

PERSPECTIVE

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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TRUTH DECAY AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Intersections, Insights, and Questions for Future Research

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RECOGNIZING TRUTH, AGREEING upon truth, and proclaiming truth are relevant to American national security in a multitude of ways. Agreement about objective facts and confidence in the institutions that produce them allow politicians to rely on Intelligence Community reports, provide a foundation for trust among military units, allow policymakers to agree on foreign policy crises even across the aisle, and enable great powers to maintain credibility in both their overtures of friendship and their threats to use force. In these ways and others, the trends that the RAND Corporation has labeled *Truth Decay* have implications for national security. This Perspective serves as a preliminary examination of the many roles and the complex intersection of Truth Decay and national security; in it, we examine how eroding confidence in facts and fact-finding institutions can affect U.S. national security. In addition to framing these intersections, we examine whether Truth Decay's role in national security has changed over time and the impact of the changing definition of *national security*.

Truth Decay affects the United States on individual, institutional, societal, and normative levels. On an individual

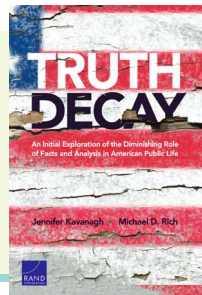
level, citizens are an increasingly recognized force in driving foreign policy and often build foreign policy positions from partisan cues rather than objective facts. The current media environment further enables individuals to affirm preexisting opinions. Truth Decay can drive elites and policymakers to more extreme positions, and the biases and opinions of policymakers can have great impact on foreign policy. At an institutional level, Truth Decay can harm the recruitment, retention, and morale of U.S. national security institutions—including the U.S. military and the Intelligence Community. More polarized and less informed discourse in U.S. legislative and executive institutions can impair quick policy action, especially in crisis. At a societal level, Truth Decay can diminish the United States' ability to use national power, the availability of resources to focus on national security, and the U.S. resilience to homeland security threats. The United States and its allies are also more vulnerable to these trends than many of the United States' adversaries, where post-truth politics are common. But, ultimately, there is much about the interplay of Truth Decay's trends that we still do not understand.

This work is intended to serve multiple purposes. The first is understanding: to better explain the broad impacts of Truth Decay on American national security. The second is to frame future research: both to highlight areas where gaps exist and future research could be most fruitful and to provide a framework for how that work would connect to the overarching strategic question. The third is response: to suggest what actors are best positioned to address Truth Decay in national security and potential mitigating initiatives. It is our hope that this work will demonstrate the importance of improving our understanding of Truth Decay in national security and combating the national security vulnerabilities it creates.

Definitions

In this Perspective, we use the term *Truth Decay* as it is defined in RAND's previous Truth Decay work. *Truth Decay* refers to a set of four related trends: (1) increasing disagreement about facts, (2) the blurring of the line between opinion and fact, (3) the increasing volume and influence of opinion over fact, and (4) declining trust in formerly respected sources of fact, such experts. For this project, we also looked for interactions between Truth Decay and other trends, such as polarized or partisan policymaking; the paralysis that partisanship can bring to the policymaking process; and the virulent spread of misinformation, pervasive conspiracy theories, and extremism

For a full discussion of the definition of Truth Decay and more information about each of these trends, please see *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, by Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich.



KEY PURPOSES

- › How does Truth Decay impact U.S. national security?
- › What future research needs to be done?
- › How can we address this problem?

at both ends of the political spectrum. As discussed in RAND's previous Truth Decay work, polarization is one of the primary drivers of Truth Decay, and erosion of civil discourse and political paralysis are major consequences.

National security is a term not easily defined, especially with regard to what the term encompasses. A textbook definition is that *national security* “refers to the safeguarding of a people, territory, and way of life” (Meese, Nielsen, and Sondheimer, 2018). This would include the narrowest sense of national *defense* as the protection of the state from external attack or overthrow. However, the range of what are considered to be national security issues has expanded, as more and more concerns are recognized as potential threats to the nation and its people. The concept of national security is constantly evolving as social issues, such as environmental change, migration, and public health, become more securitized and framed as national security threats. While these concerns are outside the traditional bounds of national security, they are potentially more disruptive to the American economy and social dynamics than traditional state actors—as evidenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. What is considered national security can also evolve over time. For example, in 1993, President Bill

Clinton characterized environmental security as a national security problem, but the subsequent Bush administration removed it from the national security portfolio (Floyd, 2010), and while this has continued to oscillate with changes in administration, the impacts of climate change on Americans' way of life are increasingly evident.

Of course, many Truth Decay trends are not unique to the national security realm. In addition to the definitional issues discussed above, this makes it challenging to define the scope of our inquiry. For most of this Perspective, we focus on the traditional, narrow conception of national security as national defense, and principally against the threats posed from other states. However, we have also included a section extending this discussion to less traditional areas that could be associated with national security, such as natural disaster response, public health concerns, and refugee migration. Internal security threats, particularly those posed by domestic extremist movements, are particularly thorny. We have made a special effort to include experts in disinformation and extremism in our focus groups, but we leave the questions as to how these trends may be undermining the American way of life or the societal fabric to other work.

Framing the Problem

What are perceived as threats to national security and what national security strategy should be are not based entirely in fact: National security strategy blends facts, expert opinion, and perspectives and beliefs. Although all Americans may agree on desired outcomes—a safe, prosperous, democratic, and free United States—Americans are not in agreement on how to best achieve these goals. Similarly, Americans may generally align on what the threats to national security are but

disagree on how to prioritize them—and opinions are nearly guaranteed to diverge on how to address them.

The complexity of national security problems and the national security environment—and limited knowledge about the intentions and resolve of other players—can play into cognitive biases, a driver of Truth Decay. Policymakers may present some *facts* about national security issues, but they will often present, with similar confidence, their *opinions* about what the facts mean and what must be done about the threats.

We live in a period when even America's role in the world is subject to debate (a debate that RAND has dedicated a space for with its Center for Grand Strategy). Varied opinions about how the United States should approach and shape the world are held both between the major political parties and within the political parties. Even expert judgment can vary dramatically. For example, *Foreign Affairs* features an "Ask the Experts" column in which it polls leading scholars on questions about the future (i.e., Will more states acquire nuclear weapons?) and the past (i.e., Should NATO have been enlarged?), and the important consistency is that the experts rarely agree. It is against this backdrop that Truth Decay is playing out.

Methods and Information Sources

In producing this Perspective, we drew on existing literature and the wide breadth of expertise available within RAND. We conducted six focus groups and spoke to 33 RAND experts on the overlap between Truth Decay and national security, both broadly and in their areas of focus. We additionally conducted nine follow-up interviews.¹ We drew from a broad range of experts at RAND, including historians, political scientists, Grand Strategy specialists, regional specialists, military experts, terrorism and extremism scholars, and nontradi-

“ Existing work relevant to this topic is often siloed in different areas of academia, the policy realm, and think tanks.”

tional security experts, organizing the focus groups around similar areas of expertise. We identified researchers with expertise in these areas, with one focus group allowing researchers to nominate themselves to participate. Although focus groups were semistructured, with flexibility to allow conversations to expand naturally, sessions were organized around structured questions related to which actors (civilians, leaders, countries as a whole) used or experienced Truth Decay, broad impacts the experts observed in national security, and possibilities for mitigation of Truth Decay in national security.

In our review of existing literature, we uncovered existing work that speaks to the intersection of Truth Decay and national security. Truth Decay itself is a burgeoning area of research. Building on Kavanagh and Rich’s seminal 2018 work on Truth Decay, RAND researchers have subsequently considered Truth Decay and its relationship to COVID-19 misinformation by Russian and Chinese actors, Truth Decay in Europe, racial inequalities, disinformation online, and other topics with direct relevance to national security. Other academic work has explored how rumors, conspiracy theories, and false information on political issues, including national security topics, are prevalent in American society, even if these phenomena are not always labeled as Truth Decay

(Parent and Uscinski, 2014). Existing scholarly literature touches on the impact of Truth Decay on individuals, including policymakers, members of the executive branch, and members of the public, but usually require melding the work of multiple scholars to reach relevant conclusions specific to our research question. For example, there is ample existing work on the psychology and delusions of leaders, and ample work on the impacts of misinformation on the public, but little work examining the impact of misinformation or Truth Decay specifically on the psychology of leaders, or on elites more broadly. Existing work relevant to this topic is often siloed in different areas of academia, the policy realm, and think tanks. There is an additional lack of research on the impact of Truth Decay on the U.S. military, civil-military relations, the Intelligence Community, or functional military specialties, such as information warfare. RAND researchers have begun to conduct work on the impact of bias and perceived bias in the Intelligence Community on its products (Dictus et al., forthcoming), but broadly there is little work on the impacts of Truth Decay on U.S. national security institutions. In this Perspective, we draw on these various research threads and our conversations with our colleagues to suggest how Truth Decay affects the national security domain.





