

Writing Fiction to Tell the Truth By Richard Thieme

Things are often not what they seem. That's a "fact." But that fact and others are filtered into our brains through images and words that often distort the truth—sometimes due to sloppy thinking but often as a result of policies adopted by "the national security state," a complex state of affairs that carried over from World War 2 and has never stopped.

The consequences of this shift are profound.

A regimen of propaganda and censorship established during World War 2 made sense. The government did not want Americans to know that debris and bodies, for example, washed up along the Atlantic coast all the time due to U-boat activity. That secret and others were well kept with the cooperation of the media that served as portals into the "mind of society."

The Cold War, an enterprise that used propaganda and censorship as weapons, ensured that these policies would continue. Playing the great game of perception management on a global scale, information operations inevitably framed the thinking of Americans as well as enemies. Enemies and citizens, hearing the same narratives, became indistinguishable.

Eisenhower, assisted by the Dulles brothers at the State Department and the CIA, was afforded plausible deniability of the use of covert operations (e.g. the overthrow of Iran's Mossadegh and Argentina's Arbenz) and established a pattern for subsequent secret operations.

I asked a historian at NSA what historical events we could discuss with a reasonable expectation that our words meant the same details. "Anything up to 1945," he said with a laugh – but he wasn't kidding.

The end of the Cold War did not end those policies.. New technologies enhanced the science of perception management. Cover stories weave truths, half-truths, and lies in a way that makes it impossible for average citizens to know what's real. The attack on 9/11 was a catalyst to do even more, and today, social media serve as accelerators for spreading the arson fires of distorted truth.

The extent of governmental secrecy, the number of documents now classified, and the number of people granted clearances because of a "need to know" have all expanded dramatically. The "need to know" as a requirement for access to compartmented truth means that many inside the intelligence community itself do not have all the dots to connect either. They too have to rely on what's "out here" to guess at what's real.

Paradoxically, as a result, the only way to tell the truth is through fiction. Movies, television, and books present stories of practices that are sometimes true, sometimes not,

but which create a shared narrative reinforced by repetition. As they percolate through the mind of society, manufactured narratives bind us, one to another, in fabrications that seem real, but serve other ends.

One obvious example is the use of the television series “24” to hammer home the belief that when a bomb is ticking and will explode in 20 minutes, torture is appropriate. “24” has even been cited by policy makers as if it is factual, using fiction to support the real-life decision that torture is an appropriate instrument of covert war.

The fact is, that “24” scenario is bogus. The “ticking bomb” story has never happened and is not likely to happen. The confluence of events required to create such a scenario don’t mesh in real life.

But the real work – convincing Americans that torture is useful – was done.

That example, writ large, suggests the nature of the world of distortion, illusion, and misdirection in which we swim. Hence, my talk for Def Con, the Las Vegas security conference where I will speak for the 19th year, is “Fiction is the Only Way to Tell the Truth.”

Over a decade ago, a friend at the NSA told me not to discuss issues of "ethical considerations for intelligence" that we had explored unless I wrote fiction. "It's the only way you can tell the truth," he said.

One result was "Mind Games," (Duncan Long Publishing: 2010), a collection of stories that illuminates “non-consensual realities” e.g. the worlds of hackers and intelligence professionals.

In the first story, “Zero Day: Roswell,” a dying intelligence professional lists “things we do that you don’t know.” Because it was fiction – mind candy – the details, written in 2006, could float out there on the edge and be ignored or dismissed by the “authoritative voices” that govern what is real.

An astute reader recently tweeted passages from that story juxtaposed with revelations from Edward Snowden, noting that they align. But Snowden stated them as facts and documented them with stolen data, so he has to live in Russia. A mere scribbler of fiction, I can stay here.

When another friend, an intelligence analyst at NSA, read “Zero Day: Roswell” he called with a chuckle in his voice. “95% of this story isn’t fiction,” he said, “but you have to know which parts to have the key to the code.”

Readers thought the bits about Roswell aliens were true, but they were fiction. They skipped over details about technology, which were often accurate. But without corroboration from an “authoritative voice,” such assertions were speculative and anomalous – which meant they never connected to the “real.”

One inevitable negative consequence of living in this national security state is the proliferation of “niches of truthiness” in which internet-fed cattle eat everything dumped into the digital trough. A lack of critical thinking has led to the decline of political discourse. Investigative reporters shrink in number – there were 300+ in the newsroom of the Journal Sentinel once, but there are fewer than 100 today – while the blogosphere explodes, where anyone can say anything. Then followers retweet, repost, and “comment” from bunkers of invincible ignorance, sustaining distrust of official sources and basic common sense. The proliferation of angry, distrustful, well-organized “thought vigilantes,” exploited and mobilized by shout show hosts, with easy access to arms – I’d call that a negative consequence.

Do we need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing?

I am often asked after speeches if I believe we went to the moon or have rovers on Mars. Many people, because they don’t know what to believe, are willing to believe anything. United in fear –fear makes us predictable - they can then be collected in digital corrals and the entire corral can be moved, while those in it don’t even notice.

In a speech at the NSA prior to Snowdengate, I warned of the chill created by wholesale intrusion and surveillance and a lack of concern for the effect on the mind of society. I warned of a lack of accountability to “we the people” who the agency was charged to protect and defend. Once Snowden delivered his bombs, the discussion of those issues went quickly to the top, where “ spin” strategies are devised in secret.

Empires create the seeds of their demise through their own internal dynamics. An external event may serve as a catalyst but is never a full and sufficient cause. The good news is, that means we have some control over what we can choose to do. The bad news is, the historical record – as much as we can tell what it is – suggests that we won’t use that freedom.

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