

Ignorance and Fear as Fertile Soil for War Propaganda: The Case of the U.S.- Iraq War

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Propaganda is generally defined as statements in the service of particular political goals. While propaganda is often considered to be untruthful or deceptive, in fact, propaganda can be an accurate account and reasonable analysis of events. It could even be argued that all information is “propaganda” in the sense that even if one is just reporting “facts”, one’s choice of which facts to include and which facts to exclude must necessarily reflect one’s outlook. Nevertheless, when it comes to war, the old saying that “the first casualty of war is the truth” is often borne out, including during the recent U.S.-Iraq War. On the broadest theoretical levels, one can find many comprehensive sources that explain the various general theories and forms of propaganda. And there is an abundance of literature that discusses various specific examples of recent pro-war propaganda from Chomsky and Hermann’s many discussions of pro-U.S. propaganda to the recently published ***Weapons of Mass Deception***, (Rampton and Stauber), an analysis of how distortions, exaggerations, and half-truths were used to convince the people of the U.S. to support the war against Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003. One can find digests of these examples on such left-of-center internet news outlets as ***Znet.com***, ***truthout.com***, the ***Independent*** (U.K.) and ***Counterpunch***, as well as many mainstream sources including the BBC, ***Asia Times***, and even various mainstream sources in the United States, and readers are encouraged to seek out and examine those various sources. Because there has already been much valuable analysis written about propaganda in its broadest sense, and because there is a veritable flood of information detailing many specific examples of half-truths, exaggerations, innuendos, and outright fabrications during the recent US-Iraq War, we will confine our discussion here to a more middle-range set of considerations: *What are some of the more general aspects of propaganda as they have been manifested during this recent war: specifically, what particular techniques were used, and what were the pre-existing conditions that provided the fertile soil that allowed those techniques to be effective on many people in the United States?* This is written not from standpoint of having done an exhaustive, variable-controlled quantitative analysis. It is, however, based on hundreds of discussions with hundreds of “middle America” college students, a cross section of middle and low income youth from a variety of racial-ethnic backgrounds.

The particular focus here is on how different types of fear can be an effective force for discouraging critical evaluation of propaganda and how ignorance lays the basis for those fears to take hold. The obvious form of fear is when one perceives a direct physical threat to oneself or one’s community. A second form of fear is fear of being “othered”.....fear of being treated as an outsider and ostracized from the community.

Fear of direct, physical threats has long been a particularly strong aspect of popular social thought in the United States. As described in sociologist Barry Glassner’s book , ***The Culture of Fear*** , and popularized in Michael Moore’s documentary film “***Bowling for Columbine***”, fear of direct, physical assault is very much on the minds of many

Americans, despite the reality that they are in far more danger from automobile crashes, air and water pollution, and unhealthy diets. This deep-rooted fear of violent crime has been effectively parlayed by pro-war propagandists into an irrationally disproportionate fear of terrorism. The attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, which killed approximately 3,000 people have been played over and over again on television. President Bush, Vice President Cheney, along with Rumsfeld, and more convincingly, Colin Powell repeatedly “linked” the attackers to Saddam Hussein, despite the fact that no evidence has surfaced linking Saddam Hussein to any role in planning those attacks----a fact that Bush has acknowledged, even as he still makes reference to alleged “connections” between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin-Laden. The build-up towards war included both explicit charges (later proven to be untrue) that the Iraqi regime was well on its way to developing a nuclear weapon, that it had hundreds of thousands of barrels of chemical and biological weapons, and that it was “linking up” with the group that bombed New York, as well as implicit threats such as the threat that oil supplies to the United States would be disrupted or the economy would be damaged. Again, as mentioned above, this short article could attempt to detail many more specific examples of ways that fear was intensified, but that has been done elsewhere.

The second type of fear, fear of being ostracized, has also been effectively used by pro-war politicians and media. Even before the war began, President Bush used the rhetoric of “Either you support me or you are supporting the terrorists”, to create a climate of intimidation among many in the United States, intensified by the constant showing of films of the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11. Some who refused to participate in pro-war displays were ostracized, news media personnel who objected to wearing an American flag lapel pin, (not because they were unpatriotic, but because they believed that it compromised their attempts at neutrality and made them partisan advocates of President Bush’s policies), were publicly castigated. Politicians threatened to cut off important funding for the University of Missouri because the journalism school was not seen as “patriotic enough” (supportive enough of President Bush’s policies). Celebrities who opposed the war have had non-political speaking engagements cancelled. The Patriot Act, while not understood by many grassroots people, did send a message of intimidation to those more educated about its possible implementations. When Jessica Lynch was rescued from an Iraqi hospital amidst reports from the Pentagon that she had been shot, stabbed, tortured, and denied medical treatment, other, more objective media sources challenged many of those statements. Even when many of the statements were revealed as false, there was still a tone of intimidation, as if criticizing the Pentagon for lying was somehow insulting to the young woman who had been so severely injured. “What kind of a person wants to insult this young woman?” was the climate that was created. When confronted with allegations that prisoners at the U.S. base in Guantanamo, Cuba were being mistreated, possibly tortured, President Bush replied something to the effect that “we are the United States, and the United States does not do that, and anyone that says that we do just does not know the United States”. That’s one way to silence a critic and attempt to end an investigation.