“ We propose an organizational framework for the multiple impacts of Truth Decay on the national security within the United States, on U.S. allies, and on U.S. adversaries.”

Organizational Framework

We propose an organizational framework for the multiple impacts of Truth Decay on the national security within the United States, on U.S. allies, and on U.S. adversaries. Our research exposed a wide variety of impacts on these three areas that are also spread over a spectrum of different actors. We have chosen to break these impacts down by the actor involved and the level at which they acted: individual, institutional, or societal. We also consider Truth Decay impacts at a fourth level: those that affect norms and concepts, as opposed to having a more direct, pragmatic policy effect on a particular individual or institution.

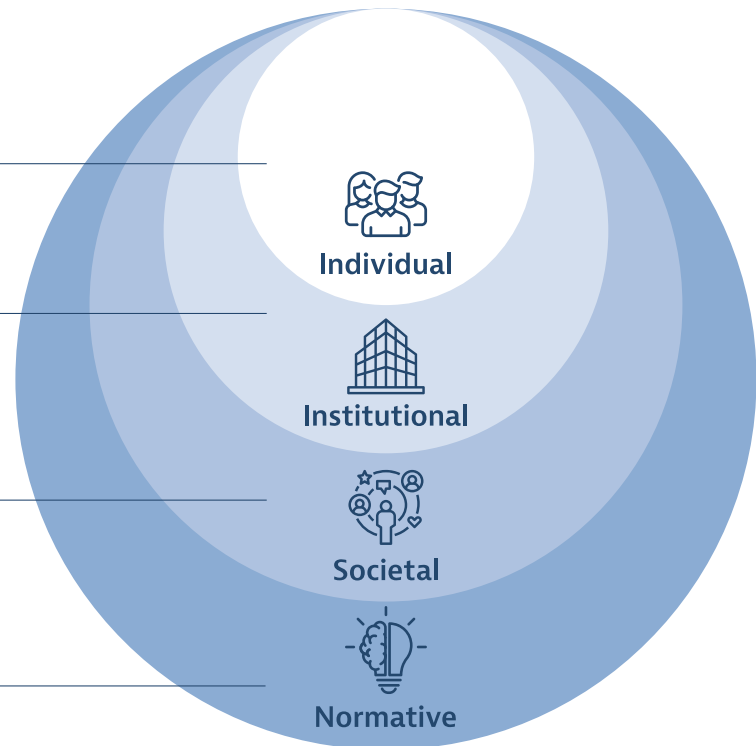
The individual level focuses on human actors, including leaders, policy decisionmakers, and members of the public.

The institutional level focuses on institutions or structures of governance, such as Congress, the military services, and the Intelligence Community.

The societal level focuses on impacts on society—whether U.S. society or the societies of U.S. allies or adversaries—and usually indicates broader trends, such as domestic stability or economic stability.

The normative level focuses on impacts at the conceptual or norm-based level, such as belief in the traditions, customs, or best practices of the country, including democracy and civic pride.

This framework offers a number of benefits. First and foremost, it provides a platform for similar and overlapping research to speak to each other and encourages coordination across different areas of research on this topic. Second, it provides researchers with a shared language for communicating about future efforts on Truth Decay and national security. Third, it allows categorizing and organization of these disparate research efforts, so that existing work can be linked into the Truth Decay framework, and it opens brainstorming for further issues that may fall in these different areas of the framework. Finally, it encourages researchers not to overlook Truth Decay as they conduct research on such issues as polarization or extremist groups, where Truth Decay may be contributing factor.





Individual-Level Impacts of Truth Decay in America

CITIZENS

Foreign policy has often been considered elite-driven—an area where leaders drive public opinion and where public opinion has little influence on policy decisions. However, a growing body of literature challenges this belief, highlighting the importance of the domestic public in shaping or constraining foreign policy.² Recent academic work has stressed the importance of public opinion in informing policymakers’ decisions regarding military force (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo, 2019) and broader foreign policy decisionmaking (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). But to what extent does the public conform to “rational” interest? Scholars argue that **foreign policy opinions are often built from foreign policy cues, such as the statement of a trusted leader, rather than objective facts, with more partisan cues leading to the public holding more strongly held foreign policy opinions** (Cavari and Freeman, 2017). In other words, polarization in politics “intensifies the impact of party endorsements on opinions, decreases the impact of substantive information, and perhaps ironically, stimulates greater confidence in those—less substantively grounded—opinions” (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013, p. 57). In the other direction, academic researchers have found that increased exposure to misinformation on social media platforms leads to polarization, most pointedly in the case of Russian misinformation around the 2016 election stoking partisan divides. (Grinberg et al. [2019] explore this misinformation and what it was directed at.) In this way, polarization and Truth Decay can have a compounding impact on one another in shaping public opinion. In addition to the impact of partisan leaders on public opinion, the recent work of scholars Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) shows that one’s peers may also influence

one’s perceptions of public opinion, which could further intensify partisan cues and the acceptance of misinformation. Connecting the dots, this literature indicates that public opinion is increasingly relevant in shaping national security, that this influence is connected to increasingly partisan politics, and that polarization can contribute to Truth Decay. A public opinion subject to the negative cycle of (1) disinformation feeding polarization and (2) polarization feeding disinformation will lead to public opinion on foreign policy that is broadly less grounded in fact and objective analysis.

There is a counterweight to this trend. Although more-partisan attitudes may lead to sharper, more extreme positions, disinformation can also encourage disengagement—both from reality and from interest in policy (Wenzel, 2019). Truth Decay can therefore also encourage the public to disengage from influencing foreign policy.

The current media environment further creates an environment where **Americans can “pick the authorities they want” and reaffirm preexisting beliefs by seeking media sources that confirm their opinions rather than seeking facts in a nonpartisan manner.** There are increasingly partisan clusters of media providing new tailored to polarized positions, with many Americans preferring news platforms outside the mainstream that more closely align with their chosen identities, such as their ethnicity, religious group, or political party. This encourages more insular community interaction and the sharing of more biased news, and it makes it easier for citizens to seek information that better aligns with their views but may be less factual. A 2021 set of Pew polls revealed that Republicans who consumed right-leaning news, and Democrats who consumed left-leaning news, held deeply varying views of China, even



ISSUE EXAMPLE

The Iranian Nuclear Deal

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and its impact on the Iranian nuclear threat is a complicated topic, and there are justified alternative points of view about the merits of the United States entering into the deal initially in 2015, withdrawing from it in 2017, and potentially reentering it in the future. But the facts are that, since the 2017 U.S. decision to withdraw unilaterally from the deal, Iran has advanced its nuclear capabilities, expanded its missile arsenal, directly attacked Saudi Arabia, and expanded hardliner control of the government, trends that are all detrimental to U.S. national security (Nadimi, 2021; Smith, 2019; Fitzpatrick, 2020; Hickey, 2020; Mortlock, 2020; *Haaretz*, 2021). Despite generally shared American views about the fact that Iran represents a threat and that diplomatic tools should be the primary approach to dealing with threat, the United States unilaterally abandoned a diplomatic agreement that put constraints on Iran's nuclear development.

As a baseline, American views of Iran are generally and consistently unfavorable: Between 80 and 90 percent of Americans have viewed Iran unfavorably since 1989 (Gallup, 2022). Although a majority of Americans have historically supported the use force if necessary to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons (Pew Research Center, 2019b), and Republicans on average have been less concerned about the consequences of using military

force, as 2019 Gallup poll found that a majority of Americans wanted to deal with Iran diplomatically rather than militarily, with 78 percent wanting America to rely on economic and diplomatic efforts (Younis, 2019).

