,” *Poynter*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2018/imposter-tweets-made-it-even-harder-for-a-reporter-to-cover-florida-school-shooting/>; Salman Bin Naeem, Rubina Bhatti, and Aqsa Khan, “An Exploration of How Fake News is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk,” *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 38, no. 2 (July 12, 2020): 143-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hir.12320/>.

³⁵ During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook failed to meet its stated commitment to prohibit and remove misleading and false information about the virus. See: Aoife Gallagher, Mackenzie Hart, and Ciarán O'Connor, "Ill Advice: A Case Study in Facebook's Failure to Tackle COVID-19 Disinformation," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/ill-advice-a-case-study-in-facebooks-failure-to-tackle-covid-19-disinformation/>.

³⁶ Stephen Hess, "Corrections: When the News Media Make Mistakes," *Brookings*, December 1, 1998, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/corrections-when-the-news-media-make-mistakes/>.

³⁷ For instance, misinformation during COVID-19 increased around the globe from 20 percent to 87 percent in some countries. See: Salman Bin Naeem, Rubina Bhatti, and Aqsa Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 38, no. 2 (June 2021): 143-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hir.12320>; Kate Starbird et al., "Engage Early, Correct More: How Journalists Participate in False Rumors Online During Crisis Events," *In Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2018): 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173679>.

³⁸ A lack of verification before posting has been observed among journalists, the majority of whom reported that they find themselves free to operate outside of the limits of traditional rules of journalistic integrity on social media. See: "2014 Study Impact of Social Media on News: More Crowd-checking, Less Facet-checking," *ING*, June 19, 2014, <https://www.ing.com/Newsroom/News/NW/-2014-Study-impact-of-Social-Media-on-News-more-crowd-checking-less-fact-checking.htm>.

³⁹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, "Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations," *Memory Studies* 10, no. 3 (2017): 323-333, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615>.

⁴⁰ This new strategy stands in opposition to the previous popularity of bot networks. Russian disinformation operations created bot networks to spread disinformation during the 2016 election to influence voting attitudes. However, growing knowledge of this strategy and increased detection technology has decreased its impact. U.S. citizens' trust in online political influencers makes them the perfect target for foreign adversaries seeking to spread believable disinformation. See: Chengcheng Shao et al., "The Spread of Low-Credibility Content by Social Bots," *Nature Communications* 9, no. 4787, November 20, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06930-7>.

In October of 2020, Carlson achieved the highest monthly viewership of any show in cable-news history. Popular influencers like Carlson have audiences of millions that choose to consume this information, and are therefore more likely to believe any misleading statements that these influencers spread—even if they're unintentional. See: Charlotte Alter, "Talking With Tucker Carlson, the Most Powerful Conservative in America," *Time*, July 15, 2021, <https://time.com/6080432/tucker-carlson-profile/>.

⁴² In the 2016 U.S. election, the United States faced a barrage of fake and authentic content online, chiefly from Russian sources of disinformation. However, in the four years leading up to the 2020 election, social media platforms and U.S. federal agencies acted fast to expose these plots, such as a spoofed email campaign organized by Iran that claimed to be from the Proud Boys, a far-right domestic extremist group. This trend of declining foreign success in influence campaigns has given way to the overwhelming source of mis- and disinformation in the United States: domestic sources. In this environment, the most successful foreign influence operations tend to amplify this homegrown disinformation. See: Scott Jasper, "Why Foreign Election Interference Fizzled in 2020," *Atlantic Council*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/why-foreign-election-interference-fizzled-in-2020/>.

⁴³ The first major swell of domestic disinformation on social occurred before the 2010 midterm elections to sway voter opinions. Many of these groups are anti-government and white supremacist, and they aim to revolutionize society with new foundations of power. These campaigns have been present since 2010, with notable groups including the Proud Boys and QAnon. In 2020, QAnon, a far-right conspiracy group organized online, took advantage of COVID-19 to argue that it was orchestrated by elite pedophiles in order to divert attention from investigations into their actions. See: Paul M. Barrett, "What the Social Media Companies Need to Do," *NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights*, March 2018, https://issuu.com/nyusterncenterforbusinessandhumanri/docs/nyu_domestic_disinformation_digital?e=31640827/68184927; Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "White Supremacist Extremism and the Far Right in the U.S.," *American University*, <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/cynthia-miller-idriss-white-supremacist-extremism-far-right-us>; Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling, "How Covid-19 Myths are Merging with the QAnon Conspiracy Theory," *BBC*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>.

