

The Basic Principles of War Propaganda: The US Lies About Every War

Part 15 of 'Elephants in the Room' series

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

"In war, truth is the first casualty" (Aeschylus(1))

A Very Brief History of War Propaganda

Propaganda as a science really got under way during World War 1 (WW1). The British and the German governments both brainwashed their populations into believing that the other country was a demonic enemy that had to be defeated. The famous writer, Aldous Huxley, once wrote that:

"The propagandist's purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human"(2)

The war itself, and the propaganda that helped to create the war, has been described as an:

"extraordinary state accomplishment - mass enthusiasm at the prospect of a global brawl that otherwise would mystify those very masses, and that shattered most of those who actually took part in it."(3)



Students of propaganda are usually aware that Germany's propaganda minister in the 1930s and 40s, Goebbels, had a large propaganda library. He was very interested in the scientific approach to propaganda and he followed the research

of early propaganda pioneers.

He used this to minimise criticism of German policy, whilst at the same time he carried out a campaign against the Jews which led to millions of them being killed.(4) However, propaganda by Britain and the US relating to these wars is discussed much less. We are encouraged to think that during WW1 and WW2, the British and US were 'the good guys', but this is an example of propaganda through re-writing history. In 1914 (beginning of WW1) and also in 1939 (beginning of WW2) Britain was the dominant imperial power in the world, and the US and France had their own colonial territories. This involved many invasions and occupations, and a great deal of mass murder, torture and rape. Germany wanted its own Empire, so both wars (sometimes described as a single war divided into 2 parts) were fights for imperial supremacy. None of these nations deserve the label 'the good guys' in either world war. They were all run by insane leaders who were prepared to slaughter millions of people for their own ends.(5)

There is further evidence of US and British criminality in those periods. In 1917, the Russian people overthrew their rulers (known as the Tsars) and withdrew from World War 1. Britain and the US then invaded Russia, in 1918, to (unsuccessfully) try to overthrow the new government. Similarly, after WW2, many Greek people wanted to govern themselves, but Britain and the US invaded Greece to (successfully) get the pre-war dictators back into power.(6) The Russians in WW1 and the Greeks in WW2 had initially fought on the same side as the US and Britain. The idea that Britain and the US were not the 'good guys' during that period is almost unmentionable in polite US and British society, and is almost never mentioned in the mainstream press.

Don't Show The Reality of War - Censorship by Omission

The most effective propaganda technique of all is to block discussion so thoroughly that almost no-one realises that there is an important topic not being talked-about. When the US invaded Panama in 1989, they finished the fighting before any reporters were even aware that there was an invasion taking place. When Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006, the US army fought, in secret, alongside the Ethiopians, so there was no discussion of it in the US or British press. Proxy warfare, where the US and Britain supply weapons to someone else, such as Saudi Arabia, to do the fighting allows the US and Britain to minimise scrutiny, and avoid challenges to the legality of their actions.

There are two other issues where the most effective propaganda is not talking about something. The first of these is not showing what war is really like for the people on the receiving end of British and US bombs. Bodies of men, women and children everywhere; people maimed or disabled for life; the ruined lives of people who have lost mothers, fathers, children or other relatives; the destruction of whole cities and, ultimately, whole nations.

The second is not engaging with the act of going to war as a monstrous crime. Where war crimes are discussed, the focus is on individual actions within war. There will occasionally be a discussion in the mainstream press about whether a war is illegal. But these discussions are often quite technical and use legal terminology, giving the impression that it's a finely balanced debate, with strong arguments to say the war is legal. This is propaganda. Destroying a nation, or invading a country to overthrow the government, is never legal. It is the crime of aggressive war - one of the worst crimes that any group of people can commit.(7)

Similarly, there are other aspects of war that are rarely discussed by the press. There is an ongoing attempt to block proper investigation into the effects of depleted uranium (DU) used in modern ammunition. Thousands of tons have been used in Iraq and Afghanistan. The number of babies born with birth defects in these regions has increased significantly. The Italian government has announced that some of its soldiers have died from DU poisoning. Belgium has now banned DU weapons but so far the US and British governments have successfully avoided a proper investigation, despite the fact that some US Gulf war veterans are now disabled due to DU.(8) There is virtually no mention of this issue in the US and British media, and therefore no widespread public pressure to do anything about it.

