

REPRESENT

Our Achilles' Heel

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Represent is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Beverly Kirk addresses how Russian influence exploited America's racial divide, and while media literacy can help combat influence campaigns racism will continue to be a vulnerability until it is addressed.

Race is America's Achilles' heel; a weak spot that makes the country vulnerable. As former Secretary of State Dr. Condoleezza Rice said in an [interview in 2008](#), race in America is a "birth defect" the country has a problem discussing. It certainly has been a constant source of division since the country's founding. Racial division, specifically White-Black racial strife and the efforts of international actors to exploit it, is nothing new. During the Cold War, [Russia used America's racial divide](#) to target Black Americans with propaganda meant to show how the communist Soviet Union lacked the racial discrimination of the United States, undermine U.S. promotion of democracy and equality, and highlight U.S. racial problems on the world stage when the United States criticized the former USSR's behavior on human rights. What is new is the lightning-fast technology that allows actors with nefarious intent to not only spread disinformation and misinformation through social media aimed at exploiting America's racial tensions between Blacks and Whites but also to access untold numbers of people at one time with the click of a mouse. Today, race remains a millstone around America's neck. Instead of getting smaller and lighter after decades of "two steps forward, one step back" progress in law and society, it is growing larger and heavier and is a threat to national security.

The [FBI](#) and the [Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#) recently identified domestic white supremacist and racially motivated violence as the top violent extremist terrorist threat to the United States. In that same DHS report, Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf observed that Russia is the top "[purveyor of disinformation and misinformation in the United States.](#)" As noted in the 2018 Senate Intelligence Committee report, Russia [targeted Black Americans](#) with disinformation and misinformation in the run up to the 2016 election, and now it appears to have continued [targeting them on racially divisive issues](#), in some cases even basing the effort in West African countries to try to disguise the source. Russia may also be [targeting white supremacists](#) with propaganda aimed at increasing racial tensions.

Combine Russia's Cold War history of targeting Blacks and using racial issues to further Russian political aims with its present-day actions and add in the concerns outlined in the DHS report about U.S. white supremacist violence, and the result is a race-based security threat at home that compels the United States to turn inward, spending less attention on other challenges to the country's security. Consider this: The wars of the past two decades diminished the Al-Qaeda threat, and the more recent conflict against ISIS significantly lessened its ability to threaten or attack the U.S. However, their ideologies remain alive, their followers dispersed but not completely silenced or inactive. There is always the risk of these types of actors "going to ground" to regroup while attention is focused elsewhere. Right now,

the threat that racially motivated violence presents within the United States has the potential to distract attention and resources from other security threats and nefarious actors who could view current racial tensions as an opportunity to plot or strike.

These threats will not abate soon. The risk and cost to Russia for fighting on the information battlefield is relatively low, and the payoff potentially high. It would seem highly escalatory for the United States to launch a missile to take out the Internet Research Agency where Russia's internet warriors churned out disinformation and misinformation on the one issue (race) that more than any other divides America. Although the U.S. Cyber Command did strike back at Russian influence efforts [in the 2018 midterm election](#) with a temporary disruption of internet service, this virtual shot across the bow was hardly a significant deterrent.

To date, social media company efforts to battle race-based and all other types of disinformation and misinformation have largely been ineffective. Plus, thinking that social media companies will on their own fight the kind of counter-disinformation campaign the United States needs is foolhardy. Information is the product they sell and fighting a war against bad information won't help their bottom line, which is likely why combating disinformation and misinformation have not been a priority until recently.

Fighting back against race-based disinformation and misinformation will not be easy. Improving media literacy and educating targeted groups on how to recognize disinformation and misinformation is crucially important. The ability to recognize bad information reduces its effectiveness and impact.

However, better media literacy will not address the underlying issue of race. American society must grapple with it once and for all in order to remove it as a tool that adversaries can use. How does that happen? The first step is admitting race is still a problem in many critical facets of American life. U.S. schools [remaining segregated more than 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education](#) and [White nationalists infiltrating the U.S. military](#) are two phenomena that are completely separate from the protests over policing that have rocked the country following the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others earlier this year. The next step is brutally honest dialogue about the racial divide and what it will take to resolve issues such as policing and institutional racism. Nothing about this will be easy, but it is a starting point.

Adversaries choose race as a subject of disinformation and misinformation campaigns because they know it works to divide Americans and has divided Americans throughout our history. The United States has not effectively dealt with its "birth defect" nor has it addressed divisions that uniquely pertain to Black and White Americans. Although there have been some efforts made, true racial reconciliation has not really happened, leaving open a societal weak spot anyone who knows our history can use against us. And therein lies the reason race is our Achilles' heel. As long as the hard conversations and work on race that could help bridge the divide and remove the weak spot never occur, America's adversaries will continue using the issue to distract and even foment unrest that threatens the country's security and its unity.

Author

[Beverly Kirk](#) is a fellow and director for outreach in the CSIS International Security Program and director of the CSIS Smart Women, Smart Power Initiative. She previously was director of the iDeas Lab, the multimedia production and design studio at CSIS. Before joining CSIS, Kirk was a journalist and worked for local and national news organizations, including NBC, NPR, and PBS. She spent much of her career focused on domestic and international politics and government. She also founded a media consulting company and has expertise in media curriculum design. She is a member of the adjunct faculty at the American University School of Communication. Kirk holds an M.A. in diplomacy and international commerce with a concentration in international politics and national security from the University of Kentucky and is a summa cum laude graduate of Western Kentucky University with degrees in history and broadcast journalism.

Beverly also hosts the [Smart Women, Smart Power podcast](#), which features powerful conversations with women leaders from around the globe who are experts in foreign policy, national security, international business, and development.

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