⁴⁴ Arkaitz Zubiaga et al., "Analysing How People Orient to and Spread Rumours in Social Media by Looking at Conversational Threads," *PloS one* 11, no. 3, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150989>; Kate Starbird,

Dharma Dailey, Owla Mohamed, Gina Lee, and Emma S. Spiro, "Engage Early, Correct More: How Journalists Participate in False Rumors Online During Crisis Events," In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2018) 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173679>; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, "Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust."

⁴⁵ Content regulation algorithms have limited understanding of the complexity of human speech, and they are inconsistent given that different social media platforms have unique systems of regulation. Even when these algorithms detect false information and users are blocked, many users will migrate from one platform to another, where they can continue to spread mis- and disinformation. Moreover, regulation tends to occur after a delay. In 2018, Meta—formerly known as Facebook—failed to promptly detect the use of the platform in Myanmar to push hate speech against the Rohingya Muslim population, which contributed to violence against the population that has been brought to the International Court of Justice. Even after Meta recognized its role in the attacks, it struggled to contain the hate speech. See: Shiza Ali et al., "Understanding the Effect of Deplatforming on Social Networks," *ACM Web Conference* (June 2021): 187-195, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3447535.3462637>.; Natasha Duarte, Emma Llanso, and Anna Loup, "Mixed Messages? The Limits of Automated Social Media Content Analysis," *Center for Democracy & Technology*, November 2017, <https://cdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Mixed-Messages-Paper.pdf>; "Why Facebook Is Losing the War on Hate Speech in Myanmar," *Reuters Investigates*, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>.

⁴⁶ Traditional analyses of rally effects found that criticism of the administration decreased in the past given that few opposition leaders had access to intelligence reports, and therefore were restricted in their ability to critique the president's response. William D. Baker and John R. Oneal, "Patriotism or Opinion Leadership?: The Nature and Origins of the 'Rally 'Round the Flag' Effect," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 5 (October 2001): 661–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002701045005006>.

⁴⁷ In general, deplatforming online political influencers is a rare measure, used for only a handful of controversial figures who generate cross-cutting disapproval, including the likes of Marjorie Taylor Greene and Alex Jones. Even once facts become clear, the misleading or untrue statements will have already taken root and spread to vulnerable audiences. In fact, social media verifies true rumors faster than it takes down false or misleading rumors, which have time to reach larger audiences. See: Paris Martineau, "Facebook Bans Alex Jones, Other Extremists – But Not as Planned," *Wired*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-bans-alex-jones-extremists/>; Zubiaga et al., "Analysing How People Orient to and Spread Rumours in Social Media by Looking at Conversational Threads."

⁴⁸ Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006): 7-46, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.30.3.7/>.

⁴⁹ Jonas De Keersmaecker et al., "Investigating the Robustness of the Illusory Truth Effect across Individual Differences in Cognitive Ability, Need for Cognitive Closure, and Cognitive Style," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (2020): 204-215, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219853844>.

⁵⁰ "How Americans Get Their News," *American Press Institute*.

⁵¹ Politically unengaged users are more likely to believe the importance of what limited political information they encounter online. This vulnerability is especially dangerous in closed messaging networks where all information is second-hand, outside of the context of authoritative sources and regulation. See: Jessica T. Feezell, "Agenda Setting through Social Media: The Importance of Incidental News Exposure and Social Filtering in the Digital Era," *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 482-494, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912917744895>; Oscar Westlund and Marina Ghersetti, "Modelling News Media Use," *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015): 133-151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2013.868139>; Ariel Bogle, "As Coronavirus Fears Grow, Family Group Chats Spread Support but Also Misinformation," *ABC News*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2020-03-21/coronavirus-health-misinformation-spreading-whatsapp-text-groups/12066386>; Cynthia Andrews et al., "Keeping Up with The Tweet-Dashians: The Impact of 'Official' Accounts On Online Rumoring," In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 2016, 452-465.

