



As discussed, the NED has never discussed or sought to address specious claims about being a CIA front or successor law. a) a response would only lend credence to specious claims that invariably come from the extremes of the political spectrum. Let our track record speak for itself. Make the case.

To respond publicly to the talking points may help to grantee (or provide) answers

Do let me know



<https://thegrayzone.com/2024/07/30/grayzone-pr-fiasco-us-govt-regime-change-leaked-emails/>

# The Grayzone caused ‘biggest PR fiasco in history’ for US govt regime change arm, leaked emails reveal

 **KIT KLARENBERG AND MAX BLUMENTHAL** · JULY 30, 2024

The Grayzone's publication of an embarrassing phone call with a National Endowment for Democracy VP triggered an institution-wide meltdown at the US government's regime change laboratory. Following the call, the group's founding president privately admitted the "fiasco" exposed major "problems beneath the polished surface."

Now, leaked emails obtained by The Grayzone reveal the organization has since descended into chaos, with two senior officials fired due to the fiasco, and remaining staff engaged in civil war between the neocon old guard and the "woke" new generation hired to replace them.

*- Senior NED management is currently in complete disarray, with two high-ranking staffers fired due to their handling of The Grayzone's phone call, and founding president Carl Gershman isolated and marginalized by those who took his place.*

*- What began as a bitter dispute over the decision to engage with The Grayzone ultimately devolved into a full-fledged culture war that pitted the group's neoconservative founders against its more liberal recent hires, derided by the neocon old guard as "woke flakes" obsessed with "microaggressions" and compulsory DEI trainings.*

*- One of the fired NED staffers, neocon Michael Allen, accused his progressive boss of a "clear campaign of harassment, marginalization and victimization," and fretted over her allowing NED staff to attend pro-Palestine rallies. He was so incensed by his dismissal that he threatened to reveal the details of his firing to the "many mailing lists of key decision-makers and opinion-formers that I have built and retained over the years" if he did not receive a substantial settlement.*

Read a collection of the NED files exclusively obtained by The Grayzone [here](#).

Through its lavish funding of anti-government opposition groups in countries where Washington has sought regime change, the US government-funded NGO known as the National Endowment for Democracy, or the NED, earned a reputation over its four decades in existence as an “overt operator” doing the work the CIA used to do in the shadows.

Critics have long pointed to the destabilizing effects of NED’s meddling in places like Nicaragua, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Haiti, where the Endowment has systematically undermined elected governments which undertook policies seen as violating the Washington Consensus. They referenced documents demonstrating the group’s origins in the Central Intelligence Agency of Ronald Reagan, and cited quotes by NED founders and Gershman himself boasting about their orchestration of coups and color revolutions.

The NED’s longtime leader, neoconservative activist Carl Gershman, invariably shrugged at his detractors, while his colleagues insisted that everything his organization did was above board, conducted in broad daylight with grantees generally listed on a publicly viewable website - and all in the name of the laudable mission of “democracy promotion.”



*Then-NED President Carl Gershman (left) with the Dalai Lama, a longtime CIA asset, in 2010*

Since Gershman retired in 2021, the NED has undergone a dramatic internal shift. A new generation of ideologically milquetoast social progressives has taken the reins of the organization, and attempted to align the NED’s programming with the diversity politics that currently animate the Democratic Party.

Among those hired in the post-Gershman era was **Leslie Aun**, a self-described “senior creative communicator” who apparently knew very little about the NED when she came on board. In one of her first moves as the organization’s Vice President of Communications and Public Engagement, Aun decided to initiate a phone conversation with The Grayzone to refute the notion that her employer functioned as a “CIA cutout.”

Now, leaked private emails exclusively obtained by The Grayzone reveal how Aun’s call and its subsequent publication sent the NED spiraling into an existential crisis, triggering several firings, legal retaliations and angry recriminations that continue to this day. One veteran NED staffer privately described the phone call as the “biggest PR fiasco in [NED’s] history.”

The NED emails are filled with resentful tirades directed by the NED’s boomer neocon old guard at their younger successors. In one exchange, Gershman described Aun as “the

moron,” trashed NED Director of Communications Christine Bednarz in another as a “woke flake,” and repeatedly questioned the competence of his successor, current NED President and CEO Damon Wilson.

Referring to the NED’s Chairman Ken Wollack, Gershman grumbled, “Screw Ken.”

From the perspective of Gershman and his clique, a collection of bumbling 40 and 50-something wokesters had infiltrated the Endowment they built, and was running it aground with their fixation on identity politics. “The NED culture may be undergoing a sea change,” Gershman complained at one point.

Michael Allen, a member of Gershman’s inner circle who edited the NED’s Democracy Digest for almost two decades, remarked that “the entire Grayzone fiasco... was due in large part to the perceived need to transcend the ‘old’ NED.” In other emails, Allen groaned about suffering through long meetings on “NED’s LGBTQIA+ agenda,” and offered detailed accounts of his remonstrations against co-workers who took issue with his vehemently pro-Israel views.

“Several NED staff attended a pro-Palestinian march organized by ANSWER, a pro-North Korean sect,” Allen vented. “And the NED President’s Facebook page still highlighted Black Lives Matter, several weeks after the group enthusiastically celebrated the Hamas massacre.”



