

The Washington Post  
January 18, 2018

## The false flags are flying again



*People attend a candlelit memorial service on Feb. 15 for the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School that killed 17 people in Parkland, Fla. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)*

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

For most Americans, the Parkland, Florida, shooting was a terrible tragedy. But for social media accounts that promote the interests of Russia in the United States, it was a fantastic opportunity.

On the morning after the tragedy, the Russia-linked accounts were commenting fiercely, pushing the "crazy lone killer" explanation for the shooting and mocking advocates of gun control.

According to Hamilton 68, a tracker website created by the German Marshall Fund, a lot of them linked to photos of guns and ammunition on the Instagram account of the suspected killer, plus a screenshot of a Google search for "Allahu akbar."

Others linked to a fact-checking website that debunked some statistics about gun crime. By Friday morning, some of the same accounts were also pushing something slightly different: the hashtag #falseflag. That's a reference to the conspiracy theory, already widespread 48 hours later, that the shooting never happened, that the attack is a "false flag" operation staged by the U.S. government as a prelude to the seizure of guns.

And this is just the beginning. Over the next few days, many of these same kinds of accounts will invent a whole range of conspiracy theories about the shooting. If the past repeats itself, pro-Russian, alt-right, white-supremacist and pro-gun social media accounts will promote the same hashtags and indulge in the same conspiracy theories.

Each group has its own interests in pushing #falseflag, but the Russian interest is clear. They do it because it helps undermine trust in institutions — the police, the FBI, the media — as well as in the government itself. They also do it because it helps to amplify extremist views that will deepen polarization in U.S. political life and create ever angrier, ever more partisan divides.

Over the next few days, the operatives who run these accounts may even seek to create events on the ground. We know they might do this because that's what they've done in the past. On Friday, a federal grand jury indicted 13 Russian nationals for "violating U.S. criminal laws in order to interfere with U.S. elections." The indictment said the group had not only organized pro-Donald Trump, pro-Jill Stein and anti-Hillary Clinton messages online, but also that they organized Trump rallies, hired a Clinton impersonator to appear at them, stole Social Security numbers and created fake PayPal accounts.

But if these kinds of actions are repeated as well, will we stop them? As the Parkland, Florida, #falseflag campaign shows, the Russian effort to shape U.S. politics, U.S. emotions, even the U.S. gun-control debate did not come to an abrupt halt with the election of Donald Trump, it continues.

Despite the bad publicity, Twitter has not removed bots from its network, and despite some theatrical agonizing from its chief executive, Facebook has not taken steps to ensure that its targeted advertising systems are not still spreading disinformation, too.

No serious attempt has been made to put pressure on any of the tech companies, let alone to regulate them. No major institutions, government or non-government, have launched digital-literacy campaigns to help teach people how to identify disinformation campaigns, Russian or not.

Despite what is now overwhelming evidence of Russian involvement in the last U.S. presidential election, no one at the highest level of the U.S. government has made a significant commitment to prevent Russian involvement in the next election, or the next debate, or the next national argument, either.

Trump continues to regard Russian intervention as a "hoax." Trump's aides and lieutenants have refused to spend any time or political capital on finding solutions. Money Congress allocated for that purpose has never been spent by Trump's administration. Remember all of that over the next few days as you read the indictment of the Russian Internet team, along with the commentary — because the same tactics, the same games, are already in use once again.

*Anne Applebaum writes a weekly foreign affairs column for The Washington Post.*

Copyright 2018 The Washington Post