

David Gibbs: How Intelligence Services Captured Academia & Journalism

David N. Gibbs is a professor of history at the University of Arizona. Debate on the CIA and academia: David Gibbs and Robert Jervis https://www.democracynow.org/2002/11/13/cia_on_campus_the_intelligence_community Article in the Los Angeles Times on the CIA-academic nexus: <https://irp.fas.org/news/2001/01/lat012801.html> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdiesen Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. David Gibbs is currently a professor of history at the University of Arizona, and he joins us today to discuss how academia, as well as journalism, often become instruments of the state and also reliable advocates for war. So thank you for coming back on the program. Thank you for having me, Glenn. Twenty-five years ago, you started a big debate about biases within academia, and your title was "Social Science as Propaganda." As I said, this isn't just a question of academia, I feel. Especially these days, we recognize that academics, as well as journalists, align themselves very closely with government narratives. But I guess the problem goes much deeper than this. I was wondering if you could—well, we can start by fleshing out your argument, perhaps.

#David Gibbs

Well, let me say that, I mean, a little bit is somewhat personal in the sense that I got my doctorate in 1989, not in history, but political science at MIT. And MIT's political science department was closely connected to the Center for International Studies, which was founded by, in a sense, the Central Intelligence Agency to link MIT to the agency. And it, you know, continued to exist when I was there. And I was very fascinated by these extraordinary links between an academic institution, MIT, on the one hand, and the CIA on the other.

And it did seem very questionable because one of the complaints, and rightly so, against the Soviet Union—and again, this was during the Cold War when I went to graduate school—was that there's no differentiation between academia, which is not independent, and the government. It's closely linked to government agencies. It's an expression of government propaganda. It was true. And supposedly, what differentiated free societies—we liked to call them back then the free world—was that academia was independent. Academics were supposed to be independent agents, not agents of

government propaganda. But it seemed really problematic if one of the leading institutions in the country, MIT, is so closely tied to the Central Intelligence Agency.

And so that got me very interested in the topic. And so I began reading about it. And one of the things that was very clear was that certainly in the earlier period, in the '50s and '60s, one of the major funders of overseas research in the social sciences, not just political science, but the whole social sciences, was the CIA and military intelligence. Bruce Cumings at the University of Chicago said that it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that either you worked for the CIA, or if you didn't work for the CIA, you would get a knock on the door from the FBI, which of course was very threatening in the early period of the Cold War.

And so you did have this sort of one-two punch, shall we say, that linked the academic fields, particularly at the prestige institutions, to the leading intelligence service of the United States, the Central Intelligence Agency. This posed many problems, as I would see it. One of them was secrecy. The CIA was created—one of the reasons it was created in 1947—was to create a super-secret agency, one that was much more secretive than the State Department or the regular military, to undertake ethically and legally questionable actions like overthrowing governments and engaging in assassination and so on. And the CIA was highly secretive, and academics who worked for the CIA had to do it in secret. Well, I can go into more detail on this, but do you want to ask me any questions? Do you want to sort of interject with anything?

#Glenn

No, no, no. Please go ahead on what you said. But also, I did want to ask, though, how are the different ways they intervene into academia as well as journalism? Because I find often, well, the intelligence agencies, they began early on to get their influence into NGOs, for example. And NGOs were supposed to be—I like the idea of NGOs because you need to institutionalize and structure civil society in a way which allows the public to influence the democratic process besides just showing up for election every four years. But there's a great deal of power in this if you can manipulate civil society to do what you want. So the intelligence community went in there, but you also have NGOs, you have the think tanks. It's just... there's a lot of areas where people think there's independence, where indeed there's not. But I thought it was interesting because in my mind, the university was supposed to be the last, the last bastion of independent thought, independent from the state. But you disagree. I disagree, yes.

#David Gibbs

Well, I mean, I'll be very specific. What are the connections between the CIA and academia? The best record on this is a 1975 investigation by the U.S. Senate under Senator Frank Church, the Church Committee, as it was called. They issued a huge number of reports. It was a serious investigation. It wasn't a whitewash, at least not mostly. And they touched lightly on this issue, by the way, of academia. For some reason, they did not go into that detail. One thing they did go into,

however, was secret consulting that many academics—again, I think the most prestigious academics; they went for the best, naturally, at the most prestigious institutions. Why not?—had contracts with them, and the contracts involved consulting for the CIA, where they would write secret reports for the CIA, and they were in secret. And I think over time, what happened is academics would say, look, I'm a professor.

I get evaluated professionally on publishing in journals and university presses, not secret reports. Please allow me to publish this report. And so the CIA said, we'll meet you halfway. Well, you can publish the report if you let us edit the report, sanitize it, as they say. And so you'd get sanitized reports being published, basically, and also funded by the CIA. The Senate investigation found, I think the term they used was, at least 1,000 books had been published with covert support by the CIA. Note the word "at least," all right? So it's over 1,000. And so I'm assuming what this meant was that you could go into the library today and pull books off the shelf published by, say, Princeton University Press, by some prestigious academic, and not know it was funded by the CIA and it was edited by the CIA in secret.

