

## POLITICS

## Congressmen Seek To Lift Propaganda Ban

Propaganda that was supposed to target foreigners could now be aimed at Americans, reversing a longstanding policy. "Disconcerting and dangerous," says Shank.

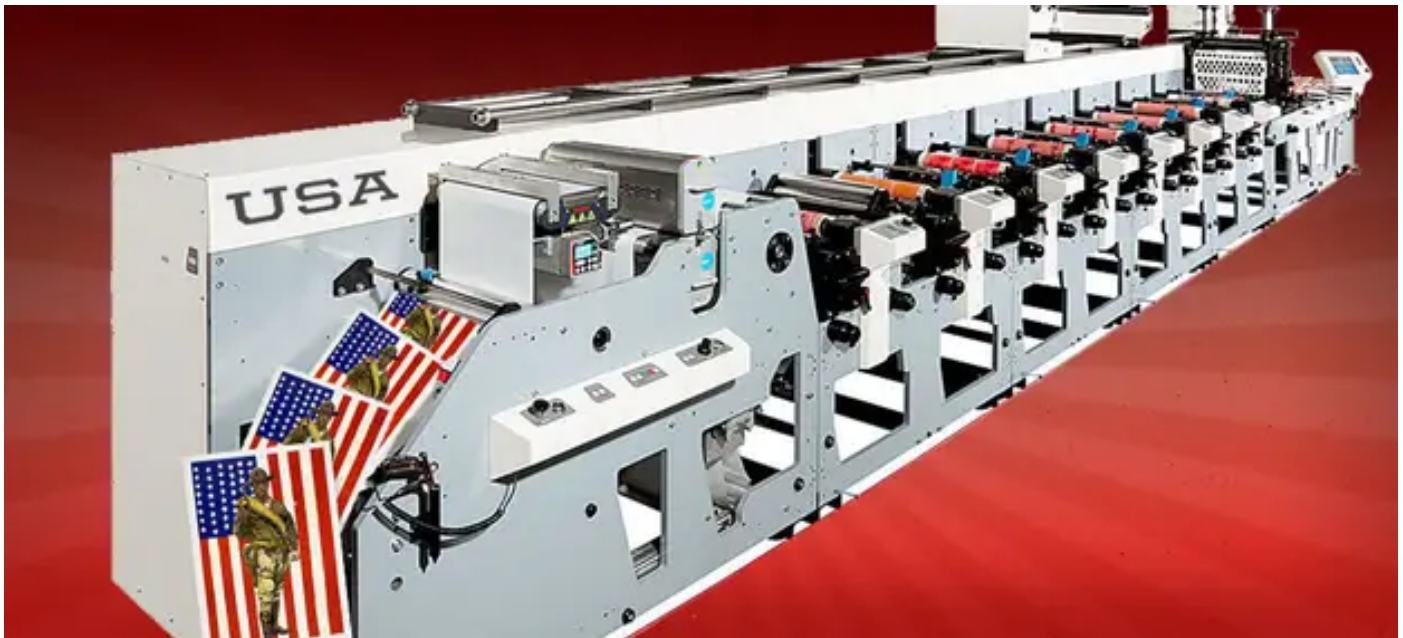


Michael Hastings  
BuzzFeed Staff

Posted on May 18, 2012 at 4:27 pm



Be one of the first to comment



Amy Sly for BuzzFeed

*buzzfeed.com*

An amendment that would legalize the use of propaganda on American audiences is being inserted into the latest defense authorization bill, BuzzFeed has learned.

The amendment would “strike the current ban on domestic dissemination” of propaganda material produced by the State Department and the independent Broadcasting Board of Governors, according to the summary of the law at the House Rules Committee's official website.

ADVERTISEMENT

The tweak to the bill would essentially neutralize two previous acts—the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and Foreign Relations Authorization Act in 1987—that had been passed to protect U.S. audiences from our own government’s misinformation campaigns.

The bi-partisan amendment is sponsored by Rep. Mac Thornberry from Texas and Rep. Adam Smith from Washington State.

