On October 13, 2016, just three weeks from the election, then-candidate Donald Trump deflected sexual assault allegations in a speech at West Palm Beach. He railed against his opponent and a corrupt political establishment:

The Washington establishment and the financial and media corporations that fund it exist for only one reason: to protect and enrich itself... It's a global power structure that is responsible for the economic decisions that have robbed our working class, stripped our country of its wealth and put that money into the pockets of a handful of large corporations and political entities... The Clinton machine is at the center of this power structure. We've seen this firsthand in the WikiLeaks documents, in which Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends and her donors.¹

Trump used similar language in a two-minute “closing argument” video released on November 4, in which he emphasized that “The political establishment that is trying to stop us is the same group responsible for our disastrous trade deals, massive illegal immigration and economic and foreign policies that have bled our country dry.”²

In the video Trump also warned of a “global power structure,” flashing photographs of prominent Jews, including international financier and liberal philanthropist George Soros, Chair of the Federal Reserve System Janet Yellen, and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein. This immediately provoked charges that Trump was employing antisemitic tropes that could have been taken from Protocols of the Elders of Zion.³

But aside from resorting to one of the oldest and vilest of populist appeals, Trump was doing something else. He was telling prospective voters—who most of whom had likely never heard of Protocols—that the ruling political establishment was “failed” and “corrupt,” and that it had “robbed our working class” and “stripped our country of its wealth.” He had launched a direct and devastating assault on the legitimacy of the country’s government and political, economic, and media elites, which he suggested was comprised of predators who posed an existential threat to voters’ towns, companies, jobs, and families; it had, he suggested, no moral right to govern.

What might have seemed to most to be normal, if unusually acrimonious, political aggression was in fact a classic example of a right-wing strategy developed in the late 1980s: Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW). Trump’s rhetoric and policies rightly identify him as a “right-wing populist bully,” in the words of former PRA senior analyst Chip Berlet, who notes that right-wing populism includes nativism and authoritarianism, as well as “fears of traitorous, subversive conspiracies.”⁴ What distinguishes harsh populist rhetoric from a 4GW attack, however, is going beyond the charge that one’s individual opponent is wrong or misguided, to claim that the system is illegitimate and one’s opponents have no right to power or even to exist.

Fourth Generation Warfare is a term of art for the latest evolution of types of warfare. Essentially, the three prior “generations” were massed manpower, massed firepower, and non-linear maneuver. Think roughly of the changing approaches of the American Revolutionary War to World War I to World War II. William S. Lind, who originated the term “Fourth Generation Warfare” in 1989, noted that elements from earlier generations of warfare, like “collapsing the enemy internally rather than physically destroying him,” would carry over into 4GW but with a greater emphasis and employing new tactics. 4GW expands warfare beyond the physical level to include the mental and moral dimensions. At the highest level of combat—moral conflict—the central objective is to undermine the legitimacy of one’s opponent and induce a population to transfer their loyalty from their government to the insurgent.
Fourth Generation Warfare resonated with military strategists and scholars, especially after 9/11, because it examined the emergence of a new type of warfare between a non-state insurgent and a central government in which ideas are key weapons. Part of 4GW is “epistemological warfare”—that is, “warfare” that adapts and incorporates concepts from post-modernism, structuration theory, deconstructionism, and chaos theory. In simpler terms, this type of warfare aims to “Disrupt the moral, physical and/or informational vertical and horizontal relations (i.e. cohesion) among subsystems.” This serves as propaganda intended to foster uncertainty, mistrust, and a sense of menace, all aimed at breaking down the bonds of social trust.

But the doctrine of 4GW has not been limited to use in foreign wars. It has also been used at home: as a psy-ops campaign perpetrated by domestic actors against domestic political and religious adversaries.

The insurgent force, in this case, is the Christian Right, led by its key strategists: the late Paul Weyrich who would transform electoral competition into all-out political warfare against the political system itself, and William S. Lind, the original thinker who postulated the emergence of Fourth Generation Warfare and who served as Weyrich’s right-hand man.

Paul Weyrich, an architect of the Christian Right and founder of the Free Congress Foundation, one of the movement’s strategic think tanks, saw 1980s-era America in terms of an epochal struggle between two camps over “our way of life.” He told the Christian Right’s founding direct mail fundraiser Richard Viguerie, “It may not be with bullets… and it may not be with rockets and missiles, but it is a war nevertheless. It is a war of ideology, it’s a war of ideas, it’s a war about our way of life.”

He argued that Rushdoony had essentially unilaterally declared that America was in a state of long term, civil war. Clarkson noted that according to Rushdoony, “every non-Biblical law-order represents an anti-Christian religion” and that “all law is a form of warfare.” The source for all law, institutions, norms, values, and ways of knowing must be their own idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible.

