

Inside America's Meddling Machine: The US Funded Group That Interferes in Elections Around the Globe

Filmed inside the Capitol, this Grayzone special explores the National Endowment for Democracy, a taxpayer funded organization that has interfered in elections, mobilized coups, and orchestrated public relations campaigns against nations that resist Washington's agenda.

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On June 13, 2018 the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy presented its 2018 Democracy Award to a collection of [Korean activists](#) who aim to topple the communist government of North Korea.

The event was timed to coincide with President Donald Trump's peace summit in Singapore with Kim Jong-Un. The ceremony appeared to be the opening shot of a massive public relations effort aimed at stifling normalized relations with North Korea.



NED founder Carl Gershman and NED director Andy Card with a group of Korean defectors and activists

I covered the ceremony because these organizations are doing precisely what Congress accuses Russia-funded media outlets and troll farms of doing in the United States. They interfere in other countries' politics with foreign money. The only difference is they do it openly, and in the name of spreading freedom.

Founded in 1983 by then president Ronald Reagan, the National Endowment for Democracy became an international vehicle for the neoconservative agenda. Its founding cadre were Cold War ideologues who were, like so many early neoconservative operatives, former Trotskyists who once belonged to the Social Democrats USA party.

Over the years, the NED and its partner organizations have weaponized civil society and media against governments that stand in the way of right-wing, free market parties and corporate interests.

Heavy payouts for anti-DPRK testimony, often with embarrassing results

Among the groups honored at the NED gathering was the Unification Media Group. They foment internal opposition to the North Korean government through shortwave radio broadcasts.

Also on hand was a collection of defectors. These activists are responsible for much of what

the West believes about North Korea and its human rights record. While many tell harrowing tales of escape from political repression, others have been exposed as serial fabricators lured by hefty sums of cash.

In 2017, South Korea [quadrupled the payout](#) for testimony from North Korean defectors to a whopping \$860,000. The bounty has incentivized colorful accounts of sadistic — and unusually creative — human rights abuses.

According to [one defector](#), a crowd of 10,000 was forced to watch the execution of 11 musicians for the crime of viewing porn. He said the musicians were shot with anti-aircraft guns, then run over with tanks. Another defector claimed female prisoners were raped and then forced to hand their babies over to be used as food for hungry guard dogs.

That same year, news of the [defection](#) of 13 North Korean waitresses provided a boost to Pyongyang's opponents

But recently, the waitresses' manager [admitted](#) to tricking the women into leaving under pressure from the South Korean intelligence services. The scandal is now under UN investigation.

A separate UN investigation accusing Kim Jong-Un of crimes against humanity was marred by fabricated testimony from defectors like Shin Dong-hyuk, who confessed to inventing parts of his story.

Testimony to US Congress by another defector, Kwon Hyuk, who claimed to have witnessed live human experimentation in North Korean prisons, helped drive the passage of the North Korea Human Rights Act in 2004. But Kwon too was unmasked as a fabulist and quickly disappeared from the public eye.

The right-wing network behind Korea's celebrity defector

Yeonmi Park is maybe the most famous North Korean defector. She emerged on the international scene at the One World Summit in 2014 with a heartrending tale of escape through China.

But key parts of Park's story at the summit differed from previous testimony she had delivered.

One of the many inconsistencies in Park's story was [documented](#) by journalist Mary Ann Jolley, who reported that Park initially [claimed](#) she had escaped through China with her mother *and* father.

At the One World Summit, however, Park's interviewer [claimed](#) that she trekked through China with only her mother, who was raped by a Chinese broker — adding an entirely new dramatic piece to her narrative.

All along, Park was profiting from her fame, [earning](#) \$12,000 and up for speeches, and receiving [critical backing](#) from a libertarian political network that included the for-profit Freedom Factory and the Atlas Foundation.

She was also made a media fellow by the Oslo Freedom Forum, an operation run by

Venezuelan-American oligarch [Thor Halvorssen](#) that weaponizes human rights in the service of neoconservative foreign policy objectives.

Image on the right: In 2014, in partnership from libertarian tech billionaire Peter Thiel, Halvorssen launched the deliberately provocative “Hack Them Back” campaign to disrupt inter-Korean peace talks.



The campaign nearly brought the Koreas to the brink of war, as the North threatened to retaliate against the [launch of balloons](#) into its territory containing messages denouncing its leader. South Korea’s government also condemned the balloon launch, while peace activists and local residents on the border attempted to block it.

