

Masters of Propaganda

A JOURNALIST friend of mine was accosted by a local official at a cocktail party in East Germany after the war. This functionary, glass in hand, angrily denounced the United States for lynching a Negro. My friend, who had heard no such news, could say little in his embarrassment. At this point a Russian in colonel's uniform intervened, pushed the German aside, and said: "Pay no attention to him; he doesn't know what he is talking about. My office in Moscow manufactured that story." Experts in propaganda usually take a news story and slant it, but the great masters make it up out of whole cloth.

To the student of semantics, there is no such *thing*—note the italics—as "propaganda." It is a word in our heads, corresponding to no entity in the outside world, a word to which everyone probably gives a somewhat different meaning. It can, however, be a useful label to designate special kinds of behavior. The label is at least three centuries old. Cardinals of the Catholic Church in charge of foreign missions were officially known as the College of Propaganda, an organization founded in 1622 and concerned with good works.

In America today, however, the word has acquired overtones of evil.¹ Elmo Roper once ran a controlled experiment. He matched two groups of respondents with approximately

¹ "Propaganda ... now often used in a derogatory sense, connoting deception or distortion." Webster's *New World Dictionary*, 1953.

similar opinions and, speaking of the Voice of America, asked Group A: “Some people say it is better to explain the U.S. point of view as well as give the news: do you agree?” Forty-three percent answered *yes*. For group B he changed the wording a little: “Some people say it is better to include some propaganda as well as give the news: do you agree?” The *yeses* fell to 25 percent.

When somebody exerts pressure through the mass media to get you to do something for him or for his cause; when he flashes signals, sends up smoke screens, employs the thirteen fallacies with additional trimmings, to change your beliefs or behavior—you are being subjected to propaganda as here defined. He wants to shift your attitude, your vote, your bank account, in a direction favorable to him and unfavorable to his opponents. Sometimes what he says is true, but it is never disinterested truth. The attentive listener can usually hear in the background the grinding of an ax.

In developing the logical fallacies earlier, I have been concerned chiefly with issues not yet decided. I have warned, in making up our minds about them, to beware of mental mantraps. In propaganda the issue has already been decided by the propagandist; his inquiry is over. *This is it*, and his goal is to make you agree that this is it. Sometimes he calls on you to agree at the level of facts, more often at the level of inference or value of judgments. The strongest pressure of all comes when action is desired; here indeed, words are weapons.

Though some people apparently like to be fooled, most of us prefer to take a hard look at the hand which pulls the strings. In this chapter I will describe some varieties of behavior covered by the label “propaganda,” and in the next will try to analyze the techniques. If the reader can see what makes the puppets dance, he may be better prepared to defend himself.

THE MOSCOW MILL

Moscow runs a large and successful propaganda mill. It far exceeds the apparatus of Dr. Goebbels, which in its time exceeded anything the world had previously seen. The Moscow mill is operated by a huge bureaucracy, trained in some six thousand special schools.² In 1950 the Russian Government spent almost a billion dollars on propaganda, internal and external, and the satellite countries spent half a billion more. This does not include Communist organizations in Western nations. France and Italy have huge Red parties, spending large sums to rally the faithful and make converts.

The major goal of Moscow's propaganda, like that of any government, is to consolidate and extend its own power. The old ideal of socialist internationalism has been distorted into a fifth column technique. The propaganda machine faces two ways: *inward* to influence the Russian people, *outward* to influence the rest of the world. Five outward drives can be identified:

1. To stir up revolutions in other countries—say Guatemala.
2. To break up coalitions against Russia by encouraging quarrels between allies. As I write Moscow is trying to drive a wedge between the Middle East and the free nations.
3. To weaken Western nations by setting group against group—Moslems against Hindus, Catholics against Protestants, Negroes against whites, Arabs against Jews.
4. To picture the Soviet Union as an invincible power, armed with invincible weapons and an invincible idea. Russia, according to the propaganda, made all the great inventions from the wheel to the turbo-jet engine.

² U.S. Advisory Commission on Information, Mark A. May, Chairman, *Report*. House Document No. 94, 83rd Congress.

