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NDAA 2013: Congress approves domestic deceptive propaganda

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Reauthorizing the indefinite detention of US citizens without charge might be the scariest provision in next year's defense spending bill, but it certainly isn't the only one worth worrying about.

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An amendment tagged on the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 would allow for the United States government to create and distribute pro-American propaganda within the country's own borders under the alleged purpose of putting al-

Qaeda's attempts at persuading the world against Western ideals on ice. Former US representatives went out of their way to ensure their citizens that they'd be excluded from government-created media blasts, but two lawmakers currently serving the country are looking to change all that.

Congressmen Mac Thornberry (R-TX) and Adam Smith (D-WA) introduced "The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012" (H.R. 5736) last week during discussions for the NDAA 2013. It was voted on by the US House of Representatives to be included in next year's defense spending bill, which was then voted on as a whole and approved. The amendment updates the antiquated Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 and Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1987, essentially clarifying that the US State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors may *"prepare, disseminate and use public diplomacy information abroad,"* but while also striking down a long-lasting ban on the domestic dissemination in America. For the last several decades, the federal government has been authorized to use such tactics overseas to influence foreign support of America's wars abroad, but has been barred from such strategies within the US. If next year's NDAA clears the US Senate and is signed by President Obama with the Thornberry-Smith provision intact, then restrictions on propaganda being force-fed to Americans would be rolled back entirely.

Both Congressmen Thornberry and Smith say that the amendment isn't being pushed to allow for the domestic distribution of propaganda, but the actual text of the provision outlines that, if approved by the Senate and signed by President Barack Obama, that very well could be the case.

"We continue to face a multitude of threats and we need to be able to counter them in a multitude of ways. Communication is among the most important," Rep. Thornberry explains in his initial press release on the bill. *"This outdated law ties the hands of America's diplomatic officials, military, and others by inhibiting our ability to effectively communicate in a credible and transparent way. Congress has a responsibility to fix the situation."*

Defense Authorization Act

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On his part, Rep. Smith says that al-Qaeda is infiltrating the Internet in order to drive anti-American sentiments ablaze. If the amendment he co-sponsors is passed, the US government would be able to fight fire with fire.

"While the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 was developed to counter communism during the Cold War, it is outdated for the conflicts of today," Rep. Smith says in his official statement. "Effective strategic communication and public diplomacy should be front-and-center as we work to roll back al-Qaeda's and other violent extremists' influence among disaffected populations. An essential part of our efforts must be a coordinated, comprehensive, adequately resourced plan to counter their radical messages and undermine their recruitment abilities. To do this, Smith-Mundt must be updated to bolster our strategic communications and public diplomacy capacity on all fronts and mediums – especially online."

Does that mean that the anti-Nazi and damning communism adverts that were a hallmark of America during the Second World War and the Cold War, respectively, will be updated to outrage Americans against the country's alleged enemies? It isn't ruled out, for sure. Both Congressmen Thornberry and Smith have tried to dull the American public's quickly surmounting outrage by saying that the act won't be used for brainwashing purposes, but by letting Uncle Sam's propaganda-spewing communication machine have free roam on the Web and elsewhere, it would absolutely be allowed.

"Clearly there are ways to modernize for the information age without wiping out the distinction between domestic and foreign audiences," Michael Shank of the Institute for Economics and Peace in Washington tells BuzzFeed, who broke the news of the amendment. "That Reps Adam Smith and Mac Thornberry want to roll back protections put in place by previously-serving Senators – who, in their wisdom, ensured limits to taxpayer-funded propaganda promulgated by the US government – is disconcerting and dangerous."

Responding to the quickly escalating backlash, Rep. Smith attacked allegations that he is encouraging pro-American propaganda on US soil. *"This amendment is intended to ensure that the US government can get factual information out in a timely manner to counter extremist misinformation and propaganda,"* he writes in a follow-up statement. *"It does not and is not in any way intended to 'legalize the use of propaganda on American*



Congress still okay with indefinite detention and torture of Americans

intended to legalize the use of propaganda on American audiences’ and, in fact, specifically ensures that the content to be rebroadcast or republished domestically by the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) shall not influence public opinion in the US. It clearly states, no funds authorized to be appropriated to State Department or BBG for any activity shall be used to influence public opinion.”

Regardless of his or Mr. Thornberry’s intentions, the text of the legislation speaks for itself.

Rep. Smith contributed to this year’s NDAA with another provision, submitted with co-author Congressman Justin Amash (R-Michigan). With that amendment, the two lawmakers proposed that the US military be stripped of their power to indefinitely detain US citizens without charge, a right granted to them under last year’s defense spending bill. Unlike the amendment Rep. Smith introduced with Thornberry, the House shot down that proposal.

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