Going on the Offensive
A U.S. Strategy to Combat Russian Information Warfare

By Seth G. Jones

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THE ISSUE

Moscow continues to wage an offensive information campaign designed, in the words of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, to “weaken and divide the United States.” But Washington has been reactive, slow to respond, and focused on defensive measures. The United States needs to adopt a proactive, offensive campaign to coerce Russia to curb its information warfare efforts, punish Moscow when further incidents occur, and exploit Russian weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The Reagan administration’s strategy and actions offer a useful template.

Moscow considers the United States its main adversary. Russian leaders are engaged in an aggressive, offensive information campaign designed to sow discord inside the United States, create fissures between Washington and its allies, undermine U.S. influence around the world, and increase Russia’s power and influence. In an opinion poll published earlier this year, most Russians identified the United States as their country’s primary enemy. Moscow’s actions have been a reaction, in part, to three decades of perceived humiliation following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expansion of the European Union and NATO to Russia’s borders, and what Russian leaders view as U.S. meddling in nearby countries like Ukraine.

In response, the U.S. government has been flat-footed and reactive. While Russia has maintained its ability to conduct information warfare over the past several decades, the United States is ill-prepared to fight a new Cold War. The United States largely abandoned these capabilities following the collapse of the Soviet Union. After 9/11, the United States focused on lethal, not political or information, operations: finding and targeting terrorists and other adversaries around the world with sophisticated intelligence and precision-strike capabilities. Yet these lethal capabilities are of limited value against adversaries who are fighting primarily with information and disinformation.

The United States needs to quickly develop an information warfare campaign—both overt and covert—that can compete with Russia and other adversaries. Thankfully, the United States doesn’t have to start from scratch. During the late Cold War, the United States established an effective and proactive information campaign against the Soviet Union that combined overt and covert programs. While much has changed over the past four decades—including the evolution
of technology and the use of social media—the Reagan administration’s playbook offers a useful model. This CSIS Brief involves the collection and analysis of thousands of pages of primary source U.S. and Russian documents—many of which have been recently declassified—from the 1980s on Moscow’s “active measures” campaign and the Reagan administration’s response. It also includes new information on one of the Central Intelligence Agency’s most successful covert action programs of the Cold War: the support to Solidarity in Poland, codenamed QRHELPFUL. Using this information, the rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first analyzes Soviet active measures during the Cold War. The second section outlines the Reagan administration’s response. The third highlights the successes of QRHELPFUL. The fourth section discusses lessons for today.

ACTIVE MEASURES

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed a broad campaign to influence populations across the globe, which was best captured in the phrase aktivnyye meropriyatiya—or “active measures.” Active measures encompassed a range of activities, which were different from typical espionage and counterespionage activities. Examples included:

• Written and oral disinformation (or dezinformatsiya)
• Forgeries and false rumors
• “Gray” (unattributed) and “black” (falsely attributed) propaganda
• Manipulation and control of foreign media assets
• Political action and the use of agents-of-influence operations;
• Clandestine radio stations
• Use of foreign Communist Parties and international front groups for pursuing Soviet foreign policy objectives
• Support for international revolutionary and terrorist organizations, including national liberation movements
• Political blackmail and kidnapping
• Targeted assassinations, including the killing of defectors

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union developed a broad campaign to influence populations across the globe, which was best captured in the phrase aktivnyye meropriyatiya—or “active measures.”