The Iranian deal was a politically charged issue in the 2016 and 2020 elections, and misinformation about the Iranian deal was perpetuated by politicians and by social media. For example, Donald Trump, while a candidate and as President, claimed 136 times that the United States had given Iran \$150 million as part of the Iranian nuclear deal, a false claim that also became a meme (Spencer, 2019; Kessler and Fox, 2021). This issue also shows the disconnect between expert opinion and popular opinion: Although 94 percent of U.S. international relations scholars disapproved of a unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA, the public was divided fairly evenly in opinion (Peterson, Powers, and Tierney, 2018). The dearth of facts and abundance of inaccurate facts likely affected public support for JCPOA. In 2015, a Pew poll asked about the deal without any specifics about its content and found the deal to be generally unpopular, with 48 percent of the 79 percent of Americans aware of the deal disapproving of it, and only 38 percent approving (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, the *Washington Post* and *ABC News* conducted a poll during the same period that asked Americans about the deal while also describing its general contours—lifting economic sanctions in exchange for Iran agreeing not to

produce nuclear weapons and to allow monitoring of its facilities. This poll found that 56 percent of Americans supported the deal and 37 percent opposed it (*Washington Post* and *ABC News*, 2015). This example illustrates how polls can drive public opinion on a foreign policy issue by

providing factual information, rather just than capturing gut reactions, which is particularly important on an issue like the JCPOA, where there was frequent misrepresentation of the facts.

when compared with members of their own party. Seventy-nine percent of Republicans with right-leaning news sources, compared with 55 percent of Republicans more broadly, said that limiting the influence of China should be a foreign policy priority (Silver and Shearer, 2021). This suggests that polarized positions, not based in shared fact, are already influencing public foreign policy opinions. Individuals are additionally vulnerable to false narratives, including those related to foreign policy: Research shows that around 50 percent of Americans ascribe to at least one conspiracy theory, although this proportion does not appear to have changed over time (Uscinski et al., 2022). One poll, as an example, suggests that one in six Americans believe in the conspiracy theory that the Bush administration allowed the attacks of 9/11 to justify an invasion of Iraq (Cox, 2020). Beyond the impact that such a belief may have on a citizen's trust in national institutions, it could affect opinion on the Iraq War or U.S. policies in the Middle East (Vedantam, 2014; Byler and Woodsome, 2021). Academic research also shows that misinformation or rumors are more prevalent on controversial topics, which in foreign policy are often those that touch such domestic topics as immigration (Kertzer, Brooks, and Brooks, 2021). Popular political figures are typically themselves perceived as partisan, which can limit the resonance of corrective, fact-based information they provide in dispelling public misperceptions

when they are seen as part of an out group (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2017).

When we tie together these disparate literatures in the context of national security, they point to two takeaways. First, some Americans' attitudes toward national security situations or allies and adversaries are built on misinformation, such as the 9/11 belief discussed above or unsupported theories about the origin of COVID-19. Second, even correct information often will not move Americans from entrenched partisan or other positions, and this partisan gap can lead to pushes for more extreme national security actions. Given the research indicating that the gap between policymaker decisionmaking and public decisionmaking may not be as large as previously suggested, elite policymakers may operate under these same misperceptions (Kertzer, 2022).

ELITES, POLICYMAKERS, AND EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

Although, as discussed previously, public opinion plays an important role in shaping foreign policy, research does confirm that elites are more influential than the general public in direct foreign policy decisionmaking (Saunders, 2022). The most impactful are individuals in positions of executive leadership or highly influential policymakers. When these

individuals fail to respect facts and the institutions that are sources of facts, **they can be even more destructive to productive or optimal national security decisionmaking than a misled general public.**

The combination of partisanship and Truth Decay can lead policymakers to take more extreme bargaining positions (Wenzel, 2019), ultimately leading to political paralysis on partisan issues. However, the interplay of these drivers is not well understood. Academic work shows that bipartisan actions in America have declined (Harbridge, 2015), while negative partisanship has increased (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018). This body of research on the effects of polarization on policymaking bodies does not focus heavily on the role that Truth Decay plays in interacting with polarization. There is limited literature examining partisanship impacts on security issues. For example, Brian Rathbun (2004) shows that right- and left-wing governments in Europe conduct humanitarian interventions very differently because they understand the world in very different ways, and this research has been updated and built upon in the work explored in Tapio Raunio and Wolfgang Wagner (2020). They show that there are genuine ideological differences between political parties on security policy and security policy decisionmaking but do not directly explore polarization or misinformation.

We know that individual policymakers' private opinions or partisan-leaning can have great impact on foreign policy. Such scholars as Michael Horowitz, Alan Stam, and Cali Ellis have dedicated an entire book to the importance of the impact of military service history on leaders' decisions to go to war (Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis, 2015), and Elizabeth Saunders (2011) found that major U.S. foreign policy decisions can be explained by the personal beliefs of Presidents about dangers posed by other governments. However, there is a notable gap in work focused specifically on how Truth Decay affects these personal views. The most relevant academic literature speaks

to the effects of leaders' delusions or psychological biases on their decisionmaking about foreign policy and conflict, and this has been the subject of study for decades (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin, 1962; Hall and Yarhi-Milo, 2012; Kertzer and Tingley, 2018). Leaders' delusions and decisionmaking biases have been explored as key contributors to war (Lake, 2010/2011), with Jerrold Post (1993) finding that the decisionmaking capabilities of a narcissistic leader are "often impaired." If these findings apply to executives influenced by Truth Decay, then partisan and nonfactual attitudes in individual policymakers can affect decisions about conflict, how the United States is treated abroad, whether the United States is targeted in disputes, and U.S. credibility in threats and reassurances (Prins, 2001; Foster, 2008; Clark, Fordham, and Nordstrom, 2011; Clare, 2014).

Institutional-Level Impacts



Although there is little literature on Truth Decay in national security at the institutional level, we suggest that Truth Decay could have **broad institutional impacts** on U.S. national security institutions. Those could include **diminishing the morale of those within the federal workforce**, because they feel less relevant—given the declining trust put in their institution by policymakers compromised by Truth Decay—or because of a tarnished reputation with the public. This could make it more difficult to **retain personnel and recruit future personnel**. Officials within U.S. government institutions who circulate misinformation or opinion as fact on social media could **erode national security professionals' trust in their colleagues**, weakening the bonds of trust that are built in the workforce and in the field. Truth Decay can diminish the potential for respectful, civil discourse between subordinates and superiors and blur the lines about what topics are appropriate

to discuss, either face-to-face or indirectly via social media posts, as misinformation leads to obvious political fault lines and reinforces polarization.

The potential impacts of increasing polarization and Truth Decay on the military are particularly concerning. The chain of command and unit cohesion and trust among service members and are critical to a well-functioning military, but Truth Decay can **reduce unit cohesion and trust both in unit members and in the chain of command**. Truth Decay can do so by eroding common ground between service members and politicizing issues that might not have previously been partisan, if individuals repeat conspiracy theories or disinformation. Routine conversations and events, such as workshops or

training, can become pitfalls in which service members come to distrust the judgment or decisionmaking abilities of fellow service members whose views they do not share. Most recently, the military has had to grapple with increasing domestic extremism and the COVID-19 vaccine mandate for service members, topics for which even factual information is often considered partisan or polarized. If service members relaying or receiving information on politicized issues see the information as false or as opinion rather than fact, not only will any positive impact be lessened, it could degrade that service member's confidence in the greater institution. These negative impacts on unit dynamics can pose direct risks to military readiness and function.

ISSUE EXAMPLE

COVID-19 Misinformation and the Military

IN AUGUST 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) mandated vaccination against COVID-19 for active-duty and Ready Reserve service members. Mandatory military vaccination is not new or unusual: Vaccination for military service members has been mandated since vaccines first became available (and inoculation against smallpox was mandated even before that [College of Physicians of Philadelphia, undated]). When DoD announced the COVID-19 vaccine mandate, nine vaccinations were already required before initial entry or basic training, with more required depending on circumstance. Despite this, as of July 12, 2022, 6,748 service members had been

separated for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine (Mongilio, 2022). And although 97 percent of the active-duty force was vaccinated by December 2021, misinformation was seen as the primary driver of the reluctance and refusal of some service members to vaccinate (Jackson, 2021). Although this is a small percentage of the overall force, given the costs of recruiting and training service members, this loss is not insignificant. Further, it points to general vulnerabilities of military personnel to misinformation.

