Defense Bill Legalizes US Propaganda

A new feature in the latest version of the National Defense Authorization Act would legalize U.S. government propaganda directed at the American people, with the belief that successful wars require domestic acceptance, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is misnamed, since it has less to do with defense than offense. The offensive it wages is not just against a growing list of alleged enemies of the United States but also, from a constitutional perspective, against the rights of American citizens and residents.

Major parts of the legislation are based on the assumption that key legal protections for individuals are incompatible with the requirements of national security. The result is that Americans are now caught between “the terrorists” and the authoritarian propensities of their own government.

The NDAA specifically Section 1021(b)(2) has already institutionalized the U.S. military’s ability to indefinitely detain, without charge or trial, citizens and non-citizens alike. This is a serious abuse of power. The monarchical authority our Founders sought to escape practiced such a “disappearance” of people. So have the contemporary dictatorships that Washington has so consistently supported.

Now Americans, apparently having no patience or imagination to seek routes to security compatible with our own legal principles, are ready to illegally imprison without recourse those whom we (rightly or wrongly) fear.

A recent decision by New York Appellate Court Judge Katherine Forrest suspended this part of the NDAA, after a lawsuit brought against the Act by seven journalists and anti-war activists. The ruling came as an embarrassing surprise to “Justice” Department lawyers defending indefinite detention.

What will now follow will be an effort to overturn or minimize Judge Forrest’s ruling because it “restrains future military operations” that might be ordered by the commander in chief during wartime. At first the government asserted the judge’s ruling applied only to the seven plaintiffs, but she quickly clarified her ruling to make it plain that her ruling “enjoined enforcement of Section 1021(b)(2) against anyone.”

The government lawyers will certainly appeal Forrest’s decision. If necessary,
they will declare to the Supreme Court the necessity of eroding the very Constitution they are sworn to uphold, and so presently myopic is that court of last resort, that it will almost certainly agree.

However, the negative potential of the NDAA does not stop with the issue of indefinite detention. It has now come to light that the 2013 version of the Act (passed by the House but yet to be taken up by the Senate) allows the State Department and Defense Department to direct the same kind of massive propaganda campaigns here in the U.S. that are presently waged as part of American war efforts in foreign lands.

This latest maneuver is the bipartisan work of two congressmen: Mac Thornberry (Republican) of Texas and Adam Smith (Democrat) of Washington State. Both claim that current law, which prohibits these government agencies from propagandizing within the U.S., “ties the hands of America’s diplomatic officials, military and others by inhibiting our ability to effectively communicate in a credible way.”

What of Public Discourse?

Thornberry and Smith’s action raises the question of the role of public discourse. Of course, the discourse coming from government has always been skewed. Yet up to this point there has been legislative recognition that the government should not lie to or manipulate its own people the way it does with foreign audiences.

It is this distinction that Thornberry and Smith would eliminate by writing into the institutional job-descriptions of the State and Defense Departments the mission of selling U.S. government foreign policy and its accompanying wars to Americans through massive advertising campaigns.

Of course Thornberry and Smith do not see their effort as sponsoring ever more sophisticated efforts at misinformation. These two congressmen have obviously swallowed whole the official patriotic storyline and now have concluded that everyone else must do likewise.

This is what happens when elected officials fail to distinguish between propaganda and “communicating in a credible way.” Their gullibility is not a good sign. It suggests that what often does not work in foreign lands is quite likely to work well here at home.

People in places like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan know that the U.S. is or was in their countries as a military conqueror. A few might approve of that position, but we can safely say that most do not. The mayhem that surrounds conquest and occupation is so immediate, so close to home, that the millions of American dollars spent for planted news stories and other forms of
misrepresentation are not going to counter that reality and thus improve the U.S. image and win wars.

However, when and if the State and Defense Departments launch professional misinformation campaigns here in the U.S., success is all but guaranteed. That is because there is no countervailing context in which most Americans, including most in Congress, can judge the psychological warfare message.

The violence and brutality of invasion, occupation and resistance do not impact the local lives of Americans (except the families of U.S. soldiers who are always considered heroes), and so you are left with a relentlessly repeated patriotic message from sources you have been taught to trust.

It is an interesting and certainly significant fact that although the propaganda campaigns of the State and Defense Departments are presently prohibited by law in the homeland, a comparable process of government misinformation takes place nonetheless. [For a historical perspective on this kind of domestic propaganda, see Robert Parry’s *Lost History.*]

Neither the State nor the Defense Departments could have done better than the administration of George W. Bush in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Washington’s consistent lying, abetted by compliant media allies, paved the way for a popularly supported bloody debacle. In Iraq, the same propaganda, contextualized as it was by widespread violence, brought forth skepticism and disgust.

Whatever the record of such efforts abroad, there seems little doubt that Bush’s success in 2003 now inspires the governments “information operatives” to seek legal authority to wage professionally designed “giant marketing campaigns” to effectively sell the nation’s foreign policy and wars to its own citizens. Hence the bipartisan efforts of Thornberry and Smith.

It should be kept in mind that government bureaucracies, be they civilian or military, are not places of free discourse. They are “get with the mission and follow orders” environments. While their representatives, drawn as they are from the American public, might give lip service to democracy, honesty and meaningful discussion, they really do not practice these tenets and probably do not believe in them either.

That is why, in an era when money stands for free speech and bellicose conservatives own more and more of the media, Thornberry and Smith’s legislation appears obvious and logical. If passed into law, it will become the capstone of an ongoing process that is turning public discourse into a poisoned well of indoctrination.
Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*; *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism.*