In a little noticed press release earlier in the week — buried beneath the other high-profile issues in the \$642 billion defense bill, including indefinite detention and a prohibition on gay marriage at military installations — Thornberry warned that in the Internet age, the current law “ties the hands of America’s diplomatic officials, military, and others by inhibiting our ability to effectively communicate in a credible way.”

The bill's supporters say the informational material used overseas to influence foreign audiences is too good to not use at home, and that new techniques are needed to help fight Al-Qaeda, a borderless enemy whose own propaganda reaches Americans online.

ADVERTISEMENT

Critics of the bill say there are ways to keep America safe without turning the massive information operations apparatus within the federal government against American citizens.

“Clearly there are ways to modernize for the information age without wiping out the distinction between domestic and foreign audiences,” says Michael Shank, Vice President at the Institute for Economics and Peace in Washington D.C. “That Reps Adam Smith and Mac Thornberry want to roll back protections put in place by previously-serving Senators – who, in their wisdom, ensured limits to taxpayer-funded propaganda promulgated by the US government – is disconcerting and dangerous.”

“I just don’t want to see something this significant – whatever the pros and cons – go through without anyone noticing,”

“ says one source on the Hill, who is disturbed by the law. According to this source, the law would allow "U.S. propaganda

intended to influence foreign audiences to be used on the domestic population."

The new law would give sweeping powers to the government to push television, radio, newspaper, and social media onto the U.S. public. "It removes the protection for Americans," says a Pentagon official who is concerned about the law. "It removes oversight from the people who want to put out this information. There are no checks and balances. No one knows if the information is accurate, partially accurate, or entirely false."

According to this official, "senior public affairs" officers within the Department of Defense want to "get rid" of Smith-Mundt and other restrictions because it prevents information activities designed to prop up unpopular policies—like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Critics of the bill point out that there was rigorous debate when Smith Mundt passed, and the fact that this is so "under the radar," as the Pentagon official puts it, is troubling.

The Pentagon spends some \$4 billion a year to sway public opinion already, and it was recently revealed by USA Today the DoD spent \$202 million on information operations in Iraq and Afghanistan last year.

In an apparent retaliation to the USA Today investigation, the two reporters working on the story appear to have been targeted by Pentagon contractors, who created fake Facebook pages and Twitter accounts in an attempt to discredit them.

ADVERTISEMENT

(In fact, a second amendment to the authorization bill — in reaction to the USA Today report — seeks cuts to the Pentagon's propaganda budget overseas, while this amendment will make it easier for the propaganda to spread at home.)

The evaporation of Smith-Mundt and other provisions to safeguard U.S. citizens against government propaganda campaigns is part of a larger trend within the diplomatic and military establishment.

In December, the Pentagon used software to monitor the Twitter debate over Bradley Manning's pre-trial hearing; another program being developed by the Pentagon would design software to create "sock puppets" on social media outlets; and, last year, General William Caldwell, deployed an information operations team under his command that had been trained in psychological operations to influence visiting American politicians to Kabul.

A U.S. Army whistleblower, Lieutenant Col. Daniel Davis, noted recently in his scathing 84-page unclassified report on Afghanistan that there remains a strong desire within the defense establishment "to enable Public Affairs officers to influence American public opinion when they deem it necessary to "protect a key friendly center of gravity, to wit US national will," he wrote, quoting a well-regarded general.

The defense bill passed the House Friday afternoon.

CORRECTION: The amendment under consideration would not apply to the Department of Defense, though the it is attached to a defense authorization bill.



**Michael Hastings**  
BuzzFeed Staff

Contact [Michael Hastings](mailto:amy+252855@buzzfeed.com) at [amy+252855@buzzfeed.com](mailto:amy+252855@buzzfeed.com).

