

American Propaganda
from the
Spanish-American War
to Iraq



War Stories

Steven R. Brydon

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This book is dedicated to the late Dr. Walter R. Fisher, decorated Marine Corps veteran of the Korean War. Dr. Fisher was my mentor and directed my PhD dissertation at the University of Southern California. His pioneering work on the role of stories in shaping human communication led to his groundbreaking “narrative paradigm.” Working with him greatly enriched my life and my research.

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Preface

Each of us has our own story about September 11, 2001. Early that morning I was driving to work and tuned my radio to the local news station. Instead of our regular announcers, I heard a network bulletin preempting local news. There were reports of planes crashing into buildings in New York and the Pentagon. When I got to class, several of my students, who had family in New York, asked to leave. I announced that anyone who wished to leave could do so and then invited students who had been following the news to share what they had learned. Soon the campus canceled all remaining classes and time seemed to be frozen.

Initially, no one really knew what had happened or who was responsible. But it was clear that America was at war. For several years, I taught a college course in Public Opinion and Propaganda. Until 2001, I mostly focused on historical propaganda, such as that from two world wars and the Cold War. But for the first time since Pearl Harbor, we had been attacked on our own soil. I knew that what I was teaching was no longer history. The United States was about to be plunged into a conflict it did not seek and the people of this country were about to be exposed to a propaganda campaign unlike any seen in decades.

Each war has its own story. From the sinking of the *Maine* to the attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans have been repeatedly drawn into overseas conflicts, often reluctantly. On more than one occasion, America has gone to war based on what were ultimately flawed and even false narratives. In some cases, even after these stories have been refuted, many Americans continue to believe the narrative reality over empirical reality—the persistence of the belief that Saddam Hussein was hiding large quantities of Weapons of Mass Destruction, despite the failure to find them after the invasion in 2003, is but one example.¹

Chapter 1 reviews theories about media effects, definitions of propaganda, and how it differs from other forms of persuasion. Chapter 2 approaches war propaganda from a narrative perspective. Chapters 3 through 9 focus on war stories from the war with Spain to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Finally, the concluding chapter synthesizes the stories from these wars to identify recurring stories. One might reasonably ask: Have we learned anything in over a century that can help avoid repeated and costly wars? If the same basic stories are repeated throughout the history of war propaganda, then can they be critically evaluated to determine if they provide good reasons to go to war? Hopefully future conflicts will be engaged in only when supported by coherent narratives that provide valid reasons to go to war.

NOTE

1. John Stauber, "Half of Americans Still Believe in WMDs—They Saw Them on TV," *PR Watch*, August 8, 2006, <https://www.prwatch.org/news/2006/08/5067/half-americans-still-believe-wmds-they-saw-them-tv>.

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Chapter 1

Propaganda and Persuasion

It was an early weekend morning in Hawaii during the seasonably warm winter. Most folks were planning a relaxing day in the tropical sun, then came the warnings of an incoming attack, with tensions between the United States and its Asian adversary mounting, everyone feared the worst. People sought shelter or attempted to evacuate, knowing there were only minutes to react. Thirty-nine-year-old Ashly Trask quickly put her family in her car and sped to her workplace, which had concrete walls and served as a hurricane shelter. Kim Smith went to Diamond Head, where there were bunkers and tunnels in which to hide. Others in western Oahu took shelter in a parking structure, crying and huddling with their children. Was this the prelude to the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor? No, it was an event over seven decades later, when on January 13, 2018, the Hawaii civil defense system blasted out an alert on cell phones throughout the island proclaiming that missiles were incoming. The alert added, “This is not a drill.” It took nearly a half hour before the alert was acknowledged to be a mistake.¹

The fear that Hawaii was under attack from a hostile foreign power had the ring of truth to it. December 7, 1941, proclaimed by Franklin Roosevelt as a “day which will live in infamy,” came on a sleepy Sunday morning, plunging the United States into the bloodiest war in human history. The believability of a forthcoming attack in January 2018 was further enhanced by the situation facing the world at that time, with North Korea having developed and tested missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads and reaching U.S. territory. Although the shooting war on the Korean Peninsula ended nearly seven decades ago without a peace treaty, the propaganda war has continued unabated. President George W. Bush included Korea in his Axis of Evil. President Obama warned incoming President Trump that Korea was the most urgent foreign policy threat he would face.² North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, who reportedly

ordered the execution of his uncle and half-brother, is portrayed as prone to horrible acts of evil. His nuclear and missile tests, along with bombastic rhetoric, are well known. In July of 2017, North Korea threatened to “strike a merciless blow at the heart of the US with our powerful nuclear hammer, honed and hardened over time.”³ This prompted President Trump to threaten “fire and fury.” Undeterred, on November 29, 2017, North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of reaching U.S. territory.⁴ Thus, it is little wonder that two months later thousands of Hawaiians thought that they were about to become the first casualties of World War III.

