

Chapter 8

Bum Dope, Blowback, and the Bomb:

The Effect of Bad Information on Policy-Maker Beliefs and Crisis Stability

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How might bad information affect crisis stability? We like to imagine that elites—military officials, politicians, and experts—will be immune to the kind of rumor, disinformation, and propaganda with which the internet is awash. This chapter explores that notion, with a nod to political scientist Stephen Van Evera’s notion of blowback—the idea that propaganda can, in fact, warp elite perceptions. Van Evera was concerned about psychological blurring between rhetoric and sincere belief while others, like Jack Snyder, another expert on international relations, emphasized the risk that policy makers might become trapped by political rhetoric.¹

This chapter is principally concerned with this idea: that bad information, even deliberate disinformation knowingly planted by some cynical elites, might “blow back” (or echo) through a wider range of elites and worsen a nuclear crisis. It examines two contemporary case studies of bad information, both of which help illustrate how such information—to use George P. Shultz’s colorful phrase, “bum dope”—could undermine crisis stability.²

I conclude that the same pathologies seen in online discourse could undermine stability, even in a serious crisis involving nuclear weapons. In short, policy makers tend to engage in public rhetoric that, in turn, shapes their own thinking. Often such statements are propagandistic in their initial formulation. But as they become part of the public discourse, policy makers tend to believe them. This carries additional risk

in an era of social media. There is a casual assumption that elites are immune to the bad information on social media, particularly involving issues relating to nuclear weapons and nuclear war. This confidence seems misplaced.

Bad Information

An interesting feature of our current era is what appears to be a sudden surge in the prevalence and power of fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories—bad information. This is merely a surmise, of course, one that reflects what the moment *feels* like. It is rather difficult, in practice, to measure the prevalence or the influence of such ideas in a body politic. One study, which simply looked at letters to the *New York Times*, found that between 1890 and 2010 the number of letters espousing conspiracy theories has generally declined—although there were distinct spikes following the financial panic of 1890 and during the “Red Scare” in the 1950s.³ There are limits to such a methodology—many aspects of journalism have changed significantly over 120 years—but the main takeaway is fairly obvious: conspiracy theories have been with us for a long time and they are more intense in some periods than others.

A growing body of research is now available on how widespread internet access, and the social media platforms that depend upon that access, has shaped the dissemination of bad information, particularly conspiracy theories. “Partisan misinformation and conspiracy theories have seemingly increased in recent years,” wrote the authors of one survey of research on this field, “in tandem with intensifying elite ideological polarization and widespread affective polarization at the mass level.”⁴

Public-policy concerns drive this interest. The widespread belief that survivors of mass shootings are, for example, crisis actors appears intended to prevent the government from considering certain policy responses to gun violence.⁵ There is also a pervasive sense that

“fake news” on social media platforms like Facebook—in particular, Russian-supplied disinformation—may have altered the outcome of the 2016 election, although the relationship is difficult to establish.⁶

Whatever challenges we face in measuring the overall popularity or impact of bad information, there is an interesting body of research that suggests that the internet and social media are helpful for the spreading of “bum dope.” This research tends to emphasize the ability of users to create homogenous online communities, communities that then collectively “process information through a shared system of meaning and trigger collective framing of narratives that are often biased toward self-confirmation.”⁷

In general, however, our concern that bad information might inhibit effective public policy has focused on mass communication and political participation. There is a frequent, if unstated, assumption that political elites are immune to such thoughts. The argument goes something like this: sure, the base might be motivated by conspiracy theories, but those in positions of power know this is simply something to wind up the rubes. One example was the tendency of George H. W. Bush and GOP consultant Lee Atwater to refer to those elements in the Republican Party easily inclined to believe conspiracies—in this case about an arms-control deal with the Soviet Union—as “extra-chromosome” conservatives, a cruel comment about people with Down syndrome for which President Bush later publicly apologized.⁸ More recently, then senator Robert Corker dismissed concerns about a tweet by President Trump that referenced a false conspiracy theory about the expropriation of lands and killing of white farmers in South Africa, a popular talking point among racists in the United States, as “a base stimulator.”⁹ Both of these comments are examples of how Republican elites distance themselves and, by implication, elite discourse from the false and often absurd views of some of their supporters— even though the available research suggests that conspiracy theories are far more common than many may realize.¹⁰

The idea that elites know better is, of course, a reassuring thought when it comes to nuclear weapons. After all, the base does not get to

make decisions about nuclear war. An unstated assumption of popular discourse is that elites—those who would be responsible for handling a nuclear crisis—are somehow immune to the effects of bad information and would not likely be influenced by disinformation or conspiracy theories.