*NED Special Assistant Michael Allen was fired after pressuring colleagues to respond to “the Grayzone fiasco” and antagonizing them over Israel-Palestine. He has accused them of a broad campaign of harassment and censorship.*

Less than a year since Aun’s disastrous phone call with The Grayzone, the former vice president has been fired and apparently furnished with a substantial settlement for “sex discrimination.” Her LinkedIn profile shows no trace of her employment history at the NED. Allen was terminated as well, on the grounds of “insubordination” – and as a direct result of his attempt to intervene in the “Grayzone fiasco,” he privately alleged. Since being forced from his job, he has plotted a scorched earth campaign of legal retaliation against NED leadership, but remained silent in public.

While the US Department of State and Congress continue to fill the NED’s coffers with close to \$200 million each year, enabling it to construct a **flashy new headquarters** just blocks from the White House, the leaked emails obtained by The Grayzone expose an organization adrift, with its founding fathers casting doubt on its future under the stewardship of a generation of corporate progressives fully aligned with the Democratic Party. The internal rift may have been inevitable, but it exploded into the open with a single phone call by a NED Vice President to The Grayzone.



## “I don’t mean to sound like an idiot”: the phone call that nearly brought down the NED

In an email from Michael Allen, the longtime editor of the NED’s blog, Democracy Digest, to Gershman and other colleagues, Allen detailed how NED President Damon Wilson “spent considerable time and expense to headhunt” Leslie Aun, painting her as a “world class” strategic communications impresario.

“Upon her appointment” as Vice President of Communications, Allen recalled, Aun “was presented at a staff meeting by way of a celebrity-style interview” with Wilson, “highlighting her exceptional qualifications and experience.” This was despite her confiding “to a NED comms staff retreat that she had never before heard of the Endowment” before applying.

Soon after Aun’s hiring, she decided to initiate a phone call with Alex Rubinstein, an independent journalist who has contributed to The Grayzone, to chide him for referring to the Endowment as a “CIA cutout.” Rubinstein’s reference appeared in an April 2023 [article](#) about Bellingcat, a self-described “open source” journalism outfit which is handsomely funded by the NED, and by extension, the US government.

A powerful outfit like the NED should have been able to casually ignore criticism from a small, albeit influential independent outlet like this one. But according to Allen, the Endowment’s communications director, Christine Bednarz, encouraged Aun to “address these critics as an example of the ‘new’ NED’s professionalism and positivity, and in contrast to what she has consistently dismissed as the ‘old’ NED’s amateurism and timidity.”

For his part, Allen claimed he tried to warn NED leadership about engaging “toxic critics” like The Grayzone, but was ignored.

From seemingly out of the blue, Aun emailed Rubinstein on April 5, 2023 to solicit a phone call. Less than 24 hours later, she was on the line with Rubinstein and Grayzone editor Max Blumenthal to demand they cease and desist from discussing any connection between the NED and US intelligence.

Over the course of the next 40 minutes, Blumenthal and Rubinstein detailed NED’s documented ties to US intelligence, pointing Aun to a [declassified document](#) showing Ronald Reagan’s CIA director, William Casey, proposing the creation of a [US government-funded “National Endowment.”](#) They reminded her of NED co-founder Allen Weinstein’s notorious [admission](#) to the Washington Post in 1991: “What we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.” And they ran through the history of regime change machinations, color revolutions and coup attempts orchestrated by the NED.

The self-styled “strategic communications” expert revealed a staggering ignorance of her employer’s [confirmed mission](#) as a peddler of “overt operations” overseas, and proved unable to answer basic questions about the organization’s history.

When Blumenthal asked her to provide concrete evidence of Endowment provisions against working with US intelligence, she fumbled: “I don’t know if it’s in the statute. I don’t know

if it's – I mean, I don't – I don't know. I'm going to sound like an idiot. I don't mean to sound like an idiot.”

For over a month, Blumenthal and Rubinstein attempted to follow up with Aun by email. She had promised them documentation demonstrating that NED staffers were forbidden from coordinating with US intelligence abroad, but it never arrived. Instead, Aun sent a series of messages expressing befuddlement about the nature of their on-the-record conversation.

“It's been a hectic month,” she claimed to Rubinstein on May 4, 2023. “I wasn't aware that you were on deadline for a story versus getting background information about NED. Can you tell me more about the story? I want to be sure I'm addressing your questions in the appropriate context. If you're doing a full on story about us, I hope you'd be asking more than just two questions.”

A day later, Aun offered a distinctively corporate spin on the “dog ate my homework” excuse: “I'm actually on vacation with my family in the wilds of Oregon this week with limited connectivity, but working to get back to you asap.”

That was the last time they heard from Aun. On May 29, The Grayzone published the audio of the conversation she initiated with them over a month before.

They did not know it at the time, but while Aun was supposedly bushwhacking her way through the Pacific Northwest, her colleagues at the NED were in the throes of a full-fledged meltdown, with senior leadership engaged in an angry blame game over what they called the “Grayzone fiasco.”

The day after the recording appeared on YouTube, Allen forwarded it to Gershman and **David Lowe**, the organization's vice president for government relations and public affairs.