This chapter will explore how our understanding of propaganda and its effects has evolved over time. First, I discuss how mass media affect public opinion. Second, I explore how our understanding of media effects has influenced perspectives on propaganda. Finally, I discuss how to recognize propaganda.

MEDIA EFFECTS

There are many ways to categorize the way media affect public opinion. The sections that follow show the evolution of our understanding of media effects and are informed by the work of Elizabeth Perse.⁵

Direct Effects

Sometimes called the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” model, media were once assumed to be powerful based on “common sense” and anecdotal data. Newspaper owners bragged about their power. When confronted with the complaint from his illustrator that there was no war in Cuba, William Randolph Hearst famously wired back, “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.”⁶ During World War I, the Committee on Public Information’s campaign to build support for the war was deemed successful by many journalists and other observers. The rise of Hitler in Germany led to a fear that master propagandists could easily manipulate a passive public.

To this day, the view that media have immense power is widely believed. Politicians rail at “fake news,” convinced that the “liberal media” easily sway people. Political campaigns spend millions on advertising, believing that the right ad can swing voters’ attitudes. After Vietnam, the Pentagon became convinced that the war had been lost, not in the jungle, but in the media back home, and took steps to assure that would not happen again. Yet, these assumptions don’t hold up well to empirical research.

Perse argues that the direct effects model should not be completely discarded, however. When a crisis arises and the public has nowhere to go for

information except the media, direct effects are more likely. During the first war with Iraq, 70 percent reported to pollsters that they were following war news “very closely.” Video rentals (back in the days of Blockbuster) dropped dramatically, as people shifted from using media for entertainment to news.⁷ Perse concludes, “The direct effects model may provide a good explanation for these media effects. People respond almost immediately and uniformly to media messages about crises.”⁸ Although direct effects may be minimal in normal times, during a wartime crisis, this model may still have utility.

Limited and Conditional Effects

World War II provided a unique opportunity for social science researchers to determine what variables made messages effective. Soldiers provided an unending source of subjects for experimental research. Much of what we know about persuasion (source credibility, primacy vs. recency, message sidedness, etc.) comes from these studies. The surprising finding was, “Although ‘mass communications are extremely effective in transmitting straight information,’ the wartime experiments showed ‘that attitudes are very resistant to change by mass media and that personal face to face communication is often required.’”⁹ This is sometimes called the *two-step flow of influence*—that the mass media may influence opinion leaders, but most people need to be persuaded by those they trust, rather than the media. Even the highly touted *Why We Fight* series of films directed by the legendary Frank Capra were found to be only minimally effective. Sproule reports, “*The Battle of Britain* (as with other films in the series) had no measurable impact on the willingness of soldiers to serve”¹⁰ Emerging from the wartime and postwar body of social sciences was a new paradigm—the minimal or limited effects theory.

Perse proposes an expanded interpretation of the limited effects model, which she terms the *conditional effects model*, which assumes that audience characteristics influence media effects. Perse argues that “unlike the limited effects model, the conditional model holds that reinforcement effects are not the only effects. Change effects are also quite likely, but conditional on the audience.”¹¹ As an example, depending on the media outlet selected by audience members, the effects on attitudes can differ. Operation Iraqi Freedom was justified in part on the belief that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. As we shall see in chapter 9, which media outlet audience members selected had a profound effect on whether or not they believed such weapons had been found after the invasion. Although limited, media effects are also conditioned on audience characteristics and choices.

Cumulative Effects

As television grew in importance, researchers began to critique the limited effects model for ignoring effects that could not be easily quantified or replicated in laboratory settings. By the 1960s, television was ubiquitous and dominated by three networks that usually told the same stories. The cumulative effects model shifts the focus back to the media, rather than the audience.¹² In a world where television is pervasive, it is almost impossible to prove specific effects from a particular message or even series of messages because they are unavoidable. This view holds that the effects are so systemic and cumulative that they are easily overlooked. Examples of cumulative effects perspectives include *agenda setting*, *cultivation*, and *critical theories*.

