

Anatomy of Propaganda

SOCIAL scientists have only recently attempted to take the propaganda machine apart and find out what makes it tick. Clyde Miller and Leonard Doob among others have made progress in this direction. Your author some years ago, in *Your Money's Worth*, collaborated with F. J. Schlink to analyze methods by which the advertiser overpowered the unwary consumer.

The great political propagandists of our time—Hitler, Goebbels, Stalin, Mussolini, Perón, McCarthy—have played mostly by ear. Hitler indeed boasted of his “intuition.” In the Army-McCarthy hearings on TV, the junior Senator from Wisconsin could be seen catching out of thin air an idea no bigger than a man’s hand—an idea which he would then develop extemporaneously into a massive thunderhead.

In this intuitive performance, as well as in a more scientific approach, various principles and techniques can be identified. Nevertheless, much needs to be done before propaganda is as well understood as, say, juvenile delinquency. The methods now to be listed are drawn from many examples of high-pressure mass persuasion, such as those described in the preceding chapter. It may be argued that such analysis can help an aspiring demagogue pinpoint his attack. It can; and so can the laws of mechanics help an aspiring safe-cracker. It could be argued that I should never have written *Your Money's Worth*, because of possible tips to unscrupulous advertisers. It is hoped

that more readers will find suggestions here to protect themselves from propaganda than aspiring propagandists will find to further their art.

PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES

Experts at the controls of a propaganda campaign, such as the master minds in Moscow, may use any of the thirteen fallacies which suit their book, as well as the *leading-question* technique, described in the Courtroom chapter. In addition they are often well versed in some special procedures which we have not yet examined:

1. The deliberate use of unscrupulous means to further their ends.
2. The Big Lie.
3. The Scapegoat and Hero technique.
4. The creation of Martyrs.
5. The constant possession of the offensive.
6. Non-verbal symbols, such as the swastika.
7. "It's a plot!"—as an answer to criticism.
8. Doubletalk.

Of the fallacies earlier described, propagandists especially favor:

1. Guilt by association and by accusation.
2. Either-or thinking. This is practically mandatory: "those who are not with us are against us."
3. Appeal to authority, often through doctored "evidence" and tearing statements out of context. A famous case was the widely published photograph which showed Senator Tydings of Maryland in close conversation with Communist Earl Browder, doctored by political opponents to defeat Tydings in an election.
4. *Post hoc* reasoning. A notorious example, still nourished by the Democratic high command, is this false syllogism:

Herbert Hoover was elected President in 1928.
The U.S. suffered a terrible depression in 1929.
Therefore Hoover was the cause of the depression.

Which is an outrageous perversion of the facts.

The propaganda message usually aims to arouse emotion. Any appeal to reason will be well subordinated, and carefully keyed to strengthen the hearer's prejudices. The emotions most frequently played upon are:

Fear of out-groups—*we will save you from them!*

Feelings of insecurity—*we will make you safe!*

Feelings of inferiority—*we will put you on top!*

Most of us suffer from various frustrations which often result in aggressive impulses of various intensities. If the propagandist can open a channel for some mass frustration, he can ride high on its torrential sweep. The classic example is the way Hitler rode to power on the mass frustrations of the German people. He had an ideal target for his propaganda in the insecurity feelings of most Germans, following defeat in war, the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and a runaway inflation.

Some of the principles and techniques now to be discussed can be found in most propaganda drives today. Earlier operators used them too, but they lacked the mass media. A Roman Senator was heard in the Senate; an American Senator can be heard around the world at approximately the speed of light.

MEANS VERSUS ENDS

Unscrupulous means are rarely employed in ordinary discussions. There the end is not known, it is something to come out of the discussion. The typical propagandist has determined his ends before the campaign begins—which is one good defini-

tion of propaganda, and he is trying to influence action—which is another.

Lenin is said to have declared: “It is necessary ...to use any ruse, cunning, unlawful method, evasion, concealment of truth.” Hitler was even more explicit: “On a given signal, bombard him with a regular drum-fire of calumnies. Keep it up until his nerves give way.”

Powerful means are essential when the party line is changed. What was denounced as black yesterday must be lauded as white today. Members of the American Communist party have had to stifle their built-in American habits in order to follow the right-about-faces of the Moscow line. No calumny, for instance, was too violent to heap upon the Nazis up to 1939, and then, like a bolt from the blue, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact made the Nazis dear comrades in arms. As I write, the dethronement of Stalin is taking place, to the consternation of Communists all over the world.

