

“Dirty Wars” and Disinformation in the Age of Ronald Reagan

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Patrick Leahy told me that he was adamant. As a US Senator, he was absolutely certain of at least one thing: the Congress of the United States “wasn’t going to be led around by some obscure subcommittee.”

Yet there it was, the Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism. And there it remained through most of the Reagan era, the launching pad for another witch hunt against dissent. Vermont’s junior Senator was in the minority. For too many of Leahy’s colleagues and much of Reagan’s administration the committee was a long lost friend.



For Jeremiah Denton it was a place to pursue his mission from God. The chairman of the subcommittee was determined to save the US from unwed sex, liberal education and the international terrorist conspiracy. At the first meeting of his new assignment he declared, “We must get our perspective back. We’ve lost it, and the dominoes are falling so thunderously that we can’t hear ourselves argue about whether the domino theory is correct or not.”

Denton made it from Alabama to Washington with a little help from his friends in the Moral Majority, and at the start of his first term became chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, otherwise known as the SST. Before that he’d been a Navy pilot in Vietnam, shot down while raiding a North Vietnamese camp. He spent seven years in a Vietnamese prison. During POW years he had become certain that God was speaking directly to him. Once he came home the Lord practically shouted at him to do battle with threats to American civilization.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah, Denton said, America was “sated” with decadence, and under attack from foreign powers, principally the Soviet Union. He became convinced that subversive thought, terrorism and “disinformation” would “bury our nation” unless someone stood up and stopped them. And he was the man for the job.

At the start, he was just another New Right zealot, a founder of the Coalition for Decency and ardent supporter of Nixon. But in 1980 Nixon and the Moral Majority teamed up to help finance Denton's election to the US Senate. After that historic election, the Republicans assumed control of the Senate and Strom Thurmond took the Senate Judiciary Committee leadership from Edward Kennedy. The new Judiciary Chair quickly set up the SST and put Denton in charge.

Despite the protests of liberals like Leahy, Denton's Committee took a conspiratorial view of world politics. The theory was this: the Soviet Union was behind all politically-motivated violence in the world, befitting its role as the Evil Empire. If the Soviet Union didn't exist, the theory proceeded, all would be calm in Northern Ireland, Latin America, South Africa and the Middle East. If most Americans had trouble believing this, it was only because the USSR had succeeded in duping Americans through sophisticated manipulation of the news media. Denton and friends thought the KGB was adept at conditioning journalists.

"There is no central war room," protested former CIA Director Bill Colby the first day Denton's committee met. Colby wanted them to know that no single government, not even the Evil Empire, was directing the orchestra. But before the spymaster could finish his thought, Denton commenced a monologue about the contribution of the American press to the American defeat in Vietnam.

The audience murmured, the press corps gasped and committee counsel Joel Lisker fidgeted as the chairman said, "It was extremely disheartening to prisoners of war to hear Radio Moscow come out with a new line, to hear that new line rebroadcast two days later by Radio Hanoi, and three days later a brand new line articulated in precisely the same phrases by some members of the press or even some members of Congress."

He meandered finally to his key concern — disinformation. "It is not subverting a journalist. It is not the KGB getting to a journalist. It is the journalist responding to what he believes to be a noble purpose. There is something wrong, and he went after it. But I say we've got to be careful."

McCarthy's Ghosts

Senator Denton was certainly careful enough about security for his hearings: hours before each session dogs scoured the room for bombs as a security force installed metal detectors at the entrances. Plainclothes cops stood guard during the testimony. He was also careful to select witnesses who reinforced his world view.

And to make sure the epidemic nature of terrorism was fully understood, he had his committee use a new definition of the word, developed by the CIA. Henceforth, terrorism would mean "the threat or use of violence for political symbolic effect that is aimed at achieving a psychological impact on target groups wider than its immediate victims." Any



insurrection anywhere could now be called terrorism.

Denton planned to use the committee to raise “public consciousness” about terrorism. But Leahy was concerned mainly about the potential for “disinformation” emanating from the committee itself. Despite poking some holes in the terror network scenario with questions to some witnesses, however, Leahy didn’t attend most of the committee’s hearings. In fact, most members didn’t attend sessions regularly, leaving the showcase to Denton.