Agenda Setting

This approach does not assume the media tell people *what* to think, but rather, what to think *about*. Its adherents contend, “By just paying attention to some issues while ignoring others, the mass media, deliberately or otherwise, may set priorities of concern within the various sectors of the public.”¹³ There is good evidence that this occurs during and prior to war. Anthony R. DiMaggio writes that “the media assists [*sic*] in setting the terms for acceptable public discourse.”¹⁴ Furthermore, he writes, “What is *not* reported determines a reporter or paper’s bias just as much as what *is* reported.”¹⁵

An important corollary to the agenda-setting hypothesis is that some types of issues are more likely to rely on media reports than others. The influence of media coverage is relatively unimportant for *obtrusive* issues compared to *unobtrusive* issues.¹⁶ Obtrusive issues affect people’s daily lives. For example, if the price of gasoline rises dramatically, drivers don’t need to read about it in the newspaper to be concerned. Events that happen overseas, however, are usually unobtrusive to people in their daily lives. For example, few Americans could have found Kuwait on a map until Saddam’s invasion in 1990 prompted extensive media coverage.

Cultivation Theory

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was another shift in theory and research. Baron and Davis explain that there was a move away from “questions like ‘What effects do media have on society or on individuals?’ . . . and ‘How do people use the media?’” Instead, theorists and researchers began to focus on issues like “how cultures organize themselves, how people negotiate common meaning and are bound by it, and how media systems interact with culture to affect the latter’s definition of itself.”¹⁷ Unlike the theories that dominated the

social sciences in the postwar period, these theories are not based primarily on quantitative research methods.¹⁸

An example of this approach is *cultivation theory*, developed by George Gerbner and his associates, who write, “Television pervades the symbolic environment. Cultivation analysis focuses on the consequences of exposure to its recurrent patterns of stories, images, and messages.”¹⁹ The ubiquitous nature of TV makes it comparable to “a gravitational process.”²⁰ For example, Gerbner and his colleagues have shown “that heavy viewers overestimate their chances of involvement in violence and their general vulnerability We study what exposure to violence-laden television contributes to their conceptions of the realities of their own lives.”²¹ One might hypothesize that portrayals of terrorism could have the same effect on viewers as violence in general.

Critical Theory

Critical theory has its roots in Marxist and neo-Marxist thought, but there are now many non-Marxists who embrace the theory. These theorists claim, “mass media are the most important instrument of twentieth-century capitalism for maintaining ideological hegemony because they provide the framework for perceiving reality.”²² Thus, like cultivation theory, critical theory is rooted in the view that the media are so prevalent that isolating their effects is almost impossible. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi writes, “The ways in which the media, particularly television, select and interpret events, what they focus on and what they omit, help to define public knowledge and construct public opinion.”²³ One can also see a kinship with the agenda-setting hypothesis.

Transactional Model

The transactional model is probably the most useful for studying propaganda. Perse explains, “the cognitive-transactional model is called *transactional* because both media content and audience factors are important to understanding media effects.”²⁴ The idea is that some media content can prime consumers to activate certain mental schemas to “direct attention, perception, recall, and other reactions to environmental clues.”²⁵ She writes, “How a news story is framed (with headlines, graphics, or introduction) influences which schema is used to interpret the information.”²⁶ For example, during major wars such as the invasion of Iraq, cable news networks developed catchy logos and stirring music to cue audience members to focus on the upcoming story as part of a nation at war. Examples fitting the transactional model include *framing and priming*, *uses and gratification*, and the growth of *social media*.

Framing and Priming

Framing is a useful concept in understanding how people make sense of the world around them. A frame is “a specific set of expectations that are used to make sense of a social situation at a given point in time.”²⁷ DiMaggio explains, “Framing is the means by which *an entire social reality* is constructed. The narratives adopted by use of one frame over another inevitably influence how news consumers view important issues.”²⁸ He cites the example of “rendering the war in Iraq as a struggle against terrorism and a quest to democratize the Middle East,” as clear-cut media framing.²⁹ Different frames can lead to very different conclusions about the wisdom and morality of a war. Closely related to framing is priming, which “affect[s] the criteria by which individuals judged their political leaders.”³⁰ In the wake of 9/11, for example, the presidency of George W. Bush was no longer judged by how successful his domestic policies were, but rather by how well he functioned as commander-in-chief.