5. To convince the world that Russia is the fountainhead of peace.

The “new look” in Moscow, following the death and degrading of Stalin, with friendship and cocktails for all, seems to be a kind of icing over the old propaganda pudding. The two lines are being carried on simultaneously. If the new line should some day win out, and the good will become genuine, then the subject of my next few pages would have chiefly historical interest. I would welcome the correction, but I do not expect it.

ARCH-ENEMY

The British authority, Edward Crankshaw, says that after World War II Moscow had planned to make Britain the arch-enemy, hoping that the U.S. would retreat to a policy of isolation as it did in 1919. President Truman’s vigorous action to save Greece, followed by the Marshall Plan, shifted the propaganda target to America. The U.S. has been in the zone of heavy verbal fire since 1946. Crankshaw explains:

In Kremlin circles an arch-enemy is a very precious thing, to be built up and cherished. It is the scapegoat to be blamed for all the ills of the world, including the harsh consequences of the Kremlin’s own domestic policy. The line in such matters, too, is always that what now is, must always have been. Thus it is not enough to call President Truman a cannibal; it has to be proved that cannibalism is a long-time American tradition...³

“HATE-AMERICA” CAMPAIGN

In January, 1951, a special “Hate-America” campaign was launched by the Kremlin. In its stocks of ammunition we can recognize the fallacy *ad verecundiam*. They contained piles of doctored documents and photographs, dubious historical

³ *New York Times Magazine*, August 17, 1952.

records, “eyewitness accounts,” and phony statistics. Thirteen books appeared about the unspeakable Yankee, including novels and plays, in addition to new textbooks for school children. These contradicted the wartime texts in which Americans were friends, sending food and supplies. Besides the standard vilification, three new charges were introduced: (1) the U.S. cheated Russia out of Alaska; (2) American troops at Archangel in 1919 buried Russian civilians alive; (3) posters advertising Coca-Cola in the United States show Christ on the cross, asking for a drink.”⁴

The last accusation is interesting for several reasons. An inscription in the Red Square reads: RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE, but propaganda for foreign consumption does not hesitate to accuse American advertisers of sacrilege—thus working on both sides of the street. The story derived, I am sure, from a British story I heard first in 1928, making fun of American advertising—only that one mentioned Snyder’s Vinegar, not Coca-Cola. Thus, after twenty years, an old chestnut is revived as “evidence.”

Moscow also had a field day with Governor Thomas E. Dewey. During the 1948 presidential campaign he was photographed with a group of Oregon businessmen, dressed in animal skins and waving bones. These characters call themselves “The Cavemen,” and hope to attract visitors to the local caves. The photograph, said the master minds of the Kremlin, shows the savage and barbaric character of America, where a presidential candidate could join a society devoted to drinking blood and gnawing bones!

Such propaganda may sound crazy to us, but it was of course not beamed at us. It was beamed at simple citizens around the world who know very little about America, beyond the violent and distorted movies which Hollywood exports. All

⁴ From the Mark May report.

unknowingly, Hollywood has softened up the customers for a brisk working over by Moscow. A U.S. information officer in Europe once suggested ironically that Washington negotiate a treaty with Hollywood to lessen the damage done by its films abroad.

The Kremlin has long insisted that Wall Street rules the U.S.; that the National Association of Manufacturers, along with millionaires, monopolists, and profiteers, constitute America's "ruling circles." "Peace-loving" peoples co-operate with the Kremlin; "warmongers" and "aggressors" do not. Co-operating governments are "peoples democracies," non-co-operators are "fascist states," or "capitalist imperialists."

"Democracy," in the Kremlin lexicon, means a job for all citizens who toe the line. Political democracy, with free voting and free speech as practiced by the West, has been branded a hypocritical scheme for insuring capitalistic control. Western leaders are called such names as "lackeys of imperialism," and "stooges of a moribund, decadent, crisis-ridden capitalist society."

Under the "new look," the attack is likely to continue. An academy for the study of "contemporary capitalism," reports C. L. Sulzberger, has been opened in Moscow, and is industriously devising a weird caricature of America.⁵ How does a Russian leader who has never crossed the Atlantic, inquire Sulzberger, "get the idea that Averell Harriman wants to control the economy of Hungary, or that Estes Kefauver favors new formulas to consolidate 'colonial domination'?"

