



Propaganda and the Free Society

Ralph Block

The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 12, No. 4. (Winter, 1948-1949), pp. 677-686.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0033-362X%28194824%2F194924%2912%3A4%3C677%3APATFS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>

The Public Opinion Quarterly is currently published by Oxford University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/oup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Propaganda and the Free Society

BY RALPH BLOCK

Taking three steps forward and two backward, the United States has created propaganda machinery in its State Department to interpret American life and policy to the rest of the world. This machinery is being operated under serious handicaps. Americans are suspicious of propaganda as an instrument of government, even when used by ourselves, although we accept it in the form of advertising. We have had little experience with it and have been more concerned with guarding against propaganda than in developing affirmative policies for influencing world opinion. Finally, American life is so broad and varied that the propagandist charged with interpreting it is faced with an almost insuperable task.

The author is Special Assistant to the Director, Office of International Information, Department of State, and is the Department's representative for certain information matters on the State-Army-Navy-Air Force Coordinating Committee.

“Thought control” as it is practiced in dictator States is a two-part process. People are forbidden to think or speak in certain ways, and they are bidden to think and speak in certain other ways. Penalties of an unmistakable nature are attached in each case. The mind is a container, to be emptied and refilled. The sinister connotation of the term “propaganda” has been correspondingly increased, and democratic states have been bedevilled by doubts as to the attitude they should take toward the processes by which people are influenced.

Not every democracy, however, has been confused by these facts. Guarantees to free thought which the English maintain in their island home have not interfered with English appraisal of realities abroad in their Empire. The “bobby” who followed the insurgent appeal of a Marble Arch

orator with, “Them as wishes to storm Buckin’ham will form a cue on the left,” was not in conflict with Britain’s policy of using propaganda to defend its world-wide position. Abroad, at least, the British have no doubts as to the democratic propriety of influencing people. B.B.C. is heard around the globe, and behind it, cultivating more intensively, come the English-Speaking Union and the British Council. In war, the Ministry of Information was a cabinet position, and the Foreign Office controlled psychological warfare through the Political Warfare Executive.

American Ambivalence Toward Propaganda

American thinking on this subject since 1917 has shown a painful uncertainty. On the one hand, we wondered whether it was correct for the United States government in time of peace to try to influence foreign people by propa-

ganda; and, on the other hand, whether it is proper for the Government to use a powerful instrument that certainly was not mentioned in the Constitution. In the past, American evangelical solicitude for the souls of men in another world played its part in acquainting the Far East and Near East with the souls and bodies of Americans in this world; American influence has been substantially extended by the activities of American missionaries. But only in comparatively recent times have Americans seriously pondered the idea that American free institutions may be the fundamentals of a faith to be propagated abroad by our government. The need to reach a decision on this question has been sharply defined by the recognition that inimical governments have not hesitated to make effective use of propaganda against us. But at the same time, the idea that governments can engage in the reconditioning of group thinking is repugnant to our Lockean doctrine and to our respect for the right of human beings to think for themselves.

The United States government established foreign propaganda as an avowed implement of foreign policy in both world wars; but the chief propagandists, George Creel and Elmer Davis, carried on under an astonishing load of odium. Then in 1948, after several false starts in 1946 and 1947, the Congress legally recognized propaganda (which was called information) as an instrument in the direction of foreign relations in behalf of the American society. In each case these affirmations have been attended by hesitation, and at no point have the Executive Departments and the Congress arrived at an agreed-upon definition of what

they do or do not mean by propaganda. Playing over this 30-year history has been a belief, imbedded in democratic dogma, that factual truth or "information," as distinguished from "propaganda," produces a kind of self-acting transmutation in peoples abroad, leaving the initiator at a distance free to disclaim moral responsibility for "influencing" anyone.

In the democratic thesis, facts provide the basis for free judgment and decision;¹ "propaganda" betrays the democratic principle. The latter has no essential preoccupation with truth; it is the guerrilla warfare of communication, it creeps up on your blind side saying one thing and meaning another; clothed in friendliness and good intentions like a bad fairy, it seduces you into taking a bite from the beautiful poisoned apple. In a world in which propaganda has increasingly overshadowed diplomacy as an instrument for influencing the course of international events, Americans remain uneasy in making concessions to its use, even as an instrument of defense. Indeed, it is possible that more Americans approve of the use of the atom bomb in defensive warfare than approve the use of propaganda to forestall war.