“This is how the NED changes under the new ‘CEO,’” the retired NED leader **growled**, referring derisively to his 51-year-old successor, Damon Wilson, a former National Security Council official who helped coordinate color revolutions across Eastern Europe under President George W. Bush.

**From:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 30, 2023 5:20 PM  
**To:** DAVID LOWE  
**Subject:** Re: Grayzone

This is how the NED changes under the new “CEO.”  
Sent from my iPhone



Allen erupted: “Amateur hour - hugely embarrassing! ‘I don't know... I don't know... I don't know... I don't know... I don't know...’ I specifically counseled against her talking to these people.”

-----Original Message-----

From: Michael Allen <[REDACTED]>

Sent: Tuesday, May 30, 2023 5:48 AM

To: Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>; 'DAVID LOWE' <[REDACTED]>

Subject: RE: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

Amateur hour - hugely embarrassing! "I don't know... I don't know... I don't know... I don't know... I don't know..."

I specifically counselled against her talking to these people.

-----Original Message-----

From: Michael Allen

Sent: Tuesday, May 30, 2023 8:33 AM

To: Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>; 'DAVID LOWE' <[REDACTED]>

Subject: FW: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

Subject: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

As discussed ..... WTF!!

Aun's performance was "breathhtakingly ignorant," Lowe replied, adding, "It was too painful to listen to." Referencing NED president Damon Wilson, Lowe asked: "I assume Damon is aware of this - what does he say about it?" He noted that if Aun "was hired to get NED more publicity, she succeeded."

**From:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>

**Date:** May 30, 2023 at 11:25:36 AM EDT

**To:** DAVID LOWE <[REDACTED]>, michael allen <[REDACTED]>

**Subject:** Re: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

Shocking that she would talk to Blumenthal. Have you shared with Ken? I could if you want.

Sent from my iPhone

On May 30, 2023, at 11:13 AM, DAVID LOWE <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Breathtakingly ignorant. It was too painful to listen to. I assume Damon is aware of this--what does he say about it?

Gershman lamented that it was "shocking that she would talk to Blumenthal."

Allen responded that he had "just raised" the issue in a communications team meeting, in which Aun was "laconic about it." She evidently didn't "realize how damaging... and embarrassing this is."

He added that he had "previously cautioned her" about discussing what he called the "NED=CIA BS" with The Grayzone, and even "wrote a memo explaining why."

# RE: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties



Michael Allen <michaela@ned.org>  
To Carl Gershman; DAVID LOWE

Reply

Reply All

Forward



Tue 5/30/2023 11:32 AM

I just raised it in our comms meeting. She seems laconic about it. Doesn't seem to realize how damaging – not least to grantees and prospective grantees in the field - and embarrassing this is. Says she already spoke to Damon this morning.

I had previously cautioned her against raising the NED=CIA BS (as did Brian) and wrote a memo explaining why.

Share with Ken by all means.

Indignation about the imbroglio soon filtered through the Beltway grapevine, as Gershman shared the recording of the call with fellow foreign policy operatives.

“It’s insulting to have someone with so little experience having the chutzpah to think this was a good idea,” Daniel Silverberg, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for New American Security think tank and former national security advisor to former Democratic House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, groaned in a June 12, 2023 email to Gershman.

**From:** Daniel Silverberg <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 12, 2023 12:36 AM  
**To:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** Re: FW: Damage limitation: The Grayzone & NED VP on group's CIA ties

I finally listened to this. It's insulting to have someone with so little experience having the chutzpah to think this would be a good idea

On Sat, Jun 3, 2023 at 2:11 PM Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Fyi.

Gershman for his part, was mortified over the “disastrous screwup,” slamming Aun as “obviously clueless.”

“Learning about [Aun] is like finding worms under a stone,” he remarked. Her presence at the NED’s highest echelons led the organization’s longtime leader to question “the situation of NED overall,” and conclude “the NED culture may be undergoing a sea change.”

On Wed, May 31, 2023, 12:52 AM Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]> wrote:  
The fact that Ken has still not replied to my email leads me to believe that he knows about the problem and will not be helpful to Mike. Learning about this VP for media relations is like finding worms under a stone. I don't know how much it reveals about the situation of NED overall, but it shows that the NED culture may be undergoing a sea change.

Carl

Sent from my iPhone

Gershman went on to slam Aun as a “moron” and “clueless wonder,” describing her hiring as an “egregious error” reflecting “the importance [current NED President and CEO] Damon [Wilson] attaches to media and image and how much has changed in that area.”



He told Allen and Lowe he emailed the recording to NED Chairman Ken Wollack, but received no response.

“Screw Ken,” **Gershman roared.**

Gershman’s wife, Laurie, chimed in to calm his frayed nerves in a reply: “Not worth getting upset about.”

“I’m not at all upset,” Gershman shot back, “but screw him anyway.”

RE: FW: Damage limitation: The Grayzone & NED VP on group's CIA ties



Carl Gershman

To Laurie Gershman

I’m not at all upset, but screw him anyway.

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**From:** Laurie Gershman <[REDACTED]>

**Sent:** Sunday, June 4, 2023 5:01 PM

**To:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>

**Subject:** Re: FW: Damage limitation: The Grayzone & NED VP on group's CIA ties

Not worth getting upset about.

On Sun, Jun 4, 2023 at 4:33 PM Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Screw Ken.