The fact that it was done in secret is, again, a real problem, because you don't know what was taken out. Academics are supposed to be objective, meaning that they're engaged in the search for the truth. And they're not supposed to be partisan. You're not supposed to have conflicts of interest. It raises somewhat similar questions to the biomedical field, let us say, where academics do research on the efficacy of drugs and are funded by the drug company manufacturing it. This is a real problem in the biomedical sciences, but at least one thing is clear. The biomedical journals have a requirement that you have to do full disclosure. If you're being funded by a drug company, you need to disclose that funding, which makes sense.

You can weigh the potential bias against the findings. That's not true in political science or the social sciences. I've never seen a journal article ever or a book that said, ladies and gentlemen, this was funded by the CIA and edited by the CIA. I've never seen that. If it's happened, I don't know about it. And so it's done in secret, okay? In a way, in a sense, you might say it's deceiving the public that is reading these books because they don't know about the biases, the hidden biases of the author. So I think it does raise serious ethical questions. Now, some people have gone public with their consulting. Robert Jervis of Columbia is a longtime consultant for the CIA. He's a prestigious professor. I don't know where he is now. He might be retired.

He was a professor at Columbia and president of the American Political Science Association. I debated him on this issue publicly 20 years ago on a radio program called Democracy Now!, and he insisted it has no impact on his research. And again, the problem is we don't know what... I think there's always going to be influence. You're always going to be influenced by the people funding you. And if you're... the problem is it's a basic conflict of interest because, on the one hand, if you're a political scientist, you're studying international conflict. On the other hand, you're being funded by

an interested party, which is the CIA, which means that you're naturally going to be partial to that agency and probably leave out a great deal. What's very striking is, when I engaged in this debate, I had done a survey of the journals.

This is a long time ago. I looked at five major, the top political science journals that deal with international relations. Anyway, they're very familiar ones to those who are in political science, the ones you've heard of. And I looked at all the articles they had during a ten-year period from 1990 to 2000. I did not find one single article that discussed CIA covert operations to any significant extent, not one. And it's very difficult for me to believe that CIA funding had nothing to do with that. And it's a very dramatic statement that for a decade there was no significant mention of one of the major sources of U.S. conduct in the Cold War, which is covert operations. And yes, I do think that that was the direct result of CIA funding of the profession.

I think there was a relationship there. And I think that's one of the reasons they did it, by the way. Not only did they like the information the political scientists gave, it meant they would capture the field and make sure that political science, and other fields too, by the way, did not discuss issues that were not to be discussed in polite society. This is not quite as bad now. I think about 10 years ago, somebody named Lindsay O'Rourke at Boston College published a book called Covert Regime Change. It's actually a pretty good book. I mean, I think there's some flaws in it, but it catalogs a vast number of CIA covert operations. And it won an award, and it's getting attention. I think that's a good thing. It shows maybe there's a little bit of balance emerging. By the way, one detail.

Professor O'Rourke is a former student of John Mearsheimer, which I think is interesting. John Mearsheimer, he's a very conservative person, and he's very connected to the foreign policy establishment, but he has one feature that distinguishes him. He's really very honest, and he's willing to stick his neck out. That's unusual, by the way. I think an interesting perspective here is many people to this day like to believe that academics are radicals who are constantly challenging power. They're constantly, relentlessly going after powerful interests in the private sector, in the government, and they're trying to tear down everything. Nothing could be further from the truth. Academia is deeply intertwined with power, beginning with the CIA and the many other agencies, Homeland Security, the military, also the private sector.

It gets enormous funding from the private sector, including the social sciences, which are ideologically directed. And I think people have a misperception of academia because of the culture wars, and they assume that if you start arguing about some cultural issue related to gender, race, and sexuality, that proves you're some sort of radical, whereas one could look at that as a way of distracting people. But in any case, on issues related to the things people in power are really concerned about, like covert operations, academia has been deeply conservative and deeply intertwined with power, beginning with the kind of connections I'm describing. I want to discuss journalism as well, but again, I want to see if you'd like to interject anything, Glenn.

#Glenn

No, no. No, I wanted to know about the journalism. First, I want to say, Professor Mearsheimer, as well as the late Stephen Cohen, they both made the point that when they started criticizing foreign policy, suddenly all the invitations from CNN and the other large news networks, they all stopped calling suddenly. So it is, yes... So there's obviously something there where you see the extent to which academics are accommodated in the media when they start to stray away from the public. But that's from the government. But Robert Jervis, yeah, he passed away a few years ago, though. Okay. All right. But, yeah, I did want to ask, though, in addition to how the journalists fit in here, what are the main objectives then of the intelligence agencies? You mentioned they didn't want any coverage of the covert operations, but are there other key issues there, essentially, where they want to shape the knowledge or the information?