Lie About Our Weapons and Death Tolls

The videos we see during wartime of smart bombs precisely hitting their targets are another form of propaganda. They give us the impression that weapons are accurate and that civilians will be relatively unscathed. The government would like us to believe that more accurate weapons lead to fewer civilian casualties, but this is a myth. In order to minimise US casualties, their strategy is to use enormously destructive air power from long range, with an approach that has been described as “shoot first, ask questions later.”(9) They deliberately attack weddings and funerals. In practice, civilians are being slaughtered in huge numbers. The expression ‘collateral damage’ is also an example of propaganda. It is intended to give the impression that civilian deaths are accidental, when in fact US strategy guarantees that most deaths will be civilian. To confuse people over the scale of civilian deaths, the US now label every military-age man in a warzone as a combatant or a terrorist.(10)

Leaders repeatedly lie about the scale of casualties, although for changing reasons. Historically, they would exaggerate the number of enemy deaths to improve morale among their own soldiers and their civilian population. These days they understate the number of dead civilians in order to minimise objections to war. During discussions relating to casualty figures in Vietnam, a foreign office representative explained that it was important for every spokesperson to keep “stonewalling” so no one knew the true figures, which were in the millions.(11)

There has been a great deal of propaganda about the number of people killed in Iraq. A 2006 report in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, using the best research methods available, suggested that the number of deaths in Iraq was over 600,000. The best estimate of deaths by 2007 was over a million.(12) US and British politicians regularly appeared in the media trying to persuade the public that the true figure was much lower, but leaked reports show that their own experts believed the figures to be correct.(13) In 2007, Americans were asked their estimate of civilian deaths in Iraq. The average answer was under 10,000, a tiny fraction of the true figure.(14) Clearly, government and media propaganda is highly effective at making sure that ordinary people have little understanding of the true consequences of war. It was noted that the official figures were clearly absurd. If they had been correct then the death rate in the middle of a war zone would have been only half the death rate in US cities such as Detroit or Baltimore. In 2014 the US air force increased the scale of their bombing in Iraq and Syria, reducing some cities, such as Mosul, to ruins. The current death toll in Iraq is likely to be over 2 million,(15) but this figure is rarely mentioned in the mainstream.

The US Lies About Every War

In many of the earlier posts we have seen examples of recent war propaganda. The use of exaggerated threats such as communism, terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction, or exaggerating atrocities to justify war. A detailed study of 25 US wars, from 1945 onwards, was carried out in 1992. The conclusion was that the US government lied about all of them.(16) The US military provides an endless stream of retired officers and specialists to fill airtime on TV channels whenever the US government wants to promote its wars. They are vetted beforehand to ensure that they will say the right things.

If the US decides to overthrow the leadership of another country, then almost everything that we hear in the mainstream news about that country contains elements of propaganda. A good example is the phrase 'axis of evil' that President Bush used in 2002 to describe Iraq, Iran and North Korea. There is nothing particularly 'evil' about these countries or their leaders. Their human rights records were no worse than many of the US's allies, and they posed no military threat to the US or Britain. Presenting the enemy as evil is an extremely powerful form of propaganda.

Smearing Whistleblowers

Propaganda is also used when whistleblowers and journalists expose war crimes. A standard technique is to deflect attention elsewhere by smearing the journalist or the whistleblower. They will say that the journalist has caused harm to others. No evidence will be presented. The immense harm caused by the war crimes is ignored. This was one of the techniques used to discredit Julian Assange and Wikileaks. The US government eventually admitted in court that they had no evidence of anyone ever being killed due to Wikileaks' releases about US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where it is impossible to deny wrongdoing, the attention will be focused on lower-ranking individuals, so that the senior people who determine policy again escape scrutiny. This was the case with the torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, where a small number of low-ranking soldiers were prosecuted, even though evidence emerged that the torture was US government policy.(17) Journalists have exposed serious crimes by US, British, Australian and New Zealand soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan. No senior people have been prosecuted, but whistleblowers have been prosecuted and imprisoned, and some journalists have been arrested.(18)

The Basic Principles of War Propaganda

Having already written many of these posts on propaganda, I came across the writing of Anne Morelli, who wrote a book called "The basic Principles of War Propaganda" in 2001.(19) It has not been fully translated into English, but the ideas have been discussed. Morelli studied propaganda throughout the last century by all sides and came up with a summary that is described as the 10 principles of war propaganda:

- 1) We don't want war, we are only defending ourselves
- 2) Our adversary is solely responsible for this war
- 3) Our adversary's leader is inherently evil and resembles the devil
- 4) We are defending a noble cause, not our particular interests
- 5) The enemy is purposefully committing atrocities; if we are making mistakes this happens without intention

- 6) The enemy makes use of illegal weapons
- 7) We suffer few losses, the enemies losses are considerable
- 8) Recognised intellectuals and artists support our cause
- 9) Our cause is sacred
- 10) Whoever casts doubt on our propaganda helps the enemy and is a traitor

It is remarkable how consistently these principles have been used to justify recent US and British wars. The leaders of Iraq, Libya, and Syria, (Hussein, Gaddafi, and Assad) were all portrayed as evil. In Afghanistan, the Taliban were portrayed as evil. We were repeatedly told that they were committing atrocities or using illegal weapons, even whilst our governments and militaries were slaughtering millions of people and destroying whole nations. Critics of these wars have been demonized, particularly in relation to Syria. Whilst not every one of these principles applies to every US and British invasion, it provides a good framework for understanding how war propaganda works.

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*Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the fifteenth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.*

Notes

1) Quote is usually attributed to Aeschylus, a Greek dramatist (525 – 456BC), but the dictionary of modern proverbs indicates that this attribution was not used before the 1980s, so the source is contested.

2) Aldous Huxley, *The Olive Tree*, 1937

3) Mark Crispin Miller, Introduction to Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, 2004, p.11 (originally published in 1928)

4) Stauber and Rampton, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You*, 1995, p.24

5) Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The beginnings of World War II, the end of civilization*, 2008

6) Ian Sinclair, 'Retrieved from the memory hole: British intervention in Greece in the 1940s', openDemocracy, 19 June 2017, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/retrieved-from-memory-hole-british-intervention-in-greece-in-1940s/>

7) The closest we might have come to a situation where an invasion was justified would be when the

Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia to overthrow the Genocidal dictatorship of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in January 1979. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambodian_genocide

8) Christian Fraser, 'Uranium 'killing Italian Troops'', BBC News, 10 Jan 2007, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6247401.stm>

Willem Van den Panhuysen, 'Belgium Bans Uranium Weapons and Armour', Global Research, 23 March 2007, at <https://www.globalresearch.ca/belgium-bans-uranium-weapons-and-armour/5167>

Project Censored, 'US/British Forces Continue Use of Depleted Uranium Weapons Despite Massive evidence of Negative Health Effects', 2004 (updated 29 April 2010), at https://www.projectcensored.org/8-us-british-forces-continue-use-of-depleted-uranium-weapons-despite-negati/?doing_wp_cron=1591940256.1105339527130126953125

For more on depleted uranium, see International Coalition to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW), at <https://www.icbuw.eu/en/>

9) <https://www.psr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/body-count.pdf>

10) Conor Friedersdorf, 'Under Obama, men killed by drones are presumed to be terrorists', The Atlantic, 29 May 2012, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/under-obama-men-killed-by-drones-are-presumed-to-be-terrorists/257749/>

11) Mark Curtis, *Unpeople*, 2004, p.237

12) Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J.S.Davies, 'The staggering death toll in Iraq', Salon, 19 Mar 2018, at https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/the-staggering-death-toll-in-iraq_partner/

13) Owen Bennett-Jones, 'Iraq death survey was robust', BBC World Service, 26 March 2007 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6495753.stm

14) Nancy Benac, cited in PSR, 'Body Count: Casualty Figures after 10 years of the "War on Terror"', Physicians for Social Responsibility, March 2015, at <https://www.psr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/body-count.pdf>

15) Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J.S.Davies, 'The staggering death toll in Iraq', Salon, 19 March 2018, at https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/the-staggering-death-toll-in-iraq_partner/

16) John Quigley, *The Ruses for War*, 1992

17) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraib_torture_and_prisoner_abuse

18) Nicky Hager, *Other People's Wars: New Zealand in Afghanistan, Iraq and the war on terror*, 2011

19) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Basic_Principles_of_War_Propaganda

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