Leahy and Delaware Democrat Joseph Biden were the liberal minority; the two other Republicans were Orrin Hatch and John East. Like Denton, Hatch of Utah was a New Rightist with ties to the Moral Majority. Even before the Denton committee was formed, Hatch had selected some of its targets, including Mother Jones, an investigative magazine; the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal Washington think tank; and the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), which found itself in conflict with US policy by opposing dictatorships.

East, selected from North Carolina with the help of Jesse Helms, shared Denton’s preoccupation with the Soviet threat. His 1980 campaign had centered on the dangers of Carter’s “liberal” international policies, the “giveaway” of the Panama Canal, and the threat of creeping communism. Upon election, East picked Sam Francis as a congressional aide. Francis, a former policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation, Washington’s leading right-wing think tank, had authored the intelligence section of the Foundation’s 3,000-page report to President Reagan. The President relied on the report for many of his policy directions.

The Heritage report was an all-encompassing policy blueprint for the 1980s. It advised Reagan and Congress to take a hard line not only against foreign revolutionaries, but also against domestic political activists. It pointed to “the un-American nature of so much so-called dissidence.” In January 1981, when Reagan took up residence in the White House, the report was turned over to his chief counsel, Edwin Meese, who had already participated in Heritage Foundation meetings. Meese said he would “rely heavily” on the advice.

The report urged tighter surveillance of radical and New Left groups, anti-defense and anti-nuclear lobbies, and the alternative press. It also suggested reviving internal security committees in both houses of Congress. The SST was an early response. Key boosters of McCarthy-like committees included the American Security Council, which helped build the proper atmosphere by producing and distributing propaganda films for TV, and the National Committee to Restore Internal Security, a watchdog of “enemy-directed misinformation.” Remnants of the old House Un-American Activities Committee were returning from the woodwork.

For right-wingers and the conspiracy-minded, the Denton Committee was a long-needed, respectable vehicle for spreading fear of Soviet-orchestrated terrorism. It would establish the basis for an unleashing of the intelligence agencies and the cutting back of public access to government documents. The Heritage report had explained that, “It is axiomatic that individual liberties are secondary to the requirement of national security and internal civil order.” This apparently meant there was a compelling need to investigate “clergymen, students, businessmen, entertainers, labor officials, journalists and government workers who may engage in subversive activities without being fully aware of the extent, purpose, or control of their activities.”

Disinformation theory was designed to allow a broad-brush approach. The committee counsel, Joel Lisker, a former FBI man, said that journalists wouldn’t have to be disloyal to become tools of terrorists. “It may be expediency or laziness,” he explained.

Leahy in the Opposition

The GOP set up the SST right after taking power in January 1981. On August 28, I talked with Senator Leahy, still in his first term, about the emerging threats to civil liberties. I asked, for example, whether disinformation was warping public understanding of world affairs?

Not much, he replied, “but a lot of people who write for the national newspapers and media are not that competent. They sometimes get extraordinarily high salaries, I know, but some people who report on national TV on the Pentagon sound like employees of the Pentagon.

“It’s those kind of broad, sweeping generalities that, if they are made and reported uncritically and without any kind of cross examination, that could create a problem.”

Asking whether the threats were any greater than in the past, he called them a different type. “Espionage goes on in the United States all the time,” he said. “The Soviets try to get whatever kind of information they can from us. But threats change depending on the circumstances – whether we’re at war or not.

“But the biggest threat is that, in trying to counter threats to our nation, we will repeal our own hard-fought-for rights – the First Amendment, the right to our own personal security, our civil liberties. If, in trying to combat threats to personal security, we really haven’t gained an awful lot, if we subjugate our own people to protect ourselves the Soviets have won.”

The Real Terror Network

Be that as it may, terrorism certainly can be money in the bank for some writers and politicians who capitalized on the public fascination with assassins, massacres, hijackings and the taking of hostages. It is a potentially lucrative assignment providing exposure and even some political clout.

One American journalist, Claire Sterling, turned her research on terrorism into a combined deal with Holt, Rinehart and Winston and Readers’ Digest to write *The Terror Network*. Excerpts appeared in the May, 1981 edition of the Digest and subsequently in the Washington Post, New York Times Magazine and New Republic, just as she was called as a witness for the Denton committee.