#David Gibbs

I think, in general, what they want—I think the CIA and generally the major agencies of government and the whole foreign policy establishment, if one thinks of it more broadly than just government agencies—what they want basically is a submissive academia that will act as a mouthpiece for official policy. That is what it is. If you look at the major journals and go beyond cultural things like masculinity and foreign policy and things like that, go beyond those, it's indistinguishable from what's being said by government agencies and things like the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. It represents power. Academia respects power. It tends to defer to power.

And in the issue of international relations, the major power are the agencies of the dominant geopolitical power, the United States, and to some extent its acolytes in places like Europe. And, you know, they have foreign outposts, of course, all over Europe and Japan, I assume, U.S. allies all over the world, U.S. academia. This is diminishing as China is rising, including in academia. But I think even now, the United States still is the beacon people look to in academia. It's the center of still a lot of the prestigious Ph.D. programs, a lot of the prestigious journals, and so on. And people look to the United States and look to American power as something they respect.

And part of that is, I mean, there are many reasons for this. One of them is funding. A lot of academics are funded by government agencies, and it really does color the whole profession. In journalism, similar things happen. There was a study done by—what was his name?—Bernstein. He was a Pulitzer Prize winner of Watergate fame. He and Woodward broke the Watergate story in the '70s, being very famous. He had a study in Rolling Stone in 1977 called "The CIA and the Press"—"The CIA and the Media," I think it was called. You can still find it. It's on the internet. And that was the most serious study I've ever seen, never been seriously challenged factually, about the role of the media.

I found out that several hundred American journalists worked for the CIA in some fashion or other, and 200 of them had secrecy agreements and/or employment contracts in secret with the CIA. Now, to the best of my knowledge, that violates every standard of journalistic ethics that I've ever heard

of, but that's what was done. And the leading publication was, surprise, surprise, the New York Times. Why the New York Times? Well, think about it. Obviously, if you want to influence the whole of the media, influencing the New York Times, it's a good place to start. And I think even internationally, I sense a lot of foreign publications look to the New York Times for leadership.

For what it's worth, during the Cold War and into the '90s, I would read the European press. I read French, so I'd read Le Monde, and I read the British press, and it was much better than the United States. It was independent. The last 20 years, it's become almost a clone of the New York Times. It just seems like when I'm reading Le Monde or something, it's like the New York Times in French. And so I think the New York Times really is the place to go if you want to influence everything. That's what the CIA did. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, who was a longtime publisher of the New York Times in, I think, the 1960s, if I'm not mistaken, he was a close personal friend of Allen Dulles, a longtime CIA director.

And there were instances in which—documented instances in which—Dulles asked him to cover up for the CIA, and Sulzberger said yes. And so that's really the role of the press, is like, again, a mouthpiece for the government. And it—I should add—this did break down during the Vietnam War. The war in Vietnam broke confidence in government policy. You had the Vietnam syndrome, when the press did become much more critical, including the Times, and academia, to some degree, to a limited degree, became more critical. That's the reason you had the investigations by the Senate and the CIA. That was a brief period, though, and right around the end of the 1970s, both academia and the CIA returned to their submissive role, which, as I can see, they're still in that submissive role.

It never ended. In fact, it's deepened, I would say, with the end of the Cold War. I mean, now you've got former CIA directors and things being presented as experts without any consideration given to the fact that a CIA officer is trained to lie. I mean, that's what they do. That's what you're trained to do in intelligence, is lie. And that's never taken into account here. They're treated as serious sources of information, openly so, in a way that goes even beyond what was true during the Cold War. So I would say this sense of they're all in bed together was not only true in the Cold War. It's become even more true now.

#Glenn

Yeah. Now, I was wondering if you saw any—did you—yeah, you probably followed the Russiagate time quite closely, because I thought this was an interesting time when the intelligence agencies and the media went hand in hand. And you also saw quite an interesting development, building on what you said, where you had former CIA directors and NSA directors, and they were all getting jobs at the different news agencies as expert opinions. And I thought, at least in the '70s, they had the decency to cover up these things. But now it's all done, you know, they're hiding in plain sight, essentially. Just put it out in the open, you can't get caught. It's just the CIA being an expert opinion. But did you see that during Russiagate? Did you feel it was more overt than before? Because...

#David Gibbs

Russia was an interesting case in the sense that I think you had a series of events that I think shook up elites on both sides of the Atlantic beginning in 2016. The first one was Brexit. And I think that was a tremendous shock in Europe, in the United States as well, but especially in Europe. And the second one was, of course, the first election of Donald Trump as president. I think at the time he was seen as deeply hostile to NATO. It hasn't really worked out that way. He mostly has played along with the NATO war in Ukraine. But he was seen as deeply hostile to NATO and possibly somebody who would change U.S. foreign policy in fundamental ways. That was a tremendous shock to the American and European establishments. I think people kind of lost their minds. It damaged people's brains. They really did go crazy. And they looked for a boogeyman.

