

**INFORMATION WARS**

January 8, 2019

# New Documents Reveal a Covert British Military-Intelligence Smear Machine Meddling In American Politics

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The Integrity Initiative has mobilized an international disinformation campaign across Europe. Now, with government and right-wing foundation money, this massive “political smear unit” is infiltrating the US.

By Max Blumenthal and Mark Ames

A bombshell **domestic spy scandal** has been unfolding in Britain, after hacked internal communications exposed a covert UK state military-intelligence psychological warfare operation targeting its own citizens and political figures in allied NATO countries under the cover of fighting “Russian disinformation.”

The leaked documents revealed a secret network of spies, prominent journalists and think-tanks colluding under the umbrella of a group called “Integrity Initiative” to shape domestic opinion—and to smear political opponents of the right-wing Tory government, including the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn.

Until now, this Integrity Initiative domestic spy scandal has been ignored in the American media, perhaps because it has mostly involved British names. But it is clear that the influence operation has already been activated in the US. Hacked documents reveal that the Integrity Initiative is cultivating powerful allies inside the State Department, top DC think tanks, the FBI and the DHS, where it has gained access to **Katharine Gorka** and her husband, the **fascist-linked** cable news pundit **Sebastian Gorka**.

The Integrity Initiative has spelled out plans to expand its network across the US, meddling in American politics and recruiting “a new generation of Russia watchers” behind the false guise of a non-partisan charity. Moreover, the group has hired one of the most notorious American “perception management” specialists, John Rendon, to train its clusters of pundits and cultivate relationships with the media.

Back in the UK, Member of Parliament Chris Williamson has clamored for an investigation into the Integrity Initiative’s abuse of public money.

*The Integrity Initiative story is just growing and growing. Many are rightly outraged that this Tory government could fund a political smear unit.*

*Questions need to be answered. Share this video on Facebook to make that happen.*

*<https://t.co/MGepaIEfGw>*

— *Chris Williamson MP #GTTO (@DerbyChrisW) December 14, 2018*

In a **recent editorial**, Williamson drew a direct parallel between the group’s collaboration with journalists and surreptitious payments the CIA made to reporters during the Cold War.

“These tactics resemble those deployed by the CIA in Operation Mockingbird that was launched at the height of the cold war in the early 1950s. Its aims included using the mainstream news media as a propaganda tool,” Williamson wrote.

“They manipulated the news agenda by recruiting leading journalists to write stories with the express purpose of influencing public opinion in a particular way,” the Labour parliamentarian continued. “Now it seems the British Establishment have dusted off the CIA’s old playbook and is intent on giving it another outing on this side of the Atlantic.”

## **Unmasking a British military-intelligence smear machine**

The existence of the Integrity Initiative was virtually unknown until this November, when the email servers of a previously obscure British think tank called the Institute for Statecraft were hacked, prompting allegations of Russian intrusion. When the group’s internal documents appeared at a website hosted by Anonymous Europe, the public learned of a covert propaganda network seed-funded to the tune of over \$2 million dollars by the Tory-controlled UK Foreign Office, and run largely by military-intelligence officers.

Through a series of cash inducements, off the record briefings and all-day conferences, the Integrity Initiative has sought to organize journalists across the West into an international echo chamber hyping up the supposed threat of Russian disinformation—and to defame politicians and journalists critical of this new Cold War campaign.

A **bid for funding submitted** by the Integrity Initiative in 2017 to the British Ministry of Defense promised to deliver a “tougher stance on Russia” by arranging for “more information published in the media on the threat of Russian active measures.”



The Integrity Initiative has also worked through its fronts in the media to smear political figures perceived as a threat to its militaristic agenda. Its targets have included a Spanish Department of Homeland Security appointee, Pedro Banos, whose nomination was scuttled thanks a media blitz it secretly orchestrated; Jeremy Corbyn, whom the outfit and its **media cutouts painted** as a useful idiot of Russia; and a Scottish member of parliament, Neil Findlay, whom one of its closest media allies **accused** of adopting “Kremlin messaging” for daring to protest the official visit of the far-right Ukrainian politician Andriy Parubiy — the founder of two neo-Nazi parties and author of a white nationalist memoir, “**View From The Right.**”

These smear campaigns and many more surreptitiously orchestrated by the Integrity Initiative offer a disturbing preview of the reactionary politics it plans to inject into an already toxic American political environment.