⁵² This trend is especially concerning when 57% of U.S. citizens in a study of 20,000 people reported seeing a fair or great amount of bias in their go-to news source. See: "American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy," *Knight Foundation*.

⁵³ Andrews et al., "Keeping Up with the Tweet-dashians: The Impact of 'Official' Accounts on Online Rumoring."

⁵⁴ Keersmaecker et al., "Investigating the Robustness of the Illusory Truth Effect across Individual Differences in Cognitive Ability, Need for Cognitive Closure, and Cognitive Style."

⁵⁵ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthew, "The Russian Firehose of Falsehood Propaganda Model," *RAND Corporation*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.7249/PE198>.

⁵⁶ Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, "Disinformation as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Participatory Nature of Strategic Information Operations," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, no. CSCW (2019): 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359229>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Public perception of a successful foreign policy response and the justifications for the conflict are key determinants of patriotic support. See: Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq." For more on entrenched patriotic identities, see: Alexander G. Theodoridis, "Me, Myself, and (I), (D), or (R)? Partisanship and Political Cognition Through the Lens of Identity," *The Journal of Politics* 79, no. 4, August 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692738>.

⁵⁹ Orla Vigsø and Tomas Odén, "The Dynamics of Sensemaking and Information Seeking in a Crisis Situation," *Nordicom Review* 37, no. 1 (2016): 71-84, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2016-0003>.

⁶⁰ Countries including China and Russia have taken actions against the United States that fall under "gray-zone" warfare, where the actions are subtle and lay below U.S. redlines to produce a series of small victories, none of which individually are severe enough to create public interest or calls for a coordinated response. See: Doug Livermore, "China's "Three Warfares" In Theory and Practice in the South China Sea," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, March 25, 2018, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2018/03/25/chinas-three-warfares-in-theory-and-practice-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁶¹ Partisan interpretations caused by the lack of a clear enemy is likely to discourage discretionary rallies, or rallies created by the U.S. government's self-led foreign policy decisions, including treaties or agreements, political assassinations, and technological breakthroughs. See: Matthew Baum, "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon."

⁶² For example, users on social media juxtaposed images of Ukrainians sheltering in metro stations during the Russian air raids in February of 2022 against photos of British families in train stations during Germany's bombing of London during World War II. See: Alex Kokcharov (@AlexKokcharov), "London Underground 1940. Moscow Underground 1941. Kyiv Metro 2022. Kharkiv Metro 2022. This is the reality of #Russia's invasion of #Ukraine, which is happening now," Twitter, February 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/AlexKokcharov/status/1497095752417525783?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetemb%7Ctwterm%5E1497095752417525783%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unilad.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fukraine-subway-hideout-compared-to-ww2-london-amid-russian-invasion-20220225. On the other side of the conflict, some Russian news outlets created disinformation that invoked national memory in order to dupe its own citizens into believing that the Ukrainian government is the heir of their past adversaries, primarily the Nazis. See: Mykola Makhortykh, "#NoKievNazi: Social Media, Historical Memory and Securitization in the Ukraine Crisis," *Memory and Securitization in Contemporary Europe* (January 2018): 219-247, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-95269-4_9; Mykola Makhortykh, Yehor Lyebydyev, and Daniel Kravtsov, "Past Is Another Resource: Remembering the 70th Anniversary of the Victory Day on LiveJournal," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 2 (2021): 375-288, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.64>; Dario R. Paez and James Hou-Fu Liu, "Collective Memory of Conflicts," *Intergroup Conflicts and their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective* (January 26, 2011): 105-24.