But why should this be the case? Perhaps, as self-styled elites, we like to think we are above all this. Looking at the situation objectively, however, as a group, those in positions of political power might actually be more susceptible to the cognitive processes that power bad information. For example, a substantial body of research suggests that “partisan stimuli have the power to activate motivated reasoning.”¹¹ Motivated reasoning is a common human cognitive bias that leads people to select, trust, and make decisions based on information that agrees with their previous beliefs rather than rationally or objectively.¹² Partisanship is, one might say, a hell of a drug. And perhaps less kindly, one might point to a recent paper—one that admittedly requires replication—that suggests that excessive confidence, or explanation hubris (perhaps a hallmark of elites), correlates with a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.¹³

In fact, the political science literature is replete with examples of propaganda or disinformation that became ingrained among elites. Van Evera first used the term “blowback” to describe the phenomenon by which military propaganda, intended for the public at large, instead influences the views of political leaders. As Snyder noted in discussing blowback, “The blurring of sincere belief and tactical argument has been common, and it would not be surprising if the elites purveying such arguments were unable to maintain the distinction between valid strategic concepts and opportunistic strategic rhetoric.”¹⁴

There is even a well-known instance of blowback relating to nuclear weapons, one that occurred during the so-called war scare of 1983. As head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov had the ability to manipulate intelligence reports to shape discussions within the Politburo. Indeed, the dissemination of intelligence information was a major element of Andropov’s power within the Politburo, as other members had few

sources of information to counter Andropov's seemingly factual assessments about the threat environment or the efficacy of Soviet policies. Oleg Kalugin, then serving as a KGB officer, recalled receiving "what I can only describe as a paranoid cable from Andropov warning of the growing threat of a nuclear apocalypse."¹⁵

KGB officers felt obligated to shape their own assessments to match Andropov's views. "When, for example, Andropov concluded that the first Reagan administration had plans for a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union," Christopher Andrew and Vasily Mitrokhin wrote, "none of the probably numerous sceptics in KGB residencies around the world dared to breathe a word of open dissent."¹⁶ In particular, Andropov, positioning himself to succeed the ailing Brezhnev, instituted an intelligence-gathering operation known as RYAN that sought to detect American preparations for a surprise attack but that in fact resulted in fabricated reports that served to confirm paranoid fears in the Soviet leadership about the possibility of an American surprise attack.

And it was Andropov—having succeeded Brezhnev and himself in failing health and having internalized those concerns—who presided over the period of tension now known as the war scare.¹⁷

Nuclear Weapons in Romania

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union frequently used disinformation campaigns to undermine the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States. A particularly noteworthy example was the campaign by the KGB and East Germany's Stasi secret police to spread what then secretary of state George Shultz called "bum dope about AIDS." This was a conspiracy theory that HIV was a biological weapon that had escaped from a US government laboratory.¹⁸ In recent years, the Russian Federation has resumed these efforts, for example spreading disinformation about the destruction of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 over Ukraine in July 2014 despite

overwhelming evidence that Russian-backed separatists shot down the aircraft with a Russian-supplied surface-to-air missile system.¹⁹ Rather than simply accepting responsibility for the tragic mistake, the Russian government has released doctored photographs, including satellite images, to muddy the waters.