Similarly, there are serious impacts on the Intelligence Community, beyond general issues with personnel morale and recruitment. Politicization of intelligence is a perennial concern, and while there was debate among our participants over how that has changed over time, there appeared to be agreement that Truth Decay would **make intelligence appear less credible** to policymakers who are seeking information that conforms to their preexisting views. This would not only undermine Intelligence Community morale but also might encourage **policymakers to discard Intelligence Community products and move to less informed national security policy decisionmaking**. Focus group participants with an intelligence background had often experienced that, when briefing policymakers who were “very ideological,” regardless of political leaning, “they [would] sometimes reject intelligence assessments,” perceiving it as coming from a partisan position. These trends affect the core mission of the Intelligence Community. The goal of intelligence professionals is to sift through information to identify the facts and present to policymakers; if policymakers are not interested in the truth, then what is the point of the intelligence enterprise and the contributions of those who serve in it?

Partisanship has not impeded Congress from performing its core function of enacting legislation agenda (Lee, 2105),³ and a 2015 review of the academic literature indicate that polarization has not yet affected congressional productivity in the aggregate, over all areas of legislation (Lee, 2015)—but there are signs that highly polarized legislative areas may be less productive (Mayhew, 2005). Partisanship has been linked with undermining policy responses to collective risk, and partisanship makes it particularly difficult to reach agreement on policies around such issues as public health measures, climate change, and immigration (Milosh et al., 2021). The combination of polarization and Truth Decay could lead to further congressional deadlock and could hold up the

everyday actions of foreign policy, such as ambassadorial appointments, ratification of treaties, and staffing the foreign service. Misinformation about an ambassadorial candidate, or the countries that are party to a treaty, could easily damage or lengthen processes that are necessary for the continued functioning of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus.

This indicates that if foreign policy topics—such as Russia’s war in Ukraine or Chinese activities in the South China Sea—become more partisan, and if disagreement on the facts surrounding foreign policy topics interacts with this polarization, **policymaking in those areas might slow, as might the government’s ability to take quick action, especially in crisis situations** with adversaries. Mistakes in decisionmaking in crises have long been of interest to political science, and in a 1987 study of decisionmaking in international crises, outcomes tended to have adverse effects on U.S. interests and were more likely to escalate when more mistakes were made (Herek, Janis, and Huth, 1987). More recent work has tied these foreign policy crisis and international conflict mistakes to delusions,⁴ psychological biases (Kertzer and Tingley, 2018), and assumptions made from heuristics (Edwards, 2022). Adversary states would be especially motivated to weaponize disinformation in a time of crisis, and academic work suggests U.S. vulnerability to these types of information attacks. As previously argued, misinformation and polarization lead to a deleterious cycle (of disinformation feeding polarization and polarization feeding disinformation) that reinforces extreme heuristics, likely leading to adverse foreign policy outcomes for the United States.





Society-Level Impacts

At the broader societal level, Truth Decay may have several less direct and more sweeping or diffuse impacts. Truth Decay, along with other variables, may affect **America’s ability to use national power, the availability of resources to focus on national security, and U.S. resilience to homeland security threats**. For example, in the event of a large-scale attack or terrorist or extremist event, Truth Decay may make the portions of the public more likely to be exposed to and believe misinformation about the attack. This could make evacuation, response, recovery over time, and reconciliation within the affected communities all more difficult. A less likely potential consequence is **violent action and instability, to the point of civil conflict, from disagreement over the truth**—that is, for some of the more polarized issues where truth is in dispute, friction could spiral into violence. This would likely occur in conjunction with other factors, such as preexisting tensions in a community.

Finally, a lack of truthful economic information could affect U.S. credibility abroad, and **misinformation or disinformation that damages U.S. economic capabilities or business interests could reduce the United States’ ability to offer foreign aid and reduce overall U.S. influence abroad**.

The January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol Building was a violent action stemming from disagreement over the facts around the 2020 presidential election and, insofar as it was an action destabilizing U.S. unity and its ability to use national power, a direct threat to national security. President Trump’s supporters were rallied directly before the action by his speech, which included encouragement to reject the vote as illegitimate and to “never concede” the election (Lonsdorf et al., 2022), despite credible support that the election was secure and voter fraud was negligible (Cuthbert and Theodoridis, 2022). Some scholars argue that this action should be classified as a failed coup (Cline Center, 2021). While the assault has not led to a larger civil conflict, it is certainly a sign of increased instability in the United States.

However, American domestic stability is built on many factors, including economic stability, social cohesion, institutional strength, all interacting with and reinforcing each other. Given this complexity, we recognize that it is difficult to isolate the impacts of Truth Decay in diminishing homeland stability.

Norm-Level Impacts



Increased partisanship has splintered support for democratic norms and constitutional protections (Kingzette et al., 2021). We note two major areas where Truth Decay might affect American norms. First, **Truth Decay might influence belief in and support of broader democratic norms**. Democracy and the importance of democratic norms have long been a rhetorical linchpin of U.S. actions abroad. If Truth Decay, especially Truth Decay spread by autocratic adversary states, further erodes American faith in democratic norms, it could be detrimental to domestic and international belief in the United States and its national security community.

Political paralysis was identified as one consequence of Truth Decay in RAND’s initial report on the subject (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), pointing to a worrying trend that could be a result of the inability of members of Congress to reach consensus:

the recent uptick in the use and abuse of emergency powers or powers that circumvent the regular policymaking process. The use of executive orders did fluctuate before the contemporary era, but Presidents Trump and Biden have both increased the number of executive orders used relative to the five presidencies preceding them, from an average of between 35-48 per

year to an average of 55 per year from President Trump and an average of 60 per year from President Biden (Peters and Woolley, 2022). This use of executive power to advance policies departs from normative political behavior in the United States and from relying on shared facts to build consensus and advance policymaking.

ISSUE EXAMPLE

American Belief in Democracy and Democratic Norms

THE ADVANCEMENT OF American values, chief among them belief in American democracy, is a core pillar of U.S. national security strategy, regardless of the political party in power. However, Americans are cynical about the future of democracy, and misinformation

The *National Security Strategy* penned by the Trump administration was built on four pillars, one of which was to “advance American influence because a world that supports American interests and reflects our values makes America more secure and prosperous.” The strategy listed those values as “America’s commitment to liberty, democracy, and the rule of law” (The White House, 2017). The *National Security Strategy* of the Biden administration states that “our democracy is at the core of who we are” and that “actions to bolster democracy and defend human rights are critical” (The White House, 2022).

surrounding the results of the 2022 election is a critical reason why. A January 2022 NPR/Ipsos poll found that 64 percent of Americans believed that U.S. democracy was “in crisis and at risk of failing.” This opinion was more common among Republican voters, and two-thirds of GOP respondents agreed that “voter fraud helped Joe Biden win the 2020 election” (Rose and Baker, 2022). A July 2022 poll by the *New York Times* and Siena College found that “discontent among Republicans is driven by their widespread, unfounded doubts about the legitimacy of the nation’s elections” (Epstein, 2022). The same poll found that a majority of American voters believed that the American system of government no longer worked and needed major reforms or a complete overhaul. Belief in democratic norms underpins U.S. foreign policy, and democracy promotion, for good or ill, has been an important part of American rhetoric around foreign policy for decades.⁵ An increasing lack of internal belief in democracy undermines U.S. ability to promote that value abroad.

Compounding Influences on Truth Decay

Truth Decay can also act as a *threat multiplier*, or a factor which has the potential to exacerbate other drivers of insecurity, instability, or other deleterious impacts on national security.

Threat multiplier is a term that is often used to discuss the impact of climate change on other factors of instability.

In these cases, Truth Decay may not be a lone catalyst, but it can be an accelerant.