Park played a [starring role](#) in the imbroglio, drumming up support for Halvorssen’s crusade among Silicon Valley powerbrokers.

The destabilizing operation prompted Mike Bassett, a former reconnaissance soldier at the Korean Demilitarized Zone and ex-information warfare officer, to describe Park as an instrument of well funded elements hostile to peace on the Korean peninsula. He wrote that her

“change in narrative warrants serious scrutiny because that narrative changed as a result of a [political and economic agenda](#) rather than a genuine desire to inform the public about the best way to liberate North Koreans from oppression.”

Despite being criticized for changing her narrative again and again, Park returned to the national stage this June thanks to the New York Times, which featured her in an inflammatory [viral video](#) aimed at undermining the Trump-Kim summit during which she compared North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to Adolph Hitler.

The neoconservative New York Times columnist Bari Weiss also pointed to Park’s largely discredited narrative to attack the peace summit, [writing](#) that Park herself had been raped on her way through China. Yet Park [never even made this claim](#). Fortunately for Weiss, her editors at the New York Times opinion section had not bothered to conduct even a cursory bit of research on the defectors she cited.

The Transitional Justice Working Group, an NED grantee, is responsible for delivering some of these testimonies to the West.

At the NED ceremony, we met the group’s director, Hubert Younghman Lee, who emphasized the importance of American backing:

“I’d like to express our sincere gratitude to bipartisan support, and also US congresspeople and US citizens especially. We are doing this work with US citizens’ tax [dollars].”

As with many high profile defectors, information delivered to Western media by South Korean intelligence has often proven unreliable, and provoked some embarrassing media

updates.

In 2016, Western media filled with [reports](#) that North Korea had executed General Ri Yong-gil. However, General Ri [turned up alive](#) days later.

Three years before, Western media [buzzed](#) with reports that Kim Jong Un had executed his ex-girlfriend, Hyon Song-wol, by firing squad. Months later, Hyon appeared alive as ever, [performing her music](#) on North Korean television.

So this begs the question: is North Korea populated by zombies who rise from the dead? Or is a US-funded influence operation cultivating opposition to engagement with North Korea by relying on often unreliable sources with dubious agendas?

Bipartisan support

During the NED ceremony, Democratic House minority leader Nancy Pelosi recalled a trip she took to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital.

“When we saw the people in Pyongyang — the blank faces, the brainwashing that went on — the poverty of spirit I saw exceeded the poverty [of] any place in the world.”

Pelosi then claimed that locals were executed on the spot for unauthorized corn consumption.

“They would get shot if they just took one corn on the cob, one husk of corn,” she claimed.

Pelosi was among a bipartisan cast of lawmakers on hand to pay homage to the NED. They included Republican representatives like Ed Royce and Pete Roskamp, as well as Democrats like Rep. Julian Castro and Stephanie Murphy.

Though the NED was hailed by Congress as a politically benign entity advancing democracy and human rights, its record tells a different story.

Sowing chaos, spreading instability, and opening markets

The NED’s first success was the defeat of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua’s 1990 elections, replacing it with the neoliberal party of Violeta Chamorro.

Since then, the NED’s advanced US interests in countless countries: it helped swing a Russian election for Boris Yeltsin in 1996, it [drove a failed coup attempt](#) in Venezuela in 2002, it orchestrated a successful one in Haiti in 2004, and another one in Ukraine in 2014, which paved the way for neo-Nazis to move into the mainstream.

Philip Agee, the late CIA whistleblower, described the work of the NED as a more sophisticated version of the old-fashioned covert operations that Langley used to engineer.

“Nowadays, instead of having the CIA going around behind the scenes and trying to manipulate the process by inserting money here and giving

instructions secretly and so forth, they have now a sidekick, which is this National Endowment for Democracy, NED.”

Agee’s words were openly confirmed by Alan Weinstein, a former Trotskyist and founding member of the NED. Weinstein told the Washington Post in 1991,

“A lot of what we do today was done covertly twenty-five years ago by the CIA.”

Since then, NED funding has almost quadrupled. In the past four years alone, the organization has directed at least 4 million dollars into parties and media outfits in Nicaragua.

That prompted an NED funded publication — the Global Americans — to [boast of the role](#) the group played in “laying the groundwork for change” in Nicaragua, where violent protests attempted to topple the country’s elected president, Daniel Ortega. The article went on to say that “it’s becoming more and more clear that U.S. support has helped play a role in nurturing the current uprisings.”