One frequent target of Russian disinformation campaigns is cohesion in NATO, discussed in broad terms by Kate Starbird in chapter 5 of this volume. In one specific case targeting NATO, in 2016 a Russian disinformation campaign spread rumors that the United States had moved nuclear weapons to a former air base in Deveselu, Romania. The site, officially known as Naval Support Facility Deveselu, is the first of two missile defense sites that are being constructed by the United States in Romania and Poland as part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), a missile defense system that is intended to defend NATO allies in Europe against ballistic missile attacks. The EPAA, as well as Romania's participation in NATO, are both frequent targets of Russian ire. After the site was declared operational in May 2016, Russian officials bitterly criticized it as "part of the military and political containment of Russia" that "can only exacerbate an already difficult situation."²⁰

The disinformation campaign—which was intended to raise political opposition to Romania's participation in the EPAA—began in August 2016 at an annual public forum that features important Romanian politicians.²¹ An anonymous person at the forum asked Traian Băsescu, a former president of Romania and at the time the leader of an important political party in the country, for "information about a possible intention of US to move its nuclear facilities from Incirlik, Turkey." At that time, there was no such information in the Romanian press. The question appears to have been planted in the hopes that an answer from an important political figure would in itself be newsworthy enough to generate coverage of the issue.

The dumbfounded former president said that he doubted the United States would remove nuclear weapons from Turkey and that, in any

case, nuclear weapons should not be stationed in Romania.²² The exchange was written up in a Romanian newspaper, however, which served to distribute the idea.

A second report soon followed, this time by Georgi Gotev, a Bulgarian journalist based in Brussels, writing for an obscure new site called Euractiv.²³ Gotev claimed that the transfer was, in fact, under way and had been “very challenging in technical and political terms.” The sourcing for this story was unusually thin—he cited only “two independent sources” with no indication of how they might know such a thing—and the Romanian government denied it. Moreover, the notion made no sense at all. Deveselu was no longer an air base—there are no aircraft there that could deliver the gravity bombs stored in Turkey. Moreover, satellite images clearly showed that there are no facilities at Deveselu for storing nuclear weapons and no construction under way.²⁴

Russian media, including Sputnik and RT, immediately seized on the story. Sputnik published no fewer than four stories on the report in the days that followed. RT, Izvestia, and other Russian sources also spread the rumors.²⁵ When accused of conducting a coordinated disinformation campaign, Sputnik media personalities claimed to be simply asking legitimate questions about whether the story was true or not. Meanwhile, the story spread through Twitter and entered the wider media ecosystem through publications like *Haaretz* in Israel and Breitbart News in the United States.²⁶

The evidence of Russian involvement is, of course, circumstantial. But the story had many aspects of a disinformation campaign. Like the AIDS story, it was laundered through an obscure publication, which Russian media could then spread without taking responsibility for it. The prominence of the idea among Twitter accounts bears many of the hallmarks of Russian bots. And finally, some US experts later noted that they had been contacted by Russian journalists *in advance* of the publication by Euractiv, suggesting that Russian media were generally aware of the coming campaign.

What is more interesting, however, is the question: Do the Russians know their own disinformation is false? The answer to this question is not obvious.

The disinformation campaign was part of a continuing effort to paint US missile defense systems to be deployed in Poland and Romania as systems that could be converted to house offensive missiles, armed with nuclear weapons, and used to decapitate the Russian leadership. There was also a similar campaign in Poland during June 2016 following joint military exercises.²⁷

But what if the Russians believe it? What if the Russians believe that there is, in fact, a conspiracy to convert missile defense interceptors into nuclear-armed offensive missiles? And what if they come to believe that nuclear weapons are, in fact, covertly stationed around the world?

There is a fair amount of evidence that the Russians believe *precisely* that. For example, in 2009 then secretary of defense Robert Gates explained that “the Russians believed, despite our best efforts to dissuade them, that the ground-based interceptors in Poland could be fitted with nuclear weapons and become an offensive weapon like a Pershing and a weapon for which they would have virtually no warning time.”²⁸ The then deputy undersecretary of defense Jim Miller later told a meeting at the Arms Control Association that he was shocked to hear Gates say that in an unclassified setting. During the negotiations over the New START treaty, Russian officials insisted on treaty language prohibiting the emplacement of offensive systems in missile defense silos. This was a significant point of disagreement between the two parties that Russia raised repeatedly and ultimately succeeded in including in the treaty text. Russian leader Vladimir Putin himself has made the point repeatedly. Putin told writer Oliver Stone that “the launching pads of these antiballistic missiles can be transformed within a few hours [into] offensive missile launching pads. Look, if these antiballistic missiles are placed in Eastern Europe, if those missiles are placed on water, patrolling the Mediterranean and Northern Seas, and in Alaska, almost the whole Russian territory would be encircled by these systems.” In addition, he told a meeting of defense industry