This worldview and its variants meant that all law, science, philosophy, and morals that did not conform to their interpretation of the Bible was illegitimate—or, in their words, anti-Christian and anti-God. Christian Reconstructionism had provided Weyrich and the Christian Right a theological justification for their all-out political war. Rushdoony himself was an acknowledged leader and thinker whose views were sought by the founding fathers of the contemporary Christian Right movement to undermine the legitimacy of the dominant regime.

The Christian Reconstructionists

The starting point for understanding epistemological warfare and 4GW called for by Weyrich and Lind and executed by the Christian Right is to begin with the Christian Reconstructionists—the low profile strategic thinkers who have influenced American politics since the 1960s.

Founded by Rev. Rousas John “R.J.” Rushdoony, the Christian Reconstructionist movement, through its voluminous writings, persuaded several hundred influential conservative clergy and theologians that American society had to be reconstructed—not reformed—on a new basis of knowledge or epistemology in order to build God’s kingdom on earth from the rubble of failed civilization. One way Christian Reconstructionist strategists influenced the trajectory of the Christian Right was participating alongside the John Birch Society in the formation and early running of the secretive Council for National Policy, a highly opaque organization that brought together Christian Right leaders, funding sources, and well-to-do activists.

The Reconstructionists argued that Christians should make a fundamental choice—obey God’s law or obey secular law. In his 1997 book, Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy, PRA Senior Fellow Frederic Clarkson noted that Rushdoony had essentially unilaterally declared that America was in a state of long term, civil war. Clarkson noted that according to Rushdoony, “every non-Biblical law-order represents an anti-Christian religion” and that “all law is a form of warfare.”

“This may not be with bullets...but it is a war nevertheless. It is a war of ideology, it’s a war of ideas, it’s a war about our way of life.”
Christian Right, including Weyrich.  

While the ideological role of Rushdoony and his fellow Christian Reconstructionists may not always be obvious, it’s not hard to detect when considering foundational thought regarding Christian nationalism;¹⁵ the grading on reli-

**COLONEL BOYD AND EPistemologi-Cal warfare**

The late Colonel John Boyd's influence on William S. Lind, the former director of cultural conservatism at Weyrich's Free Congress Foundation, may be one of the most underappreciated stories of the development of the Christian Right and its ever-evolving political strategy. It's not like Lind was hiding it. He was the co-author of at least three books on political strategy for the Christian Right: Cultural Conservatism—Towards a New National Agenda, Cultural Conservatism—Theory and Practice, and The Next Conservatism.²⁰

Col. Boyd was a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot in the Korean War who dedicated the latter part of his career to reformulating U.S. strategic thinking. Boyd never wrote a book on strategy, but instead spread his thinking throughout the Pentagon via constantly evolving marathon briefings, each of which could last between 14 and 18 hours. In 1959, while an Air Force captain, Boyd wrote “Aerial Attack Study,” which would become official Air Force doctrine on air combat.²¹ He went on to help develop the F-15, F-16, and F-18 fighter jets in the 1960s and 70s. His contribution to the development of the U.S. Army's AirLand Battle concept for defending NATO in the '70s and '80s, the incorporation of his ideas into the Marines’ doctrinal warfighting manuals and the Department of Defense's joint doctrinal documents, as well as his influence on the United Kingdom's and other European military doctrines all marked him as a uniquely influential military thinker. As an associate of Dick Cheney, then the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Boyd also heavily influenced the design of the 1991 Gulf War's ground campaign.²²

Boyd's 1997 obituary in The New York Times noted that he is regarded as having helped “revolutionize American military strategy." The highly decorated Colonel David Hackworth believed Boyd to be “America's greatest military thinker." Likewise, Major Jeffrey L. Cowan concluded his Marine Corps master's thesis on Boyd's conceptualization of warfare with the observation that Boyd “should be considered one of the most important military theorists of the United States."²³

What made Boyd's work such an historic advance in the philosophy of military strategy was that he added the physical, mental, and moral dimensions to the traditional tactical, operational and strategic levels of military combat. For example, Joint Publication 3.0 on Joint Operations—which provides Pentagon doctrine to all U.S. military forces—defines the strategic level of warfare as the setting of national objectives and allocation of national resources to achieve those objectives. This translates national strategy into operational campaigns within a theater (e.g. Europe, Middle East), which then links to its use by military forces.²⁴

*The Christian Right has applied this type of warfare against the federal government, the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, and its religious institutional rivals among mainline Protestant churches.*

Boyd posited that the highest level of warfare was moral, followed by mental, and physical. For example, a victory at the physical level of combat could, in reality, be a defeat at the moral level. Thus a government massacre of villagers could tactically mean that the government
could claim a territorial victory, but it could delegitimize the government in the eyes of its citizens or international allies.