Uses and Gratifications

How people use media to gratify their needs is essential to understanding media effects. James W. Carey and Albert L. Krieling explain, “In sum, uses and gratifications researchers shifted the impact of mass media from the effects of producers’ intentions to the effects of audiences’ intentions, which are understood to depend upon sociological context and active psychological processes.”³¹ As an example, one might watch television purely for its entertainment value, but suppose a war appears to be on the horizon. Then people may turn to the media, not so much for entertainment, but for information about the budding crisis. The high ratings earned by cable TV outlets such as CNN and Fox as war in Iraq seemed on the horizon in 2002–2003 shows that a great many people were seeking not entertainment, but information about the upcoming battle.

Overall, this evolution of models of communication research shows that a simple one-directional model of propaganda is misguided. The transactional model, I believe, provides the best framework in which to understand the influence of propaganda on public attitudes toward going to war.

Social Media

When the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began, social media were nonexistent. Even MySpace had not yet been created when U.S. troops entered Baghdad. Pew Research Center didn’t begin tracking their use until 2005, when only 7 percent of respondents used social media.³² By 2017, the number had reached 81 percent.³³ Since social media were not a factor during

the early years of these wars, one can only speculate about their impact in future wars. What we do know is that according to W. James Potter, “The major characteristics that distinguish digital media from analog media are the fluidity across channels, the greater ability to customize messages, dispersed decision-making across more people, and ability to provide a wider range of experiences to users.”³⁴ Clearly, social media fit the transactional model, perhaps more so than traditional mass media. Social media give all users an instant way to react—from liking to disliking to re-tweeting. Probably most relevant for the study of war propaganda are social media’s interactive nature and dispersed decision-making structure. The latter “allows every user to largely bypass authorities who used to function as gatekeepers and instead create any kind of content . . . and then distribute those messages widely . . . anywhere in the world.”³⁵ When the next war comes, it will be much more difficult for the government to control the messages people receive and far more likely that different groups of people will perceive very different realities depending on their choice of social media platforms.

PERSPECTIVES ON PROPAGANDA

Given the focus of this book on war propaganda, it is not my purpose to provide a comprehensive review of the study of propaganda. Excellent and comprehensive sources are available. I particularly recommend J. Michael Sproule’s *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*, which informs much of the discussion that follows.

Prior to World War I, the study of propaganda was not a major concern of theorists. However, the advent of the Great War in 1914 suddenly thrust America into a propaganda war well before it entered the shooting war in 1917. Once the war began in Europe, the British made a concerted effort to propagate their views to Americans. Reports of atrocities were featured in the highly charged Bryce Report. Sproule writes, “[I]ts effect on American public opinion in 1915 was significant. Proof positive seemingly was at hand to sustain the Allied claim that theirs was a contest of good versus evil.”³⁶ In his highly influential work, *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, noted columnist Walter Lippmann distinguished between “the world outside and the pictures in our heads.”³⁷ Thus, although Americans did not directly experience the European War between 1914 and the first part of 1917, thanks to largely one-sided propaganda from the Allies, they had pictures in their heads of German atrocities and the suffering of the Belgian and other European democracies. Sproule notes,

Before the war, propaganda . . . signified chiefly the spreading of self-interested opinions through publicity. Under the influence of anti-German exposés, however, the term by 1915 had begun to take on more sinister connotations of manipulations and half-truths secretly sowed by society's avowed enemies.³⁸

Once America entered the shooting war, the Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel, embarked on a powerful campaign to support the patriotic goals of the war. Based on the apparent success of this propaganda, the notion that skilled propagandists could bend the people to their will took hold. Thus began the era of what was termed the direct effects, magic bullet, or hypodermic needle theory discussed earlier. Media were seen as so powerful that few could resist their influence. World War I seemed to offer a prime example of how propaganda could control public opinion.