## **Lessons from “the man who sold the war”**

A newly released Integrity Initiative document reveals that the outfit plans an aggressive expansion across the US.



The Integrity Initiative claims to have already established a “simple office” in Washington DC, though it does not say where. It also boasts of partnerships with top DC think tanks like the Atlantic Council, the Center for European Policy Analysis, CNA, and close relationships with US officials.

A major hub of Integrity Initiative influence is the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, a **de facto US government propaganda operation** that was established by President Barack Obama to battle online ISIS recruitment, but which was rapidly repurposed to counter Russian disinformation following the election of Trump.

The Integrity Initiative has also **recruited one of the most infamous American PR men** to organize its clusters of journalists and political figures.

He is John Rendon, best known as “**The Man Who Sold The War**” — several wars, in fact, but most notoriously the Iraq invasion. Rendon was the self-described “information warrior” who planted fake news in the major US-UK media about non-existent WMD threats. With deep ties to the CIA and other military-intelligence agencies, his PR firm was paid \$100 million to organize and sell Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress. In 2002, the New York Times **exposed** a Pentagon program using Rendon to plant “disinformation” — including “false stories” and “the blackest of black PR” — in media outlets around the world, in order to shape public opinion and sell the Iraq invasion.



*John Rendon (left) with Maj. Gen. Michael Snodgrass, US Africa Command Chief of Staff (photo by US Africom Public Affairs)*

Journalist **James Bamford** outlined a catalogue of disinformation feats Rendon performed for the Pentagon, such as identifying “the biases of specific journalists and potentially obtain an understanding of their allegiances, including the possibility of specific relationships and sponsorships.” Bamford also found proposals and programs Rendon was involved in that aimed to “‘coerce’ foreign journalists and plant false information overseas... [and] find ways to ‘punish’ those who convey the ‘wrong message.’”

These tactics seem particularly relevant to his work with the Integrity Initiative, especially considering the internal documents that reveal further Rendon-style plans to produce reports and studies to be “**fed anonymously into local media.**” (Among the outlets listed as friendly hosts in Integrity Initiative internal memos are BuzzFeed and El Pais, the center-left Spanish daily.)

## Keeping up with the Gorkas

Internal documents also refer to interactions between Integrity Initiative Director Chris Donnelly and top Trump officials like **Katharine Gorka**, a vehemently anti-Muslim Department of Homeland Security official, as well as her husband, Sebastian, who earned right-wing fame during his brief tenure in Trump’s White House.

The latter Gorka is an **open supporter** of the Hungarian Vitezi Rend, a proto-fascist order that collaborated with Nazi Germany during its occupation of Hungary. Following Trump’s election victory in 2016, Gorka appeared for televised interviews in a black Vitezi Rend uniform.



*Sebastian Gorka, in Vitezi Rend garb, with his wife, Katharine, on Election Night*

Gorka was among the first figures listed on an itinerary for Donnelly to Washington this September 18 to 22. The itinerary indicates that the two had breakfast before Donnelly delivered a presentation on “Mapping Russian Influence Activities” at the federally funded military research center, **CNA**.



According to the itinerary, Donnelly was granted access to Pentagon officials like **Mara Karlin**, an **up-and-coming neoconservative cadre**, and John McCain Institute executive director **Kurt Volker**, another neoconservative operative who also serves as the US Special

Representative for Ukraine. Numerous meetings with staffers inside the State Department's Office of Global Engagement were also detailed.

## A foreign agent in the State Department?

Of all the State Department officials named in Integrity Initiative documents, the one who appeared most frequently was Todd Leventhal. Leventhal has been a staffer at the State Department's Global Engagement Center, boasting of "20 years of countering disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and urban legends." In an April 2018 Integrity Initiative memo, he is listed as a current team member:



Funded to the tune of \$160 million this year to beat back Russian disinformation with "counter-propaganda," the State Department's Global Engagement Center **has refused to deny** targeting American citizens with information warfare of its own. "My old job at the State Department was as chief propagandist," **confessed** former Global Engagement Center Director Richard Stengel. "I'm not against propaganda. Every country does it and they have to do it to their own population and I don't necessarily think it's that awful."