First, Truth Decay can exacerbate the effects of **polarization**. Conspiracy theories and misinforma-

tion interact continuously with the broader phenomenon of increasing polarization. The ability to “choose” facts and media sources that align with preexisting opinions reinforces polarization (Lee, 2016), and polarization encourages individual actors to spread opinions and misinformation as facts (Osmundsen et al., 2021). While Truth Decay is clearly not the only factor causing polarization, it appears to exist in a feedback loop with polarization, as both feed into and increase the effect of the other; this is a worrisome relationship, given that both chambers of Congress have become more polarized since the 1970s (Neal, 2020). Polarization, therefore, while an external driver that is not wholly caused by Truth Decay, is inextricably linked with Truth Decay and many of its impacts.

The second evolving factor that heavily interacts with Truth Decay is **technology**. Changing technology, social media platforms, the constant flow of information, and poor controls on technological evolution are all tied to the increase in Truth Decay. As media platforms proliferate, it is easier for individuals to pick and choose among them. As social media platforms connect more extreme opinion groups, it is easier for individuals to stay in an echo chamber of opinions that align with their own beliefs. Attempts to moderate extremism on social media platforms, such as Facebook, are ramping up—notably in the

EU, where the European Commission has initiated legal challenges and established a committee to police hate speech on social media platforms (European Commission, undated)—but regulation still lags behind the evolution of these factors. The evolution of technology is inextricably linked with the amplification of Truth Decay in American society. Additionally, increased polarization is tied to increasing access to social media platforms and the internet (Barrett, Hendrix, and Sims, 2021; Trussler, 2020).

Change over Time

The original RAND Truth Decay report (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018) addressed the question of whether Truth Decay was a new phenomenon. In an exploration of three historical periods in the United States, going back to the 1880s, the authors found evidence of two of the four trends identified as part of Truth Decay: the blurring of the line between opinion and fact and the increasing relative volume of opinion over fact. Decline in trust in institutions and increasing disagreement over facts were seen as trends associated with the contemporary era.

Dishonesty is not new in national security and—when used appropriately for denial or deception against U.S. adversaries—is in fact an important weapon in the arsenal of the U.S. military. Then-Army Chief of Staff Dwight Eisenhower, in a 1947 memo, stated that “no major operations should be undertaken without planning and executing appropriate deception measures” (Galambas, 1979). This type of deception is not Truth Decay but rather strategic deception for the purpose of national security. But there has always been some dishonesty in domestic political discourse, and, more deleteriously for the country’s national security and stability, politicians and appointed figures have often manipulated or

ISSUE EXAMPLE

Disinformation About Immigrants in the European Union

ONE EXAMPLE OF a nontraditional security threat being exacerbated by Truth Decay is in Belarus, where migration has been used as a tool of coercion. In late 2021, Belarusian leadership threatened to send migrants to European Union (EU) countries ill-equipped to support them—for example, using disinformation to lure Iraqis and Kurds to the border with Poland with the false promise of easy entry into the EU—as a form of diplomatic confrontation with the EU (Galeotti, 2021). However, perceptions of the threat were multiplied by Truth

Decay. Western European beliefs about immigrants are heavily shaped by disinformation (Szakacs and Bogнар, 2021), and far-right groups in the targeted Western European countries used immigration opinions masquerading as facts to drum up xenophobia and support. For example, in Western European countries, it is a consistently cited “fact” that migrants in the EU are responsible for a wave of sexual assault, which has been used as evidence that immigration needs to be slowed (Szakacs and Bogнар, 2021).

distorted the facts, or outright lied, about national security topics, be it to advance a partisan agenda or for personal prestige.

However, most of our experts believed that the frequency and magnitude of dishonesty around foreign policy issues have changed, for several reasons. First, several of the experts we interviewed suggested that leaders now lie more shamelessly and more constantly. Second, technology has grown by leaps and bounds in recent decades, and lies can more easily have widespread or even global reach. For example, the President and many members of Congress now have Twitter and other social media accounts, and members of the public who wish to can be connected constantly to their political representatives. Finally, there is not yet an agreed upon guiding legal or normative monitoring and policing mechanism for the rapid growth and

usage of technology. “The phenomenon is familiar, the delivery mechanism is novel,” quipped one participant.

Vulnerable Populations

Another form of complexity in exploring the impacts of Truth Decay on national security is that Truth Decay does not affect all individuals equally. Polarization makes individuals more vulnerable to Truth Decay, but so do other personal characteristics. These points were raised by our focus group participants. Racial or ethnic marginalized groups, religious groups, and class groups were highlighted as being more vulnerable to Truth Decay. Members of marginalized populations may be



“ Truth Decay can prompt a focus on the crisis of the moment but not its underlying systemic issues.”

more vulnerable because they often do not feel represented, or because they are not as well-represented in mainstream media, and thus may be more likely to get their news from sources outside the mainstream media. Class groups, in particular, came up several times in our discussions, with focus group members agreeing that lower-income or less educated Americans are more likely to favor “working class populism” and to distrust those who are wealthier or seen as intellectual or erudite, including those with scientific expertise. As future research further examines the linkages between Truth Decay and national security, these are important factors to consider. U.S. national security institutions, including the military, do not draw representatively from the U.S. population, and America is facing increasing threats from within its own population in the forms of violent extremism.

Nontraditional Security Threats to National Security

Nontraditional security considerations further exacerbate U.S. vulnerabilities and add further complexity to the chal-

lenge of identifying the impacts of Truth Decay on national security. Expanding the definition of *national security* to encapsulate such issues as natural disaster response, public health, climate, and migration expands the types of research that should be explored. COVID-19 disinformation, or public health disinformation, is a clear sign of the serious impact of Truth Decay on national preparedness to face public health crises. Similar issues are echoed in work on natural disasters and the government’s ability to communicate important information—and cut through disinformation—in the event of a natural disaster. This is an issue serious enough that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has released a report on natural disaster misinformation, including case studies and suggested best practices (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Social Media Working Group for Emergency Services and Disaster, 2018). Beyond direct disinformation, broader Truth Decay can prompt a focus on the crisis of the moment but not its underlying systemic issues. When spreaders of disinformation exploit and expand vulnerabilities in United States’ ability to respond to crises, such as COVID-19, they both misdirect United States’ energy and investment and also clearly highlight vulnerabilities for adversary states.

Truth Decay and Ally and Adversary Relationships

Truth Decay also affects U.S. allies and adversaries, both in terms of domestic dynamics within that ally (or adversary) and in terms of their relationship with the United States. We can see impacts of Truth Decay both within foreign countries and in the bilateral and multilateral relationships these countries have with the United States. These impacts can strain U.S. alliances or make for more formidable adversaries.

American foreign policy is based in a complex alliance structure of bilateral and multilateral arrangements, often grounded on military or economic cooperation. This includes multilateral security agreements, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); multilateral forums, such as the United Nations; and bilateral security agreements, such as the one between the United States and Japan. Many of these relationships are based on formal and rhetorical commitments to protect and provide for allies and partners, who in turn provide support for U.S. global hegemony and the U.S. vision of a prosperous and peaceful world order. Although alliances put in place obligations and restrictions in exchange for certain benefits, there is no guarantee that these bargains will be honored, so credibility is very important in maintaining alliances (although the topic of credibility is an area of active scholarly discussion [Walt, 2022]). The United States has maintained roughly the same alliance system since the end of World War II, to counter threats from the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China, and has invested significant national resources in building the capacity of U.S. partners and allies. There is a valid and ongoing debate about the national security value to the United States of this alliance system, and whether the United States would benefit from diminishing its extensive alliance ties,⁶ or at least having a smaller international footprint and fewer formalized alliance ties with associated U.S.

bases abroad (Posen, 2015). However, the need for the United States to maintain some form of ties with most other countries is recognized by a majority of academics and politicians,⁷ and those alliances are underpinned by confidence that the United States speaks truthfully in its commitments to its allies. The United States also provides a credible partner to mediate global conflicts and prevent them from escalating to regional conflict. Despite disagreement about whether the United States is too concerned with its credibility or how that credibility is established, credibility is generally acknowledged as important to U.S. foreign policy (Walt, 2022).