Sterling charged that the CIA was naive about terrorism, and was even serving communism by deliberately covering up the extent of the terror network. Since 1968, she claimed, the Soviets had provided most terrorist groups with a “do-it-yourself kit for terrorist warfare” designed to destabilize the West. When Sterling made her case Leahy asked the only critical questions, honing in on her claim that “the fix is in” with Western intelligence agencies.

“Have the CIA and FBI been bought?” Leahy asked.

“Well, I don’t know about the FBI because I really was talking about the situation in Western European countries...”

Leahy pressed. “Who’s been fixed, and how? Have all these intelligence services been paid off, or is it political timidity?”

Sterling back-peddled, admitting she had no evidence of political payoffs.

“What is the fix then?” Leahy asked.

“The fix is political. It is a political attitude. It is an unwillingness to face certain political realities which are unpleasant...”

Leahy left the hearing that day pleased to have found some inconsistencies in Sterling’s case. The trouble was that he missed the main event the same afternoon. It came when another writer, Arnaud de Borchgrave, launched his own disinformation campaign. Along with another witness, Robert Moss, he had recently written a popular thriller called *The Spike*, a thinly disguised smear of the American left.

In the de Borchgrave-Moss novel, a successful young journalist discovers that his career has been manipulated by the KGB, which plans to lull the West into self-destruction by 1985. One character is a turncoat CIA agent based on Philip Agee; a KGB-controlled think tank is modeled on the Institute for Policy Studies. In the end a Soviet invasion of Saudi Arabia crumbles as the US finally begins to resist disinformation.

Moss and de Borchgrave had built careers on such speculation and conspiracy theories. When de Borchgrave, a former *Newsweek* editor, conducted an interview the questions were often rhetorical answers. A more experienced hand at dis-informing the public, Moss, had worked for the Rhodesian and South African regimes, the Portuguese right and the Chilean junta. He’d helped to set up publications and front groups, sometimes joined by his co-author.

In March 1973, Moss wrote the first call for a coup in Chile. It came in the form of a cover story for a CIA-funded Chilean magazine, *SEPA*. He also founded the British National Association for Freedom (NAFF), which distributed sophisticated propaganda about the “Sovietization” of Britain in the mid-seventies. In that instance, he was instrumental in polarizing business-labor relations to the breaking point. And Moss edited *Vision*, a Latin American news magazine owned by former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, and later *Policy Review*, the house organ of the Heritage Foundation. Of course, Jeremiah Denton had to have Robert Moss as a witness for his committee.

Over the years, publications like *Policy Review* and *Washington Quarterly*, another right-wing house organ sponsored by the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies and edited by Moss associate Michael Ledeen, had refined disinformation theory. Once before the Senate subcommittee, they reiterated the scenario that had been dramatically put forth in *The Spike*.

Denton needed little convincing; he already believed that the Soviets were working hard to keep Americans unconscious of the threat in their midst. But de Borchgrave provided a final ingredient — the names of US groups that he claimed were in cahoots with the enemy.

“There is a direct link-up,” he testified, “between the World Peace Council, a well known Soviet front organization, and anti-nuclear lobbies, both in the U.S. and in Western Europe.” De Borchgrave was ready to name names. “The World Peace Council’s US Branch, known as the US Peace Council, and the U.S.C.P. are affiliated with the MfS — Mobilization for Survival — which is a leading umbrella organization for anti-nuclear groups,” he charged.

Not only that; he also said the “UN infrastructure is under increasing KGB control.”

The Mobilization for Survival immediately denied the charge as a “total fabrication” and challenged de Borchgrave to present evidence that MfS was anything but a nonviolent,

democratically-organized coalition. The writer didn't respond, and why should he have? After all, his appearance had already helped to launch the paperback sale of his new book, and his charges had been carried by national media.

Who needed evidence? His testimony supported the scenario he and his associates had spent years developing. His claims even eclipsed testimony by former CIA chief Colby that an Agency investigation had shown the anti-war movement to be indigenous.