According to the Soviet magazine, *International Affairs*, "it has been almost enough to send a man to the electric chair to speak seriously of peace" in the United States. Meanwhile heads of AF of L-CIO, "separated by many years of bureaucratic leadership from the workers, collaborate with the most

⁵ Dispatch from Moscow to the *New York Times*, January 2, 1956.

reactionary elements of government like Attorney General Brownell, and FBI Director Hoover.” Brownell, it appears, does “everything in his power to wreck any labor union that fails to follow his political beliefs.”

Sulzberger then quotes this curious Russian example of American customs: “Parents who want to determine what sort of a career their child is likely to follow place a dollar bill and a bottle of whisky before it. If the child picks up the dollar, that is a good sign—it will grow up to be a hardworking and prosperous citizen. If it reaches for the bottle, it will most likely grow up a confirmed drunkard.

“There is admiration here in Moscow,” says Sulzberger, “for the power of the United States, respect for our technical ability, and envy of our living standards. But the contempt and misunderstanding of our politics, economics, social system and ideology—as expressed in party literature—is beyond belief.”

Undoubtedly there are plenty of observers in Moscow well informed about the U.S. The propaganda picture is for local Russian consumption, and for ignorant, insecure, and unhappy people around the world. The first rule of Moscow is that anything connected with “capitalism” is evil, by definition, and therefore any propaganda which hurts capitalistic countries is perfectly legitimate.

INSIDE UTOPIA

“In Russia,” says ex-Senator William Benton after a visit, “the rulers seek to convert the total culture into a giant propaganda apparatus.”⁶ The Minister of Culture runs the movies, the theatre, music, radio, TV, books and publishing, painting and graphic arts. The Party runs the policies of all the newspapers. “Every column, every story, every editorial will continue

⁶ Article for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1956.

to promote the Party line, to the complete exclusion of anything that interferes with that line.”

Meanwhile in the U.S.S. R. “the political indoctrination of radio and TV becomes the ‘commercial.’” The net effect of this attempt to control the thoughts and behavior of two hundred million people we will reserve for the next chapter. Some of the propaganda takes, and some apparently does not.

CAESAR, HITLER, AND PERÓN

If Julius Caesar had had television to aid him he might never have been overthrown. Modern dictators would be relatively helpless without such technological inventions as Klieg lights, high-speed presses, radio, movies, TV. Both Mussolini and Hitler were masters at putting on a show, while the Red Square is famous for spectacles far beyond the scope of Hollywood.

Hitler especially knew the psychological value of suspense. He would assemble mammoth audiences at Munich or Hamburg and keep them on the edge of their chairs, waiting, waiting, until the supreme moment when the lights flared on, the music of twenty bands blared out, ten thousand storm troopers came rigidly to attention, swastikas fluttered under electric fans, and der Fuehrer in his simple uniform—always simple in dramatic contrast to the surrounding magnificence—came striding down an arrow of light, his hand at the Nazi salute. It took a stout heart to stand up against this massed attack on eye, ear, and central nervous system.

The dictatorship in Argentina began preparing, months before Eva Perón died, to make her death and funeral a political weapon to bolster the regime.⁷ She was dying as “the martyr for the workers.” The propaganda was gradually intensified. Presently union locals and Perónista party branches began

⁷ R. J. Alexander in the *New Leader*, September 8, 1952.

calling for special masses to pray for her life, and pressure was put on priests to co-operate. A skilled embalmer waited for days in a hotel room, to be rushed to the death chamber. Nine hours later her body was ready for the stupendous obsequies.

Street lights were draped in black; mourning portraits, printed in advance by the thousand, at once appeared on walls and billboards. A two-day work stoppage was decreed throughout the country. Broadcasting stations played funeral music, interrupted only by solemn readings from Evita's book, *The Purpose of My Life*. "With the state set so diligently," says Alexander, "it was not difficult to evoke a demonstration of mass hysteria unknown in the history of the continent." At the funeral, many persons were reported crushed to death.