officials that “the launchers, to be deployed after the radar stations in Romania and Poland go on stream, can easily be used for the deployment of intermediate and short range missiles. The conversion can actually happen in a very short time, and we will not even know what is happening there.”²⁹ The last sentence is particularly worrisome—if the Russians believe that the conversion can take place without their knowledge, then in a crisis they may well experience a kind of analytic slippage, going from “a conversion might have taken place” to a belief that “a conversion had taken place.”

It seems bizarre. There are no nuclear weapons in Poland or Romania, nor are there plans to convert these missiles to offensive purposes. The problem is that such a conversion is feasible, and it is the kind of thing that American officials occasionally propose. For example, the report accompanying the Senate version of the FY 2018 National Defense Authorization Act included language calling for “evaluating existing U.S. missile systems for modification to intermediate range and ground-launch, including Tomahawk, Standard Missile-3, Standard Missile-6, Long-Range Stand-Off Cruise Missile, and Army Tactical Missile System.” The SM-3, of course, is the missile deployed in Poland and Romania.³⁰

Of course, we know that there is no secret plan to convert the missile defenses in Poland and Romania into offensive nuclear-armed intermediate-range missiles. But the Russians do not know that—and that is the point. The Russians have pushed this particular conspiracy theory so long—maybe cynically at first, to recreate the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s—that now they might very well believe it. After President Donald Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would target with nuclear weapons any countries in Europe that hosted US intermediate-range missiles. “The European countries that agree to [host future US missiles],” Putin explained, “must realize that they will put their own territory at risk of a retaliatory strike.” Putin singled out Romania, explaining, “The Aegis launchers can be used for offensive missiles, not anti-missiles.

They only need to update the software and that's it. This can be done in hours. We will not even be able to guess what is happening, we will not be able to see it from the outside." There is no way to know whether Putin really believes this, but Van Evera's theory of blowback suggests he very well might. And that might be very dangerous in a crisis.

Escalate to De-escalate

The United States has its own myths about Russia, just as Russia has about us. Consider the idea, widespread in the United States, that Russia has a nuclear strategy that involves a limited use of nuclear weapons. "The dominant narrative about Russia's nuclear weapons in Western strategic literature since the beginning of the century," French political scientist Bruno Tertrais wrote, "has been something like this: Russia's doctrine of 'escalate-to-de-escalate' and its large-scale military exercises show that Moscow is getting ready to use low-yield, theatre nuclear weapons to stop NATO from defeating Russia's forces, or to coerce the Atlantic Alliance and end a conflict on terms favourable to Russia."³¹ Other American officials have gone further, asserting that they believe that Russian military doctrine contemplates the first use of a small number of nuclear weapons in the midst of a conventional conflict to compel NATO to accept a settlement favorable to Russia. "I don't think the Russian doctrine is escalate to de-escalate," General John E. Hyten, commander of US Strategic Command, told a conference of reporters. "To me, the Russian doctrine is to escalate to win."³² This narrative dominates conversations at conferences and appears in official US documents, including the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review.³³

It is worth noting how little evidence there is to support this view. A full examination is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth noting two dissents. Russia expert Olga Oliker concludes that assertions that Russia has an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy "do not track

with what I know of Russian nuclear strategy, nor with how Russians talk about it, for the most part.”³⁴ For Tertrais, “All the elements of this narrative, however, rely on weak evidence—and there is strong evidence to counter most of them.”³⁵ For nuclear security expert Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “The evidence for a lowered Russian nuclear threshold is getting weaker by the day.”³⁶