Uyghur “re-education camp” allegations against NED target China

Another top target of NED and its Washington partners is China.

The US has worked closely with Uyghur Muslims, an ethnic minority group that has faced discrimination at the hands of the Chinese government. As the confrontation with Beijing deepens, the US has attempted to use Uyghurs as a bargaining piece to ratchet up the pressure on Beijing.

At the ceremony, I met Omer Kanat, chairman of the World Uyghur Congress — a group funded almost entirely by the NED.

“The Chinese authorities have put more than one million Uyghurs in re-education camps, it is very similar to concentration camps,” Kanat claimed to me.

He said that his organization, a top NED grantee, had supplied much of the information the US government and Western media rely on about the alleged camps.



The World Uyghur Congress is funded largely by the NED and has helped introduce the story of Chinese re-education camps to the American public.

Indeed, along with the US-funded Radio Free Asia, which Kanat used to work for, Kanat’s US-funded Uighur Congress is responsible for widely reported claims that as much as one tenth of the Muslim population of China’s Xianjing province has been placed in re-education camps.

The numbers of Uighurs said to be housed in these camps vary wildly, from [120,000](#) to 500,000 to a million. And the sources invariably boil down to [US-backed media](#) like Radio

Free Asia.

Western analysts [concede](#) that testimonies from actual camp prisoners is rare. One of the few detailed testimonies arrived through [an anonymous source](#).

Kanat himself conceded that he did not know how many people were in the alleged camps, and that he was relying on “Western media estimates” to make his claim of one million.

The disturbing but still-unverified allegations about Uyghur re-education camps have added momentum to a new Trump national defense doctrine that singles out China as a top American adversary. With help from pundits like late night comedian John Oliver, who also [echoed](#) the claims of US-government backed sources on Xianjiang, Washington appears to be hoping that a carefully crafted PR campaign will reverse Americans’ [generally favorable attitude](#) towards China.

Making Mongolia neoliberal

The NED has also turned up the heat on China by interfering in its neighbor’s elections.

Back in 1996, the International Republican Institute (IRI) — an NED partner group — helped [propel right-wing libertarian parties to victory](#) in Mongolia, dealing a death blow to the country’s socialist tradition and driving record levels of economic inequality.

At the NED ceremony, I spoke to an IRI staffer, Alexander Moree, who presented the group’s work in Mongolia as a blueprint for a post-communist North Korea.

“So we took a group of defector-scholars over to Mongolia to study their transition,” Moree explained to me. “So Mongolia’s transition, if you don’t know, it was a peaceful democratic transition, there was no fighting, there was no revolution. But it developed a successful free market economy with peaceful elections without any dramatic turnover of power. It’s more of an island of democracy in Asia, and that’s more the model we want to encourage the North Koreans to pursue.”

“So like, transitioning from a socialist economy to a free market economy is paramount?” I asked him.

“Exactly.”

The meddling machine McCain built

The IRI has been led for years by Senator John McCain, who turned the group into what the New York Times [called](#) “a revolving door for lobbyists and out-of-power Republicans that offers big donors a way of helping both the party and the institute’s chairman.”

Carl Gershman founded the National Endowment for Democracy. He’s neoconservative activist with roots in Trotskyism. Today, Gershman still embraces the ideology of permanent worldwide revolution.

But with peace looming on the Korean peninsula, Gershman was forced to reassure his grantees that their work for regime change would not become irrelevant.

“There is some concern among the activists that the focus on the nuclear issue today will reduce pressure for human rights in North Korea and maybe even reduce support for the kind of work that is being done by the organizations that we have honored this evening,” Gershman said. “I want to assure our friends that NED’s support is solid.”

In the Longworth hallway outside of the NED event, I asked Nancy Pelosi if she thought the US government should stop funding organizations that seeking regime change against North Korea if it signed a peace treaty with the South.

“I don’t know if that’s what they do,” Pelosi responded, referring to the NED and regime change, “but I do know they promote human rights where ever they [are].”

I then asked if she considered NED activities to be the same sort of foreign meddling Russia is accused of carrying out in the US.

“I’m not going into any hypotheticals,” she said, dismissing the issue out of hand.

America remains obsessed with the specter of Russian interference and Moscow’s supposed active measures against our political system. But at the same time, official Washington celebrates its own taxpayer funded meddling machine as an engine of “democracy promotion.” Does the American public know what’s being done with its money, and will there ever be a public debate on the consequences of Washington’s regime change efforts?

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