

The Russians have long been the masters of propaganda, the infiltration of conspiracy theories and big lies in the hope of sowing dissention in democracies. They have used these methods to keep their own populations from critical thinking that might result in revolt or (in a make-believe democracy) vote them out of power.

Their efforts go back to the late 19th century, when they manufactured a notorious lie, "the Protocols of the Elders of Zion," that pretended to be a secret document revealing a Jewish plot to rule the world. They published this fantasy and sent it to the world, where it took root until the British press, in 1922, unmasked it as a fraud.

Despite the discrediting, the document continued to be published and disseminated. It was picked up by Hitler, languishing in jail, who then made it the centerpiece of his "Jewish Problem" campaign to rid the world of Jews. It was also picked up by Henry Ford, who published and disseminated it. (His son later apologized, recognizing its contribution to the Holocaust after World War II.)

In 1941, The New York Times, the day the Nazis invaded Russia, published an excerpt from Hitler's manifesto, Mein Kampf, called "The Art of Propaganda." He correctly identified propaganda as the basic tool of Fascism, stating that a big lie, repeated loudly and frequently, will convince the weak-minded among us of its truth.

The Times wrote: "Germany is now waging a psychological war against this country as well as other parts of the world. All effective propaganda should be limited to a very few points which, in turn, should be used as slogans until even the very last man is about to imagine what is meant by such words." It is clear that Donald Trump understood these principles. His "Make America Great Again," "Build the wall," "Lock Her Up," and now "The Great Election Steal" have revved up rabid followers to hoot and holler at rallies and then to storm Congress, ready for lynching of "enemies."

People are often ready to believe big lies: the assumption that others will do unto them that which they did to those others. Man have long feared that emancipated women wanted to suppress them (they don't); former slave owners assumed that the emancipated slaves would seek revenge and try to enslave the Whites (they didn't); and the numerically declining Republicans fear that the new majorities will outvote them and sow hatred of White Men (they will not).

These false beliefs endanger our democracy. But the new young and diverse majorities also endanger democracy by "identity politics," emphasizing difference rather than our common citizenship. We need to see ourselves as Americans, in this together, not hyphenated by race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The latest propaganda campaign is aimed at education: the Right-Wing Republicans claim that any teaching about America's founding sin (slavery) is designed to make children hate White people. They also fear that the 1619 project, which is a tool for the graduate school economist to understand economic racism, will be used in elementary and high schools to poison the patriotism of white children. This is a deliberate falsehood.

Europeans, like Americans, have had terrible times in their histories. For European school children to learn about the Inquisition, witch burnings, imperialism, and slave trade, does not make those children hate their countries. We too will not be harmed by understanding the past in context, seeing how far we have come in undoing these past horrors.

There is an antidote to healing the great divide between those who swallow the "big lies" and those ready to accept that there is no "alternate reality." It starts with a national campaign to restore civics to school curriculums, encourage youngsters to have a year of national service between high school and college, and encourage projects that involve a year of foreign travel.

The Big Lie needs darkness to flourish; the antidote is sunshine: local newspapers to be funded because they promote credible reporting that can be checked for accuracy, and a national campaign to remind us that we are indeed one country, in this together.

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