TRUTH DECAY'S IMPACT ON ALLY RELATIONSHIPS

There is limited literature on the impacts of Truth Decay on U.S. allies or U.S. ally relationships, but in our focus groups and interviews, participants identified a number of areas where Truth Decay could have an impact. Our framework can be applied to organize some of these various affects. While this Perspective is focused on the impacts of Truth Decay in America on national security, there are signs from RAND research that U.S. European **allies are also experiencing internal Truth Decay**, if to a lesser extent. Axelle Devaux, Sarah Grand-Clement, and Stijn Hoorens have explored Truth Decay trends in Europe, including the role of polarization and increasing erosion of civil discourse and political paralysis, and emphasize the importance of European educational systems in guarding against some of the more serious impacts of Truth Decay (Devaux, Grand-Clement, and Hoorens, 2022). We will not delve into these specific effects except to say that they may vary by country and are interesting and worthwhile areas for deeper study, and that Truth Decay can exist at the same levels that we identified earlier—individual, institutional, societal, and normative—within an ally. In this section, we

ISSUE EXAMPLE

U.S. Financial Support of NATO

NATO IS TOUTED as “the most powerful and successful Alliance in history” (U.S. Department of State, 2021), and it is foundational in defining U.S. relations with Europe and Russia. The fall of the Soviet Union prompted existential questions for NATO, and NATO’s focus, structure, and required contributions by its members continue to evolve in the face of militant nationalism, terrorist threats, and most recently, the Russia’s war with Ukraine. Eight in ten Americans said in 2019 that NATO is beneficial for the United States, but there was still a partisan gap in views over the alliance, with Republicans being more likely than Democrats to see the alliance as more beneficial for U.S. allies than it is for the United States (Pew Research Center, 2019).

As President, Trump reframed criticism of the U.S.-NATO relationship to more strongly emphasize the financial costs of the alliance to the United States, but he also perpetuated misinformation and falsehoods about the payment of the alliance to support NATO. Trump stated repeatedly and explicitly that the United States was paying a disproportionate amount to sustain NATO, with other allies getting “a free ride” (Kessler, 2016).

There is some validity to this statement, given that not all members meet NATO’s 2014 Defence Capabilities Initiative guideline that 2 percent of a country’s gross domestic product should be allocated to defense spending. (Notably, President Barack Obama also used the language of “free riders” in 2016 [Goldberg, 2016].) However, Trump’s statements inaccurately described the state of NATO’s direct spending, which is distributed equally among members on the basis of gross national income (Kessler, 2016). Consistent with the academic research cited earlier in this Perspective that partisan cues—rather than facts—often influence public opinion on foreign policy topics, academic research on this topic found a drop in support for the U.S.-NATO alliance after 2016, but along partisan trends—with Republicans expressing greater skepticism and Democrats expressing greater support for the alliance (Lee and Goidel, 2022). Additionally, Trump’s statements left allies feeling the need to defend themselves and push back (Flaherty, 2018), and they eroded confidence in the alliance itself, driving European states to see NATO as increasingly fragile (Richter, 2021).

apply the same framework to think about the impacts specific to allies and to U.S.-ally relationships.

Scholars have also suggested the diffusion of transnational far-right groups that favor perpetuating Truth Decay (Ramos and Torres, 2020). Truth Decay, conspiracy theories, and conspiratorial thinking within the politic or public of U.S. allies can affect U.S. national security. Limited academic evidence shows that conspiracy theories can shift public views on alliances—such as research that has shown a shift away from the West toward Russia in Slovakia (Onderco and Stoeckel, 2020). This indicates that Truth Decay in U.S. allies could serve as a blow to alliance strength. An area that begs for future research is the impact of American-exported right-wing extremism and the spread of its brand of Truth Decay to certain allies (Caiani and Kroll, 2015; Perry and Scrivens, 2016; Heft et al., 2020). This transnational network has served to mutually reinforce these groups and the particular opinions or conspiracy theories that they spread (Ramos and Torres, 2020). While these groups may play on existing partisanship or ideological differences, the amplification and spread of partisanship or ideological differences is a serious concern for allied strength.⁸ There is little research on the impact of the spread of these groups on U.S.-ally relationships.

U.S. leaders' perpetuation of misinformation or downright falsehoods can undermine the United States' credibility with its allies. Several foreign policy experts have suggested that President Trump's reliance on opinion rather than fact was a blow to American credibility abroad that will last beyond his presidency (Ashbrook, 2020). As President, Trump had generally negative confidence ratings both among the United States' closest allies and the world as a whole, with 29 percent of 32 countries polled saying they had low confidence in Trump in 2020 (Wike et al., 2020). This was especially the case among key Western European allies (Poushter, 2020). Views of the United States, while still favorable overall, also declined over

the course of Trump's presidency. Recognizing that we do not know the extent to which President Trump believed his own public statements, the *perception* that he believed falsehoods and did not trust expert opinion harmed U.S. credibility. The negative impacts of U.S. leaders being perceived as not credible can last past their terms in office, as allies may fear that a similar shift of a U.S. foreign policy stance based in nonfactual information could come with a change in administration.

Individual elites and policymakers also play a role in signaling and messaging to U.S. allies and adversaries. Truth Decay can confuse those messages, creating doubt about who represents the U.S. government and its policies. For example, in June 2021, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley was received by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Neither were actively in positions of government, but Netanyahu treated Haley as an official U.S. representative and acted as if he were still in office and Haley tweeted a photo referring to Netanyahu as the Prime Minister (Times of Israel Staff, 2021). Casual observers of the event could understandably perceive it as an official state visit, given that it had much of the dressings of official protocol and these individuals' previous official roles. These sorts of events could have longer-term impacts on the United States' reputation and **diminish the United States' ability to make effective statements of support or deterrence**. There is well-supported academic research suggesting that lack of credibility makes deterrence more difficult.⁹

Further, U.S. allies often respect that the United States forms policy positions based on expert opinion. One researcher echoes several others in the focus groups in noting that there was

concern among several of our allies and partners, . . . Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, the idea that Americans seem, at an official level, to be turning away from reliance on expertise that would

be reflected in policy. Real concern at senior level in these countries that America domestically would undervalue and eventually underfund and ignore the sorts of expertise that, from U.S. allied perspective, had underpinned policymaking in the U.S., that that was going away.

Truth Decay can undermine the credibility of U.S. institutions, which play an important function in U.S.-ally relationships. As a prime example, the U.S. Intelligence Community has close relationships with intelligence agencies of allies, which “often reflect mutual security interests and the trust each side has of the other’s credibility and professionalism” (DeVine, 2019). These relationships provide concrete benefits to U.S. national security. But, increasingly, we have seen politicization and false accusations targeting the Intelligence Community, which could affect **ally confidence in U.S. intelligence**. The United States is still recovering from the blows to its reputation stemming from the use of faulty intelligence on Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction to lobby the international community for invasion (Roberts, 2021). It does appear that the quality of actual intelligence has been protected by internal review processes—some put in place because of those failures. But in the Trump administration there was well-broadcasted discontent with Intelligence Community findings, particularly on Russian interference in the U.S. election. This criticism may have been motivated by a personal or party agenda, but there is a risk that it fostered a perception of a failing Intelligence Community among U.S. allies.

On a normative level, Truth Decay can harm the United States’ reputation as the global leader and the leader of a global alliance. Relationships between allies are most clearly tested in war, specifically whether allies are willing to join in hostilities. However, the depth of U.S.-ally relationships is also visible in whether allies decide to support the United

States’ broad national security agenda. Allies depend on honesty and transparency in their relationships with the United States, and if they are given a sense of doubt that U.S. leaders are not telling the truth, especially at the executive level, then they may not support the U.S. agenda. This can have secondary consequences, such that the United States is **less credible because of internal Truth Decay and, with that diminishing ally support, looks as if it stands alone from its allies**. It can also create the perception that the United States is not a truthful or reliable country, which would also affect the United States’ reputation in situations where it wishes to be seen as a neutral actor. Mediation, and the ability to mediate internationally, is something the United States already struggles with; **diminished reputational credibility would make that international mediation even harder**.