Soviet active measures focused primarily on the United States, which it referred to as the “main enemy.” The Soviets had multiple objectives: to influence global and U.S. public opinion against U.S. policies that were perceived as threatening the Soviet Union; label the United States as an aggressive, colonialist, and imperialist power; sow discord between the United States and its allies; undermine those who cooperated with the United States; and weaken Western intelligence services and expose their personnel; confuse world opinion regarding the nature of Soviet policies and actions; and create

Figure 1: Soviet Organizational Structure for Active Measures

![Diagram of Soviet Organizational Structure for Active Measures]

CPSU POLITBURO

CPSU SECRETARIAT

INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION DEPARTMENT (IID) CPSU
CHEIF: ZAMYATIN

INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT (ID) CPSU
CHEIF: PONOMAREV

COMMITTEE OF STATE SECURITY (KGB)
CHEIF: FEDORCHUK

SERVICE A, FIRST CHIEF DIRECTORATE
FOREIGN RESIDENCIES (KGB) LINE PR

FOREIGN COMMUNIST PARTIES
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNIST FRONTS
FRIENDSHIP SOCIETIES
CLANDESTINE RADIOS

TASS
NOVOSTI
PRAVDA
IZVESTIYA
RADIO MOSCOW
EMBASSY INFORMATION DEPARTMENTS
a favorable environment for the implementation of Soviet foreign policy. Many of these Soviet objectives and tools have remarkable similarities with Russia today.

While the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, or Committee for State Security (KGB), had long been involved in these types of activities, U.S. officials were particularly concerned about the quality and quantity of these actions by the early 1980s. CIA Director William Casey argued in a sensitive memo that, “most of these active measures are not new. Many of them were employed by Lenin and Stalin and by others throughout history. At no time in this century, however, have these techniques been used with more effect or sophistication than by the current Soviet state.”

The Soviets regarded propaganda and broader irregular activities as important instruments of foreign policy. As one U.S. intelligence assessment concluded: “Active measures are in essence an offensive instrument of Soviet foreign policy.”

Soviet activities were hierarchical and adaptive. “Almost everything is considered at the center, in Moscow, and it is worked up in aspects of Soviet foreign security policy,” one CIA operative explained during congressional testimony. “So the Soviets are in a position to react and act quickly if it is something that is in their game plan.”

As Figure 1 highlights, the Soviets established centralized organizations—such as the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the International Information Department (IID) of the CPSU, and Service A of the KGB’s First Chief Directorate—to direct propaganda and other active measures. These organizations were supervised by the Politburo. The KGB’s Service A planned, coordinated, and supported operations, which were designed to backstop overt Soviet propaganda using forgeries, printed press articles, planted rumors, disinformation, and controlled information media. Given the importance of propaganda and covert action in its foreign policy, the Soviet Union was willing to spend large sums of money on its programs—roughly $3 billion per year, according to CIA estimates.

The Soviets used propaganda to extol the virtues of communism and condemn the vices of capitalism. Moscow promoted the Soviet Union’s revolutionary ideals by conducting clandestine interference in the affairs of third world governments that brought pro-Soviet Marxist regimes to power or delivered arms and other aid to national liberation organizations opposed to the United States. The KGB also clandestinely placed articles or disinformation in foreign publications to influence local audiences. In many cases, the KGB planted the same fake news story in multiple media outlets—print, radio, and television—to increase the likelihood that individuals would believe it. The KGB recruited journalists, such as the French political writer Pierre-Charles Pathé, or placed agents in news organizations. In addition, the KGB provided aid to Communist parties in the West—including in the United States—using the open payment of large commissions to local party-owned or party-affiliated firms or printing houses. Perhaps more dangerously, the KGB provided covert assistance to non-Communist organizations, such as the World Peace Council and cultural societies in Western countries.

Forgery was another important component of active measures. These forgeries could be complete fabrications or slightly altered versions of genuine documents. In one case, the KGB forged a U.S. government paper that criticized Carter administration policies toward Latin America, which were allegedly being repeated by the Reagan administration transition team. The KGB had the document distributed to news agencies, and it was even quoted by journalist Flora Lewis in the New York Times. Another example was the

Figure 2: Soviet Campaign Against NATO Efforts to Increase Theater Nuclear Forces

![Figure 2: Soviet Campaign Against NATO Efforts to Increase Theater Nuclear Forces](image)
KGB’s Operation INFEKTION, which falsely implicated the U.S. Department of Defense in the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. Examples of other active measures campaigns included undermining the campaign against Theater Nuclear Forces in Western Europe (see Figure 2), supporting left-wing insurgents in El Salvador, assisting political groups in Pakistan that wanted to topple the government of President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq for its aid to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, and weakening U.S.-Egyptian relations.