It is true, of course, that some Russian officials have discussed using nuclear weapons first—in precisely the same way that it is also true that some US officials have discussed giving the SM-3 an offensive role. Proving such an assertion requires more than curating selected statements from Russian officials. For most outside observers, the idea of escalate-to-de-escalate seems like a bit of a Beltway fad, a Team B exercise that slipped out of the Washington, DC, think-tank “fever swamp” and has gone viral. Tellingly, when pushed to explain why Russian writings and exercises have clearly moved away from such strategic concepts, proponents of the escalate-to-de-escalate narrative have invoked the notion that Russia’s classified doctrine must be different from the public one.³⁷

Despite the thin evidence to support this approach, the escalate-to-de-escalate narrative remains the dominant view in American strategic circles, much as the view that the United States has a covert plan to convert missile defense interceptors to offensive weapons is dominant among Russian strategists. Perhaps some will object to the comparison. *Their* concerns may be a conspiracy theory, but *ours* reflect a reasonable debate among viewpoints. Here I might note that sincerity of belief is hardly relevant, since we are concerned here precisely with the prospect that motivated reasoning might harden into sincere, if wrong-headed, conviction. For all its sincerity, the indignation that would meet the claim that escalate-to-de-escalate is little more than a conspiracy theory would seem little different to an outside observer than the indignation that would be heard in Moscow if someone denied that NATO were covertly converting missile defenses in Poland and Romania to nuclear-armed offensive roles.

Crisis Stability

These two ideas, even if false, could have real implications for crisis stability—especially if they interact with one another. Four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, there was a scare. It all started innocently enough. In 1995, a group of American and Norwegian scientists launched a sounding rocket from the Andøya Rocket Range off the northwest coast of Norway. This was all quite normal—there have been more than one thousand rocket launches from this site over the decades. Following standard protocol, Norwegian authorities informed their Russian counterparts of the launch.

Yet, as the sounding rocket headed up and away from Russia, Russia's Olenegorsk early-warning radar in Murmansk saw it. The radar operators thought the speed and flight pattern resembled not a sounding rocket but something more ominous: a single US Trident ballistic missile, launched from a submarine and heading toward Russia.

The sounding rocket was headed out to sea, away from Russia. But the radar operators saw something else. The radar operators saw a US ballistic missile, not a sounding rocket, and concluded that it was headed toward Russia, not away from it. Russian military officials looked at the lonely missile streaking toward their country and began to worry that the United States had fired it to black out Russian early-warning radars, with the main nuclear attack to fly past the blinded radars a few moments later.

So, a warning was passed up the chain of command, reaching all the way to Russian president Boris Yeltsin. He was informed of the impending attack and presented with Russia's "nuclear briefcase"—the *cheget*—which was activated for the very first time. All that was left was for Yeltsin to order a retaliation. And then? Nothing.

There was in fact no US nuclear-tipped missile headed for Russia. Yeltsin, fortunately, did not order Russian strategic forces to retaliate preemptively. This was four years after the end of the Cold War. US-Russian relations were as good as ever. Yeltsin simply did not think

his friend Bill Clinton would launch a surprise nuclear attack (also, he was sober). Happily, we survived.

Now, let us consider our current moment. The Nuclear Posture Review proceeds on the basis that, unlike in the 1990s, a nuclear war with Russia is very much a possibility. It imagines a scenario in which the United States and Russia are at war, for example with conventional weapons in the Baltics, when Vladimir Putin “escalates-to-de-escalate.” According to the Nuclear Posture Review, Moscow might use a small number of nuclear weapons under the “mistaken expectation that coercive nuclear threats or limited first use could paralyze the United States and NATO and thereby end a conflict on terms favorable to Russia.”³⁸

So this time there is no misunderstanding—the authors of the Nuclear Posture Review propose to “modify a small number of existing SLBM warheads to provide a low-yield option,” modifying the weapons so that they explode with far less destructive power. This would allow the United States to respond to a limited first nuclear use by Russia—in other words, the escalate-to-de-escalate scenario—by responding with a low-yield strike of its own. Put simply, they propose to replay the most frightening nuclear scare of the past thirty years, but for real—by deliberately launching a nuclear-armed Trident ballistic missile toward Russia with the expectation that Russian radars will see it, Putin will be informed, the *cheget* will be opened, and then Putin will decide to wait. And that once it explodes, Putin will wait for a report on its yield, that report will be accurate, and Putin will take no further action.