They didn't want a complex answer. They wanted a simple answer. The complex answer, of course, is that the public had lost confidence in much of the establishment, and they looked for anti-system candidates. In the United States, those anti-system candidates, ironically, were two: Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. In some ways, they're obviously very different. In other ways, they're flip sides of the same coin. They're anti-system, and that's why people supported them. Bernie Sanders, people forget also, he came out of nowhere. Nobody had heard of him. He was a senator, yes, but an obscure senator. He almost won the presidency. Instead, Donald Trump won the presidency. But the establishments could not admit any fault, that they didn't do anything wrong in Europe. They didn't do anything wrong. Nothing they did wrong led to Brexit. It just came out of nowhere.

And so the question is, what caused these things? And the answer was, Russia did it. It must have been a Russian conspiracy. So the newspapers in the United States, again, I didn't read the British press as closely as I had in the past, but I'm assuming they also focused heavily on Russia, Russian interference, disinformation. The term disinformation, I kept hearing it again and again. Russian disinformation was the cause of all these things. For years in the United States, they kept on hammering away at how the election of Donald Trump had been engineered by the Russians. The New York Times was filled with this. I remember initially, when I was reading it, I thought that the claims were so outlandish, nobody would take them seriously.

But then everybody was taking them seriously. All my friends were taking them seriously. The next thought I had was, "Looks to me like somebody is trying to lay the groundwork for a war with Russia." I remember thinking that already in 2016. Well, here we are. I mean, it's not like these things don't have effects. But the outlandishness of this has to be emphasized. The claims were that there were some social media campaigns criticizing Hillary Clinton, and this must have been a massive campaign by the Russians to elect Donald Trump. And there have been three studies on the effectiveness of these social media campaigns.

One was done by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the second in the British peer-reviewed journal Nature, and the third by the Institute for New Economic Thinking in New York

City. By top academics, they came to identical conclusions through different methodologies, but identical conclusions: zero influence. Okay, the social media campaign had no influence on the public, all right? In other words, the term they used was undetectable, all right? They could not detect anything in terms of influence. And yet this was one of the top stories for years: Russian disinformation electing Donald Trump, all right?

And presumably also it caused Brexit. And so it seemed like this extraordinary thing, but it did look to me like a lot of it fairly obviously was coming out of intelligence services, openly being pushed by retired CIA officers. And there's a phrase, "Once CIA, always CIA." You can quit, but you can never leave. And so this did look to me like the intelligence services were trying to cook this up. Somebody was cooking it up. That was clear. And it wasn't anything substantive. So, yeah, there we are. It helped to poison American politics, but also poisoned international relations. I'm convinced it did play a significant role in the lead-up to the war that is currently going on in Ukraine.

#Glenn

But I would say also what I find a bit shocking is how academia has, as well as the journalists, aligned themselves completely with government talking points in this war as well. I mean, the whole argument by the NATO countries, the governments, that the war was unprovoked, for example. I find it shocking because if you go through the literature now, I mean, there is endless evidence that the political and military leaders in the West, they knew that NATO expansionism would likely trigger a conflict with Russia. You know, as former CIA director William Burns once said, you know, this Ukraine and NATO is the reddest of all red lines. And he was making the point Russia would feel compelled to intervene even if it didn't want to.

I mean, there's all this evidence that the Russians saw this as a threat. We knew it was a threat. It can't really be disputed, but it's ignored by the academics. They do not discuss it. They don't touch it. And also, you know, the whole idea that Ukraine should be allowed to choose which alliance it should be in. It chose the West. They tried to escape Russia, all of this. You know, I don't see academics challenging this either. I mean, academia should be the pursuit of truth. But every single poll between '91 and 2014 showed that only a small minority of Ukrainians wanted it, that the Americans primarily pushed for it, and the Europeans fell in line, as they do.

But again, all of this, it can't be disputed. So what did the academics do? They ignored it. And same as this other one, the full-scale invasion in 2022, in which the argument was that, well, the Russians did a full-scale invasion with the intention of conquering all of Ukraine. But, you know, you have ample evidence. You have Zelensky himself saying on the first day after the Russian invasion that he was already contacted by Russia to start negotiations to put a quick end to the war based on restoring Ukraine's neutrality. We see that they dropped fewer bombs on Ukraine in the first month than the US dropped on Iraq in the first 24 hours, with the understanding that excessive violence would undermine diplomacy.

We saw the low troop levels. You can't conquer a country of 35 million with 100,000 troops. All of this can't be disputed, but instead we see that they don't even discuss it. No academics in Europe I know of will even discuss the fact that the Russians and the Ukrainians began to talk about peace on the first day. And same with this Istanbul thing. I mean, you can have all, again, all the evidence. You can have a Turkish foreign minister arguing that the Russians and Ukrainians both wanted, almost very desperately, to get a deal. But the US and the UK torpedoed it. It can be confirmed by the Israeli prime minister, the former one, that is, Bennett. Still, it doesn't appear in any academic discussions.