While it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of active measures, U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that many campaigns were effective in influencing target audiences. As one U.S. intelligence study summarized, “What we have seen indicates that Soviet active measures are conducted on a worldwide scale, are well integrated with other Soviet foreign policy actions, and appear frequently to be effective.”

THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION RESPONSE

In response to Soviet active measures, the Reagan administration conducted an aggressive, proactive campaign to compete with the Soviet Union, including in the USSR’s backyard of Eastern Europe. The administration developed a series of National Security Decision Directives (NSDDs), set up an Active Measures Working Group, and conducted a wide range of irregular operations and tactics across the globe.

At the strategic level, Reagan’s National Security Council staff drafted a series of documents that outlined an aggressive campaign to compete with the Soviets. On May 20, 1982, Reagan signed into law NSDD-32, titled “U.S. National Security Strategy,” which marked a shift in U.S. policy. It authorized diplomatic, propaganda, political, and military action to “contain and reverse the expansion of Soviet control and military presence through the world.” The document also had a covert action component that supported such efforts as sponsoring “demonstrations, protests, meetings, conferences, press articles, television shows, exhibitions, and the like.”

Several months later, Reagan signed NSDD-54, titled “United States Policy Towards Eastern Europe.” It went even further than NSDD-32, declaring that it was U.S. policy to unhinge Moscow’s grip on Eastern Europe and to reunite it—eventually—with Western Europe. NSDD-54 also supported the policy of “differentiation” in Eastern Europe, which included “encouraging more liberal trends in the region” to “reinforcing the pro-Western orientation of their peoples” and “undermining the military capabilities of the Warsaw Pact.”

In 1983, the Reagan administration published NSDD-75: “U.S. Relations with the USSR.” It declared that the United States would no longer coexist with the Soviet Union, but change the Soviet system. NSDD-75 bluntly stated that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union would now consist of three inter-related objectives: to reverse Soviet expansionism by competing on a sustained basis in all international arenas, promote change in the Soviet Union toward a more pluralistic political and economic system, and engage in negotiations with the Soviet Union (when feasible) which protected and enhanced U.S. interests. To accomplish these objectives, NSDD-75 argued that the United States needed to use a broad panoply of military, economic, political, and other instruments—including ideological ones: “U.S. policy must have an ideological thrust which clearly affirms the superiority of U.S. and Western values of individual dignity and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy over the repressive features of Soviet Communism.” The document noted that Eastern Europe—situated in Moscow’s backyard—was an essential battleground: “The primary U.S. objective in Eastern Europe is to loosen Moscow’s hold on the region while promoting the cause of human rights in individual East European countries.” Most previous U.S. administrations had at least tacitly ceded Eastern Europe to the Soviet sphere of influence after the 1945 Yalta Conference.

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In addition to these strategy documents, the Reagan administration established an Active Measures Working Group to publicly identify Soviet propaganda. The group was an interagency body that collected examples of Soviet disinformation; analyzed them using the CIA’s computerized database of forgeries, U.S. intelligence experts, and KGB defectors; and published the results openly to inform a wide audience of journalists, U.S. government employees, and foreign government officials. The Active Measures Working Group was led by the U.S. State Department and ultimately published numerous reports on topics such as Soviet front organizations, Soviet disinformation, and KGB anti-American forgeries.
More broadly, the Reagan administration waged an aggressive campaign against the Soviets around the globe. After a meeting on October 6, 1982, Reagan wrote in his diary: “I’ve had a top secret briefing on our ability at covert operations abroad. They made it plain we had lost this capacity under the previous admin. If our people only knew the heroism of unsung Americans risking their life every min. of every hour around the clock they’d be as proud as I am.” Since a direct confrontation between U.S. and Soviet military forces could escalate to nuclear war, Reagan agreed that unconventional activities were a better option to counter Moscow because they involved working through local surrogates. Consequently, the Reagan administration conducted a range of unconventional programs across the globe—from Europe to Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