Advertising versus Propaganda

It may be inaccurate to attribute this reluctance entirely to the wellsprings of American moral ideas.² In the devia-

¹ "The American dream . . . the hope of . . . a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed . . ." James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*.

² "As America has a moral culture—that is, a culture which accepts right and wrong as important—any discussion of Americans must simply bristle with words like *good* and *bad*." Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*.

tion between public morality and its private counterpart, which like Eddington's universe seems to wobble on its base, our libertarian tradition appears to be one thing and our practice is frequently another. A similar dichotomy prevails in our folk-ways on the subject of influencing people. Nowhere else in the world are human beings so beset by oral and visual propaganda as Americans—by radio, newspapers, television, electric signs, billboards, and through the channels of the United States mail. Under the guise of advertising, propaganda is accepted as an integral factor in our social and economic pattern.

In the purifying process through which it has arrived at its present consecration, advertising has run the gauntlet of pure food laws and the Federal Trade Commission, as well as vigilante committees of advertising clubs, chambers of commerce, and national publications. To maintain its position, psychologists³ and anthropologists of advertising use advertising in behalf of advertising, viz.: a Washington bus carries a placard accompanied by a photo engraving of a pay check—"advertising protects your pay check. By selling more goods it makes your job more secure."

A limited amount of (as yet unpublished) public-opinion testing on a subject which obviously must be a touchy one for advertisers, indicates that a respectable percentage of consumers believe that:

Some product advertising is more honest than others; That advertisers influence the treatment of news; That newspapers and radio news broadcasters leave out or soft-pedal news stories unfavorable to advertisers.

While further exploration of this misty mid-region would be valuable, advertising appears to be generally accepted as an important function in the free market of the American economy. There is obviously a definable difference between the influence aimed at you as a consumer, which you can take or leave, and the influence which your government is aiming at foreign peoples in your behalf.

Propaganda, A Recent Arrival

"Propaganda," in its secular meaning, is comparatively a new word in the American vernacular. Mark Sullivan's *Our Times—The Turn of the Century*, published in 1926, does not mention "propaganda" in the index; although the author includes in his historical summary the Direct Primary (1900), Conservation and the Reclamation Act (1902), direct election of United States Senators (1913), the graduated income tax (1913), prohibition (1919), Woman Suffrage (1920), and legislation for Immigration Restriction and Selection (1921-1924). Propaganda played indiscriminately on both sides of these questions to an important degree but was apparently viewed in the context of democratic public discussion.

This Svengali of the social process first became generally recognized as such in the United States in the period around the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914. Newspapers and magazines were filled with discussions of

³ John B. Watson, a high priest of behaviorism, once Professor of Experimental and Comparative Psychology, and Director of the Psychological Laboratory of Johns Hopkins University, moved from the Halls of Academe to become Vice-President, successively, of two important national advertising agencies.

Nietzsche, Bernhardt, and Treitschke, godfathers of the German war cult, and the effect of their ideas upon the German people and their neighbors. James Truslow Adams, in *The Epic of America*, points out that "the flood gates of propaganda addressed to emotion and sentimentalism were opened wide. Every string was played upon—Lafayette and La France of '76; hatred of the 'Hun'; the union once more of the 'English speaking peoples' . . ." In an earlier paragraph Adams says, "As the war got under way we were deluged with propaganda, much of which was designed to appeal to the base emotions rather than the intellect, and much of which has subsequently turned out to have been deliberately false. All the warring powers tried thus to influence us, though the Germans proved particularly clumsy in their efforts." George Creel's contemporaries, of course, had no illusions about the methods necessary to maintain popular backing for the war and the peace, however much Mr. Creel might be attacked in his control of the various propaganda devices of the time. Lincoln Steffens in his *Biography* makes a revealing reference to a conversation with Colonel House.

"Colonel House . . . said that the war was going to end—sometime, and that the President had come to realize that there had been no thought of terms, there had been no propaganda for peace, only for war, and that when he should go to Europe to make peace he would have no intelligent backing for peace in his own country. . . . I remarked only that they had overdone that war propaganda. 'Yes,' said House, 'and now we have got to go at our peace propaganda.'"