In an editorial column for the New York Times, de Borchgrave took another step with the claim that, "A relatively high percentage of secret agents are journalists. A journalist operating in Britain, West Germany or in the U.S. is a great asset to Communist intelligence."

In the same article he accused the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post of being duped by Soviet disinformation when they reported on the errors that riddled a Reagan administration "white paper" on El Salvador. The Journal had merely published an article showing that the US over-estimated Soviet support of Salvadoran guerrillas. Such accusations by de Borchgrave and others nevertheless meshed well with Denton's conviction that the Soviet's were effectively deceiving "a story-hungry and sometimes gullible press."

In a Cold War atmosphere, allegations of disinformation could someday become a basis for government intrusions into newspapers themselves.

Casualties of the Security State

The KGB never held a patent on disinformation. US spooks have often used the same techniques on enemies overseas and in America. And some of the targets have been US citizens whose only offense was opposition to government policies.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the FBI conducted a multi-pronged counterintelligence offensive against targets like Martin Luther King, Jr. and his supporters, the Socialist Workers Party, White Hate Groups, the Black Panthers, people who wanted to abolish HUAC, and the New Left. The Bureau's enemies were bugged, infiltrated, sabotaged and disrupted whenever possible. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover personally approved hundreds of such COINTELPRO operations, on grounds that Communists were behind every act of dissent.

In the 1970s, victims of COINTELPRO obtained voluminous files on these activities through the Freedom of Information Act, leading to multi-million dollar lawsuits against the government and its agents. But much of the damage couldn't be undone. For example, no lawsuit could compensate for the impact on film star Jean Seberg. Her support for the Black Panthers provided a justification for the FBI to spread false stories about her sex life. Distressed by the smears, she had a mental breakdown and ultimately killed herself.

Documents from the FBI confirmed that disinformation was a standard practice used against the Panthers. Internal memos candidly revealed that the FBI tried to "negate favorable publicity," hoping to "isolate the organization from the majority of Americans, both black and white." The campaign included phony letters, spurious newsletters, harassing supporters with the aid of journalists "friendly" to the Bureau, and distributing scandalous cartoons about Panther leaders in the black community. This was praised by FBI higher-ups as a low-cost campaign that produced tangible results. The bureau didn't bother to claim that the Panthers were Soviet-backed.

Revelations about intelligence abuses led in the 1970s to more restrictive standards and, for a while, limited intrusive tactics. But by the early 1980s, another terrorist scenario reversed that trend. Reagan's CIA chief, William Casey, drafted an executive order on intelligence, freeing the attorney general to conduct an intrusive investigation of anyone who "may be acting on behalf of a foreign power." As far as the disinformation experts were concerned, this included all of the American left. Searches and break-ins would no longer require warrants; the CIA would once again be able to bug US citizens at home; phone taps were back in fashion. And to cut down on objections, the attorney general urged federal agencies to withhold more information about what they were doing.

The new policies were an official endorsement of secrecy. They illustrated the same desire to keep dirty work out of sight as did the passage of the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. With this law, Congress made it a crime to disclose information exposing an agent even if the information was derived from public sources.

When the so-called "names of agents" bill was in the Denton Committee, the Chairman seized the opportunity to criticize the American Civil Liberties Union, which opposed the idea. In Denton's view, ACLU's efforts to control the intelligence community disqualified the group. "In more liberal times," he said of such civil liberties lobbies, "they would be called Communist."

Only information that discredited critics of US policy or supported the terrorist scenario registered with Denton. Over the next few years his Committee became a showcase for bizarre revisions of reality... the Soviet Bloc became responsible for the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II, neo-Nazi violence was said to be fomented by East Germans, the PLO was charged with a right-wing attack on an Oktoberfest celebration in Munich. No specific evidence was offered to support these claims, but Denton didn't need evidence. All political violence, unless it was perpetuated by an ally, qualified as terrorism, and all terrorism was Soviet-inspired action against the US.

The theory was adopted as a rationale for covert US acts of war in Central America and equally covert harassment at home of people who didn't care for the Reagan Revolution. To the administration and Jeremiah Denton, anyone opposing the government was more than likely either a potential terrorist or a Soviet dupe. Either way, they required surveillance and maybe much more.

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