And it's shocking to me that none of this is worth mentioning at all. And I think I know why. I mean, I'm not saying that all academics are on the payroll of CIA, but there's enough of an intimidation campaign, though. I mean, if you do mention any of these things, you'll be crucified, though. There's no career for you anymore. Even in private, there's a high, very high social cost if you start to mention anything that undermines the government position. It's just, it's—I just, I would like to know what other explanation there would be. How can you live with this omission of key, key events, which are just, you know, slandered as, "Ah, that's, you know, something the Russians would say."

#David Gibbs

Well, you know, I think, again, I think what you have here—everything you say is 100% true. It's certainly been my experience. And I think that, you know, I'm a full professor. I'm tenured. It gives you a high level of protection. So I'm not particularly worried. But if I were untenured, certainly, I would have a great deal of reason to be worried. And you do have a situation where you will pay a price professionally. You know, John Mearsheimer, I don't think he really cares, but he's not invited anymore to write op-eds in the New York Times. He's not invited anymore on CNN, on the mainstream news programs he'd been welcomed on before.

And so you do pay a price for this professionally and personally. The people who may not talk to you anymore, colleagues who feel so strongly about this, they will denounce you in all sorts of ways. You're a Putin puppet, whatever the current term is. And so there's definitely a price to be paid. And most faculty, even if they know the facts, aren't willing to take the risk. And to some extent, I can understand it, especially, again, if your job is at risk. In that case, it may be a prudent thing for you to do. But one of the questions, again, is why. And I think academia does look respectfully to power.

It's always done that in both the private and public sectors, and it tends to be very submissive towards power, despite, again, the reputation of academics as feisty and against power. It's a complete myth. It has no truth whatsoever, in my experience. It's a very rare academic who's willing to challenge power in any meaningful sense. And, you know, you get this in trivial ways. You know, several years ago, you had deconstruction. You get academics deconstructing cartoons, and that was considered radical, that kind of thing. But, you know, in terms of challenging the CIA or U.S. policy in Ukraine, that's just not done. That's just not done.

And, you know, there was—I think the best way to put it was that early in the Cold War, the American Historical Association elected as its president Conyers Read, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and he gave a presidential address in 1949. It was published in the American Historical Review. And he said, let me see if I can find it. I can—where did it go? What he said, I'll just paraphrase it. He said that all armies have to march together under some symbol. In the Soviet Union, it's a hammer and sickle. In America, it's the stars and stripes. And the academic is no freer from this obligation than the physicist is.

And that, you know, we must institute sort of intellectual controls here if we're going to win this war. And he said, "This may sound like some kind of social control being advocated here. In short, it is." So, you know, he was explicitly stating what I think really was the idea, which is academia should fall behind official policy. And he was much more explicit and blunt about it than anybody before or since would be. But I think that really is, to some extent, what has happened, is that academics did fall in line behind the government, and they stayed in line behind the government, except briefly during the Vietnam debacle and a few others. But on the whole, they've mostly adhered to the official policy.

And I just see this as very consistent with it. I have to say that the level of repression of open discussion here is the worst I've ever seen in my lifetime. I was around during the 1980s. It was never as bad as this. I think you'd have to go back maybe to the early '50s, the McCarthy period, to really get an atmosphere as oppressive as the one we have now. And equally true, maybe even more true, in Europe. I suspect it is more true in Europe. In America, we do have the First Amendment to the Constitution, which gives robust legal protections, which is not the case in Europe. So I think it may even be worse in Europe than it is in the United States. It's certainly pretty bad here.

#Glenn

Have you seen academics and journalists emulate the language of the state? Because I find it interesting. Orwell, he wrote very much about how propaganda is, you know, you create separate language for us and them. And I see this in academia as well, especially in political science. So, you know, for example, we have policies, but our opponents, they have behavior, right? So you have this pedagogic thing, you know, our job is to socialize them. This was very much built into the idea of the EU and NATO after the Cold War, that the role of the West was to socialize everyone else, like a new civilizing mission, if you will.

And, you know, and I notice in academia, all the language is organized accordingly. The way the politicians speak, this, you know, they argue that, well, others will threaten us, but we don't threaten; we, you know, we punish or reward, like a teacher would do. You know, that is, NATO, it will reward good behavior, it will punish bad behavior. And this whole assumption of a socializing role would be incorporated into the language. Again, very uncritically used by many academics as

well. You know, if the Chinese refuse, they refuse to compromise. When we refuse to compromise, we're principled. You know, others interfere in domestic affairs. We promote democracy. They go to war. We intervene.

You know, so the Russians, they seek influence in neighboring states. We're just promoting the European path. I mean, you have this kind of language where you don't have to make arguments anymore, so then the wording replaces arguments, which is kind of strange, because the whole thing for academics should be to, you know, to unpack these words, to discuss. I mean, I had an unpleasant experience as well at my university. I had 37 colleagues who denounced me and published a letter in the newspaper because they said, "Oh, we stand with Ukraine." This does not. And the reason why is because I argue that we should do diplomacy. We shouldn't send weapons, and argue that NATO has contributed to provoking this, which I see as important to resolve it.

