

Russian Threats to the United States

Threat to Democratic Values (Peter Berkowitz)

Moscow has a long history of endeavoring to subvert freedom and democracy in America by sowing distrust among Americans in their political institutions and fomenting anger and resentment between right and left in the country. For decades, the Soviet Union employed propaganda operations to deceive and demoralize America and the West. Following in the footsteps of his communist predecessors, Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin — along with the Chinese Communist Party — has taken advantage of the revolution in digital communications and social media platforms to inflame political discourse in the United States, weaken free and democratic nations, and rally the forces of authoritarianism.

In 1946, in “The Long Telegram,” U.S. State Department diplomat George Kennan warned about the Soviet Union’s ambition to undermine Western nations from within.¹ “Efforts will be made in such countries to disrupt national self-confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest, to stimulate all forms of disunity,” Kennan wrote. “All persons with grievances, whether economic or racial, will be urged to seek redress not in mediation and compromise, but in defiant violent struggle for destruction of other elements of society. Here poor will be set against rich, black against white, young against old, newcomers against established residents, etc.”

To prevail against the Soviet challenge, Kennan advised, the United States must preserve its “cohesion, firmness and vigor,” which depended on education and upholding the best in American traditions. Defense experts and foreign-policy analysts needed to study the threat with “courage, detachment, objectivity.” It was incumbent on the United States to “see that our public is educated to realities of Russian situation.” In addition, the nation would have to address its “internal problems” because reforms boosted the national spirit and represented

1. KENNAN, GEORGE. THE LONG TELEGRAM.
[NSARCHIVE2.GWU.EDU/COLDWAR/DOCUMENTS/EPISODE-1/KENNAN.HTM](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm)

“a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth 1000 diplomatic notes and joint communiqués.” And, finally, Americans would be called on to summon the “courage and self-confidence” to affirm the nation’s principles and fortify its political institutions.

Kennan’s 1946 warning and advice about the Soviet challenge are highly pertinent to today’s Russia challenge.

The United States can do little in the short term to transform Russia from an authoritarian power hostile to America and the international order it leads to a democracy and freedom respecting nation. U.S. foreign policy should not plan on working anytime soon with a Russia that respects its own citizens’ human rights and other nations’ political sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the near term, Russia will continue to exploit American social media to echo and amplify extremist opinions already circulating in American political discourse. The First Amendment’s severe limitations on government regulation of speech, however, greatly circumscribe steps that Washington can take to regulate the flow of information in America. Furthermore, recent attempts to protect against supposed Russia disinformation — the multi-year federal investigation of false allegations of Russia collusion against then-candidate and President Donald Trump, and the false assertion promulgated in October 2020, backed by dozens of intelligence community experts, that Hunter Biden’s laptop was a Russia disinformation dirty trick — illustrate the ease with which government officials and partisan experts use claims of disinformation to prosecute political opponents and suppress politically inconvenient facts.

This does not leave the United States helpless. As in 1946, so too in 2024: To restore “cohesion, firmness, and vigor,” the nation must focus on education.

To combat Russian disinformation, the United States must ensure that American citizens are better informed about the Russia challenge. Defense experts and foreign policy experts must study formally and in-depth Russian language, history, and culture. We must reform the nation’s educational system so that students acquire a sound understanding of the principles and practice of American constitutional government, obtain an appreciation of the larger Western civilization of which the United States is a part, and learn about other

nations, peoples, and civilizations. Schools should foster curiosity, civility, toleration, and independent thought.

Education reform will enable a new generation of American citizens to appreciate the virtues of American political institutions as well as the weaknesses; fashion and adopt measures to strengthen the nation; and, last but not least, see clearly the growing authoritarian threat and adopt measures to defend against it.