*At a Council on Foreign Relations forum about "fake news," former Editor at Time Magazine Richard Stengel directly states that he supports the use of propaganda on American citizens – then shuts the session down when challenged about how propaganda is used against the third world [pic.twitter.com/CLAT5POv7G](https://twitter.com/CLAT5POv7G)*

— William Craddick (@williamcraddick) *May 11, 2018*

Like so many of the media and political figures involved in the Integrity Initiative's international network, the Global Engagement Center's Leventhal has a penchant for deploying smear tactics against prominent voices that defy the foreign policy consensus. Leventhal **appeared in an outtake** of a recent NBC documentary on Russian disinformation smugly explaining how he would take down a 15-year-old book critical of American imperialism in the developing world. Rather than challenge the book's substance and allegations, Leventhal boasted how he would marshal his resources to wage an ad hominem smear campaign to destroy the author's reputation. His strategic vision was clear: when confronting a critic, ignore the message and destroy the messenger.

Integrity Initiative documents reveal that Leventhal has been paid \$76,608 dollars (60,000 British pounds) for a 50% contract.



While those same documents claim he has retired from the State Department, Leventhal's own **Linkedin page** lists him as a current "Senior Disinformation Advisor" to the State Department. If that were true, it would mean that the State Department was employing a de facto foreign agent.

As a cut-out of the British Foreign Office and Defense Ministry, the Integrity Initiative's work with current and former US officials and members of the media raises certain legal questions. For one, there is no indication that the group has registered under the Justice Department's Foreign Agent Registration Act, as most foreign agents of influence are required to do.

## Grants from the neocons' favorite foundation

An Integrity Initiative memo states that the right-wing Smith Richardson Foundation has also committed to ponying up funding for its US network as soon as the group receives 501 c-3 non-profit status. The foundation has already provided it with about \$56,000 for covert propaganda activities across Europe.

The Smith Richardson Foundation has old ties to the US intelligence community and controversial cold war influence operations. According to reporter **Russ Bellant**, the foundation was secretly bankrolling radical right-wing “indoctrination campaigns for the American public on cold war and foreign policy issues”— programs that got the attention of Senator William Fulbright, who warned then-President Kennedy of their dangers. At one of these indoctrination seminars, a Smith Richardson Foundation director “told attendees that ‘it is within the capacity of the people in this room to literally turn the State of Georgia into a civil war college,’ in order to overcome their opponents.”

Smith Richardson has funded a who’s who of the neoconservative movement, from hyper-militaristic think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War. “To say the [Smith Richardson] foundation was involved at every level in the lobbying for and crafting of the so-called global war on terror after 9/11 would be an understatement,” **wrote** journalist Kelley Vlahos.

Besides Smith Richardson, the Integrity Initiative has stated its intention to apply for grants from the State Department “to expand the Integrity Initiative activities both within and outside of the USA.” This is yet another indicator that the US government is paying for propaganda targeting its own citizens.

## The “Main Event” in Seattle

An Integrity Initiative internal **document** argues that because “DC is well served by existing US institutions, such as those with which the Institute [for Statecraft] already collaborates,” the organization should “concentrate on extending the work of the Integrity Initiative into major cities and key State capitals [sic] across the USA.”

This December 10, the Integrity Initiative organized what it called its “main event” in the US. It was a conference on disinformation held in Seattle, Washington **under the auspices** of a data firm called Adventium Labs. Together with the Technical Leadership Institute at the University of Minnesota, the Integrity Initiative listed Adventium Labs as one of its “first partners outside DC.”



Adventium is Minneapolis-based research and development firm that has reaped contracts from the US military, including a **recent \$5.4 million cyber-security grant** from the Pentagon’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA.

Inside a modest-sized hotel conference room, the Adventium/Integrity event **began with a speech** by the Integrity Initiative’s Simon Bracey-Lane. Two years prior, Bracey-Lane appeared on the American political scene as a field worker for Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential primary run, earning media write-ups as the “**Brit for Bernie.**” Now, the young operator was back in the US as the advance man for a military-intelligence cut-out that specialized in smearing left-wing political figures like Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader widely regarded as the British version of Sanders.

Bracey-Lane opened his address by explaining that Integrity Initiative director Chris Donnelly had been unable to appear at the event, possibly because he was bogged down in the scandal back home. He proceeded to read remarks prepared by Donnelly that offered a window into the frighteningly militaristic mindset the Integrity Initiative aims to impose on the public through their media and political allies.

