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PROPAGANDA SYSTEMS: ORWELL'S AND OURS

Noam Chomsky

Although we call our era the age of Orwell, the fact is that Orwell was a latecomer on the scene. In the 1920's, a sophisticated American public relations industry was already developing and writing about the tools Orwell described.

Even earlier, during the First World War, American historians offered themselves to President Woodrow Wilson to carry out a task they called "historical engineering," by which they meant designing the facts of history so that they would serve state policy. That's Orwell, long before Orwell was writing.

In 1921, the famous American journalist Walter Lippmann said that the art of democracy requires what he called the "manufacture of consent," what the public relations industry calls the "engineering of consent," another Orwellism meaning "thought control." The idea was that in a state in which the government can't control the people by force, it had better control what they think.

The Soviet Union is at the opposite end of the spectrum from us domestically. It's essentially a country run by the bludgeon, a command state. There, it's very easy to determine what propaganda is: what the state produces is propaganda.

That's the kind of thing that Orwell described in 1984 - not a very good book. In my opinion, 1984 is so popular because it's trivial and because it's about our enemies. If Orwell had dealt with a different problem - ourselves - his book wouldn't have been popular. In fact, it probably wouldn't have been published.

In societies where there's a Ministry of Truth, propaganda doesn't really try to control your thoughts. It just gives you the party line. It says,

"Here's the official doctrine; don't disobey and you won't get in trouble. What you think is not of great importance to anyone. If you get out of line we'll do something to you because we have force."

Democratic societies can't work like that, because the state is much more limited in its capacity to control behavior by force. If the voice of the people is heard, you'd better control what that voice says, meaning you have to control what people think.

One of the ways to do that is to create a debate so that it looks like there are many opinions, but to make sure that the debate stays within very narrow margins. You have to make sure that both sides in the debate accept certain assumptions, and those assumptions turn out to be the propaganda system. As long as everyone accepts the propaganda system, then a debate is permissible.

"Tweedle-dum, Tweedle-dee"

The Vietnam War is a classic example. In the official media - the New York Times, CBS, and so on - in fact, all across the spectrum except at the very periphery, there was a lively debate. It was between people called "doves" and people called "hawks." The people called hawks said, "If we keep at it we can win." The people called doves said, "Even if we keep at it we probably can't win, and besides, it would probably be too costly for us, and besides maybe we're killing too many people."

Both sides, the doves and the hawks, agreed on something: we have a right to carry out aggression against South Vietnam. In fact, they didn't even admit that aggression was taking place. They called the war the "defense" of South Vietnam, using "defense" for "aggression" in the standard Orwellian manner. We were in fact attacking South Vietnam just as much as the Russians are attacking Afghanistan.

Like the Russians in Afghanistan, we first had to establish a government in Vietnam that would invite us in, and until we found one we had to overturn government after government. Finally we got one that invited us in, after we'd been there attacking the countryside and the population for years. That's aggression. Nobody thought that was wrong, or rather, anyone who

thought it was wrong was not admitted to the discussion.

If this were a totalitarian state, the Ministry of Truth would simply have said, "It's right for us to go into Vietnam. Don't argue with it." People would have recognized that as the propaganda system, and they would have thought what they wanted. They could have seen that we were attacking Vietnam, just like we can see that the Russians are attacking Afghanistan.

In this country, you can't permit people to understand that level of reality. It's too dangerous. People are much freer, they can express themselves. Therefore it's necessary to try to control thought, to try to make it appear as if the only issue was a tactical one: can we get away with it. There was no issue of right or wrong.

"Down the Memory Hole"

During the Vietnam War, it worked partially but not entirely. Among educated people it worked very well. Many studies show that among the more educated parts of the population, the government's propaganda was accepted unquestioningly.

On the other hand, after a long period of spontaneous popular opposition, dissent, and organization, the general population got out of control. As recently as 1982, according to the latest polls I've seen, over 70% of Americans still thought the war was, quoting the Gallup poll, "fundamentally wrong and immoral, not a mistake." That is, the overwhelming majority of the population is neither hawks nor doves, but opposed to aggression.

One reason that propaganda often works better on the educated than on the uneducated is that educated people read more, so they receive more propaganda. Another is that they're the commissars. They have jobs as agents of propaganda, and they believe it. By and large, they're part of the privileged elite, and share their interests and perceptions.

The rest of the population is more marginalized. It doesn't participate in the democratic system, which is overwhelmingly an elite game. People learn from their own lives to be skeptical, and in fact most of them are. In this case there's even a

name for the erosion of belief. It's called the "Vietnam Syndrome," a grave disease: people understand too much.

Yet if you pick up a book on American history and look at the Vietnam War, there is no such event as the American attack on South Vietnam. It's out of history, down Orwell's memory hole.

"Accuracy in Media"

Let me give one more example - the major vote on contra aid in March 1986. For the three months prior to the vote, the administration was heating up the atmosphere, trying to reverse the Congressional restrictions on aid to the terrorist army that's attacking Nicaragua.

(Publicly, the contras are called freedom fighters, but internal documents describe them as a proxy force based on terrorists. So I'll call them by the accurate internal terms.)

I was interested in how the media was going to respond to the administration campaign for the contras. So I took the two national newspapers, the Washington Post and the New York Times. In January, February, and March, I went through every one of their editorials, opinion pieces, and the columns written by their own columnists. There were eighty-five pieces. Of the 85, 85 were anti-Sandinista. On that issue, no discussion was tolerable. 85 out of 85 followed the party line: Sandinistas are bad guys.