In between blustery diatribes against their younger colleagues, Allen and fellow members of the NED’s neocon cabal consoled one another by sharing articles and tweets denigrating Grayzone editor Blumenthal, whom they held ultimately responsible for their crisis.

In one such exchange, Gershman’s wife, Laurie, emailed a tweet by neoconservative NED board member and Atlantic Magazine staff writer **Anne Applebaum** attacking Blumenthal for addressing the United Nations Security Council on US arms sales to Ukraine, declaring with a large emoji, “**Max Blumenthal Hearts Russia.**”

Max Blumenthal and Russia



Carl Gershman <[redacted]>  
To Carl Gershman

Reply Reply All Forward

Thu 8/17/2023 12:57 AM



Max Blumenthal Russia

Inbox

Search for all messages with label Inbox

Remove label Inbox from this conversation



Laurie Gershman [redacted]@gmail.com

to me

From Anne A retweet

I see Max Blumenthal, editor of the totally independent and unbiased The Grayzone, is going to appear at a UN meeting on behalf of

Russia.

Quote Tweet

The Grayzone emailed Gershman and his wife, Laurie, to solicit their comment on the institutional crisis that unfolded at the NED after the Grayzone affair. We also asked Gershman why he forwarded apparently privileged internal NED email discussions to his wife's private email. They did not respond.

## Appeals for response to The Grayzone go down at NED's offices "like a lead balloon"

Back at the NED offices in downtown Washington DC, Allen unloaded on the organization's communication's team in a lengthy email.

"It is hugely damaging and embarrassing to voluntarily initiate a conversation and give a global platform to some of NED's most vicious detractors, thereby legitimizing their specious arguments and compromising a reputation so assiduously cultivated and protected for the last 40 years," he wrote.

"More importantly," Allen continued, "it threatens to undermine the safety, security and integrity of our partners and grantees in the field... There are robust reasons why we have always refused to engage with these toxic characters' absurd claims. Now our critics are able to cite a senior NED official's inability to refute such allegations and we can be sure that this video will be promoted and cited by the CCP, the Kremlin (whose line Grayzone generally follows) and the like to vilify NED and to attack our partners and grantees. There is a case to be made that the damage is already done and a public response would only exacerbate matters."

Allen previously advised Aun and others: "NED has never directly addressed or sought to rebut the specious claims about being a CIA front or successor... To respond publicly to the NED=CIA BS would be a huge mistake."

But now, in his view, it was important for NED staff to be able to push back more effectively than Aun had. Thus he proposed preparing “a rebuttal for internal use.” This would consist of “talking points that refute the CIA canard” and training on “How We Talk About NED” to journalists. Calling the recording “a self-inflicted wound,” he lamented that it had “gone viral - it consistently shows up in my social media feeds - so we can assume a great many of our partners, grantees and staff have seen it.”

In delivering the memo to NED’s comms team, Allen explained that he had avoided using “a certain acronym for FOIA reasons.” He appeared to be referring to the CIA.

Re: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

LD Larry Diamond <[redacted]>  
To: Carl Gershman

Reply Reply All Forward

Tue 6/20/2023 3:34 AM

From: Michael Allen <[redacted]>  
Sent: Wednesday, April 12, 2023 12:55 PM  
To: Leslie Aun <[redacted]>  
Cc: Franklin Bonner <[redacted]>; Christine Bednarz <[redacted]>  
Subject: Talking Points

Further to the discussion at Monday’s team meeting, I’ve gone through my files and found considerable material that would be extremely helpful in rebutting the claims of covert activity (I’m avoiding a certain acronym for FOIA reasons).

Do you have a particular format or deadline in mind? I’m on vacation for a week from tomorrow, but I could get a provisional draft through ASAP or something more substantial when I return next week.

Incidentally, I’ll be doing research at the Hoover Institution archives at Stanford, which include the papers of Allen Weinstein, who directed the research study that led to NED’s creation and was briefly NED’s Acting President. Maybe I’ll take a peek!



Michael Allen  
Special Assistant, Communications and Public Engagement  
Editor, Democracy Digest  
National Endowment for Democracy  
1201 Pennsylvania Ave, NW,  
Suite 1100,  
Washington, DC 20004

Though Allen’s memo contained talking points which might have benefited a novice and clearly clueless hire like Aun, he claimed he was rebuffed by NED’s communications team. “My intervention went down like a lead balloon,” he complained in an email to Gershman and Lowe. “Ah well, I’m on my way out anyway.”

## “Whistleblower” trumped by “moron” under the new NED regime

By this point, Allen was a marked man. In a May 30, 2023 email, his friend, David Lowe, surmised that Allen’s “position at NED is very fragile, particularly with his boss [Aun].” Recently, he wrote, she had “[given] him a highly negative performance review.”

According to Gershman, Aun had been personally recruited by Damon Wilson, who was still apparently supporting her, despite her self-destructive gaffe. He warned Allen that Aun might use Wilson’s sponsorship “to retaliate in some way” against them.

Wilson did not respond to an email from The Grayzone requesting his response to the allegations by Gershman and Allen.