According to Donnelly’s comments, the West was no longer in a “peace time, rules based environment.” From the halls of government to corporate boardrooms to even the UK’s National Health System, “the conclusion is that we have to look for people who suit a wartime environment rather than peacetime.”

During Q&A, Bracey-Lane remarked that “we have to change the definition of war to encompass everything that war now encompasses,” referring vaguely to various forms of “hybrid warfare.”

“There is a great deal to be done in communicating that to young people,” he continued. “When we mean being at war we don’t mean sending our boys off to fight. It’s right here in our homes.”

The emphasis on restructuring society along martial lines mirrored the disturbing thinking also on display in **notes of a private meeting** between Donnelly and Gen. Richard Barrons in 2016. During that chat, the two officers decided that the British military should be removed from democratic supervision and be able to operate as “an independent body outside politics.”



While Bracey-Lane’s presentation perfectly captured the military mindset of the Integrity Initiative, the speakers that followed him offered a diverse array of perspectives on the concept of disinformation, some more nuanced than others. But one talk stood out from the rest — not because of its quality, but because of its complete lack thereof.

## Reanimating the “red-brown” grifter



*Alexander Reid Ross (left) and Emmi Bevensee at the Integrity Initiative’s “main event” in Seattle*

The presentation was delivered by Alexander Reid Ross, a half-baked political researcher who peddles computer-generated spiderweb relationship charts to prove the existence of a vast hidden network of “red-brown” alliances and “syncretic media” conspiracies controlled by puppeteers in Moscow.

Ross is a lecturer on geography at Portland State University with no scholarly or journalistic credentials on Russia. His students have **given him dismal marks** at Rate My Professors, complaining about his “terrible monotone lectures” and his penchant for “insert[ing] his own ideologies into our class.” But with a book, “Against the Fascist Creep,” distributed by the well-known anarchist publishing house, AK Press, the middling academic has tried to make his name as a maverick analyst.

Before the Integrity Initiative was exposed as a military-intelligence front operation, Ross was among a small coterie of pundits and self-styled disinformation experts that **followed** the group’s Twitter account. The Integrity Initiative even retweeted his smear of War Nerd podcast co-host John Dolan.

*UK government-funded fake "monitoring group" the Integrity Initiative is retweeting some of the most prominent Syria regime-change trolls, anarcho-neocons, and pro-imperialist pseudo-"socialists," as they attack anti-war journalists*

*These are effectively UK gov-sponsored attacks [pic.twitter.com/KqABxFcqLF](https://pic.twitter.com/KqABxFcqLF)*

*— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) November 27, 2018*

In a series of articles for the Southern Poverty Law Center last year, Ross attempted to bring his warmed-over Cold War theories to the broader public. He wound up trashing everyone from the co-author of this piece, Max Blumenthal, to Nation magazine publisher Katrina Vanden Heuvel to Harvard University professor of international relations Stephen Walt as hidden shadow-fascists secretly controlled by the Kremlin.

The articles ultimately **generated an embarrassing scandal** and a series of public **retractions** by the editor-in-chief of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Richard Cohen. And then, like some Dr. Frankenstein for discredited and buried journalism careers, the British Ministry of Defense-backed Integrity Initiative moved in to reanimate Ross as a sought-after public intellectual.

Before the Integrity Initiative-organized crowd, Ross offered a rambling recitation of his theory of a syncretic fascist alliance puppeteered by Russians: “The alt right takes from both this ‘red-brown,’ it’s called, or like left-right syncretic highly international national of

nationalisms, and from the United States' own paleoconservative movement, and it's sort of percolated down through college organizing, um, and anti-interventionism meets anti-imperialism. Right?"

In a strange twist, Ross appeared on stage at the Integrity Initiative's Seattle event alongside **Emmi Bevensee**, a contributor to the left-libertarian Center for a Stateless Society (C4SS) think tank, whose tagline, "a left market anarchist think-tank" expresses its core aim of uniting far-left anarchists with free-market right-libertarians.

**Bevensee**, a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona and self-described "Borderlands anarcho into tech and crypto," concluded her presentation by asserting a linkage between the alternative news site, Zero Hedge, and the "physical militarized presence in the borderlands" of anti-immigrant vigilantes. Like Bevensee, Ross has **written for** C4SS in the past.