But from their argument, this means you don't care, because the people who care, they topple their government. They boycott diplomacy. They fight a war they can't win, apparently. So there was no unpacking the argument. What does it mean to help Ukraine? Because you can have different perspectives on this. I think we are destroying them by doing what we're doing now. We're sacrificing them as a proxy. But there's no unpacking the argument. No one wants to discuss. They just have this concept: this is pro, this is against. And I find that academics do the same, which is very strange, because you should have a way of unpacking the language. I don't know if that's too specific, the language of academic centrists. Do you pick up on this or...?

#David Gibbs

Yeah, I think that another way to put it is this. It's understandable and unsurprising if government officials use propagandistic language that kind of somehow sanctions their actions and demonizes their opponents. That's understandable. You might say that's even their job. But academics are not supposed to do that. Academics are supposed to evaluate these things, are supposed to be even-handed. They're supposed to be—the word is—objective. And there's no objectivity. Academia is just a mouthpiece for these things. They just parrot the same language you're describing uncritically. Another one I would add is humanitarian intervention, something I've been especially interested in.

And the claim is that when the United States intervenes, it's for humanitarian purposes. And when it deserves criticism, when it doesn't intervene, if there's some place it doesn't intervene, that shows a cynical realpolitik. Intervention is humanitarian because it seeks to protect the weak. It protects minorities from persecution. It prevents genocide. It prevents women from abuse, and so on and so forth. This is the language you might say that governments might use as propaganda. But academics here are promoting it. There's a whole industry in academia of humanitarian intervention. That's a huge topic.

And pretty much, they're using the language of government agencies and NGOs that are closely connected to government agencies. It's the language of political propaganda, not analysis. But, you

know, this is where academia is. And I think basically its social function is to act basically as a mouthpiece for power, basically, is what it is, and a justifier for power. And you might say academics are, in a certain sense—I've been especially interested in academics as lobbyists. I've looked at this also in the private sector. And they use academics as lobbyists, and academics are the best lobbyists because they're perceived to be prestigious and unaffiliated.

And they're supposed to be highly critical of powerful interests. And so when they act as spokespeople for powerful interests, they're especially effective because people have this image of academia that's so out of kilter with their real role. Academics themselves like to promote this, by the way, that we're radical, we're challenging power, and so on. So I think basically that what we have here is academia isn't really playing the proper role. You could say if academia has a function, it's to basically hold the powerful to account. It's to challenge power. But again, that's not what we're doing at all.

#Glenn

I agree. Well, what is the consequence of this going so far? Because, you know, reality can only go so far. I'm thinking about all those journalists and academics who, well, at the beginning of the U.S. attacks on Iran, everyone had to kind of repeat the same thing: slogans, you know, the Iranian regime oppressed the women, you know. Oh, well, it's going to be much better after this. They're going to have a chance for freedom. And then suddenly you saw this turn to the very dark, where, you know, Trump goes, "Well, yeah, we have to—yeah, we might destroy a civilization tonight," and all of this kind of very genocidal language. And I don't think anyone anymore—well, I think it's quite obvious that the attack on Iran wasn't a humanitarian mission.

I mean, it's what great powers do. They go to pursue power politics, and you dress it up in humanitarian, benign language, you know, as something virtuous. But what happens when reality catches up? Or won't it? Because we had the same with—if you remember the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—you had these stories in the newspapers about the Ghost of Kyiv. Apparently they had a Ukrainian fighter pilot who just flew around shooting down dozens of Russian planes. I mean, it was absurd.

It was a wild claim, but everyone had to pretend it's real because otherwise you undermine the narrative, and then you're pro-Russian. This is the logic here. But what happens when all of this proves to be fake? Because I'm thinking, with the Ukraine war, all of this: Ukraine is winning, the Russians have much higher casualties, all these nonsense stories. At some point, it will fall apart when we face defeat, much like in Iran. Will there be a day of reckoning? What's going to happen to academics who went behind all this unprovoked narrative that Russia would restore the Soviet Union? All of this stuff. I mean, what happens then?

#David Gibbs

That's a good question. It's an excellent question. The other day I was on Pascal Lottaz's program discussing what I call the Vietnam moment. You see, in Vietnam, also in all wars, the narrative is, "We're winning, we're winning, we're having sensational victories, fantastic victories." In World War I, everyone was saying that. In Vietnam, in the early years of the Vietnam War, the U.S. government had all these narratives of, "We're winning, we're winning." The body count—they counted the number of dead bodies, the ghoulish thing, of the communist forces. They made up the numbers, it turns out, very similar to what they're doing now with the Russian casualties, I suspect.