According to diplomatic dispatches ... on January 18, 1956, *Kommunist*, the Communist theoretical organ, was sent to press with an article praising Stalin. About January 25, a conference of Soviet historians met to consider the problems of rewriting the history of the Stalinist era, along the lines of the anti-Stalinist attacks delivered at the party Congress the following month [February 1956]¹

In the West, historians meet to compare sources and get closer to the truth about the past. In Moscow they meet to reconstruct the past. Well, it keeps the printers busy, anyway. American political battles developed over the years are rough, but they have their rules. You may call your opponent a rascal, a whittler-away of liberties, a tax-eater and exploiter, even a liar—but you must not call him a traitor. This rule was recently violated by the slogan “twenty years of treason,”

¹ Dana A. Schmidt in *New York Times*, March 21, 1956.

which carried us a long step toward the total propaganda standards of the dictators.

THE BIG LIE

A lie is a false statement made deliberately, but a Big Lie, as Hitler described it at length in *Mein Kampf*, is a work of art. The bigger and more improbable it is, he said, the more stunning the effect. The effect cannot be achieved, however, without pounding reiteration in the mass media. Among Hitler's masterpieces was the identification of the Germans with the "Aryan Race," glorified as superior to all other races. Moscow has a well-stocked storehouse of Big Lies, including:

The people of the U.S. are starving.

The South Koreans crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded North Korea, bringing on the war.

American fliers practiced germ warfare in Korea.

Russians made all the great inventions.

In December, 1955, Soviet leaders accused the West of having started World War II by grooming Hitler as their "bloodhound." "Even the boldest lie," says the *New York Times* editorially, "cannot change history."² That war was sparked by the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in which the two most aggressive powers of the time arranged for the division of the spoils of the war they were preparing. What is more, this pact involved a monstrous Soviet double-cross of the Western powers, then seeking to stop Hitler and to avert a war."

Senator McCarthy on the home front proved himself an expert in the Big Lie technique. He might start it with a simple piece of paper. "I hold here in my hand a list of 205 persons who are known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party, and who nevertheless are still working

² December 8, 1955.

and shaping the policy of the State Department.³ Asked to name the 205 persons, McCarthy reduced the number to 57; later advanced it to 81. *No member of the Communist party has ever been found in the State Department to correspond to the charge.* “Security risks” have been reported, but not one authentic Communist. Richard Rovere described a development of this technique, and called it the “multiple untruth.” It consisted in a kind of rotating, retreating advance. As one charge is disproved, you substitute another, and so on until your confused audience has forgotten the first. Six or seven are usually enough and then you begin over again.

SCAPEGOAT AND HERO

This propaganda technique is ancient, as the name implies. On the Day of Atonement the Israelites chose a live goat by lot.⁴ The high priest in his robes laid both hands on the goat’s head and confessed the sins of the people, accumulated during the past year. The goat, full of transplanted sin, was then banished to the wilderness, and the people, much relieved, could go about their business. Said Allport:

Everywhere we see our human tendency to revert to this primitive level of thinking and to seek a scapegoat—some object or animal, or more often some luckless human being—who may be saddled with blame for our own misfortunes and misdeeds ... Though a universal phenomenon, it is especially during times of stress—of war, famine, revolution, depression—that . . . scapegoating increases.

Russia has been in chronic crisis since 1914, enduring successively war, revolution, famine, purges, and again war. Italy and Germany were in crisis after World War I. The United States is in crisis today, but a curious one. While economic

³ Speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950. As reported in the *Saturday Evening Post*, August 19, 1950.

⁴ Following Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Addison-Wesley and Beacon Press, 1954).

prosperity is great, world leadership has suddenly been thrust upon us, making citizens confused, uneasy, and alarmed. The Korean War particularly upset us.

The scapegoat of Stalin was the “capitalist class.” The scapegoat of Hitler was “the Jews”; of Mussolini “the Communists.” The scapegoat of Senator McCarthy was the *Communist within*, including everyone, as we have seen, who could be implicated through a very broad application of guilt by association.

Propaganda identifies the scapegoat, and simultaneously identifies the Hero who will save the people from impending doom. Throughout the Army-McCarthy Hearings in 1954 the Senator from Wisconsin seized every opportunity to remind the TV audience (estimated at twenty-six million), that it was he, McCarthy, who stood alone against the Communist conspiracy—“reaching for the nation’s jugular vein.”

THE CREATION OF MARTYRS

McCarthy doubled as Hero and Martyr. The Peronistas in Argentina made a martyr out of Evita, declaring that she gave up her life for the cause of labor. Communists, Nazis, even Chicago gunmen, stage stupendous funerals for their fallen heroes. A case of real or supposed injustice may be seized upon and inflated by publicity to the skies. We recall the “Scottsboro Boys,” and the Rosenbergs. A martyrdom focuses popular attention on a specific, personal outrage, and is often more effective than tons of printed arguments.⁵ “Remember the *Maine*,” in 1898, may have been responsible for a war.