With the walls seemingly closing in on the NED’s old guard, Gershman proposed an in-person war room meeting: “Please stay in touch... on this and other matters - I like to know what’s going on - but let’s do that very confidentially... Maybe the three of us should get together for dinner sometime, preferably not downtown. I’m not getting paranoid, but I

sense that this incident exposes some problems beneath the polished surface [of NED] and I want to be very careful.”

A week later, Gershman wrote Allen to inquire about his employment status: “Are you Ok, or are you still in danger of being fired? It would not look good if they fired the whistle blower and retained a moron who should have never been hired in the first place.”

---

**From:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 5, 2023 2:13 PM  
**To:** Michael Allen <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** Fwd: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

**External Email:** Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Damon should realize that Brian is under a lot of pressure from Program staff to know how the organization is going to address this problem. I assume there are others who are also upset, including board members who know about. Those who don't know also won't appreciate not being kept informed. They can respond low key and not lose their cool, but I think they have to respond in some way, internally as well as to the various publics that follow NED.

Are you Ok, or are you still in danger of being fired? It would not look very good if they fired the whistle blower and retained a moron who should never have been hired in the first place.

Carl

Sent from my iPhone

Allen later disclosed that after emailing NED leadership to propose remediating the damage caused by Aun's phone call with The Grayzone, he was “told to report” to Endowment Chief Operating Officer **Maju Varghese**, “to explain MY actions.”

He said he was also subjected to a withering performance appraisal by **Sheri Melvin**, the NED's director of human resources, whom he accused of submitting his review “5 months late, packed with palpable falsehoods and mistakes.” He groaned that the “main focus” of the meeting was not Aun's “incompetent, incoherent sullyng of NED's reputation, but that I should have consulted with her before sending the email” advising her team on damage control.

Following an interminable comms team meeting in which everything from NED “swag” to the organization's “LGBTQIA+ agenda” was discussed - everything but the PR crisis eating the Endowment from the inside - Allen predicted that while he might not be fired, “they'll marginalize me and make life uncomfortable.”

---

**From:** [REDACTED] <allenm@[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 5, 2023 5:34 PM  
**Cc:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** Re: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

I suspect that's the strategy. It wasn't mentioned at our Comms team meeting today (but we did discuss “swag” - NED pens, mugs, ties, etc.), nor at the all-staff meeting this pm, which focused on the more urgent matter of NED's LGBTQIA+ agenda.

I had a meeting with Sheri and LA this afternoon, ostensibly about my performance appraisal (submitted by her 5 months late, packed with palpable falsehoods and mistakes). But main focus - as with Maju - was not her incompetent, incoherent sullyng of NED's reputation, but that I should have consulted with her before sending the email on remediation & damage limitation.

I don't think they'll fire me because of the PKF & because, as LA admits, I have an “influential voice” through the Digest. But they'll marginalize and make life uncomfortable.

Not the NED I joined.

Sent from my iPhone



When Gershman followed up with Allen, he asked him to “delete the last [email] with the stuff on ‘the moron,’ and this one, too.”

RE: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties



Carl Gershman  
To allenm@ [REDACTED]

Reply

Reply All

Forward



Tue 6/6/2023 11:47 AM

OK, you can delete the last one, with the stuff on “the moron,” and this one, too. But I’d like to know what’s going on. They have to address the concerns of Program. As of last Friday afternoon, no one had talked to Brian.

---

**From:** Michael Allen <[REDACTED]>

**Sent:** Monday, June 5, 2023 2:48 PM

**To:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>

**Cc:** Michael Allen <[REDACTED]>

**Subject:** RE: The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties

Best shift this to my personal email.

Apparently, Allen did not heed his friend’s instructions. And his marginalization deepened, just as he expected, as he escalated conflicts with colleagues over their fixation on diversity politics and insufficient support for Israel’s war on Gaza.



*NED Director of Communications Christine Bednarz*

## **NED neocons assail “woke flake” comms director as anti-Zionism envelops Endowment partners**

Among the NED’s new generation of leadership, none inspired the resentment of the neoconservative old guard more than the Endowment’s director of communications, **Christine Bednarz**. A self-described “digital content strategist, writer, and artist,” and former food and travel writer, Bednarz was portrayed in email exchanges between Allen, Gershman and their clique as simultaneously inept and hard-charging, ruthlessly enforcing the woke agenda at every turn.

Under the watch of Bednarz, according to David Lowe, the NED placed a “big emphasis” on what he called Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) “nonsense.” He mentioned “other



warning signs” of the new generation’s excesses, such as the NED’s promotion of a new book “on police violence against blacks with an introduction by Angela Davis.” (The book appears to be a collection of essays called “**Policing the Black Man.**”)

From: DAVID LOWE <[REDACTED]>  
Date: May 31, 2023 at 11:19:44 AM EDT  
To: Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>  
Subject: Re: Grayzone

Yes, that's certainly true. There's also a big emphasis on this DEI nonsense which, the way Mike talks about it, strikes me as something beyond just covering themselves and appeasing younger staffers. There are other warning signs as well. Mike showed me the cover of a new book coming into the DRC on police violence against blacks with an introduction by Angela Davis. He says there's been a marked change on the titles ordered by the DRC with a heavy emphasis on organizational management-type issues.

I guess as long as Brian and Chris are around, Program and the Forum are "safe," but who knows what will happen when they're gone.

