

THE WORLDVIEW OF DISINFORMATION GROUPS

My name is Mark Juergensmeyer from the University of California, Santa Barbara. I study radical movements around the world, from al Qaeda and ISIS to militant Buddhists and the QAnon movement.

My research approach is “worldview analysis.” This means I try to get inside the minds of militants, to see the world as they see it. When they foster disinformation, I try to find out why. Why is this part of their worldview?

Here are some answers:

One is Imagining Power

Disinformation undercuts the legitimacy of a government, and gives the militants a feeling of power.

When the January 6 rioters who were convinced that they had been disempowered by a rigged election climbed through the broken windows of the US Capitol, they were asserting their power -- and that they, rather than their elected officials, had the right to claim that space.

In Myanmar, I talked with the Buddhist monk who advocated violence against the Muslim minority in his country. He promoted the myth that they were trying to replace Buddhism with Islam. Buddhists who accepted this replacement theory felt empowered to know, in their words, “what was really happening.”

This disinformation was an “aha” experience for them. They then felt empowered to do something about it.

The Second is Taking Control

What they can do about it is to take control. Disinformation can lead to real power.

As the January 6 Hearings showed, disinformation was not just the illusion of power, it was part of a strategy to bring down the political process. And it almost worked.

It did work for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Former ISIS militants told me that the takeover began by spreading rumors about the evil

intentions of the Shi'a based governments in Baghdad and Damascas. They were said to be agents of the devil. So when Baghdadi stood on the balcony of the Mosul mosque and proclaimed himself to be Caliph, there was little protest from ordinary Sunnis. They thought that the Shi'a governments were led by Satanic beasts, and relieved that the Sunni-supporting ISIS was in control. Disinformation was part of their struggle with Shi'a.

The Third is a War Mentality

In every case I've studied war was in the background: a great unseen battle between good and evil, right and wrong, in which one's very existence was in peril. "This is war," one of the combatants on January 6 shouted out. Disinformation was a tactic in war.

War is an alternative world view that turns civil order upside down. Opponents are seen as evil, worthy of destruction. Any means, including lies and spies, are permissible in war. Especially if you think God is on your side.

When I told the military head of Hamas that suicide bombings had little effect against Israel's military might, he said, "maybe not in my life time. Maybe not in my children's lifetime. But maybe in my children's children's lifetime we may prevail. We cannot lose. This is God's war."

If you think you're fighting God's war, anything is possible. Disinformation is often a part of an even bigger lie—the fiction that there is a hidden war going on and you have to fight it. Manipulating information is a tactic in that war. And if it's God's war, you cannot lose.