⁶³ While Democrats largely consume the same news sources and are exposed to cross-cutting information, Republicans are fractured, with a substantial subgroup isolating their media consumption to sources with a strong Republican lean. Additionally, the Democratic party is relatively more homogenous in its political beliefs on foreign policy and news consumption compared to Republicans, so Democrats are more likely to rally together—or fail to rally together—in a foreign policy crisis. See: Andrew M. Guess, "(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans' Online Media Diets." *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 1007-1022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12589>. For more, see: Andrew M. Guess, "Media Choice and Moderation: Evidence from Online Tracking Data," New York University; "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," *Pew Research Center*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/6-views-of-foreign-policy/>; Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, "Less Than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook," *Science Advances* 5, no. 1, 2019, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>.

⁶⁴ Gray-zone warfare include economic coercion, influence operations, cyberattacks, the use of mercenaries, and assassinations, among others. See: Robert J. Giesler, Arun Iyer, and Clementine G. Starling, "Today's Wars Are

Fought in the ‘Gray Zone,’ *Atlantic Council*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/todays-wars-are-fought-in-the-gray-zone-heres-everything-you-need-to-know-about-it/>.

⁶⁵ Other examples of rallies include the 1898 explosion of the U.S.S. Maine before the Spanish-American War, the early 1800s confiscation of U.S. ships by Barbary states before the Barbary Wars, and the 1986 bombing of the West Berlin discotheque before the U.S. intervention in Libya.

⁶⁶ For example, the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service united the U.S. population to overcome hesitation about antagonizing foreign powers by intervening in the war. Measured by voting patterns in Congress, U.S. political polarization reached a minimum in the years after the Allied victory in 1945. Christopher Ingraham, “A Stunning Visualization of Our Divided Congress,” *The Washington Post*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/23/a-stunning-visualization-of-our-divided-congress/>.

⁶⁷ Richard M. Doty, Bill E. Peterson, and David G. Winter, “Threat and Authoritarianism in the United States, 1978–1987,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 61, no. 4 (1991): 629–640, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.61.4.629>.

⁶⁸ Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svobik, “Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392–409, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052>. For more on partisanship in the United States, see: John M. Carey et al., “Party, Policy, Democracy, and Candidate Choice in Elections,” *Bright Line Watch*, October 2018, <http://brightlinewatch.org/us-elections/>; Kaia Hubbard, “Running Riot on American Exceptionalism,” *U.S. News*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2021-01-11/attack-on-capitol-building-shakes-views-of-us-exceptionalism>.

⁶⁹ Hyperpolarization in U.S. politics following a reverse rally has a range of consequences: there is an increasing willingness to trade long-term democratic interests for short-term partisan policies; bipartisan policy decisions become gridlocked beyond the immediate aftermath of a crisis; and parties consider undemocratic methods to preserve power when public support drops, contesting power outside of traditional political arenas. See: Milan Svobik, “Polarization Versus Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 20–32, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/polarization-versus-democracy/>; Murat Somer and Jennifer McCoy, “Transformations Through Polarizations and Global Threats to Democracy.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 8–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818058>.

⁷⁰ Bennett and Livingston, Chapter 4 in *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*.

⁷¹ Jen Daskal, “After the Authorization for Use of Military Force,” *Open Society Foundation*, May 2013, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/after-authorization-use-military-force>.

⁷² For example, former President Donald Trump downplayed elements of the coronavirus pandemic to control his public image in the wake of the publication of a highly critical biography about his presidency. See: Josh Dawsey, Felicia Sonmez, and Paul Kane, “Trump Acknowledges He Intentionally Downplayed Deadly Coronavirus, Says Effort Was to Reduce Panic,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-reaction-woodward-interview-coronavirus/2020/09/09/fc21e67e-f2ca-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html.

⁷³ Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq.”