Allen recalled how mandatory, in-office DEI sessions descended into rancor when he challenged the prevailing orthodoxy. “During the NED’s first compulsory DEI training (conducted by an external provider),” he wrote, “I asked why social class was not being considered alongside ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.; questioned the term ‘microaggression’; and observed that social justice movements have historically sought equality of opportunity, not equity of outcomes. I raised other questions at a DEI training on the 1619 Project, not least that it was an ideological, not historical project. After each session (and a couple more) certain colleagues - including my line manager - suggested that such interventions were ‘not helpful’ and, in essence, reflected my white male privilege.” (Allen’s line manager was Bednarz).

#### Cancellation

During the NED’s first compulsory DEI training (conducted by an external provider), I asked why social class was not being considered alongside ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.; questioned the term “microaggression”; and observed that social justice movements have historically sought equality of opportunity, not equity of outcomes. I raised other questions at a DEI training on the 1619 Project, not least that it was an ideological, not historical project. After each session (and a couple more) certain colleagues - including my line manager - suggested that such interventions were “not helpful” and, in essence, reflected my white male privilege.

The October 7, 2023 attack on Israel deepened the cultural divide inside the NED. As the Israeli army commenced its bombardment of the besieged Gaza Strip, Allen found himself isolated as the only outspoken Zionist in the office.

Bednarz’s “interventions increased notably but not exclusively following the Oct 7 Hamas atrocities,” Allen groused to his friends, “including her veto of an entirely neutral obituary of Israeli political scientist and [Journal of Democracy] contributor Shlomo Avineri which she deemed ‘partisan’ and ‘inflammatory.’”

In November, he said he showed up at work sporting an Israel-UK solidarity lapel pin. He claimed the display invited a scolding from Bednarz, who allegedly described his pin as “‘inappropriate’ in light of ‘recent events.’”

According to Allen, Bednarz also “observed that I was the only white, straight male on the comms team and twice the age of other team members; and asked why I didn’t cite my pronouns on my NED business card and email address.”

In a subsequent email, Allen noted in passing that Bednarz’s former spouse was Israeli. “Might she bear a grudge, a la Alice Walker, or is she just a woke flake?” Gershman asked, referring to the outspoken pro-Palestinian author, who weathered a nasty divorce with a Jewish man.

“The latter, combined with a certain megalomania and defensive resentment over the Grayzone fiasco,” Allen answered.



The latter, combined with a certain megalomania and defensive resentment over the Grayzone fiasco.

Ha - I never knew about that Alice Walker angle.

Sent from my iPhone

On Feb 27, 2024, at 00:34, Carl Gershman <> wrote:

Interesting about CB’s ex. Might she bear a grudge, a la Alice Walker, or is she just a woke flake?

The Grayzone offered Bednarz an opportunity to respond to the accusations and invective against her by Allen and his cadre, sending detailed questions to her email and through a direct message on Twitter/X. She did not respond.

According to Allen, the anti-Zionist menace extended well beyond Bednarz, and had begun to envelope the NED’s international network. He accused several NED-backed organizations, “including a member of the World Movement’s Steering Committee,” of “posting aggressively anti-Israel screeds on social media, [and] orchestrating online petitions against ‘genocidal’ Israel.” He also harrumphed that “several NED staffers promoted and attended the pro-Palestinian march organized by ANSWER, a pro-North Korean sect; and the NED President’s Facebook page still highlighted Black Lives Matter, several weeks after the group enthusiastically celebrated the Hamas massacres.”

By December, one of the last holdouts of the NED’s neocon old guard had been fired for “insubordination” and ordered to relinquish his key card.



**From:** [REDACTED] <allenm@[REDACTED]>

**Sent:** Tuesday, December 12, 2023 4:02 PM

**To:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>; DAVID LOWE <[REDACTED]>

**Subject:** Terminated

Just met with HR and the union. I'm terminated with immediate effect.

Onwards and upwards...

Sent from my iPhone

## Allen alleges “clear campaign of harassment, marginalization and victimization” by NED leadership

On February 12, 2024, Allen emailed a lengthy missive to his closest confederates in the NED network. He had just consulted with his union representative, and was ready to outline what he saw as the real reasons for his firing, and to propose a course of resolution.

While officially terminated on the grounds of “insubordination” to his line manager, Bednarz, for allegedly refusing to perform menial tasks - what he called “the latest in a pattern of willfully demeaning demands” - Allen revealed that he had been secretly recording phone conversation and gathering emails that would demonstrate his firing was, in fact, prompted by the following:

“a) being ‘canceled’ due to my outspoken criticisms of and resistance to DEI orthodoxy; b) and a related campaign of harassment [sic] and marginalization prompted by the Grayzone affair, arguably the biggest PR fiasco in NED’s history.”

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**From:** RCN <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Monday, February 12, 2024 5:14 PM  
**To:** Carl Gershman <[REDACTED]>; ML Caravatti <[REDACTED]>; DAVID LOWE <[REDACTED]>  
**Subject:** NED termination

Friends,

I welcome your advice.

My union rep confirms that NED has rejected the request for a review of my termination filed through the formal grievance procedure under NED’s collective bargaining agreement.

The decision confirms that my termination stands and that I have been dismissed for “insubordination” without any compensation after 18 years of service.