In an influential *TIME* magazine article, journalist Charles Krauthammer outlined what he termed the Reagan Doctrine. “The Reagan Doctrine proclaims overt and unashamed American support for anti-Communist revolution,” Krauthammer wrote. “Only a few months ago, a Nicaraguan friend, an ex-Sandinista who still speaks their language, said in near despair that the struggle of democrats around the world was doomed by the absence in the West of what he called ‘democratic militance.’ The Reagan Doctrine represents a first step toward its restoration.” Reagan lauded Krauthammer’s interpretation, explaining that he was trying to “send out a signal that the United States intended to support people fighting for their freedom against Communism wherever they were.”

**QRHELPFUL: CIA SUPPORT TO SOLIDARITY IN POLAND**

Among the most effective U.S. information campaigns—which the U.S. government has not yet officially acknowledged—was a CIA covert action program to aid the democratic opposition movement Solidarity in Poland. Codenamed QRHELPFUL, the CIA provided nearly $20 million in aid to Solidarity to help wage an information campaign against the Soviet-backed government. Unlike the more controversial U.S. programs in Afghanistan and Central America, this covert action program succeeded without providing weapons or participating in military action.

In 1981, Poland was Soviet-aligned and an important member of the Warsaw Pact, Moscow’s military alliance of Eastern European countries. Yet Poland also had a growing opposition movement, which U.S. President Ronald Reagan recognized was a potential crack in the Soviet empire. Chief among the dissident groups was the trade union Solidarity, which had grown out of demands for worker-led unions that were independent of state control. After a series of strikes, the movement’s most visible leader, Lech Walesa, began to pull other dissident groups into Solidarity’s orbit. Kremlin-backed Polish prime minister Wojciech Jaruzelski attempted to crush the budding opposition movement and declared martial law in December 1981.

President Reagan was determined to reverse a decades-old policy of retreat and accommodation in the face of Soviet aggression and saw the crisis in Poland as a unique opportunity. On November 4, 1982, Reagan held a National Security Planning Group meeting to discuss covert action in Poland. After a short discussion, Reagan signed a presidential finding to provide money and non-lethal equipment to moderate Polish opposition groups through surrogate third parties, hiding the U.S. government’s hand. The finding also authorized the CIA to conduct clandestine radio broadcasting in Poland. The goals were limited: to aid
Among the most effective U.S. information campaigns—which the U.S. government has not yet officially acknowledged—was a CIA covert action program to aid the democratic opposition movement Solidarity in Poland.

QRHELPFUL would be daunting for the CIA and the staunch anti-Communist Director of Central Intelligence, William Casey. CIA operatives would need to recruit Polish assets while the nation was under martial law. There were at least two major challenges for the CIA in infiltrating money and material into Poland.

First, Soviet, Polish, and other Warsaw Pact governments were acutely aware that Western governments and nongovernmental organizations were conducting clandestine efforts to send money and material to dissidents. Some outside support came from labor unions like the AFL-CIO. Some came from religious groups like the Catholic church. Some came from humanitarian organizations. Polish authorities, who viewed these clandestine programs as subversive attempts to undermine their power and legitimacy, were aggressive in collecting intelligence on infiltration routes, identifying smugglers, and seizing personnel and materials. Any CIA assistance had to be provided under the watchful eyes of the KGB and Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies.

Nevertheless, the CIA ran assets in places like Sweden, West Germany, Norway, France, Italy, and other European countries. They had experience smuggling books and other literature across the iron curtain throughout the Cold War. As one CIA official remarked, “[B]y the 1980s the Agency had accumulated a great deal of experience, stretching back to the 1950s, in smuggling things into and out of Poland.”