And it held together up to a point until about 1968, when it collapsed. And when it collapsed, you had what was called the credibility gap. The entire foreign policy establishment was discredited for about a decade because of this. The public support for the war evaporated. You know, the anti-war movement grew by leaps and bounds because it was so obvious that the war was not being won. The claims being made about imminent victory were not credible. These were openly false, by the way. Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers, he was working for Robert McNamara. And he was saying that, you know, in private, he was giving McNamara intelligence reports about how badly the war was going on the ground.

And then McNamara read these reports and then went out and said how great things were going. And so I think that after a certain point, reality caught up with the propaganda and discredited not just the propaganda but the whole set of people promoting the propaganda, including much of the media. You know, the media had to change dramatically as a result of this for a brief period. I wonder if we're getting to that point with regard to Ukraine, you know, that we kept having these narratives: Ukraine is winning. My read of the war, and I could be wrong, is that at some point the Ukrainian army will crack under the weight, basically, of simply larger and superior Russian forces.

And when that happens, you could get a Vietnam moment where the credibility of the people making the statements will simply collapse, and public support for the war will collapse. I'm hopeful that that will happen because I fear that one of the dangers here is nuclear war. This is getting very, very dangerous indeed, with the Europeans basically openly talking about, you know, Kaja Kallas talked about how she'd like to break up Russia into pieces. She's virtually the foreign minister of the EU. There was the attack on the Russian bomber bases, the strategic nuclear bomber bases, I think it was a year ago, very likely with European and U.S. connivance.

These are far more reckless than anything that was ever done during the Cold War. And I do fear if this keeps going, there's a very significant risk we could have nuclear weapons used at some point. And so I'm hopeful that that will not happen. We will get instead what is a Vietnam moment and a collapse of public support for the war. In Europe, this could be very dramatic because the political establishments of the leading countries are already on very thin ice. You look at people like Merz or Macron, or recently Starmer, who was forced out. These were deeply, deeply unpopular figures, some of the lowest popularity ratings in the history of polling, literally.

You know, Britain, I think, what, have they had six or seven prime ministers in 10 years? That's extraordinary. So, and the only thing keeping this project afloat is the narrative of, "We're winning." And if it's very clear we're not winning anymore, we're not even going to have victory to show for it, you could get a real dramatic collapse of public confidence in the whole political establishment, also extended political instability. I think that's where Europe is headed right now. But I think the good news is this could basically cause an ending, basically, of the Ukraine project and at least protect the world against nuclear war, which again I see as a real danger here.

#Glenn

I think that's one of the things that people will come to realize. If the Ukrainians were really winning, then suddenly a lot of what NATO is doing now could make sense. That is, we're helping them defeat the aggressive invader, all of this. But once it becomes evident that Ukraine was never winning, it was losing, all we did was help it lose slower. People will have to ask why. Why would you boycott diplomacy if you knew they were winning? Why would you try to extend the war over and over again if you knew that they were losing? The only conclusion I can reach then is that we used the Ukrainians as proxies to simply try to weaken an adversary, even though we knew it would destroy them.

The fascinating part is you actually have Zelensky making this point himself back in March of 2022, while the U.S. and the U.K. were trying to convince him to walk away from the peace talks and choose war, where he actually told The Economist in an interview that, yeah, well, there's many countries in the West who want a long war with Russia so they can weaken an adversary, even if this means the destruction of Ukraine. Right. I mean, he said it himself. So at one point, this will have to come out. But I did have one last question. Can I just address what you just said?

#David Gibbs

I fear there's another interpretation, which is even more disturbing, which is that European elites, including military elites, are starting to believe their own propaganda. In other words, when you start repeating propaganda enough, perhaps you start to internalize it yourself. And perhaps they do believe that Russia can be militarily defeated, that you can get Putin removed, you can get him brought to The Hague, you can get Russia broken up into pieces. They believe that this is possible and achievable.

And just because they keep saying it so frequently, I could be wrong about that. And I hope I'm wrong about that and that they're just lying through their teeth. But what I'm starting to hear is they're not lying through their teeth. They do believe this rhetoric, that this is something that can happen and can be achieved. And so I think they're going to be very reluctant to ever disengage unless they're forced to by the public. I do have some hope in democracy that the public eventually will put their foot down and simply say no to this.

#Glenn

Well, this is unfortunately part of the human condition, though. That is, we are a group animal. Yeah, sociology teaches us. So we also see this, at least in propaganda studies, that the rational individual can be critical, but the instinct to adjust to the group, that group psychology, as Sigmund Freud called it, which was weaponized by his nephew Bernays in propaganda, the group psychology, it overwhelms the rational individual. So even if you've seen something with your own eyes, you will still adjust to the group. So it's quite powerful. My point is, if you have all the journalists in your country saying the same thing, all the political class saying the same thing, if you have all the academics repeating the same thing, you're going to fall in line.