Truth Decay could fuel anti-Americanism abroad, feeding into conspiracy theories already present in those countries. Additionally, if the United States’ democracy and respect for democratic norms is not healthy, it will become harder, and more hypocritical, for the United States to advocate for the American model.

Truth Decay and American Adversaries

There has been significant research on U.S. adversaries’ relationship with Truth Decay, by RAND researchers and others, particularly on Russia’s promotion of false narratives, disinformation about the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and Russian and Chinese misinformation around COVID-19. These examples illustrate how Truth Decay leaves America more vulnerable to adversary states. Academic literature supports that misinformation can have serious impacts on public attitudes toward national security—for example, increasing “misperceptions” about the Iraq war were associated with

ISSUE EXAMPLE

Chinese Misinformation in Nepal

IN 2017, the United States and Nepal signed an agreement for a \$398 million grant, under the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation, to improve the Nepalese electric grid (Millennium Challenge Account Nepal, undated). However, due largely to a Chinese disinformation campaign, this grant was portrayed as undermining Nepali sovereignty and as evidence of “coercive diplomacy” by the United States (*Katmandu Post*, 2022). The topic became so divisive that it led to protests in multiple cities and a risk to the coherence of Nepal’s ruling coalition government (Poudel, 2022).

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higher levels of support for the conflict (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis, 2013). Russian misinformation about the 2016 election influenced the performance of U.S. democratic institutions (Zeigler, 2017). Russia has also spread disinformation and propaganda about U.S. actions abroad—for example, Russian state news sources attacked Kurdish partners of the United States during the Syrian civil war (RT, 2021; Rosen, 2021). Below the state level, extremist groups, such as QAnon, believers, regularly spread disinformation on a wide variety of topics, including national security—for example, linking the CIA to assassination attempts (Douglas et al., 2019). Other RAND Truth Decay research has examined adversary misinformation and its direct impacts.¹⁰

The academic literature shows that the spread of misinformation in the United States among citizens can encourage public disengagement from international multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, and this disengagement allows for the undermining of those organizations and the possible creation of competitive authoritarian organizations by adversary states (Drezner, 2017).

Truth Decay makes the United States more vulnerable to foreign influence and misinformation from adversaries. Interviewees characterized Truth Decay as a “huge vulnerability,” an “obvious one,” one whose the impact which would “jump off the page” at them, and a clear factor pushing the United States further into polarization and spreading more misinformation in the public. Additionally, a researcher pointed out that, even if adversaries are not able to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities related to Truth Decay, the United States might incorrectly determine the threat to be credible and commit resources to try to mitigate it.

Adversaries might be able to use Truth Decay to **further stagnate foreign policy and national security policy by pushing gridlock through increased partisanship.** As one researcher put it, “If you can introduce enough doubt into

minds of electorate and sway some reps and you can’t agree on the basic things, it can lead to inaction and create conditions where an adversary can take certain steps which can be truly dangerous down the road, and it won’t be met with a response.” This echoes fears discussed earlier that Truth Decay internally might have a similar influence, leading to political paralysis.

There was additional discussion of what Truth Decay might look like in adversary states. Autocrats may often believe their own misinformation and be surrounded by individuals unwilling to correct those narratives, and Truth Decay can act to exacerbate this. These delusions can negatively affect leaders’ foreign policy decisions. However, **Truth Decay may affect many U.S. adversary populations and social cohesion less than it does the United States**, because many U.S. adversaries already operate in a post-truth space. As one researcher said, “There is no Truth Decay in North Korea. There is only the Truth.” In many adversary countries, government perspectives, regardless of their relationship to reality, are laid down firmly. And as another researcher argued, domestic adversary citizens may “already be inoculated” after many years in a society where what is considered truth is more fungible. For example, someone who grew up in the Soviet system, where the truth was never transparent, may come to see the truth as unknowable. American adversary states may simply be **less vulnerable to the impacts of Truth Decay, as their societies may have a very different relationship with what “truth” is and how it is created and defended.**

Mitigating Influences and Mechanisms

There are many ways to mitigate Truth Decay. Media literacy workshops, classes, and messaging may help, although the literature on their effectiveness is mixed. Civic education has been shown to help combat misinformation (Jones-Jang, Mortenson, and Liu, 2019), in both helping citizens identify false news stories and avoid their harmful influences. Media literacy interventions have been shown to increase political engagement beyond national security (Kahne and Bowyer, 2019); however, civic education also affects attitudes about national security. There is less research and evaluation of policy efforts to combat Truth Decay, such as the efforts of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA) to combat electoral misinformation. As efforts to mitigate Truth Decay expand, this is an area of research that should also correspondingly expand. The issue of Truth Decay in national security is one that, at its face, seems too complex to handle with any single initiative, actor, or edict. When we asked focus group participants about actors who might serve to combat Truth Decay in the arena of national security, there was little agreement—instead, they suggested a variety of actors, organizations, and agencies:

- **Domestic legal restraint institutions** could play an important role in raising the penalties for those who spread misinformation in this area. Actors who spread misinformation are beginning to be punished when it crosses lines into regulated areas. For example, in Texas, a man was given a jail sentence for spreading COVID-19 misinformation, under a federal law that makes false information about biological weapons a criminal act (Elamroussi, 2021).

- **Political figures with moderate views** could provide mitigating influences, particularly by framing more factual information as nonpartisan and trying to stall the polarization–Truth Decay cycle. On national security issues, **the military** can also play this role. While the military has recently become seen as more partisan-coded,¹¹ there is still high trust in the military as an institution (Pew Research Center, 2019a).¹² One shortfall, however, is that recent RAND research shows that portions of the population do not trust any authority figure enough to find them credible (Matthews et al., 2022), suggesting political or military figures could not mitigate Truth Decay among these groups.
- Other RAND Truth Decay efforts are exploring the importance of **civic education and media literacy** in American schools, although there is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of different types of media literacy efforts (McCulloch and Watts, 2017).

For a single recent example, see Baker et al. (2021).
- Within the government, while most agencies are bound to action overseas alone, the **U.S. Department of Homeland Security**, specifically those departments with misinformation-focused efforts, such as the **Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency** and the **Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships**, are beginning to invest in combating misinformation online in specific areas. While it is unlikely that it could do a wider initiative, CISA has released a COVID-19 Disinformation Toolkit and an Election Disinformation Toolkit.

- **Private-sector actors, such as technology companies and social media platforms** (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), bear significant responsibility for the role they sometimes play in spreading Truth Decay, and they could do more to moderate and regulate what is posted on their platforms. However, most actions they have taken thus far appear to have come because of intense negative public attention or as a result of pressure from government regulators. As discussed previously, it has taken European Union legal action in France and Germany to press for change in the area of extremism (*Financial Times*, 2022) and hate speech, although it has been successful in doing more to police the latter on its platforms (European Commission, 2021).
- **Activist and nonprofit groups** are currently combating Truth Decay in national security in a broad variety of ways, including providing media literacy education and fact-checking misinformation on national security topics, and think tanks are supporting truthful reporting and analysis of scenarios.
- **The media** similarly can serve to fact-check incorrect information and propagate factual information, and the media could do more to mark partisan information or opinion pieces and avoid amplifying misinformation. There are signs that newspapers are beginning to do more transparent and highlighted fact-checking of political news (Lee, 2022).

ISSUE EXAMPLE

Exposing Russian Disinformation About Ukraine

RUSSIA ACTIVELY USES misinformation and disinformation in foreign policy. In addition to its extensive use of misinformation to undermine free and fair elections in the United States and elsewhere, Russia has used disinformation to justify its war with Ukraine and the nature of it.* The United States, however, has used strategic disclosures of intelligence to establish the facts and expose Russian disinformation efforts (Boot, 2022). This has allowed the United States to frequently preempt a forthcoming false narrative, before a misinformation campaign has gained momentum. For example, the United

States exposed Russian efforts to create a fake video, using actors and corpses, to justify its initial invasion, in what was described as “pre-bunking” rather than debunking (Myre, 2022). To the extent that this information is seen as accurate and credible, this also can potentially give the Intelligence Community a mechanism to be seen as a truth-telling organization in the public sphere.

* For some examination of Russian disinformation around Ukraine right before the invasion justifying it, see Grossman et al. (2022) and the Stanford Web Observatory’s further expansion on the same topic in Giles (2022).