At that moral level of conflict, Boyd believed in exploiting three psychological conditions—menace, uncertainty, and mistrust—in order to create an existential and epistemological threat to an army or a society. Maj. Cowan, in his thesis, quoted Boyd’s explanation of these terms: “menace, which are the impressions of danger to one’s well being and survival; uncertainty or the impressions, or atmosphere generated by events that appear ambiguous, erratic, contradictory, unfamiliar, and chaotic; and, mistrust as an atmosphere of doubt and suspicion that loosens human bonds among members of an organic whole.”

Frans P.B. Osinga, a Dutch Air Force Lt. Colonel with a PhD who wrote a comprehensive analysis of Boyd’s briefings, noted that the aim of moral conflict, according to Boyd, is to “Destroy moral bonds that permit an organic whole to exist.” Osinga quoted Boyd’s analysis of the “strategic aim” of moral conflict: to “Penetrate [his] moral-mental-physical being to dissolve his moral fiber, distort his mental images, disrupt his operations, and overload his system, as well as subvert, shatter, seize or otherwise subdue those mental-mental-physical bonds, connections, or activities that he depends upon, in order to destroy internal harmony, produce paralysis, and collapse adversary’s will to resist.”

What has so far gone largely unnoticed is that the Christian Right has applied this type of warfare against the federal government, the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, and its religious institutional rivals among mainline Protestant churches.

**ADAPTING WARFARE FOR THE RIGHT**

Weyrich’s view that the Christian Right had to wage an all-out propaganda war against secular liberalism and the Democratic Party (and the GOP) with the “same intensity” as a “shooting war” would come to early fruition with Newt Gingrich, whom Weyrich personally recruited in the 1980s and trained to use inflammatory rhetoric around cultural wedge issues. Eventually, Gingrich ascended to be Speaker of the House of Representatives by exploiting scandals he choreographed against the Democratic and Republican House leadership.

John Dean, President Nixon’s former White House counsel (whose Senate testimony laid the foundation for the article of impeachment for obstruction of justice), described Gingrich’s pre-Speaker tactics as “portraying Republicans as godly and Democrats as anti-religious liberals.” Gingrich’s rhetorical tactics according to Dean, “were developed through consultations with communications experts, and soon became standard operating procedure for Republicans.”

Gingrich would be instrumental in dismantling the committee structure of the House of Representatives, undermining democratic norms of comity, polarizing the House into warring political tribes, and, weakening the scientific basis of public policy.

Lind was very familiar with Boyd and his work. Prior to joining Weyrich at the Free Congress Foundation, Lind worked for Senator Gary Hart on military reform issues, including as part of a small group working to reform U.S. defense strategy in Europe, which included Boyd. He also collaborated with Colonel Boyd on introducing maneuver warfare to the U.S. Marine Corps. Lind considered Boyd “America’s greatest military theorist.” He once wrote that he had “worked with Boyd for about 15 years.”

Lind acknowledged that Boyd’s theories had shaped his own views on moral conflict, writing that 4GW’s “goal of collapsing the enemy internally rather than physically destroying him” derived from “Boyd’s OODA [observation-orientation-decision-action] theory.” Lind further argued, in ways consistent with Boyd’s thinking, that “psychological operations,” “manipulating the media,” and television news would become “more powerful” weapons in altering perceptions and public support for a government’s policies than actual military combat.

Uncoincidentally, Weyrich launched National Empowerment Television (NET) during 1992-93 to attempt to manipulate news directed at conservative and Christian audiences. Although Weyrich’s first challenge to the media establishment came in 1973 with the Joseph Coors-funded Television News, Inc. (TVN), part of its significance is that it brought Weyrich and Roger Ailes into a direct working relationship and laid the groundwork for the emergence of Fox News some 20 years later.

Since then, not only has the growth of the Christian Right and various submovements benefitted from Fox News misinforming its viewers but the Religious and Political Right depends upon dubious documentaries as a form of psychological operations to inform and expand its base of conservative and evangelical supporters, as well as undermine progressive organizations.

Stephen Bannon, President Trump’s senior strategist, is responsible for eight documentaries alone, including *In the Face of Evil: Reagan’s War in Word and Deed, Generation Zero* and *Fire from the Heartland* (about the Tea Party movement), *District of Corruption*, and, *Occupied Unmasked*. The group Citizens United also released *Rediscovering God in America* and *Rediscovering God in America II*, produced by Candace and Newt Gingrich; *Hype: The Obama Effect, Blocking the Path of 9/11; Hillary: The Movie; We Have the Power: Making America Energy Independent; ACLU: At War with America; Border Wars: The Battle over Illegal Immigration*; and, *Broken Promises: The United Nations at 60*.