⁷⁴ Future rallies in the United States may resemble the lack of public support experienced under President Bill Clinton in two interventions. In 1992, the U.S. intervention in Somalia turned disastrous as insurgents shot down two American Black Hawk helicopters, and a group of soldiers sent to rescue the passengers wound up trapped overnight in an urban gunfight. After the incident, news outlets broadcast videos of a group of Somalis dragging the bodies of U.S. soldiers through the streets. Criticism the intervention skyrocketed, and President Clinton halted the mission. In 1994, President Clinton presided over Operation Uphold Democracy in the wake of the Black Hawk Down incident. This intervention in Haiti installed 25,000 U.S. troops to reinstate democracy after the 1991 military coup d’etat. However, memory of the Somalia intervention upheld criticism against the Clinton. See: “What A Downed Black Hawk In Somalia Taught America,” *NPR*, October 5, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/10/05/229561805/what-a-downed-black-hawk-in-somalia-taught-america>; “Intervention in Haiti, 1994–1995,” Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/haiti>.

⁷⁵ Facing the costs of political polarization for U.S. foreign policy credibility, a high degree of policy inconsistency is likely to signal to adversaries that the U.S. will not maintain cohesive foundational beliefs about the position of the United States within the global system. For more, see: Rachel Myrick, “America Is Back—but for How Long?”

Foreign Affairs, June 14, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-06-14/america-back-how-long>; Kenneth A. Schultz, “Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1406705>.

⁷⁶ Christopher J. Bolan, “American Credibility Is Dangerously Low: Just Not for the Reasons You May Think,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/07/american-credibility-is-dangerously-low-just-not-for-the-reasons-you-may-think/>.

⁷⁷ Jessica Brandt, “How Democracies Can Win an Information Contest Without Undercutting Their Values,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 2, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/02/how-democracies-can-win-information-contest-without-undercutting-their-values-pub-85058>.

⁷⁸ Stephan Lewandowsky and Sander van der Linden, “Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2021): 348-384, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983>.

⁷⁹ For example, the United States intelligence community warned of a potential “false-flag” operation in which the Kremlin would release a staged video depicting an attack by the Ukrainian military on Russian territory or against ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine. Mark Warner, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, reported that this intelligence has “not only thrown Putin’s plan’s slightly off, it’s also really helped solidify the NATO alliance.” For more, see: Nomaan Merchant, “US Tries to Name and Shame Russian Disinformation on Ukraine,” *Associated Press*, January 28, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-media-vladimir-putin-ecba20c81181c028b06109cf8620426a/>; Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Exposes What It Says Is Russian Effort to Fabricate Pretext for Invasion,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/russia-ukraine-invasion-pretext.html>; Julia E. Barnes and David E. Sanger, “Accurate U.S. Intelligence Did Not Stop Putin, But It Gave Biden Huge Advantages,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/intelligence-putin-biden-ukraine-leverage.html>.

⁸⁰ Barnes and Sanger, “Accurate U.S. Intelligence Did Not Stop Putin, But It Gave Biden Huge Advantages.”

⁸¹ *Ibid.* Before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the United States shared intelligence alongside similar releases by British intelligence officials.

⁸² Orla Vigsø and Tomas Odén, “The Dynamics of Sensemaking and Information Seeking in a Crisis Situation,” *Nordicom Review* 37, no. 1 (2016): 71-84, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304003759_The_Dynamics_of_Sensemaking_and_Information_Seeking_in_a_Crisis_Situation.

⁸³ An immediate attack against the United States is unlikely to be isolated—the initial crisis tends to be part of a longer timeline of political demands or continued attacks. The few attacks that are isolated will likely be terrorist attacks. However, given the aim of these attacks to provoke high levels of fear in the population using sharp and intense conflict, the public response is more likely to be a limited traditional rally rather than a divided or reverse rally.

⁸⁴ The U.S. government can target four dimensions of the national userbase. First, the government’s messaging must account for different age groups. Younger generations are more likely to use Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, while older generations tend to use Facebook. Second, the level of technological literacy also divides the U.S. population. The government should ensure that its online messaging is legible and easily accessible without having to navigate between various links. Third, the U.S. government should cover diverse partisan networks so that both ends of the political spectrum come across the government’s messaging. Fourth, this messaging should extend from non-politically engaged members to elected politicians at multiple levels of governance. To this end, the messaging can be more effective at promoting unity when it reaches different elements of the population. For more, see: Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2021,” *Pew Research Center*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.