After the war, it became known that much of the prowar propaganda was based on falsehoods and exaggerations. The reports of German atrocities turned out to be greatly exaggerated. Sproule writes, "American disillusionment . . . began in Europe, where the sentiment spread among American troops that atrocity stories had been false concoctions and that the Germans had behaved no worse than any other combatants."³⁹

The concern about people being easily misled by propaganda led to a movement called *propaganda analysis*—the idea that if average people could be taught to recognize propaganda, then they would not be defenseless. In 1937, as war seemed to be approaching again, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis was founded. Their definition of propaganda was the "*expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends.*"⁴⁰ The Institute became best known for its list of seven propaganda techniques, with catchy titles like name-calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon.⁴¹ However, as Hitler's power in Europe rose, the IPA became a victim of the shift in American priorities. Fighting fascism replaced identifying propaganda as the dominant concern. Sproule identifies the IPA's Achilles' heal at a time when America was preparing for war: "[E]qual treatment of propaganda rendered the IPA vulnerable to criticism that its approach was fundamentally defective for being unable to distinguish the relative moral qualities of democratic and fascist propaganda."⁴² This lack of a moral distinction was evidenced in 1939 when the Institute published an analysis of Franklin Roosevelt's supposed use of propaganda. Soon the tide turned against the Institute as funds dried up and board members resigned, many to join the U.S. government's own war propaganda efforts.

If propaganda was not likely to persuade people by shooting a magic bullet at their psyches, then teaching propaganda analysis became unnecessary. Sproule

views the shift from propaganda research to communication research as “what Thomas Kuhn would term a paradigmatic revolution.”⁴³ The fall of propaganda as a term of art is shown by the decline in citing the term in *Psychological Abstracts*. By the 1950s references to propaganda were found in less than ten citations and by 1966 were totally absent.⁴⁴ Thus, for several decades, propaganda was regarded as a tired subject that had outlived its relevance to modern communication research. Sproule writes, “*Media effects* ultimately supplied the mantra that permitted communication scholars to turn away from their field’s historical interest in issues of propaganda and participatory democracy.”⁴⁵

However, in the 1960s and beyond, interest in propaganda began to return, especially in the wake of revelations such as the Pentagon Papers and Watergate. The domain of mass media effects began to expand, including agenda setting, cultivation, and the like. According to Sproule, Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell’s 1986 book *Propaganda and Persuasion* “broke a generation’s silence on comprehensive antipropaganda education . . . the likes of which had not been seen since Alfred Lee’s 1952 book [*How to Understand Propaganda*].”⁴⁶ The influence of Jowett and O’Donnell’s book is reflected in the publication of a seventh edition in 2019.⁴⁷ Events such as the wars with Iraq also led to a greater interest in studying propaganda, as reflected in journalist John R. MacArthur’s *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War* and Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy’s *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction*.⁴⁸ Thus, propaganda once again became a subject of interest to academic researchers, journalists, and the general public. That raises an important issue, what exactly counts as propaganda?

RECOGNIZING PROPAGANDA

In seeking to define propaganda, one is tempted to follow the lead of Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of obscenity: “I know it when I see it.”⁴⁹ Where does one draw the line between propaganda and other forms of persuasion? As Downing and his colleagues admit, “The dividing line is often hard to draw.”⁵⁰

The term can be traced back to *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) established in 1622 by the Roman Catholic Church to propagate the faith and defeat Protestantism. Early twentieth-century definitions rested on an assumption of manipulation and deception. Harold Lasswell offered a definition in 1927 that became widely accepted: “Propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols.”⁵¹ Thus, the idea of *manipulation* became integral to the definition of propaganda.

On the other hand, some practitioners of propaganda defended its use in the service of a just cause. Edward Bernays wrote, “[T]he only real difference between ‘propaganda’ and ‘education,’ really, is in the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don’t believe in is propaganda.”⁵² He noted, “[W]hether, in any particular instance, propaganda is good or bad depends upon the merits of the causes urged, and the correctness of the information published.”⁵³ In a 1983 interview concerning his work with the Creel Committee in World War I he told Bill Moyers, “I think the propaganda was very effective and, as I say now, it was propaganda and not ‘improperganda.’”⁵⁴ This view, therefore, comes very close to equating propaganda with persuasion. In World War II, few doubted the legitimacy of American war propaganda—after all the facts were indisputable—the United States had been attacked without warning and few villains in history could rival Hitler. Propaganda was only a concern when the Nazis and their Axis allies practiced it.