Post-War Reaction: Anti-Propaganda Defenses

After World War I there was a general effort even among those who were trying to see propaganda as a social phenomenon or "as a function of a particular kind of society" to build up an immunity against it, a self-acting, instantaneously releasable anti-venom. Leonard Doob, in *Propaganda*, published in 1935 when World War I was the war in men's minds, said: "the author believes very timidly that the recognition and understanding of a phenomenon enables an individual to free himself to a certain extent from the forces which that phenomenon represents." Professor Doob was not thinking in an ivory tower; economic depression in the United States in the "Thirties" was succeeded by a slow realization that Continental United States was dangerously exposed to ideas alien to the platform of a democratic society, that the fundamentals were perhaps not impregnable. This was the period of Brown Houses in New York's Yorkville area and in Los Angeles. In this situation propaganda, the weapon of attack from without, was once more tagged with a bad name.

The effect of Fascist and Nazi propaganda in the United States was both to confuse some people about concepts and terminologies and to compel others to clarify their definition of elements entering into the social structure. Education in the totalitarian countries was seen to be nothing more than propaganda to maintain the rigidity of the political and social scheme. But in the United States the possibility that the inculcation of democratic virtues through the public school system might be propaganda never became acceptable

doctrine; "education" and "information" were "good"; propaganda was always "bad."

In World War II, the United States Office of War Information ran head-on into a suspicion that it was an agent for propaganda to the American people. This suspicion existed in separate compartments. The public expected to have accurate information about the war and blamed the domestic branch of OWI when for security or other reasons the information was withheld. OWI was authorized to coordinate the information enterprises of all government agencies but never succeeded in rationalizing the output of these ambitious competitors and was blamed for the resulting confusion. Congressmen suspected OWI in its activities at home and abroad as a political instrument manipulated by a powerful President. Experts in foreign languages used in the psychological warfare branch were viewed with suspicion. In addition, there was the recurring mistrust of the kind of people engaged in propaganda, professional users of symbols—writers, journalists and artists—probably radicals, anyway not regular.

Propaganda and Diplomacy

The Germans, even before Hitler, the Italians under Mussolini, and later notoriously the U.S.S.R., seldom drew a line between what at one moment was the classic channel and method of diplomacy and at another the dark-alley thrust of propaganda. The only thing that was new about this was giving the process a name. It is not necessary to look very far in history to find instances⁴ in which the methods of diplomacy were used to mislead, to delay, to introduce ideas for public propa-

ganda purposes rather than to develop a meeting ground for agreement.

From 1914 until the end of the 'Twenties, diplomacy itself as practiced by the Chancelleries of Europe was under suspicion; from which came the popular democratic cry at Versailles, "open covenants openly arrived at." But in the shadow of the even more pressing need for understanding between nations, diplomacy (i.e., negotiation) has recovered its good repute as a means used by men of good will who are disposed to use reason as a method of arriving at agreements. But its successful use on this high plane, unadulterated by sharp practice, must rest upon the assumption that both parties to a diplomatic exchange will be reasonably honest and will negotiate under the classic etiquette of their special procedure—negotiation under Marquis of Queensberry rules.

Charles E. Bohlen, Counselor of the Department of State, in an address at the University of Arizona on May 26, 1948, commented on the confidential exchange between Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith and Mr. Molotov and its propaganda use by the Soviet government, and made clear the distinction between "information" and "propaganda" from the standpoint of the United States government:

"The integrity of our action and of the reputation of this Government for honest dealing is one of the most priceless assets which the United States possesses. It cannot be bartered

⁴ Whether the representatives of the Japanese government knew and understood the real purpose of their Washington conferences in December 1941 or not, there is no mystery now about the fact that they were sent as a part of an organic scheme of deception.

away from temporary propaganda advantage or even to offset temporary propaganda disadvantage.

"The deep-seated desire of the peoples of this earth for peace and tranquility cannot be regarded as expendable coin for propaganda purposes. . . .

"To be alert to the danger of propaganda does not mean that we must ignore the vital necessity of clear public understanding of our policy purposes. That is quite a different matter.

"Good publicity means accurate and continuous explanation and interpretation of our policy.

"Propaganda means playing fast and loose with the truth as a means of confusing and not enlightening public opinion.

"We cannot, and I am confident will not, permit our foreign policy to be at the mercy of foreign propaganda."

What Is Americanism?