Moving currency would be a challenge, to be sure, but it would be much harder to move larger items—from typewriters and photocopiers to duplicators—that required trucks and transport beyond one of the most formidable borders in the world. As part of QRHELPFUL, CIA funds would bankroll key components of running an underground media enterprise: leaflets, posters, offset presses, xerox machine, duplicators, typewriters, paper, and technical help in running clandestine radio broadcasts and breaking into television programs.

Second, and more difficult, the CIA wanted to smuggle materials in such a way that Solidarity members never definitively knew the CIA was providing aid. Solidarity’s legitimacy would have been severely undermined if there was unequivocal evidence of CIA assistance. After all, Solidarity was a Polish—not an American—populist movement. Jaruzelski would have been delighted to uncover clear evidence of the CIA’s role, which
would have allowed the Polish and Soviet governments to delegitimize Solidarity members as stooges of a foreign intelligence agency. The capture of a CIA case officer who was meeting with a Solidarity member, for example, would have handed Jaruzelski an excellent excuse to arrest Solidarity’s remaining leaders and destroy the movement. As former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates acknowledged, “Our people thought that deniability was important for Solidarity, and so we worked through third parties or other intermediaries in Western Europe.”

A direct hand-off of aid from CIA to Solidarity would have risked discovery, so operatives set up “ratlines,” in CIA parlance. Ratlines referred to routes used to covertly move material, people, and money from one location to another. The operatives utilized smugglers, philanthropists, publishers, and others to move supplies into Poland. A few knew they were working with CIA case officers. Many did not, though some suspected that the CIA or other Western intelligence agencies were involved. Most of the smugglers were already transporting large amounts of material into and out of Poland. By the time the goods made it to Solidarity, it had moved through such a complex web of people, companies, foundations, and geographic locations that it was difficult for anyone—including Solidarity members, the Polish government, and perhaps even the CIA—to figure out where all of it originated. The use of assets maximized secrecy by hiding the hand of the CIA, and it protected Solidarity by ensuring that CIA case officers were not working directly with Solidarity members.

Figure 4 provides an overview of key ratlines, which originated or passed through cities like Malmo and Stockholm, Sweden; Bornholm and Copenhagen, Denmark; Turin and Rome, Italy; Oslo, Norway; Paris, France; West Berlin, West Germany; and Brussels, Belgium.

QRHELPFUL’s success was highlighted, in part, by Soviet and Polish attempts to shut CIA aid down. Section 11 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs collected information on CIA and other Western aid to Solidarity. Ministry operatives identified Solidarity sympathizers involved in printing and distributing opposition media and then planted moles in the underground, made arrests, and intimidated their families. Over the course of the 1980s, Polish police and intelligence units conducted thousands of dramatic raids against the Solidarity underground, seizing people, radios, printing presses, leaflets, and other material. As Figure 4 highlights, the internal records of the Sluzba Bezpieczenstwa (SB), Poland’s security service housed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, indicate that they confiscated millions of leaflets, journals, and other items, though they barely made a dent in underground publishing. The Jaruzelski regime also aired a two-part series, “Polish Aide Ties Solidarity, CIA,” on Polish National Television in February 1985.

Polish agencies often trumpeted the materials seized in these raids as examples of CIA support, though Polish agencies never showed definitive proof. A Sejm investigation into Western intelligence efforts concluded that the Jaruzelski regime failed to intercept virtually all the money and nearly three quarters of the equipment sent to Solidarity from outside the country. One SB report that summarized activities from December 1981 to December 1983 noted that, “despite our intense operations and achieving significant results confiscating printing equipment and arresting people involved in these activities, illegal journals are persisting and improving their conspiratorial methods in preparing and editing texts, and organizing locales for duplication and systems of distribution.”