Future Research



This Perspective has highlighted many gaps in the current research on Truth Decay and national security. Several are especially pressing to fill, as they have serious implications for the national security of the United States. In particular, it is important to study the following in greater depth:



- how leaders' and policymakers' receptivity to misinformation or lack of confidence in facts and expert judgment affects national security decisionmaking
- the impact of Truth Decay on national security institutions, such as the military and the Intelligence Community
- ally opinions about Truth Decay in the United States
- Truth Decay in ally or adversary states
- the role of adversary states in spreading Truth Decay around national security topics
- how to effectively mitigate Truth Decay around national security topics.

Truth Decay is currently a strong weapon in the hand of American adversary states. The United States and its allies are not yet prepared to address and mitigate the threat it poses to their security and the international system. We hope that this Perspective offers a first step toward more discussion and research on this topic.





Level	Affected Group	Examples of the Potential Impact of Truth Decay
<p data-bbox="227 458 366 483">Individual</p> 	<p data-bbox="447 181 552 206">Citizens</p> <p data-bbox="447 217 852 344">Voting members of the public; popular figures on social media, mainstream talk shows, podcasts, and blogs</p>	<ul data-bbox="951 181 1586 555" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="951 181 1586 309">• Public, civil servants, elites: Increased polarization and partisanship; more engaged in discourse on national security matters with more extreme opinions <li data-bbox="951 355 1586 452">• Policymakers, executive leaders: Belief in misinformation can lead to substandard policymaking <li data-bbox="951 498 1586 555">• All: Reinforced partisanship means more extreme divides and lack of bargaining territory
	<p data-bbox="447 371 522 395">Elites</p> <p data-bbox="447 406 835 498">Academic experts, lobbyists, journalists, and others informing policymaking</p>	
	<p data-bbox="447 525 621 549">Policymakers</p> <p data-bbox="447 560 892 720">Members of Congress; officials in the executive branch involved in national security issues, such as senior policymakers in the Departments of Defense and State</p>	
	<p data-bbox="447 751 678 776">Executive leaders</p> <p data-bbox="447 786 892 879">In the United States, the President; in other countries, the president, prime minister, or monarch</p>	
<p data-bbox="210 1079 383 1104">Institutional</p> 	<p data-bbox="447 905 557 930">Military</p> <p data-bbox="447 940 864 1033">Some or all of the six service branches of the U.S. military or the Department of Defense</p>	<ul data-bbox="951 905 1586 1315" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="951 905 1586 967">• Military and Intelligence Community: Undermines unit cohesion and respect for chain of command <li data-bbox="951 1013 1586 1074">• Legislature: Foreign policy paralysis and slower decisionmaking <li data-bbox="951 1121 1586 1182">• Executive branch: Increased use of emergency powers and circumvention of established processes <li data-bbox="951 1228 1586 1315">• All: Degrades institutions, weakens federal bureaucracy, diminishes morale, and makes it harder to recruit qualified personnel
	<p data-bbox="447 1059 756 1084">Intelligence Community</p> <p data-bbox="447 1094 857 1187">Some or all of the 18 organizations comprising the U.S. Intelligence Community</p>	
	<p data-bbox="447 1213 595 1238">Legislature</p> <p data-bbox="447 1248 708 1273">Members of Congress</p>	
	<p data-bbox="447 1305 670 1330">Executive branch</p> <p data-bbox="447 1341 812 1396">The White House and National Security Council Staff</p>	

Level	Affected Group	Examples of the Potential Impact of Truth Decay
<p data-bbox="175 317 288 340">Societal</p> 	<p data-bbox="383 181 614 204">Societal resilience</p> <p data-bbox="383 217 835 309">Ability of the United States to recover from misinformation, disasters, conflict, and other obstacles</p>	<ul data-bbox="887 181 1520 417" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="887 181 1520 278">• All: Undermines social cohesion, leads to a negative cycle with misinformation or information attacks from adversary states <li data-bbox="887 320 1520 417">• All: Diminishes American productivity, which diminishes the United States' ability to influence and coerce on the global stage
	<p data-bbox="383 335 600 358">Internal stability</p> <p data-bbox="383 371 822 463">Impacts affecting the internal stability or governance of the United States</p>	
	<p data-bbox="383 489 499 512">Economy</p> <p data-bbox="383 525 748 586">Impacts affecting the financial stability of the United States</p>	
<p data-bbox="157 736 305 759">Normative</p> 	<p data-bbox="383 622 618 645">Democratic norms</p> <p data-bbox="383 657 829 749">Impacts affecting the behavior of the American public and policymakers toward the concept of democracy</p>	<ul data-bbox="887 622 1520 994" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="887 622 1520 749">• All: Lack of agreement on basic values leads to splintering and increased partisanship, lack of trust in the electoral process, diminished will to fight and willingness to promote democracy abroad <li data-bbox="887 791 1520 888">• All: Distrust in the Intelligence Community and shared facts make it more difficult to reach agreement <li data-bbox="887 930 1520 994">• All: Increased use of emergency powers and executive functions outside the norm
	<p data-bbox="383 776 777 837">Norms of behavior in domestic policymaking</p> <p data-bbox="383 850 782 973">Impacts affecting senior policymakers and their respect for the accepted rules of action in policymaking</p>	

NOTES

- ¹ Focus groups were conducted from June 2021 to August 2021. Follow-up interviews were conducted from November 2021 to March 2022.
- ² New research, such as that by Tomz et al. (2019), highlights the importance of the foreign policy positions of the public in national security decisionmaking.
- ³ This topic is also explored and extended in Curry and Lee (2020).
- ⁴ Self-delusions and biased decisionmaking are both cited as causes for the Iraq War in Lake (2010/2011).
- ⁵ For an exploration of this in economic statecraft, see Collins (2009); for an exploration of this in military matters, see Hermann and Kegley (1997), updated in such works as Downes and Monten (2013).
- ⁶ Posen, 2015; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, 1997; and Glaser, Preble, and Thrall, 2019, p. 31, are all excellent examples of scholars with this viewpoint, while an example of a policymaker who deplores the cost of the U.S. alliance system abroad is Senator Rand Paul.
- ⁷ For further information on the arguments scholars of alliance restraint make and the boundaries they suggest putting on relationships with other countries, see Priebe et al., 2021.
- ⁸ Germany and its Alternative for Germany (AfD) serves as an excellent example for how influential these populist groups who favor misinformation are (see Denney, 2021; on the AfD's use of misinformation, see Scott, 2021).
- ⁹ Effective deterrence is especially difficult if the country trying to achieve it has a long-standing reputation for not being credible. There is a rich literature on reputation and alliance formation, war, and conflict more broadly. For some examples, see Huth (1997), Tomz (2012), and Sechser (2018).
- ¹⁰ Examples from RAND include Johnson and Marcellino (2021) and Matthews, Migacheva, and Brown (2021).
- ¹¹ See the discussion of critical race theory in the military in Kurtzleben (2021).
- ¹² Even with a decrease in 2022, Americans' trust in the military as an institution remains strong (Pew Research Center, 2022).

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ABOUT THIS PERSPECTIVE

THIS PERSPECTIVE EXPLORES the overlap between Truth Decay and national security. It is intended to encourage cross-disciplinary discussion of the disparate areas of national security and security studies affected by Truth Decay, with the ultimate aim of highlighting research gaps currently open in this field, identifying pathways to further discuss and explore in this overlap area, and encouraging a shared foundation and framework for future research.

This work is part of the RAND Corporation's Truth Decay initiative (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018), which studies the diminishing role of facts and analysis in public life. Through this initiative, RAND has invited researchers and engaged stakeholders to find solutions that counter Truth Decay and the threat it poses to evidence-based policymaking. More information about Truth Decay is available at www.rand.org/truth-decay. More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to Heather_Williams@rand.org.

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ABOUT THIS PERSPECTIVE

The authors of this Perspective explore how Truth Decay—the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life—affects U.S. national security, what should be done about it, and what future research on this topic should focus on. They highlight research gaps in this field, identify pathways to further discuss and explore in this overlap area, and encourage a shared foundation and framework for future research.



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