As noted earlier, Jowett and Donnell’s 1986 book resurrected the study of propaganda and their definition has become widely accepted. They define propaganda as “*the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.*”⁵⁵ In their view propaganda differs from persuasion because the latter involves not just the fulfillment of the source’s goals but also that of the recipient: “Because both persuader and persuadee stand to have their needs fulfilled, persuasion is regarded as more mutually satisfying than propaganda.”⁵⁶

As widely accepted as this definition is, however, it is not without limitations. How is one to determine whether the persuader desires to fulfill only their goals or those of the persuadee? Who makes that judgment? Bernays would argue that the Creel Committee’s war propaganda served the entire nation’s interests not just those of the Wilson administration. Yet those who were jailed for their opposition to World War I would strongly disagree. Moreover, what if the recipients harbor objectionable goals that the propagandist exploits? A QAnon message to true believers certainly satisfies needs of both the sender and receivers. But does that mean it’s not propaganda? In fact, one marker of propaganda is that it appeals to biases and prejudice. O’Shaughnessy claims that “the propagandist dramatises our prejudices and speaks to something deep and even shameful within us. Propaganda thus becomes a co-production in which we are willing participants, it articulates externally the things that are half whispered internally.”⁵⁷ From a transactional view, propaganda is not simply something that a source does to a receiver. Thus, merely establishing a shared goal doesn’t disqualify a message from being propaganda.

Keep in mind that direct media effects are more likely to be found in crisis situations. The attacks of September 11th were certainly a crisis. Although

the first response was to attack the government that harbored bin Laden, soon Bush began pushing for war with Iraq. His father had succeeded in equating Saddam Hussein with Hitler. Thus, the forty-third president's war propaganda was conditioned by that of the forty-first. Ellul refers to this as "pre-propaganda."⁵⁸ As cultivation theory has shown, there exist myths, stories, beliefs, and prejudices cultivated for years before the actual propaganda campaign begins. The portrayal of Arabs in American media had for years been stereotyped in ways that made them easy targets for propaganda.

The definition should not be limited to official government propaganda. In fact, governments often conceal the true source of war propaganda. During the efforts of George W. Bush to promote a war with Iraq, the *New York Times* sometimes printed stories that were leaked to them by the administration. Then Vice President Dick Cheney and other administration officials quoted the very articles as supposedly independent evidence for going to war. Although it appeared to the public that the messages were from reputable and objective media sources, in reality they were from the very administration promoting the war.

In many cases, the purpose of the propagandist is clear—both Presidents Bush were seeking approval for military action against Iraq. But often the purpose is concealed or unknowable at the time. Thus, to limit one's analysis of propaganda to cases where the source is openly proclaiming a goal of war is to miss one of propaganda's most important tools—deception. For example, the war in Vietnam was escalated in response to a supposed attack on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. LBJ constantly invoked the claim, "We seek no wider war," while increasing American troops to over a half-million. Had he initially announced that as his goal, it is doubtful that the propaganda underlying U.S. escalation in Vietnam would have succeeded.

Some have suggested that factual messages cannot be propaganda. Although on the surface, this might seem a reasonable limitation, propagandists have learned that facts can be powerful weapons in their arsenal. Konrad Kellen, who translated Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda*, explains this apparent paradox:

Most people are easy prey for propaganda, Ellul says, because of their firm but entirely erroneous conviction that it is composed only of lies and "tall stories" and that, conversely, what is true cannot be propaganda. But modern propaganda has long disdained the ridiculous lies of past and outmoded forms of propaganda. It operates instead with many different kinds of truth—half truth, limited truth, truth out of context. Even Goebbels always insisted that Wehrmacht communiqués be as accurate as possible.⁵⁹

Ellul writes, "[P]ropaganda must be based on some truth that can be said in a few words and is able to linger in the collective consciousness."⁶⁰

Having shown problems with other definitions, one can reasonably ask what messages should be considered propaganda? O'Shaughnessy argues that we need to look at symbolism, rhetoric, and myth in ferreting out propaganda.⁶¹ As an example, rhetorician Kenneth Burke examined Hitler's *Mein Kampf* "to discover what kind of 'medicine' this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America."⁶² Burke argues the *names* we use reveal our motives and our implicit program of action:

To call a man a bastard is to attack him by attacking his whole line. . . . An epithet assigns substance doubly, for in stating the character of the object it at the same time contains an implicit program of action with regard to the object, thus serving as motive.⁶³

As we shall see, in war after war, the enemy and even the people the United States was supposedly protecting are named in ways that convey a motive for war. For example, Germans were referred to as "Huns" in World War I. Japanese were called far worse and even American citizens of Japanese descent were rounded up and placed behind barbed wire in euphemistically named "relocation camps." Saddam was named "Hitler" in two wars, and on it goes. So we shall include in propaganda messages that use language naming a potential enemy in a biased way.