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<td>793,422</td>
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<td>651</td>
<td>2,283</td>
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<td>134</td>
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<td>68</td>
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<td>Papers (reams)</td>
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<td>1,122</td>
<td>2,240</td>
<td>1,924</td>
<td>19,198</td>
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report blamed “far reaching aid from the West” on the underground’s survival and eventual expansion. The KGB was equally concerned about CIA activity in Poland. As outlined in a secret KGB document with the bulky title, “Plan for Basic Counterintelligence Measures to Step Up Still Further the Effort to Combat the Subversive Intelligence Activities of the United States Special Services,” the KGB assessed that the CIA was involved in a broad ideological war designed to subvert the Soviet Union and its satellite countries – including in Poland. According to one KGB official, Moscow believed that the CIA was providing aid once it became clear that Solidarity was well-funded and had access to foreign technology and parts unavailable in Poland to carry out their activity. Vadim Pavlov, head of the KGB mission in Warsaw, was convinced that the CIA was providing assistance to Solidarity. The Soviets viewed such activity with alarm, interpreting it as a campaign to destabilize Poland and other Eastern European countries and to undermine Soviet influence in its backyard. According to one Top Secret KGB report: “The [KGB’s] foreign intelligence service has sought to thwart the crude interference by the USA and other NATO countries and their special services in the internal affairs of Poland.” In a Top Secret memo to the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs, KGB director Viktor Chebrikov ordered the ministry to maximize its efforts to “expose material support coming from imperialist circles in the West.”

Figure 6: Example of Russian Information Campaign

In the end, QRHELPFUL contributed to the survival of Solidarity and the eventual collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. The Iron Curtain crumbled, Solidarity was victorious, and, crucially, Lech Walesa and the opposition ushered in freedom and democracy to Poland. QRHELPFUL remains one of the U.S.’s greatest covert action programs. It is also a reminder of the importance of information campaigns. Lech Walesa, Solidarity, and the Polish people ultimately won their own freedom, not the CIA, Reagan, or anyone else from the outside. Members of the underground risked their lives to distribute literature, establish an organizational structure, and conduct strikes and demonstrations against the regime. Near gate number two in the Gdansk shipyard, there is a plaque dedicated to the memory of those killed by Polish forces in 1970. It speaks to members of Solidarity and others that have struggled for freedom in Poland:

A token of everlasting remembrance of the slaughter victims.
A warning to rulers that no social conflict in our country can be resolved by force.
A sign of hope for fellow-citizens that evil need not prevail.

LESSONS FOR TODAY
U.S. strategy and operations during the Cold War, including such covert action programs as QRHELPFUL, provide useful lessons for today. Moscow has updated its strategy and tactics to the information age of Facebook, Instagram, bots, and trolls. As Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats recently acknowledged, “we continue to see a pervasive messaging campaign by Russia to try to weaken and divide the United States.” Organizations like the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, often referred to by its previous abbreviation GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatel’noye Upravleniye), have engaged in cyber operations inside the United States.

Figure 6 shows an inflammatory Facebook page created and managed by the Russian-based Internet Research Agency. At its peak, the Secured Borders Facebook page had more than
133,000 followers. The U.S. Department of Justice has accused the Internet Research Agency of being “a Russian organization engaged in operations to interfere with elections and political processes.” By operating troll farms with hundreds of Russian employees, the Internet Research Agency has been able to promote disinformation on the internet since 2014.

It is important to play defense—including protecting U.S. and allied cyber networks, exposing Russian bots and trolls, and preparing for cyberattacks and disinformation. But Russia will continue to target the United States at home and abroad until the U.S. government implements a more aggressive offensive information campaign. The goal should be to coerce Russia to curb its information warfare campaign, punish Moscow when these incidents occur, and exploit Moscow’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities. An offensive U.S. campaign might include several steps.