I have also been denied access to any files and emails, including a significant cache of materials essential to the Lasky biography for which David and I have just received a contract from Stanford University Press. I have even been denied to write the standard neutral message to contacts - “I am no longer with the NED and be contacted at...”

My termination is technically due to “insubordination” to my line manager, comms director Christine Bednarz, for refusing to tag photos in NED’s database on the grounds that a) it’s outside my job description, b) a task more befitting an intern and c) the latest in a pattern of willfully demeaning demands.

Yet I can demonstrate through emails and other materials in my possession (including legally recorded telephone conversations - yes, I saw it coming) that my termination was prompted by

a) being “canceled” due to my outspoken criticisms of and resistance to DEI orthodoxy;

b) and a related campaign of harassment and marginalization prompted by the Grayzone affair, arguably the biggest PR fiasco in NED’s history.

He charged that from the moment he held forth on Aun and Bednarz for stumbling into the “Grayzone fiasco,” he became the target of a “clear campaign of harassment, marginalization and victimization by Ms. Bednarz.”

What’s more, according to Allen, “a current NED board member” informed him that “in order to settle Ms. Aun’s entirely spurious claim that her dismissal was due to sex

discrimination,” and not due to her politically suicidal call with The Grayzone, “management released confidential information of an ‘embarrassingly intimate’ nature from my HR records in a stark violation of my privacy rights.”

#### Grayzone fiasco

NED leadership spent considerable time and expense to headhunt a new “world class” VP for strategic communications. Upon her appointment, Leslie Aun was presented at a staff meeting by way of a celebrity-style interview with NED’s President, highlighting her exceptional qualifications and experience (yet she confided to a NED comms staff retreat that she had never before heard of the Endowment despite being DC born and bred and involved in foreign affairs).

I was the only NED staffer to vocally and consistently warn NED leadership, verbally and in writing, that the new “world class” comms director was not only insisting that we publicly address claims that NED was associated with the CIA, but also planning to “engage” some of NED’s most toxic critics.

Ms. Bednarz was actively complicit in this fiasco, cheerleading Ms. Aun’s plans to address these critics as an example of the “new” NED’s professionalism and positivity in contrast to what she has consistently dismissed as the “old” NED’s amateurism and timidity.

As Ms. Aun’s disastrous interview with Grayzone’s Max Blumenthal went viral, I expressed my indignation and consternation that same morning in a NED comms team meeting to the evident discomfort of Ms. Aun and Ms. Bednarz. Later in the day, after proposing a course of remediation in an email to NED’s leadership, I was told to report to NED’s COO to explain MY actions.

It is from this precise moment that I can demonstrate the start of a clear campaign of harassment, marginalization and victimization by Ms. Bednarz (nor have I since had any personal communication from NED’s President).

Furthermore, in order to settle Ms. Aun’s entirely spurious claim that her dismissal was due to sex discrimination, a current NED board member has revealed that management released confidential information of an “embarrassingly intimate” nature from my HR records in a stark violation of my privacy rights.

After all he had endured at the hands of the NED’s incompetent leadership, Allen declared his intention to seek “a modest and equitable settlement.” The least they could do was provide him “12 months salary or compensation equivalent to the sum paid to Ms. Aun (subject to legal disclosure) to settle spurious claims of sex discrimination.”

If the NED failed to pay up, it could be costly, he suggested. After admitting “I deeply resent the way I’ve been treated,” Allen immediately issued a veiled threat, raising the possibility that he might “tell my side of the story through the many mailing lists of key decision-makers and opinion-formers that I have built and retained over the years (including every member of every cohort of the [NED’s Penn-Kemble Forum])” but claiming he was “reluctant” to do so.

Upon receipt of the hush money, he promised not to publicly blow the whistle about the circumstances of his exit. Allen’s public silence in the months after his firing suggests he may have received just such a payoff.

#### Course of action

I have received legal advice that I may have grounds for claiming age discrimination. But a second source of legal counsel advises that legal action is likely to be more successful on grounds of harassment and political victimization, evident in Ms Bednarz’s adverse reaction to my critical comments within NED’s compulsory DEI trainings and her censorship of Digest blog posts.

Her interventions increased notably but not exclusively following the Oct 7 Hamas atrocities, including her veto of an entirely neutral obituary of Israeli political scientist and JOD contributor Shlomo Avineri which she deemed “partisan” and “inflammatory” (at the same time, NED partners - including a member of the World Movement’s Steering Committee - were posting aggressively anti-Israel screeds on social media, orchestrating online petitions against “genocidal” Israel; several NED staffers promoted and attended the pro-Palestinian march organized by ANSWER, a pro-North Korean sect; and the NED President’s Facebook page still highlighted Black Lives Matter, several weeks after the group enthusiastically celebrated the Hamas massacres).

There is much more I could disclose, including my resistance to Bednarz’s attempts to manage the Penn Kemble Forum despite her demonstrable ignorance of proposed themes and speakers.

Even though I have refrained from publicizing what has happened and denied the “moved on” email message, I am being approached by contacts, including former NED colleagues, Digest readers, and PKF alumni expressing a mixture of incredulity and indignation.