If bias is a marker of propaganda, is unintended bias excluded? According to O'Shaughnessy, Ellul "regards all biased messages as propagandist even when the biases are unconscious."⁶⁴ Some would criticize such a broad view, arguing that *intention* is essential to defining propaganda. If people were fully cognizant of their biases, then such an objection would be difficult to overcome. However, as we have learned in recent years, bias is often so built into people's psyches that they are unaware of it. In the wake of numerous killings of unarmed people of color by police, many departments around the United States have instituted training in recognizing unconscious bias. This should caution us against requiring proof of consciousness of bias before treating a message as propagandistic.

Beyond bias, what other characteristics of the message might be an attribute of propaganda? Ellul's view of propaganda includes the use of "*psychological manipulations*."⁶⁵ For example, fear appeal, appeal to prejudice, and appeals to patriotism can all be seen as potential manipulations embedded in a message. In each case, the use of such techniques is a clue that the message contains propaganda.

The channel of communication may be one of the most obvious characteristics of propaganda. The source must convey the message to as wide a population as possible. Ellul writes, "Propaganda must be total. The propagandist

must utilize all of the technical means at his [*sic*] disposal—the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing.”⁶⁶ He adds that “they must *all* be used in combination. The propagandist uses a keyboard and composes a symphony.”⁶⁷ Thus, our analysis must not exclude any channel of communication used to convey propaganda.

As noted earlier, the idea of a passive audience, easily manipulated by a “magic bullet” by propagandists has largely been dispelled by research. Instead, we now realize that the receivers of communication are participants in the transaction. Tony Schwartz, the creator of one of the most famous political ads of all time (“Daisy Girl” in 1964) uses the term “partipulation,” not manipulation, for what he does.⁶⁸ In other words, people must participate in their own manipulation. He explains in his book *The Responsive Chord*:

A listener or viewer brings far more information to the communication event than a communicator can put into his [*sic*] . . . message. The communicator’s problem, then, is not to get stimuli across, or even to package his stimuli so they can be understood and absorbed. Rather, he must deeply understand the kinds of information and experiences stored in his audience, the patterning of this information, and the interactive resonance process whereby stimuli evoke this stored information.⁶⁹

For the critic of propaganda, therefore, understanding the prior beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of the public is crucial to understanding propaganda. According to Ellul, people respond to “certain words, signs, or symbols, even certain persons or facts [T]he propagandist tries to create myths by which man will live, which respond to his sense of the sacred.”⁷⁰ As we will see, propagandists tell “war stories” that embody people, signs and symbols, facts and even myths to move an often reluctant nation to war. To the extent that prior public opinion can be ascertained, often through public opinion polling, we can better understand how these stories resonated with the public and moved them to action.

For some writers, the distinction between propaganda and persuasion becomes almost undetectable. DiMaggio writes,

Propaganda entails the systematic dissemination of *any* given doctrine or dogma, by *any* party, regardless of their outlook In other words, it does not, at its core require deliberate deception. Propaganda, then, is not necessarily inherently good or bad.⁷¹

If one accepts this definition, then it is difficult to draw a bright line between propaganda and persuasion. My view is the distinction between

propaganda and persuasion lies more on a continuum, rather than there being a bright dividing line.

Based on the preceding analysis, therefore, what counts as propaganda? We will look for messages that possess *one or more* of the following characteristics. First, do they contain *false or distorted information*. Second, do the messages *omit relevant information* or introduce irrelevant appeals to the matter at hand. Third, are messages *consistent*? Fourth, do the messages misstate or ignore the possible *consequences* of the war. Finally, do messages appeal to *questionable values*, as evidenced by biased language, appeals to prejudice, or other types of manipulation. If a message contains *any* of these elements, then it should be considered as at least potentially propagandistic. In the next chapter, we will present a model of how to analyze war messages that gets to these core issues. Keep in mind, however, that not all of these characteristics are required. For example, a truthful message that is propagated for purposes of stirring hatred or violations of human rights should not be excused just because it contains elements of truth.