Under the strategic guidance of Weyrich and Lind, the Christian Right launched multiple propaganda campaigns since the 1980s to induce, through stages, a crisis of confidence and legitimacy completely independent of which political party controls the presi-
dency and Congress, which philosophy holds sway in federal courts, or prevailing economic conditions. The delivery mode of this unrelenting barrage of criticism—designed to provoke a Boydian sense of disorientation, disruption, overload, menace, uncertainty, and mistrust among the general public—is propaganda disseminated through television, radio, movies, and documentary film, all mediums that appeal to emotions rather than logic.

THE PAYOFF

Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute scholars Thomas E. Mann and Norman Ornstein respectively reported in their 2012 book, It’s Even Worse Than It Looks, that the “Republican Party has become the insurgent outlier in American politics...The contemporary GOP...has veered toward tolerance of extreme ideological beliefs and policies...and rejection of the legitimacy of its partisan opposition.” Four years later, the scholars argued that both the Republican Party and the dysfunctional government had gotten worse. In their view, the “radicalization of the Republican Party” included “an utter rejection of the norms and civic culture underlying our constitutional system.”

This conflict of legitimacy predates Trump’s candidacy. In addition to Republicans’ efforts to delegitimize President Obama, they were undermining the very basis of a secular, constitutional order and were using fear and propaganda to do so. But Trump also built upon these efforts and included his own violations of democratic norms.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump used racially charged accusations against Hillary Clinton, such as the insinuation that she would use African American voters to rig the election through voter fraud. These claims originated years before within the Republican Party. Not only is the claim of massive voter fraud without a factual foundation, it has long been a right-wing propaganda tool.

Trump also declared throughout the campaign that he intended to jail Clinton for treason and prosecute her and her lawyers, calling her “crooked Hillary.” The Republican convention descended into a cesspool of prospective authoritarianism with calls to “lock her up” led by prominent Trump campaign officials and surrogates, including the future White House National Security Advisor, Gen. Michael Flynn. The effort appeared to be intended to delegitimize Clinton and her administration if she had won the election.

In addition to delegitimizing candidate Clinton, Democratic voters, and the prospective election results, Trump amped up longstanding right-wing attacks on the existence and functioning of a free, independent press. In fact, Trump escalated and expanded his attacks into full-blown epistemological warfare. But as historian and journalist Neal Gabler argued, Trump’s triumph and the ongoing epistemological war it wrought was made possible by the very same mainstream media that failed to adequately report on Republican and Christian Right destabilization of democracy.

The theological-political war first unleashed by the Christian Reconstructionists, followed by decades of Fourth Generation Warfare propaganda barrages perpetrated by the Christian Right and the wider conservative movement, ultimately resulted in something most political observers thought impossible: the election of Donald Trump as president. This is both a result and a cause of American society probably being more divided—by race, class, gender, and political ideology—than at any time since before the Civil War. The bonds of societal trust are disintegrating. Constitutional norms of governance are being undermined. Institutions meant to hold the executive branch in check are under assault from within and without. None of this was accidental. But if we are to hold onto any semblance of democratic society, knowledge of how Fourth Generation Warfare works, and that a religious and political insurrection is well advanced in the United States, is essential to formulation of appropriate strategies going forward.

The strategic intent of a 4GW attack, as Boyd explained, is “to dissolve [an enemy’s] moral fiber, disorient his mental images, disrupt his operations, and overload his system, as well as subvert, shatter, seize or otherwise subdue those moral-mental-physical bastions, connections, or activities that he depends upon, in order to destroy internal harmony, produce paralysis, and collapse adversary’s will to resist.”

In a 4GW scenario, the better narrative wins. Thus, any counter-strategy must include a robust narrative of what is being defended and why.

Any effective counter-strategy to efforts of the Trump administration and its Christian Right supporters must begin by understanding that when they attack, their objective is to undermine opponents’ legitimacy, since under 4GW, legitimacy is the coin of the realm. But fact-checking and debunking conspiracism is only a partial solution. It must be accompanied by defending the legitimacy of institutions, democratic norms, legal procedures, and social groups singled out for attack.

In a 4GW scenario, the better narrative wins. Thus, any counter-strategy must include a robust narrative of what is being defended and why, as well as the tools to counteract the menace, uncertainty, and mistrust engendered by 4GW attacks. These tools—a corresponding set to those in Boyd’s plan of epistemological warfare—provide individuals and groups with moral strength. Or in Boyd’s words, a “triumph of courage, confidence, and esprit [de corps] over [the] fear, anxiety, and alienation” of our modern, domestic, psychological war.

James Scaminaci III earned a PhD in Sociology from Stanford University, specializing in political sociology. He worked as a senior civilian intelligence analyst with subject matter expertise on the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, and organized crime.
former versus the latter fully legitimate."


