

# *The Kremlin's Return to Active Measures*

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Review of Thomas Rid's *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, April 2020)

The [final installment](#) of the Senate Intelligence Committee's multiyear probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, like the Mueller investigation before it, found unequivocally that Moscow engaged in "an aggressive, multifaceted effort to influence, or attempt to influence" the outcome. Despite this noteworthy bipartisan revelation, by the report's Aug. 18 release—nearly four years after the affair—most Americans were tired of reliving the 2016 shenanigans, and partisans on both sides of the political spectrum were waiting eagerly for the American electorate to cast judgment at the ballot box.

Yet the closing volume is of significant value. Hidden within its nearly 1,000 pages, the senators provide striking evidence of archetypal Russian geopolitical strategy, as defined by Thomas Rid in his new book, "[Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare](#)." For many geopoliticians, the fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of the East versus West rivalry that produced decades of nefarious activities. While Rid pays homage to the active measures of the Cold War, the long-run value of "Active Measures" is to preview the ways and means of great power competition to come

and the particularly American susceptibility thereof.

Rid's typology proposes two core competencies under the category of "active measures": disinformation and political warfare. Evidence of both is found in the Senate report. For instance, the Kremlin propagated the false narrative that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the U.S. election—a narrative designed to take Americans' eye off the ball. Meanwhile, Russian military intelligence (GRU) hackers stole and released emails from American politicians in an effort to harm the Democrats and their presidential nominee in the court of public opinion. While Moscow certainly sought to combine these two activities to sway the voting, the paramount goal was to debase underlying American institutions—such as elections themselves or the U.S. intelligence community.

These tricks are not new. Rid traces these kinds of acts from the 1920s to today, noting that they have originated on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet evidence of state-sponsored lies and political meddling is difficult to uncover even decades after the ruse has run its course. Government security apparatuses are often reluctant to

declassify the key details of their not-so-above-board operations. To that end, "Active Measures" fills a void in Western scholarship and understanding of these strategies.

What defines "active measures"? First, they are not the simple, uncoordinated lies and schemes of politicians and government officials. These plots are methodical and require the planning, support and deconfliction of large bureaucracies. For an active measure to take hold within the minds and actions of the intended audience, the highest levels of governance must be in lockstep; any slip-up in messaging or security could uncover the ploy and unleash unintended consequences. Second, all active measures embrace dishonesty at the core. The deceit could be the substance of the campaign itself (such as Ukrainian meddling) or the true identity of individual(s) responsible for exposing true information (such as the GRU's hacking of Democratic National Committee emails). Third, active measures always seek a specific geopolitical end—generally, to weaken the adversary.

Rid spends the bulk of "Active Measures" chronicling roughly two dozen East versus West schemes of the past century. Often considered the foundational disinformation campaign, "The Trust" was an elaborate subversion concocted during the first decade of communist Russia that created a faux monarchist organization in Moscow planning the overthrow of the party. Running several years, "The Trust" not only succeeded in obstructing Russian reactionary efforts and keeping the fledgling communist system afloat, but it also fooled Western intelligence agencies into greatly exaggerating the unanimity of the Russian people and the capability of the Russian military.

As active measures grew in size and scope after World War II, the use of journalists and media outlets emerged as a key theme. Rid pored over nearly 800 pages of now-declassified U.S. government records on

operation "DTLINEN" to reveal that an American-sponsored print agency, Aquator publishing; a satirical newspaper, Der Tarantel; and even phony editions of the East German youth journal Junge Welt were exploited to delegitimize socialist movements behind the Iron Curtain. Both Washington and Moscow found value in having their messages carried by ostensibly nonofficial media outlets.

By the 1970s, Berlin was the epicenter of the democracy versus communism ideological battle. The East German Stasi emerged as the actor that would escalate active measures to new heights. Its Department X concocted many schemes during the period, but its effort in April 1972 to avert the removal of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt marked an escalation in geopolitical competition practices—vote tampering. Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, or policy of détente vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc, was too vital for the East Germans or their Kremlin overlords to give up without a fight. Needing to influence just two West German legislators to defeat Brandt's removal, Department X hurriedly put a plan in motion. The first target, Julius Steiner, was an easy mark and simply received 50,000 DM (just under \$17,000) to abstain from the Brandt vote. The second traitor was involved in a much more elaborate scheme that took decades to uncover. Department X retained a Bavarian journalist whom they tasked to recruit legislator Leo Wagner under false flag—in other words, convincing him that he was working on behalf of another nation. Wagner cast his vote in support of Brandt, believing (incorrectly) that he was tasked to do so by the United States. West German rapprochement with the Soviets was saved.

While Rid's determination and diligence to uncover these chronicles of historical nefarious activities is commendable, it would be a mistake to leave these lessons in the past. The most enriching feature of "Active Measures" is its applicability to conditions today. The author's most salient

conclusion is just how acutely active measures might put liberal democracies at risk.

The American republic, as a “political system that places its trust in essential custodians of factual authority” requires a fundamental faith in U.S. institutions to flourish. If these institutions, from the Constitution to Congress, are to have legitimacy, they must be seen by Americans as emanating from the principles of patriotism, transparency, honesty and fairness. Without these principles and legitimacy, these and other institutions of democratic governance might well be trampled, just as they are in autocracies around the globe.

The bipartisan Senate report detailed just how those institutions and principles were held at risk. The senators concluded that Trump adviser Roger Stone attempted to convey intents and strategies between the campaign and the Russian hack-and-dump operatives. Trump campaign chair Paul Manafort promulgated the lie that Ukraine, not Russia, had interfered in the 2016 election, in direct opposition to the U.S. intelligence community’s assessment. The Russian Internet Research Agency was even so bold as to directly influence American social media groups to stoke partisan sentiments at both poles of the political spectrum. The Stone-Manafort revelations questioning the patriotism of some of the president’s closest allies are damning in their own right. But the more perilous consequences of these cases involve Russian erosion of faith in the honesty and transparency of the U.S. government and the solidarity of the American people against foreign influence.

Active measures targeting the United States did not end in 2016. The likelihood of deception of the American body politic continues to rise. Rid notes that the introduction and propagation of disinformation has a polarizing effect, “as distinguishing between facts and non-facts becomes harder, distinguishing between

friend and foe becomes easier.” We see these consequences daily. An outlandish dossier about the president finds its way into a warrant, the White House erodes trust in the electoral process, or the once-fringe conspiracy theory QAnon goes mainstream and demonizes political foes.

Regardless of confirmation of any foreign source or contribution, each of these instances is built on a foundation of disinformation and each inflames the American audience. As the divergence between Americans grows, so do the opportunities for foreign adversaries to contribute to weakening U.S. institutions. Rid concludes that “active measures are purpose-designed temptations, designed to exaggerate, designed to give into prejudice, to preformed notions—and to erode the capacity of an open society for fact-based, sober debate, and thus wear down the norms and institutions that resolve internal conflict peacefully.”

Reading the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report through the lens of the “Active Measures” taxonomy yields a sobering assessment of the fragility of American governance and the electorate. Rid’s contribution to memorializing and characterizing these past campaigns is a service to historians and geopoliticians in its own right. But the enduring legacy of “Active Measures” is the exposure of a glaring softness in American national security that transcends the traditional firewall between domestic and foreign affairs. Only by resisting the urge to act before validating inflammatory information can Americans resist the possibility of falling prey to the snares of a foreign adversary bent on corroding the essential democratic unity of the United States.

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