"CAMPAIGN ORATORY"

An American presidential campaign is of course a classic exhibit in political propaganda. To be sure it is less lethal than the shows put on by the dictators. Few voters lose their lives, and the election itself illustrates a certain standard of sportsmanship: the defeated candidate is expected to send a telegram of congratulation to the winner. The dictators have no monopoly on doubletalk, but in the democracies the talk is often discounted. Here politics is generally regarded as a game, while in the dictatorships it is war without quarter.

Our presidential conventions follow a standard pattern. The spread-eagle speeches, the parades up the aisles, the banners, the singsong of balloting, the carefully clocked demonstrations—all fuse into a formal ballet, with the actors as well drilled as automatons. An anthropologist might fairly compare it to a Polynesian tribal dance.

As for the language involved, Frank Sullivan in *The New Yorker* puts his cliché expert, Mr. Arbuthnot, on the trail:

How does your candidate stand, Mr. Arbuthnot? *On his own two feet!*

Can he grasp a nettle? *Fearlessly. He faces facts. He will lead us out of the morass. His deeds are writ large!*

Where? *In the hearts of his countrymen!*

The opposition candidates, Mr. Arbuthnot finds, are “selfish opportunists, trampling on our God-given liberties” ... When not trampling they are “whittling away.” ... “They stifle initiative. They suffer Agencies (Key) to be infiltrated by travelers (fellow), who follow philosophies (alien), and ideologies (false) ... They undermine the foundations ... only eternal vigilance ...” After an evening with Mr. Arbuthnot almost anybody could write a campaign speech for either side.

SLOGANS IN 1952

Let us look at the record of a sample campaign—that of 1952. Republican propaganda in that year gave sinister implications to such slogans as: The Mess in Washington, New Dealism, Creeping Socialism, the Welfare State, Handouts-to-Foreigners, the Crushing Burden of Debt, and Me-Too-ism. The last was vigorously used in the campaign, but it had a boomerang. Anyone who said a kind word for social security, or any other popular legislative act of the last twenty years, could be tagged with Me-Too-ism, and so judged little better than a Communist. This identification continued to plague the Eisenhower administration when it came into office.

Democratic party oratory in 1952 was not quite so vivid. Being in office, orators were on the defensive and had to refer now and then to a few facts—the natural enemies of propaganda. Democratic orators did their best, however, to build an idyllic picture of life in America under their party: “You never had it so good.” Their predictions of what would happen, if the Republicans should come to power, were as gruesome

as the historical summaries of Republican orators about what *had* happened while the Democrats were in power. Big Business and the Interests were given a thorough going over; the Taft-Hartley Law was usually called the “slave labor law”; while criticisms of the protective tariff were taken out of mothballs and given a vigorous airing, reminiscent of the days of William Jennings Bryan.

REAL ISSUES VS. PHONY

These slogans, both Republican and Democratic, were blown up till they resembled the swaying monsters in Macy’s Thanksgiving parade in New York City. Like Macy’s monsters, too, they were filled with gas. Only candidate Stevenson made an attempt to “talk sense,” and actually did so a good deal of the time. He tried to replace propaganda with information, reflection, and honest doubt. This was unique in all my long observation of the American political scene. The point is not whether Stevenson was right, but that, in the middle of a political campaign, he tried to gather facts, use logic upon them, and consider the issue under discussion in a grown-up way. Time and again he said he did not know the answer. Citizens accustomed to candidates who knew all the answers were stunned by the admission.

In the main, the real questions before America in the fall of 1952 were either ignored, or distorted in the hope of wringing votes out of them. Such looming issues as atomic energy and the H-bomb, proposals to break the deadlock of the cold war, the pressure of population on the food supply around the world, Japan’s economic future, steps to halt a depression if the arms race should slacken, an intelligent program for agriculture, the definition of “loyalty” and “security,” the crisis in the public schools—were almost never honestly examined, if they were mentioned at all.

Do citizens prefer the swaying verbal monsters, as professional politicians firmly believe? It would take an expensive project in public opinion research to find out, but here is an interesting sidelight. A fundamental rule of the professionals is that citizens demand, and deserve, lower taxes. Yet Elmo Roper in 1953 found a substantial majority of Americans *against* lower taxes at the expense of adequate defense. Perhaps the sovereign voter is not so bemused by logical fallacies as the politicians believe. Perhaps if not an orator had opened his ample mouth from June to November of 1952, General Eisenhower would have been elected by the same comfortable margin.