Got a confidential tip? [Submit it here](#)

**MORE LIKE THIS**



**COVID Scams Are Surging, But Congress Isn't Giving The Government Power To Repay Victims**



**Congress Hit New Levels Of Absurdity This Week**



**A Group Of Republicans Could Briefly Shut Down The Government Over Vaccine Mandates**



**Crime Researchers Say Political Candidates Are Ignoring Evidence As The Midterm Campaigns Heat Up**



**A Possible Senate Change To CDC Leadership Has Public Health Experts Worried**



**Florida Republicans Are Creating An Office Of Election Crimes As Trump's Fraud Claims Continue To Spread**

## incoming

Your weekday morning guide to breaking news, cultural analysis, and everything in between

le !



**As Someone Who Loves Astrology And Taylor Swift, This Is The "Midnights" Song That Matches Each Sign**

**Let's Play A Game Of "One Must Go: Thanksgiving Food Edition"**

**The Midterm Elections Have Gone To The Dogs**

**These Are 15 Of Google's Most Misspelled Words Of The Year — How Many Can You Get Correct?**

**Live Results: How Americans Are Voting On Abortion**

**20 Things From Target So Stylish, You'll Want To Add Them To Your Weekly Rotation**

**Live Results: 2022 Midterm Elections**

**Two Poll Workers In Georgia Were Dismissed After Officials Found "Questionable Social Media Posts"**

**The Hero Of This Election Is The Freaky Little Spider On Ulster County's "I Voted" Stickers**

ADVERTISEMENT

**Kumail Nanjani Just Played With Kittens While Answering Questions, And Yes, I'm Obsessed**

**In My Humble Opinion, These Are The Top 6 Thanksgiving Dishes**

**21 Pairs Of Workout Shorts For Both The Gym And At-Home Exercise**

**Former "SNL" Cast Member Chris Redd Got Real About Why Kanye West's Pro-Trump "SNL" Rant Was "Bullshit"**

**Tell Me What You Eat In A Day And I'll Try My Best To Guess Your Zodiac Sign**

**15 Nepo Babies Who Are Like Third Generation Hollywood Royalty**

**31 Items For Your Home That Scream "I'm Good At Being An Adult"**

**People Are Once Again Just Finding Out Chris Evans Is Covered In Chest Tattoos After His "Sexiest Man Alive" Photo Shoot**

**Choose The Things You Love Most And I'll Tell You Which Student From "The School For Good And Evil" You Are**

ADVERTISEMENT

**Lauren Conrad And Kristin Cavallari Just Hashed Out Their Decade Old Drama From "Laguna Beach"**

**The \$2 Billion Powerball Jackpot Has A Winner And It's Me**

**People Online Aren't Sure What To Think Of Selena Gomez And Raquelle Stevens' Friendship After Watching Selena's New Documentary, With Some Calling It "Toxic" And "Passive-Aggressive"**

**Followers Believe That Banned Influencer Andrew Tate Has Snuck Back Onto Twitter Again**

**These Candies Are Supposedly "Iconic" — Are They Appropriately Rated, Though?**

**I'm Actually Shaking With Rage At The Audacity Of These 16 Rude, Fake, Entitled Friends**

**23 Unforgivable Things Subway Employees Absolutely Hate That Customers Do And 8 Things They Absolutely Love**

**32 Products That'll Probably Make You Like Traveling More**

**"I Couldn't Even Afford My Groceries": Model Olivia Culpo Opened Up About Her Financial Struggles After Nick Jonas Broke Up With Her**

ADVERTISEMENT

**This Woman Says Her Driver Broke Into Her Apartment In The Middle Of The Night, And It Should Not Be Taken Lightly**

**We Can Predict Something About Your Future Based On The House You Design**

**17 Photos Of The Very Infuriating And Very Specific Things Baristas Have Had To Deal With**

**Here's What Everyone Wore To The 2022 CFDA Fashion Awards**

**Here's What The Cast Of "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" Have To Say About The New Film**

**Robert Downey Jr. Just Debuted His Bald Head After Allowing His Kids To Shave Off His Hair**



**Ted Cruz Got Hit By A Beer Can As The Astros' Victory Parade Booed Him And The Man Who Allegedly Threw It Was Arrested**