Now there are two very striking facts about the Sandinista government, as compared with our allies in Central America - Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. One is that the Sandinista government *doesn't* slaughter its population. That's not open to discussion. That's a fact.

Second, Nicaragua is the only one of those countries in which the government has tried to direct services to the poor, has in fact *diverted resources to social reform*. Again that's not a matter of debate; it is conceded on all sides to be true. You can read about it in the Inter-American Development Bank reports or anywhere you like.

On the other hand, our allies Guatemala and El Salvador are among the world's worst terrorist states. So far in the 1980's they have slaughtered over 150,000 of their own citizens, with U.S. support and enthusiasm. They are

simply violent terrorist states. They don't do anything for their population except kill them.

Honduras is a little different. In Honduras there's a government of the rich that robs the poor. It doesn't kill on the scale of its major allies, but a large part of the population is starving to death.

So in examining those 85 editorials, the next thing I looked for was how often those two facts about Nicaragua were mentioned. I discovered that the fact that the Sandinistas are radically different from our allies in that they don't slaughter their population was not mentioned once. The fact that they have carried out social reforms for the poor was referred to in two phrases, both sort of buried. Two phrases in 85 columns on one crucial issue, zero phrases in 85 columns on another. That's really remarkable discipline.

"State of Siege"

After that I went through all the editorials in the New York Times from 1980 to the present - just editorials - on El Salvador and Nicaragua. It's essentially the same story.

For example, in Nicaragua on October 15, 1985 the government instituted a state of siege. This is a country under attack by the regional superpower, and it did what we did in the Second World War in Hawaii, instituted a state of siege. Not too surprising. There was a huge uproar, editorials, denunciations, it shows that they're totalitarian Stalinist monsters, and so on.

Two days after that, on October 17, El Salvador renewed its state of siege. This is a state of siege that was instituted in March 1980 *and had been renewed monthly since*, and it's far more harsh than the Nicaraguan state of siege. It blocks freedom of expression, freedom of movement, virtually all civil rights. It's the framework within which the army we organized has carried out massive torture and slaughter. They're still doing it, in fact, all you have to do is look at the latest Amnesty International report.

The New York Times considered the Nicaraguan state of siege a great atrocity. The Salvadoran state of siege, far harsher in its measures and its application, literally was not mentioned. Furthermore, it has *never* been mentioned. There is not one word in about 160 editorials that

mentions it, because that's our guys, so we can't talk about it. They're a budding democracy, so they can't be having a state of siege.

In fact, according to the editorial comment and the news reports on El Salvador, Duarte is heading a moderate centrist government under attack by terrorists of the left and terrorists of the right. This is complete nonsense. Every human rights investigation, the church in El Salvador, even the government itself in its own secret documents, concedes that the terrorism is being carried out by government itself. The death squads are the security forces. Duarte is simply a front for terrorists. But you can't say that publicly. It gives the wrong image.

"Word Management (or) In the Higher Interest"

Many terms in political discourse are used in a technical sense that's very much divorced from their actual meaning, sometimes even the opposite of it.

Take the "national interest." The term is commonly used as if it's something good for all of us. If a political leader says, "I'm doing this in the national interest," you're supposed to feel good because that's for you.

But if you look closely, it turns out that the national interest is not defined as the interest of the entire population. It's really the interests of small, dominant elites who command the resources that enable them to control the state - basically, corporate-based elites. Correspondingly, the "special interests," of whom we're all supposed to be suspicious, really refer to the general population.

This became very clear during the last few presidential campaigns. President Reagan is largely a figment of the public relations industry, and the public relations aspects of it, including control over language, are very striking. Every choice of terms by the Reagan public relations machine was carefully crafted.

In both the 1980 and 1984 elections, Reagan and his handlers identified the Democrats as the "party of special interests." That's bad, because we're all against the special interests. But if you asked who the special interests were, they listed women, poor people, workers, young people, old

people, ethnic minorities - in fact, the vast majority of the population. One group was not listed among the special interests - the corporations. In the campaign rhetoric, that was never a special interest, and in their terms that's right - because that's the national interest.

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Propaganda Review is a publishing project of Media Alliance, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization of 2800 media professionals.

"Censoring Chomsky: Kid Glove, Iron Fist"

Because Noam Chomsky ventures outside the boundaries of acceptable thought, his work suffers not only the automatic neglect that he says characterizes our propaganda system, but also outright suppression. Though he is obviously a thorough researcher and an articulate writer, Chomsky has been forced to publish most of his works with small-circulation presses. They are then resoundingly ignored by mainstream reviewers.

This systematic silence was nearly broken and then forcibly reestablished in the early 70's. Warner Modular Publications, Inc., a subsidiary of Warner Communications, signed a contract with Chomsky and Edward S. Herman for a book called Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and in Propaganda.

The manuscript was written and accepted, twenty thousand copies of the book were printed, an ad for it was placed in the New York Review of Books, and a promotion flyer listing it was prepared by the publisher. Then the parent company caught a whiff. Warner's William Sarnoff, offended by the book's criticism of the U.S. government, ordered that publication not take place.

The president of the Warner subsidiary, Claude McCaleb, resisted the edict from above, then tried to find a compromise. But Warner Communications was interested only in getting rid of the book. McCaleb and those on his staff who supported him were soon fired; the subsidiary itself was dissolved.

In France, the incident became a minor cause célèbre. In the United States, au contraire. Despite efforts by Chomsky and Herman to bring this act of censorship and suppression to the attention of prominent journalists and columnists, it was never discussed in the mainstream press.

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