While I deeply resent the way I’ve been treated after what most would consider a demonstrable record of commitment to the Endowment, I am reluctant to pursue legal action a) for the likely damage to NED’s reputation from the required disclosures and b) because I would much rather focus on the Lasky biography.

I am also reluctant to tell my side of the story through the many mailing lists of key decision-makers and opinion-formers that I have built and retained over the years (including every member of every cohort of the PKF).

But I am also disinclined to accept that the one who vocally warned NED leadership - verbally and in writing - of the coming PR debacle was ultimately dismissed while those directly responsible either evaded responsibility, were generously compensated or promoted to a position from which they were able to terminate my employment.

I believe a modest and equitable settlement would be as follows:

a payment of 12 months salary or compensation equivalent to the sum paid to Ms. Aun (subject to legal disclosure) to settle spurious claims of sex discrimination

the release of or temporary access to my NED files and emails concerning the Lasky biography

the right to post a neutral “moved on” email message.

In return, I would concede

a non-disclosure agreement, including an undertaking not to inform or alert any contacts on the extensive mailing lists at my disposal;

an undertaking not to pursue a planned libel action against Ms. Bednarz

I know that you share these concerns and welcome your advice or the opportunity to discuss further.

Warm regards,

Mike

## Protecting the legacy of CIA-tied NED heroes

As Allen strategized with lawyers, he fretted over the future of two initiatives that he felt best reflected his legacy at the NED.

The first was a hagiography he and David Lowe planned to co-author on Melvin Lasky, the iconic Trotskyist-turned-cold warrior. Because he was locked out of the Endowment's offices, he said had "also been denied access to any files and emails, including a significant cache of materials essential to the Lasky biography for which David and I have just received a contract from Stanford University Press."

Having made the seminal case for a cultural Cold War against communism during the early 1950's, Lasky's journal, *Encounter*, received **covert funding** from the CIA until 1966.

The second initiative Allen saw as imperiled by the NED's new generation was the Endowment's **Penn Kemble Forum**, an off-the-record dinner salon for neoconservative activists which he helped oversee. He warned that Bednarz had attempted to seize control of the Forum "despite her demonstrable ignorance of proposed themes and speakers."

The anticommunist activist who inspired the name of the NED's off-the-record dinner forum, Richard "Penn" Kemble, was a founder of Social Democrats USA who wound up assisting the Reagan administration's dirty war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. According to **declassified CIA files** and public **reports** on the Iran-Contra scandal, Kemble spent much of the 1980's presiding over a covert \$10 million US government lobbying campaign for military aid to the CIA-backed Contras.

After his fervid efforts to disseminate talking points to colleagues refuting the Endowment's relationship with US intelligence, Allen apparently failed to see the irony in his veneration of one personal hero who operated as a CIA asset, and another who advanced Langley's agenda as a dirty war lobbyist.

Allen did not respond to calls and emails from The Grayzone requesting comment on the circumstances of his departure from the NED.

## A shredded Israeli flag amid final series of humiliations

Over two months since his firing, Allen's research files and the contents of his desk remained locked inside the Endowment's office. On February 25, he navigated traffic to downtown DC and met the NED's office manager on E Street, just outside the Endowment's new offices, to arrange a handover of his belongings. With cold drops of rain pouring down, he weathered a final series of humiliations.

"They also demanded my NED ID - already deactivated, of course, but I assume they fear I'll be running around DC impersonating a bona fide NED employee," Allen recounted in an email to Gershman. "It would be funny if it wasn't so risible and deliberately demeaning."

When he examined the returned belongings, Lasky claimed a check Penn Kemble's widow made out to him was missing. Worse, someone had torn up the Israeli flag he kept on his desk.

“Do you assume that Bednarz shredded the flag, or do you think it was one of her underlings?” Gershman asked. “The hostility to the ‘old’ NED seems palpable.”

Opposition to Israel had become so rampant inside the Endowment, Allen replied, that “it could be anyone.”

“True,” he reflected, “the entire Grayzone fiasco - and much else - was due in large part to the perceived need to transcend the ‘old’ NED.”

Re: Mike's Files

 <allenm@...>  
To: Carl Gershman

Reply Reply All Forward ...

Tue 2/27/2024 8:50 AM

**From:** <allenm@...>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 27, 2024 12:27 AM  
**To:** Carl Gershman <...>  
**Subject:** Re: Mike's Files

Yes, they would be very helpful, although the truth is I can probably recoup most of the material even though it will be very time consuming as there is a LOT of it.

Of course, I'd assumed it would be OK to leave that material on the NED server since, as you know, Nadia, Dave, Miriam L and others have written books using DRC and the NED server.

Yes, it was in the boxes. I honestly can't accuse CB - I suspect she doesn't have that temperament (although her ex is Israeli, whatever that's worth). At the first NED staff meeting following Oct 7, Damon made some balanced - "on the one hand, on the other" - comments followed by MENA Director Amina making similarly moderate comments, albeit focused on the plight of NED's Palestinian partners. Immediately following, at the staff Happy Hour, there was a pretty heated discussion in which my minority-of-one position - in brief, we are the NED so our reflex position should be to defend MENA's only democracy - clearly infuriated several colleagues. So it could be anyone. I certainly don't suspect Melvyn.

True - the entire Grayzone fiasco - and much else - was due in large part to the perceived need to transcend the "old" NED.