It's very difficult not to do so. But yeah, what I want to ask was, you know, does there have to be a Vietnam moment, though? Because I'm thinking, I thought something similar would come after the war in Afghanistan, because 20 years, all the blood and money poured into this, and, you know, everything was exposed at the end. You had the Afghanistan Papers that showed that while the U.S. government was saying, "We're winning, we're winning," it was actually fake. They knew things were going poorly. We have leaked CIA documents showing that, well, the Europeans are losing some interest in occupying Afghanistan. What do we do? And the conclusion was, let's sell it as promoting women's rights in Afghanistan because the Europeans apparently care about that stuff.

It's a good way of selling the war as, you know, human rights. So you have people like Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary General, writing an op-ed with Angelina Jolie, get some Hollywood flair into this, about why NATO is now the main promoter of women's rights. I think they wrote in The Guardian. It's just extraordinary stuff. I mean... But it was always absurd. I mean, yes, NATO did not occupy Afghanistan for 20 years to liberate women, and they weren't winning. So it was all fake. So you would think that once this came out, NATO had this dramatic footage of fleeing, people falling off planes and all of this. You would have thought there would be some repercussions, but we just changed the topic, it seemed. I mean, how do you explain this?

#David Gibbs

Well, there's a number of factors here, but one of them is that I always thought that one of the reasons you had the push for war with Russia in 2022 was to make up for the failure in Afghanistan. It came really very soon after. I think it was August 2021, I should say, you had the collapse in Afghanistan, the humiliating U.S. departure. And then February, you had the war in Ukraine. And it seemed that there was a need to make up for that failure and to paper over that failure and make sure you would not have a Vietnam moment resulting from Afghanistan, which could have happened because after all, it was 19 years we were there. And then we spent hundreds of billions of dollars. How many? Thousands and thousands of lives were lost, and for nothing, for absolutely nothing.

It was a huge embarrassment by any standard, and the departure was deeply incompetent. And all of that was quietly forgotten because, after all, there was something much more important in the

world, which is the big Russian bear threatening everybody in the world. And that was, I think, to some extent used as a— I think there were other reasons, obviously, why the U.S. wanted to go to war with Russia and wanted to ensure there would be a war with Russia, which I think is exactly what happened, and baited Russia into invading. Something I have a long history of, by the way. I've written extensively about how the U.S. baited the Soviet Union into invading Afghanistan in 1979. Very similar situation.

But I think one of the triggers to it was indeed the failure in Afghanistan. So there's that. Now, why am I more optimistic this time? We've had multiple U.S. failures. We had the war on terror. It was a failure. We had the overthrow of Gaddafi; it was a failure. Of course, the Iraq War was a catastrophe of remarkable proportions, and no accountability. Nobody paid any price for this. It's amazing. Not even a public apology. And so why did the public put up with it? I'm amazed that the establishment has gotten away with this, let me say that. I mean, part of it, again, is this extraordinary miasma of propaganda that suffused all discussion of it, and the fact that it's bipartisan. Both parties supported the continuation of these types of policies.

And evidently in Europe, too, it's pretty much across the political spectrum. But I think that this time could be different because, I mean, a very telling sign was when Trump went to war in Iran. This was the very first war that I can think of where, at the outset, at the very beginning, the public, at least a plurality, opposed the war. That's never happened before. The typical pattern is initially the public supports the president, supports the war, and then tires of it as the war goes on over time. This time, the public was opposed at the very outset. And so I'm thinking, losing two wars, first in the Persian Gulf and then in Ukraine.

I'm hopeful this will be such a dramatic blow to the idea of endless intervention and endless war that this will finally lead to a collapse of public support, and the Vietnam moment when the public simply says, "No, we're not going to do this anymore." Now, I admit there are some historical differences here that are fairly obvious. The most striking one, of course, is conscription. America had a conscript army in Vietnam. There was mandatory military service for males, and there were ways to get out of it if you were educated. But if you were not educated, pretty much you went to the Mekong Delta. And so a big factor in the opposition to the war was conscription, mandatory conscription. You don't have that anymore. It's a volunteer army.

But still, I think the public is aware of the fact that this is lowering their living standards. It's having a real impact on living standards, even more so, by the way, in Europe than it is in the United States, but in the United States too. And so I'm thinking that—and there's an awareness, I think—there's a trade-off between guns and butter. It's become clearer and clearer to the public, even to the uneducated. And so I think that in the end, again, you know, maybe I'm being optimistic, too optimistic here. Maybe I'm engaging in wishful thinking, but I don't think so. I think this could be the set of events that will finally end public support and the political viability of the imperial project that we've had since the end of the Cold War. I hope I'm right. We'll see.

#Glenn

I hope you're right as well. I do suspect, though, that as Trump is defeated in Iran, on his way home, they will drop by Cuba and try to make this a little success to make up for that loss. But I do think you're right, though. A defeat in Iran, defeat against Russia. And this is, of course, made even worse by the economic problems which are just building up, and it's going to take on a life of its own. It's going to be hard to control the narrative after this, I think. So, yeah, I hope you're right. I rarely end this podcast on an optimistic note, so let's leave it there. And thank you so much for taking the time.

#David Gibbs

Thank you, Glenn.