HOLD THE OFFENSIVE

Always the attack! as the French General Staff used to say. The smart propagandist, repulsed on one position, has a new

⁵ Don Mankiewicz analyzed this method at length in his novel, *Trial*.

offensive in readiness. When forced to get rid of J.B. Matthews, McCarthy launched an all-out assault on Allen Dulles and the Central Information Agency as a hotbed of subversion. Moscow too is quick at covering a retreat on one front with a brisk offensive on another. The “arch-enemy” abroad is always good for another pounding when things are not going so well at home. No big-time propagandist can afford to be wrong, or to give an inch.

NON-VERBAL SYMBOLS

Skilled propagandists associate their message with popular symbols, such as the hearthstone and the flag, or at times adopt new symbols—the hammer and sickle of the Communist, the swastika of the Nazis, special salutes, songs, and uniforms. Moscow converted both Lenin and Stalin into ikons or semideities. I once saw Lenin, very lifelike, embalmed in his shrine outside the Kremlin wall. A long line of weary people in smocks and shawls were patiently waiting to see him too. The staring portraits of Stalin, executed, as Mark Twain would say, by gifted sign painters, furnished new ikons for peasant huts throughout Russia. They are now coming down in a hurry. Who will be the next ikon?

It is interesting to note how a well-oiled propaganda machine, like that of Moscow, or of Goebbels, develops an apparatus almost theological. There is a supernatural hierarchy of gods and devils, together with sacred writings—*Mein Kampf*, *Das Kapital*, Evita Perón’s *The Purpose of My Life*.

“IT’S A PLOT”

If a propagandist finds the opposition too rough to ride over, he may declare a conspiracy. Thus the attorney general of Georgia, fighting desegregation in the schools, accused the NAACP of plotting to force the Supreme Court to rule in favor of segregation. Congressman Carroll Reece of Tennessee sees

American charitable foundations as engaged in a ten-billion-dollar conspiracy to subvert the American way of life. “Interlocking directorates of Wall Street” used to be a powerful slogan in left-wing propagandist literature, with a spiderweb chart to back it up. McCarthy supporters have prepared similar spiderweb charts of internal subversives, from the wives of ex-Presidents down.

Mr. Zed, as a lone alleged subversive, is not nearly so newsworthy as Mr. Zed, a key figure in a secret organization boring its sinister way through key government bureaus. This is not to say that conspiracies never exist, only that they make fine copy for the propagandist, whether they exist or not.

When John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, was interviewed in February 1956, by a reporter from *Life* magazine, the reverberations shook the world. Mr. Dulles was reported to have said in effect that the art of keeping the peace is to have the courage to advance to the brink of war.

Mr. Butler, of the Democratic National Committee, sees in it a deep-laid Republican plot, but Mr. Butler would, of course. It is his official business to discover everywhere Republican plots full of moral turpitude and intellectual depravity, and he attends to his business assiduously; but it is doubtful that even he, as a person, not an official, puts much stock in the plot theory.⁶

DOUBLETALK

Classicists list a logical fallacy called *equivocation*, in which a single word, or term, is used in two senses in the same context.

All fair things are honorable.
This woman is fair.
Therefore she is honorable.

Here the word “fair” is used to mean (1) right and reasonable, and (2) a beautiful blonde.

⁶ Gerald Johnson in the *New Republic*, February 6, 1956.

Anatole Rapoport gives another example.

Nothing is more important than life.
Holes in doughnuts are nothing.
Therefore holes in doughnuts are more important than life.

The meaning of “nothing” he points out, has changed in mid-syllogism. The word remains the same, while its meaning shifts like a mainsail coming about in the wind.

The oracle at Delphi encouraged Croesus to attack Cyrus, with the promise that if he crossed the Halys Peninsula he would “destroy a mighty empire.”⁷ The promise was a perfectly safe one, but unfortunately it was Croesus’ own empire which fell. Oracles, soothsayers, and writers of Wall Street market letters must be well versed in doubletalk.

Propagandists in the U.S. are now engaged in a spirited drive to pass anti-labor legislation in the states, under the banner of the “right to work” law. Who can possibly be against the right to work? Meanwhile propagandists on the labor side brand the Taft-Hartley Act as the “slave labor law”—thus returning the compliment.

Businessmen, trying to modify the laws against monopoly, plead for “fair trade” legislation, while automobile manufacturers over-sell their output by means of a “thrift plan.” The American Medical Association torpedoed Mr. Truman’s program for federal medical insurance by branding it “socialized medicine.” “The displacement of the term ‘insurance,’” said J. K. Galbraith, “by the term ‘socialism’ was a workmanlike achievement in the technique of argument.”