THE PAIN AND BEAUTY BOYS

Campaign oratory in the democracies is less sinister than the propaganda mills of Moscow, and it might be argued that advertising is less damaging to a given society than campaign oratory with its neglect of real issues. But advertising uses many of the same methods of argument, often in ways that are easier to observe. It also has a useful function in telling us about new products. Most of the words and pictures, however, which fill the newspapers, magazines, and air waves attempt to shift the consumer's dollar from product A to product B and back to A again, or stimulate him to buy something he doesn't really need. All the thirteen fallacies come into play, together with extra psychological snares, such as the new and much touted "motivational research."

Publicity campaigns for worthy causes—and some not so worthy—and for building up individuals, often skirt the edges of the truth with equal agility. Imitating advertisers, the idea is to "sell the package" without too much attention to what's inside it. In *The Golden Kazoo*, for instance, a novel by John

Schneider, we find a hilarious account of how Madison Avenue took over the presidential election of 1960, and sold both Republican and Democratic nominees—dull fellows they were—like so much toothpaste. “The first immutable law of advertising,” says one of the characters, “is that *There ain’t any high-brow in low-brows, but there’s some low-brow in everybody.*”

The worst offenders in advertising have been nicknamed in the trade “the pain and beauty boys,” and here is a sample of each.

PERFUME ADVERTISING

...I think only of that moment—the moment when “the world forgetting, by the world forgot,” we shall soar together to the stars. Until that moment comes, may your dreams reveal the message that surges from my very being. Yours alone, *Cobra*.

A reporter named Joseph Field, overwhelmed by this surging prose, went around to see the agency man in New York who wrote it. He was given a frank and engaging account of how perfume ads are dreamed up. “Writing perfume copy,” said the agency man, “is much more entertaining than writing any other kind. Most perfume businessmen understand that promoting their product involves a certain amount of fantasy. As far as meaning goes, the first fundamental in perfume copy is that it doesn’t have to mean anything...you are not governed by the laws of common sense.

“What we try to do,” he continued, “is to get a woman to go to a store and ask for our brand. We try to amuse and startle her in the copy. Above all, almost all perfume copy contains an implied promise that using the particular brand will heighten her sex appeal....Sometimes,” he said, “we like to see how far we can go. That *Cobra* ad did create several violent reactions.”

The copy writer was wrong on one important point: his perfume ad was alive with meaning, and it was also a prime example of *post hoc*, viz:

Successfully seductive ladies in the ads use *Cobra*.
I'll use *Cobra*.
Therefore I'll be successfully seductive.

And off she goes to the nearest drugstore.

MIRACLE TOOTHPASTE

So much for beauty and allure; how about pain? Our sample is typical. "Triumph Over Tooth Decay!" reads a full page ad in January, 1956. "At last scientists have found the answer," with a picture of two "scientists" in white coats, flanked by a microscope, and holding up test tubes—a splendid same of *ad verecundiam*.

The month before, however, the president of the New York State Dental Society had paid his respects to *all* toothpaste advertising, as follows:⁸

The last five years have seen a succession of so-called "magic ingredients" introduced to the public through shrieking headlines and alluring text in printed and televised commercials. These dentifrices have had one thing in common—their disappointing performance. Throughout the country our colleagues report bitter complaints from disillusioned patients who have acquired numerous new cavities, and other mouth diseases, despite regular use of the "miracle dentifrices" ... Such false claims are almost criminally deceptive and misleading.

The Golden Kazoo supports the doctor. "Maybe you don't remember," says one high-powered ad-man to a colleague, "how you zigged and zagged from amazing ammoniated to

⁸ New York *Herald Tribune*, December 8, 1955.

colossal chlorophyll to astonishing anti-enzyme to fantastic fluoridized to Formula 9 Perma-white....”

Miracle Toothpaste and Miracle Candidates are subject to similar laws of high-pressure merchandising. Let us look more closely at these laws.