SUMMARY

This chapter has reviewed basic models of media effects and shown how the history of studying propaganda has evolved in light of these models. The difficulty of defining propaganda and distinguishing it from persuasion leads to a somewhat different approach. We shall look for clues that we are dealing with propaganda in terms of truth, relevance, consistency, consequences, and values. In the next chapter, we will lay out a paradigm that will guide the remainder of this book. As the opening story illustrates, in a perceived crisis, people are prone to react out of fear and readily accept what appear to be official messages, whether they are on the TV or their smart phones. Fortunately, the warning of an incoming missile attack was merely an unfortunate human error. No propaganda was intended, but the possibilities for spreading misinformation have multiplied in an era where a tweet can reach millions in mere seconds.

NOTES

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Chapter 2

Narratives of War

On October 10, 1990, a fifteen-year-old Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah (her last name was withheld to protect her family) testified before the Human Rights Caucus of Congress. Saddam Hussein had invaded her country on August 2, and she was there to help convince members of Congress and the public that the United States needed to intervene. She said, in part:

I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital with twelve other women who wanted to help as well. I was the youngest volunteer. The other women were from twenty to thirty years old. While I was there I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the children to die on the cold floor. [Crying] It was horrifying.¹

Needless to say, the story was a bombshell. Journalist John R. MacArthur reports that six senators cited the story in support of their vote for the war, which passed by a mere five-vote margin.² The Persian Gulf War of 1991 rested on an underlying narrative—Saddam Hussein was another Hitler, who had invaded a helpless neighbor and then committed grievous atrocities against its citizens. Nayirah’s story was but one small part of an overarching narrative told to convince the American public and Congress to go to war.

In chapter 1, we reviewed a number of approaches to understanding media effects. Ultimately, the most useful approach to this topic is the transactional model, where the source and receiver of messages are coproducers of the effects. In this chapter, we review two theories that are well suited to the study of war propaganda. Transportation theory rests on the premise that stories—both factual and fictional—can transport audiences into an experience that becomes real to them. The narrative paradigm provides a method of assessing whether a story provides good reasons to accept its values and the

actions implicit in it. These theories come from very different lineages. Social psychologist Melanie Green has proposed the transportation theory to explain the effects of stories on people and has empirically tested her hypothesis and shown it to have validity. The power of the story told by *Nayirah* is examined in light of that theory. Walter Fisher developed his narrative paradigm based on a rhetorical approach. The narrative paradigm is applied to the *Nayirah*'s story. Although to my knowledge Green and Fisher never met, I believe their two theories are complementary and well suited to studying war propaganda. Finally, the process for selecting artifacts for study in the following chapters is explained.

TRANSPORTATION THEORY

We've all been in the situation of reading an engrossing novel, getting lost in a movie, or listening to an engaging storyteller. It is likely that each of us has been transported, as Green suggests, to a different reality, at least for a time. Along with her colleague Timothy C. Brock, she found that narratives, both true and fictional, can transport audiences and significantly affect beliefs and evaluations.³ Moreover, they found, "While the person is immersed in the story, he or she may be less aware of real-world facts that contradict assertions made in the narrative."⁴ When reading a work of fiction this is of little concern. But when an allegedly true story advocates war, failing to compare it to real-world facts can be catastrophic. Green and Brock

suggest that transportation into a story causes people to be less motivated (or less able) to disbelieve any particular conclusion; transported individuals are so absorbed in the story that they would likely be reluctant to stop and critically analyze propositions presented therein.⁵

Of course, stories are not just told, they are seen—whether on TV, a computer, or smart phone—and can have powerful effects. Green writes, "Story-based mental imagery may be a particularly powerful means by which narratives can influence beliefs. Visual images, or mental pictures, can be evoked by a transporting narrative or provided by a visual narrative (television, movies)."⁶ Certainly, *Nayirah* presented a vivid word picture that transported her audience to a horrific scene and may even have caused several senators to change their vote.

Green and Philip Mazzocco applied this model to the courtroom setting in an article for the American Society of Trial Consultants.⁷ One of their key findings is