When Bush reported that Saddam Hussein allegedly used rape and torture against his political opponents, and the existence of “rape rooms” was alleged, it put critics of the

war on the defensive – who wants to appear to be defending rapists? (Of course, the reality that the United States government and its CIA have worked with right wing terrorists who have committed rape and torture in Latin America is seldom reported in the press, and no doubt there would be shouts of indignation if someone accused former Presidents George H. Bush or Ronald Reagan of supporting rape....) This kind of intimidation is accompanied by a kind of verbal “bullying”, where direct answers to specific questions are evaded, even relatively non-partisan questions about possible war profiteering, and instead the questioner is accused of being a defender or even supporter of “the enemy” because such questions “get in the way of getting the job done”. A climate of “we have a job to do here and we can’t be slowed down by the timid or the weak because that will only help the terrorists” is used to silence many questions, either directly, or by creating a sense of guilt. Different constituencies are presented with different, often contradictory, rationales. Many religious Christians are made to feel that they are “opposing God” by not giving one hundred percent support to a war against non-Christian alleged terrorists. On the other hand, sophisticated professionals are told that the U.S. will bring democracy and improve women’s rights (despite the fact that Iraq, even with its other abuses of human rights, probably had more women’s rights than most other Arab or West Asian countries). The media conflates, confounds, and combines the public’s perception of al-Quaeda, of Pakistan, of the Taliban, of Iranian mullahs, of Saudi Wahabbi, of Filipino Islamic separatists, and of Saddam Hussein into one vast seemingly coherent enemy. And the “trump card”, the argument of last resort, is that many thousands of American youth are now at risk of being harmed, so “now is not the time to criticize”. In the context of all this, it might actually seem rather remarkable that so many hundreds of thousands of people in the United States have publicly protested.

While fear has always been an effective tool for winning support in the short term, one must consider what conditions allow fear to take root. The lack of knowledge among U.S. citizens about social, cultural, political, and economic events in the rest of the world is appalling. Few understand even basic geography including locating nations, estimating populations, and giving the most general descriptions of terrain and climate. Many assume that all Arabs are Muslims, all Muslims are Arabs, and that people from Morocco, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan, India (Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus alike) and Indonesia share similar lifestyles, religion, and cultural ideas. Hence the ease with which many Americans can be convinced that “those people” are all working in concert against an embattled American fortress. This lack of understanding geography is compounded by a lack of understanding history, even the history of the United States, as well as some of the most basic economic processes. And this short-sightedness leads to the notion that while science, technology, and gadgets change, on a fundamental social-cultural level, things always were and always will be more or less the way they are now, unless there is some indescribable, and uncontrollable, cataclysm. Short-sighted pragmatism might seem to be the absolute opposite of cataclysmic fatalism, but in fact they reinforce each other.....the short sighted pragmatist has no way to explain the seemingly sudden changes taking place, and reaches for a simple, if mystical explanation while the fatalist Millenarian just assumes that one should just deal with life “one day at a time” and not look too deep, since fundamental change for the better is beyond the reach

human society. This cynicism leads to a resigned attitude of not really trusting the politicians, but trusting humanity even less.

How can this be overcome? With facts. With evidence. Moral appeals are important, but it is especially important to marshal the evidence and to persistently insist on confronting the evidence. So many Americans get their political education from fictional films and television, and television news is no exception. One recent study demonstrated that those who acknowledged watching FOX news regularly demonstrated significantly less knowledge of actual facts about current events than those who used other outlets, including the also-mainstream CNN. One short term alternative is a careful, judicious use of the internet. While the internet is an ocean of myth and misinformation, it is possible, by investigating sources, evaluating the political perspective of the sources, and comparing reports, to develop a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of current events, including wars. Certainly one has a greater likelihood of getting accurate information through a combination of worldwide news sources and a careful process of sifting, winnowing, and cross-evaluation than one can find from television news or a local newspaper. Beyond that, we must promote general knowledge --- history, geography, economics, as well as critical thinking skills---so that people have a context with which to evaluate current events, including especially war. Evidence is intertwined with other evidence, and a combination of having the knowledge and having the patience to unravel the connections is indispensable for learning how to resist untrue propaganda. Polemics can be an important way to battle other polemics, but in the end, it is the ability to uncover, analyze, and present evidence that is the only way to defeat propaganda that exploits fear based on ignorance.

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