The first involves blunt and regular U.S. warnings to Russian leaders, both in public and private, that their information warfare campaign will be met with an equally forceful response. Senior U.S. officials like President Donald Trump have not seriously threatened Moscow despite substantial evidence of Russian activism in the 2016 U.S. elections; Russian efforts to exploit issues like gun control, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement; and cyberattacks against even conservative U.S. organizations like the Hudson Institute and the International Republican Institute. Following the Soviet Union’s global active measures campaign against the United States, U.S. President Ronald Reagan vowed to respond in kind and, ultimately, to “leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history.” Moscow understood that Reagan and his administration were deadly serious about combating Russian active measures, which is what Reagan did in authorizing effective Russian active measures, which is what Reagan did in authorizing effective cyberattacks against the Soviet Union.

Second, the United States needs to continue developing its offensive cyber capabilities and—just as important—it needs to use them if necessary. President Trump’s decision to sign National Security Presidential Memorandum 13, a directive facilitating offensive U.S. cyber operations, is a helpful step. This directive rescinded the Obama administration’s more cautious approach under Presidential Policy Directive 20. But this change means little if the U.S. fails to use—or, more importantly, to threaten to use—cyberattacks to protect itself from cyber operations by countries like Russia. In his influential work “Arms and Influence,” the Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling wrote that “it is the threat of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply.” Moscow needs to understand that the United States is prepared to use all available instruments—including cyber operations—if it continues to be threatened.

Third, the United States should take steps to weaken and isolate Moscow economically, militarily, and diplomatically. Washington could provide overt and covert assistance to governments like Ukraine and Georgia that are battling Russian-backed groups to weaken Moscow’s grip. In addition, Moscow’s authoritarian political system and attempt to control access to information—including through its state-run media—make it vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign.

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Washington needs to proactively highlight examples of Russian malign activity, human rights abuses, and corruption. U.S. intelligence agencies need to work closely with the White House to quickly declassify information. In some cases, it may make sense to release information on Russian activity through third parties—like the media or WikiLeaks—as Russia did with the e-mails from the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 U.S. elections. Examples of subjects that could be highlighted include:

- Russian direct or indirect involvement in human rights abuses, including the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons in Syria or abuses in Idlib, Syria.
- Russian involvement in the assassination (or attempted assassination) of defectors, political opponents, and those—such as journalists and lawyers—investigating or prosecuting Russian corruption or human rights abuses.
- Russian proxies involved in abuses, such as Russian-backed rebel groups in Ukraine and non-state actors in Syria. There have been numerous examples over the past several years, such as the July 2014 shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine using a Russian surface-to-air missile.
- Corruption and cheating scandals in Russia.
• Information and data on Russian soldiers killed and wounded in the wars in Syria and Ukraine, a politically-sensitive subject in Russia.

• Russian support to terrorist and insurgent groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Lebanese Hezbollah and Shi’á militias in Syria.

• Russian economic problems.

• Anti-regime riots, protests and demonstrations in Russia or in allied countries like Belarus.

• Support to the Baltic States, Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries that continue to support freedom and democracy.

The irony of today’s situation is that Moscow is weaker now than it was during the 1980s. Russia’s economy is frail, Moscow has lost most of its Eastern European allies, and it doesn’t have a popular ideology to sell to the world—let alone its own people. It is time for the United States to resurrect a modified version of its Cold War playbook and develop an information campaign that can compete with Moscow. It’s not too late.

Seth G. Jones is the Harold Brown Chair and Director of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is the author, most recently, of “A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland” (W.W. Norton).

The author gives special thanks to Olga Oliker for her comments and Clayton Sharb for assistance in collecting and analyzing data.

40 Schweizer, Victory, 223.


47 Information for the figure is from “Soviet Active Measures,” Hearings before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives, July 14, 1982, 228.

48 “Soviet Covert Action (The Forgery Offensive),” Hearings before the Subcommittee on Oversight of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives, February 6, 19, 1980, 4.

49 The information for the figure comes from the author.