Among the other hurdles which must be cleared by a United States government propagandist are the obviously different interpretations in a vigorous, developing society of the meaning of that society and of its constitutional sanctions. Who, for instance, can be trusted to find a mean common denominator of the virtues of American life which will permit every American to say, "Yes, that's us. You've hit the nail right on the head." The freedom to differ is the life blood of the American people; but how many Americans will agree, to take an easy instance, that "Oklahoma," with its phenomenal long run in the American theater, would

adequately interpret even one aspect of American life to foreign audiences.

Under Public Law 402, in which the Secretary of State is authorized "to provide for the preparation, and dissemination abroad, of information about the United States, its people, and its policies . . .", who is to be trusted to select the factual information which will convey the true essential meaning of American life? To the foreign observer, our stresses and strains seem frequently to be more audible and more visible than the balance which we as Americans have confidence exists. To those persons abroad who do not understand the mood in which the American people conduct their elections, the contradictions in the news must undoubtedly be confusing; not only confusing but offering a prime target to any unfriendly government which is competing for the attention of the international audience. An opponent's chance of scoring a hit is increased when the differences in American opinion are intimately related to the lags between our tradition of liberty—our constitutional sanctions—and the realities of our social pattern.

The authorities who assess the use of propaganda as an instrument of government must cope with the knowledge that even if the truth as we see it can be conveyed abroad, foreigners lack the background by which the truth can be assimilated in its approximately accurate values. Even the most sophisticated foreigner seldom sees American events and institutions from the same perspective of understanding as Americans do. While we may cavil at the extravagance and distortion which appear in a considerable number of American motion pictures, we recog-

nize these variations as representing to some extent the Paul Bunyan spirit which is an inescapable factor in American entertainment. Foreigners as a rule take our movies, our comics, our sports, and all the other elements on the surface of our life as an accurate and literal index to our character. The problem of obtaining understanding abroad, therefore, is how to obtain it in terms of the frame of reference of those who observe us. Even the English, who speak the same approximate language, do not always arrive at an interpretation of us with which we would agree. Harold Nicholson's *mot*, "two people separated by a common tongue," would appear to indicate that more than a common language is needed for reciprocal understanding. An effective delineation of American life and institutions would permit foreigners to see the terms of our life as interpreted in terms of theirs. Facts can be as often misleading as not.

During the 1948 Congressional Hearings on the appropriations for the Voice of America and its related activities, both editorial and political opinion in some quarters held that a government news agency was a threat to private enterprise, that it might impair the free flow of factual information abroad and, of course, that it was bound to misrepresent American opinion. Again the question of how objective a government agency could be in mirroring American life was raised, and of course it was stated that a government-sponsored program was out of tune with American precedents and principles.

Trying To Please Everyone

Practical difficulties of operating a United States propaganda agency to

foreign countries are brought out in some of the Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, considering the State Department appropriation legislation for 1949. Congressman Karl Stefan of Nebraska was questioning Mr. W. T. Stone, Director of the Office of International Information:

Mr. Stefan: Now, as to the library, the committee had some information to the effect that some of the books were rather objectionable. There has been some complaint against them. Have they been screened?

Mr. Stone: Yes, sir; they have been very carefully screened and we are prepared to submit to the committee a selection of the books which we have sent out during the past year. We have a complete break-down of the requests from each of the libraries, and I think you will find that the books are representative of America in all fields. A great many of these are technical books.

Mr. Stefan: The committee had only the information they received from the Department on the books when we requested the names of the books that were going to be put into circulation. There were books in circulation and in libraries over the world, regarding which we had received some complaint. They have been screened very carefully, and those which are objectionable will be withdrawn?

Mr. Stone: That is correct."

Later in the Hearing, the following exchange of ideas was held between Congressman Cliff Clevenger of Ohio, and Mr. Howland Sargeant, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs:

"*Mr. Clevenger*: Yes. Do you subscribe sometimes to the Fort Wayne *News-Sentinel* that presents the other side of it, or is it always the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette*, that presents the administration side of this, or the interventionist side of it, let us call it that.

"*Mr. Sargeant*: No, sir. I can answer that categorically. We are in the business of disseminating a representative cross-section of American opinion. You will find . . . for example, that we occasionally send to our ambassador, or to his people in the United States Information Service for their background information, occasionally for use with the press in that country . . . our editorial background sheets. You will notice that we are very careful to include representative editorial opinion from all kinds of papers.