The irony of contributors to an anarchist group called the "Center for a Stateless Society" auditioning before The State – the most jackbooted element of it, in fact – for more opportunities to attack anti-war politicians and journalists, can hardly be overstated.

But closer examination of the history of C4SS veers from irony into something much darker and more unsettling.

## Pedophile co-founder, white nationalist associates

C4SS was co-founded in 2006 by a confessed **child rapist** and libertarian activist, Brad Spangler, who set the group up to promote "Market anarchism" to "**replace Marxism on the left.**"



When Spangler's child rape confessions emerged in 2015, the Center for Stateless Society founder was **finally drummed out** by his colleagues.

There's more: Spangler's **understudy** and **deputy** in the C4SS, Kevin Carson — currently listed as the group's "**Karl Hess Chair in Social Theory**" — turned out to be a longtime friend and **defender** of white nationalist Keith Preston. Preston's name is prominently plastered on the back of Kevin Carson's book, hailing the C4SS man as "**the Proudhon of our time**" — a loaded compliment, given Proudhon's unhinged **anti-Semitism**. Carson only **disowned** Preston in 2009, shortly before Preston helped white nationalist leader Richard Spencer launch his alt-right webzine, Alternative Right.

*Kevin Carson defending his neo-Nazi bro Keith Preston <https://t.co/qfV2y5orQ7>  
<pic.twitter.com/AdzN2S09gM>*

*— [exiledonline.com](http://exiledonline.com) (@exiledonline) January 13, 2016*

The C4SS group currently **participates** in the annual Koch-backed International Students For Liberty conference in Washington DC, **LibertyCon**, a who's who of libertarian think-tank hacks and Republican Party semi-celebrities like Steve Forbes, FCC chairman Ajit Pai, and Alan Dershowitz.

In 2013, C4SS's Kevin Carson tweeted out his dream fantasy that four Jewish leftists — Mark Ames, Yasha Levine, Corey Robin, and Mark Potok — would die in a plane crash while struggling over a single parachute. Potok was an executive editor at the Southern Poverty Law Center, which last year retracted every one of the crank articles that Alexander Reid Ross published with them and **formally apologized** for having run them.





For some reason, the super-sleuth Ross conveniently failed to investigate the libertarian group, C4SS, that he has chosen to partner with and publish in. That ability to shamelessly smear and denounce leftists over the most crudely manufactured links to the far-right — while cozying up to groups as sleazy as C4SS and authoritarian as the Integrity Initiative — is the sort of adaptive trait that MI6 spies and the Rendon Group would find useful in a covert domestic influence operation.

Ross did not respond to our request for comment on his involvement with the Integrity Initiative and C4SS.

## Disinformation for democracy

As it spans out across the US, the Integrity Initiative has **stated its desire** to “build a younger generation of Russia watchers.” Toward this goal, it is supplementing its coterie of elite journalists, think tank hacks, spooks and State Department info-warriors with certifiable cranks like Ross.

Less than 24 hours after Ross’s appearance at the Integrity Initiative event in Seattle, he **sent a menacing email** to the co-author of this article, Ames, announcing his intention to recycle an old and discredited smear against him and publish it in the Daily Beast — a publication that appears to enjoy a **special relationship** with Integrity Initiative personnel.

Despite the threat of investigation in the UK, the Integrity Initiative’s “network of networks” appears to be escalating its covert, government-funded influence operation, trashing the political left and assailing anyone that gets in its way — all in the name of fighting foreign disinformation.

“We have to win this one,” Integrity Initiative founder Col. Chris Donnelly **said**, “because if we don’t, democracy will be undermined.”

**Mark Ames is the co-host of the *Radio War Nerd* podcast. Subscribe to Radio War Nerd on *Patreon*.**



### Max Blumenthal

Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist and the author of books including best-selling [Republican Gomorrah](#), [Goliath](#), [The Fifty One Day War](#), and [The Management of Savagery](#), which will be published in March 2019 by Verso. He has also produced numerous print articles for an array of publications, many video reports and several documentaries including [Killing Gaza](#) and [Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie](#). Blumenthal founded the Grayzone Project in 2015 to shine a journalistic light on America’s state of perpetual war and its dangerous domestic repercussions.

<http://grayzoneproject.com>



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