Students of semantics call such terms *purr* words or *snarl* words. “Insurance” is of course a *purr* word, associated with home, mother, and security. “Socialism,” at least in America, is a *snarl* word, associated with dividing up the wealth. Propagandists of all types, with advertisers in the lead, ransack

⁷ Story from Schiller.

the dictionary for *purr* words to favor their product and *snarl* words to discomfit a competitor. The 1956 Mercury, we were assured on the radio, was the envied possessor of a “safety surge” engine. Boy! Surging power to pass anything on the road, yet perfectly safe!

SUGGESTIONS FOR A BULLETPROOF VEST

Some people seem to think that propaganda can do anything—including making water run uphill. If citizens are once exposed to a good dose of it, they are presumed to be done for. The first line of defense for citizens is the firm realization that this is not so. There are definite limits beyond which propaganda fizzles out. We will now briefly explore those limits, and offer some suggestions for personal protection. If words are bullets, every alert citizen should have handy a bulletproof vest.

WANTS AND NEEDS

Political propaganda has no power in itself; it is potent only when it connects with a deep human need shared by a great many people. When citizens feel insecure, confused, frightened, then political propaganda has a chance to bite. But if they feel prosperous, confident, and secure, all the wizards of the Kremlin cannot elicit much more than a yawn. The wizards on Madison Avenue can often persuade them to *buy* more stuff, however, by either rewards or threats.

Lenin had the overwhelming demand of the Russian people for peace to exploit. Hitler had the frustrations of the German people after World War I; McCarthy had the uncertainty of the American people in their country’s new role as leader and banker for the world. The historian will record, however, that the frustrations of the American people, fully employed and prosperous in the 1950’s, were shallow compared to

those of the German people in the 1920's, or the Russian people in 1917.

PROMISES ARE NOT ENOUGH

Propaganda, even if addressed to mass wants, cannot continue to exert an effect by words alone. Sooner or later there must be *acts* to back up the words. Here is an example:

The Soviet delegate at a UN meeting on Indonesia once delivered the standard tirade against America. The delegate from India retorted: "The Soviet Union has done practically nothing to help this region, and has attributed malicious motives to other countries that have helped." While American counter-propaganda had been feeble compared to the blasts from Moscow, the tangible *acts* of America, expressed in foreign aid programs, had done more to hold friends than all the words in the dictionary. "In the final analysis," says Thomas Wilson, who covered the story for the *Reporter*, "the Communist system cannot deliver what it promises to deliver, and therein lies the fundamental weakness of the propaganda."⁸

Studies by Clyde Kluckhohn and his staff, at the Russian Research Center at Harvard, have suggested that Moscow's internal propaganda is losing some of its bite; the customers are getting bored with dialectical materialism. A serious limitation is that the lies and doubletalk are so farfetched that presently they are no longer believed by objective listeners, on the principle of "Wolf, Wolf!"

William Benton in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* reports that today only about 10 percent of Moscow's internal publicity seeks to inculcate Communist doctrine. The other 90 percent aims to encourage technical proficiency, and especially to promote professional careers for bright youngsters. Already

⁸ Russia, following the "new look," is stepping up her promises, and possibly her deliveries of tangible goods. The situation needs watching.

Russia is graduating more scientists and technicians than the U.S. Not more Marxism but more *managers* seems to be the present goal. Can the managers really compete with the West if they lack access to free inquiry and the scientific spirit? "In my judgment they are succeeding to an alarming degree," says Mr. Benton.

Political propaganda campaigns, no matter how expensive, eye-filling, and noisy, will not get far unless they (1) connect with a mass need, and (2) produce deeds to go with the words. They may also defeat their ends if they reach the height of total incredibility. The Russian educational drive for competent managers and technicians is something else again, and should bear the most careful examination. We would be very foolish to write it off as "mere propaganda."

SEMANTIC ARMOR

Bulletproof vests can be made from knowledge of how political propagandists operate, what techniques they use, the scapegoats they create, and the doubletalk they manufacture. This chapter has attempted to supply a little of this knowledge for the reader, and help to armor him for tomorrow's headlines.

An understanding of semantics also helps. Semantics, defined as "the systematic study of meaning," is useful, not only in analyzing the propagandists' talk, but in going behind the talk to the motives. It helps us to check abstract terms with concrete events, to dissolve word magic, to distinguish a fact from a value judgment. It exposes cases of guilt by verbal association, and enables one to trace the staircase of spurious identification. It locates black-or-white reasoning, and aids intelligent listening—the other half of talking. Semantics teaches us to watch our prejudices, and to take our exercise in other ways than jumping to conclusions. Semantics is the propagandist's worst friend.