There are two contrary data points. First, Russian doctrine is not to wait for a nuclear warhead to detonate. Russia’s policy is a kind of “launch on warning”—although Putin, in an effort to be reassuring, has added that “warning” includes not merely detection of the launch but also the calculation of its trajectory. “A decision about using nuclear weapons can be made only if our missile warning system recorded not only the launch of missiles,” he has explained, “but also gave an accurate prediction of flight trajectories and the time when the warheads fall on Russia.”³⁹ Second, Putin has also made clear that he would not distinguish between different yields. “I believe it is my duty

to say this: any use of nuclear weapons of any yield—small, medium, or whatever—against Russia or its allies will be regarded as a nuclear attack against our country. Retaliation will be instant with all the ensuing consequences.”⁴⁰

Perhaps Putin is just bluffing. Maybe there really is a secret Russian nuclear doctrine to ride out an attack. Perhaps Putin is exaggerating his concerns about US missile defenses in Poland and Romania to score propaganda points. These are major assumptions on which to base US policy, especially since they may be based on motivated reasoning—“bum dope.”

Let us consider the alternative believed by Russian nuclear analysts: that the United States might covertly convert missile defense installations to give them offensive capabilities. Let us imagine that the Russian denial is sincere, that Moscow does not have an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy. If that is so, then Russian policy makers are likely to conclude that the Nuclear Posture Review is simply an elaborate justification to allow the United States to adopt the very strategy of which it accuses Moscow. And they will have evidence to support this view—from, of all places, Twitter.

Here is how one of the architects of the US Nuclear Posture Review responded when an expert at a Russian think tank tried to make a rhetorical point about the absurdity of “escalate-to-de-escalate.” He asked if, given the low standard for evidence adopted by US proponents, Russia should not worry that the United States might not have such a strategy. “Should Russia be worried that when US is faced with a loss in a conventional conflict with Moscow,” wrote Moscow consultant Andrey Baklitskiy, “Washington would use limited nuclear strike to ‘de-escalate’ the situation and cease hostilities on US terms?”

His American colleague responded: “Yes!!!!!!”⁴¹

The point, of course, is that information has consequences. The United States believes that Russia has an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy and is taking actions—the development of a low-yield SLBM option—to respond to it. And we accept that Russia should worry that

we will do the same. It is not controversial to observe that what the late economist Thomas Schelling called the reciprocal fear of surprise attack might be destabilizing. But it should be jarring to observe how little such fears need to be grounded in reality to pose a real danger.

Conclusion

It is uncomfortable to consider the fact that American and Russian elites are just as vulnerable to bad information as our relatives on Facebook are. Yet there is ample evidence that leaders in Moscow have made—and are making—decisions based on ideas about us that we find ridiculous. It would be extraordinary arrogance to imagine that we do not suffer some of the same problems. As Moscow and Washington drift back into an arms race, officials and politicians in both countries are spreading myths about the other with the high-minded purpose of creating the political will to keep up. This is how political systems function. “If we made our points clearer than the truth,” US statesman Dean Acheson later said of the first wave of Cold War propaganda, “we did not differ from most other educators and could hardly do otherwise.”⁴²

The problem, of course, is that clarity might well lead us into deeper crisis. Yet, unlike Acheson, we have hindsight. We do not have to wait for our own crisis like Berlin or Cuba to learn that false strategic concepts—like the missile gap—might lead us into oblivion. We also have experience with the tools—arms-control agreements—that can provide transparency, stability, and predictability. If the problem is that Russia believes there may be nuclear weapons, then we might imagine allowing Russian inspectors access to the sites. And if the United States believes that Russia is developing a covert nuclear doctrine, then we might imagine US military officials being invited to attend exercises and allowed to interact with their counterparts on the Russian general staff. These problems are old ones—ones we know how to manage, if not quite solve.

Notes

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