**5 True Crime Podcasts Credited With Convictions — Or Exonerations**

**I'm Genuinely Curious If You Find Chris Evans Sexier Than These Guys — Like, These Questions Are Harder Than You Think**

ADVERTISEMENT

**Whitney Houston Almost Played A Character On "Glee," And Ryan Murphy Explained Why It Didn't Happen**

**What's Your Bedroom Aesthetic?**

**Men Are Admitting Things They Didn't Know Until They Lived With A Woman, And It's Insightful And...A Lot**

**30 Things From Wayfair Perfect For Anyone Trying To Improve Their WFH Setup**

**Jennifer Lopez Has A Pretty Good Reason Why She Took Ben Affleck's Last Name After Marrying Him**

**Ryan Reynolds Recalled The Exact Moment That His And Blake Lively's Kids Realized That "Aunt" Taylor Swift Is Actually A Global Superstar**

**What's Your Mental Age?**

**The Cast Of "The Watcher" Vs Their Real Life Counterparts**

**35 Fancy Kitchen Gifts That Are As Useful As They Are Luxurious**

ADVERTISEMENT

**Netflix Is Being Accused Of Treating "Serial Killers Like They're The Avengers" After Announcing That Its Jeffrey Dahmer Series Will Return For More Seasons Focusing On "Other Monstrous Figures"**

**Judge These Thanksgiving Dishes Honestly To Find Out Which "Friends" Character You Are Deep Down**

**21 Movies We Still Can't Believe They Actually Made**

**30 Winter Wardrobe Staples That The Devil On Your Shoulder Would Totally Say You Need**

**Let's See If You Can Answer All 15 Of These Questions About "Om Shanti Om" Correctly**

**Jessica Simpson Has Responded To Fans' Concern Over New Instagram Video**

**We'll Reveal Your Mental Age, But First You Have To Eat A Massive Feast**

**29 Chic And Cheap Accents To Breathe New Life Into Your Home**

**"Girl Meets World" Is Being Called Out For Treating Autism Like "A Terminal Disease" After A "Toxic" Clip Resurfaced On TikTok**

ADVERTISEMENT

**25 Roles That Totally Changed How We See These Actors**

**The News Roundup You Need This Election Day**

**Pinpointing The Voice Of A Nation**

**Here's Where To Follow "The White Lotus" Season 2 Cast On The 'Gram In Case You Don't Already**

**30 Gifts For Anyone Who Loathes The Cold**

**It's Election Day! Here Are The Races To Watch**

**19 Cleaning Products To Take Your Home From Looking Good To Looking Great**

**These Then And Now Pictures Show What The Sexiest Man Alive Has Looked Like Since 1985**

**27 Stylish Things From Target That Are Perfect To Wear As The Seasons Change**

ADVERTISEMENT

**10 Dr. Fate Facts Everyone Should Know Before Making Dr. Strange Comparisons**

**53 Products Reviewers Loved So Much They're Buying Them Again As Gifts**

**38 Things From Amazon You'll Actually Want To Wear This Winter**

**What, In Your Humble Opinion, Is The Single Most Romantic Line Ever Uttered In TV History?**

**25 Of The Best Places To Buy Comfy Loungewear**

**26 Things From Target That'll Make Traveling This Holiday Season Much Less Stressful**

**31 Skincare Products From Walmart That'll Make You Think, "Why Didn't I Start Buying This Years Ago"**

**"Spirit: Stallion Of The Cimarron" Is The Best Animated Movie Of All Time And This Is The Hill I'll Die On**

**A Gay Man Revealed The Story Of How His Ex-Wife Realized He Was Having A Same-Sex Affair, And It's Sparking A Heated Debate**

## Sections

Arts & Entertainment

Books

Celebrity

Culture & Criticism

Health

Inequality

Investigations

JPG

LGBTQ

Opinion

Politics

Science

Tech

World

## Company

Support Us

BuzzFeed.com


Privacy Policy

User Agreement

## Follow Us

 Facebook

 Twitter

 Instagram

**BuzzFeed**.News

a **BuzzFeed** brand.