"*Mr. Clevenger*: You send the *Reader's Digest*, which is a magazine that is fair in its expression of opinion.

"*Mr. Sargeant*: That is correct. You will find, for example, that we try to do a job of evaluation. If, for example, on some issue that is before the American people, it is quite evident that three out of every four papers you pick up show a particular relationship to the issue, we will attempt to indicate that in the selection of the editorials that we send out; that is, we would be manifestly wrong if we sent 20 editorials against this and only 2 that were for it if, in fact, the current of editorial opinion in this country were exactly the other way.

"What I am trying to say, Congressman Clevenger, is that whether

it is in accord with the foreign policy of the United States is not the determining factor. It is what, in fact, our free press in this country is writing and saying that governs what we send out to our information offices and to our missions.

"*Mr. Clevenger*: The other day I put in the record percentage figures, reflecting a national survey of public opinion and public information in the United States. It showed that about 87.5 per cent of the metropolitan press, the big-city press; about 92 per cent of the magazines in general circulation; and about 93.5 per cent of the commentators, are all slanted one way.

"*Mr. Sargeant*: On what issues?

"*Mr. Clevenger*: This was a general survey, an educational survey of the media of public information on the ERP in the United States. I presented that to another committee and one of the members said that Senator Vandenberg had given him practically the same figures the day previous.

"*Mr. Stefan*: I am sorry, I did not quite understand the gentleman; what was that?

"*Mr. Clevenger*: The press and the radio and the magazines being slanted practically all one way. I know that the general public west of the Appalachian Mountains are not that way in their thinking. And they are entitled to have a chance even in the United States to hear both sides of the picture.

"Now, it is unfortunate that 51 of our great metropolitan papers—you can take this off the record, if you wish, or leave it in the record—are practically all directed from one of-

fice in their editorial policy. Their propaganda has not cost them anything. On the contrary they have been profitable papers. And the editorial columns of these papers, regardless of where you buy them, are all about the same in basic thought expressed.

"I do not expect that I have heard the last of what I am saying to you. I expect to have it dished back at me in my own district within a week or 10 days. Somebody will do it. But that is not the question with me. I want the public to know both sides of the problem and I will rest my case on their good judgment. But I do not want to feel that the air in Europe is filled with a lot of useless twaddle that distorts the picture of America.

"From some of the things that we have had from the personnel of this Department, I would question whether we would get an unbiased American slant on a lot of these things. I hope, whoever is in charge of it, will see to it that it does represent America; some reference once in a while to the American Republic, if you please, which is what we are, but which is never mentioned.

"For instance, right here in these justifications they talk of American Democracy, spelled with a capital D. It has gotten to be done that way unconsciously by the people who write this stuff. Yet, this is a representative republic, quite unlike a democracy. It is no New England town meeting, this Congress of the United States, or the Government thereof. I want them over there really to understand that this is the best government that was ever made.

I think perhaps the Swiss may claim that theirs is almost as good. They have been able to maintain themselves right in the middle of all this confusion over there. But I want them really to understand what our American Government is, a representative government of the people, and not a mob, and not a debating society."

Behind this varied critical opinion of United States government propaganda lies a confusion in ideas. Some aspects of American life may effectively interpret Americans to Europe and be without value in the Far East, and conversely. Few Americans moreover have a total picture of their country, as the chief propagandists must attempt to have. To do their work properly, propagandists must know that they are aiming at targets, and that the arrow must be different for each nation, and for each economic, political, and social level within foreign nations.

Propaganda as an Instrument of Statesmanship

Is there any reason for the United States government to engage in the projection of information about itself, its people, and its institutions except to influence other peoples in its favor and to help them to view American policies with understanding? The American people can demand that the promulgation of a propaganda program by their government be for purposes which are expressed openly and without deceit. But this assuredly is not to disallow that to influence foreign peoples in the interest of American ideals and policies is a justifiable interest of American statecraft.

It is a mistaken view of history to

think that the responsibility of world leadership is something that has been thrust on our unwilling national brow. However reluctant we may be to leave our cozy national fireside for the alarms and excursions of the international open country, our whole history has been leading us step by step to this maturity. But if we are with due humility to live up to this responsibility, our propaganda cannot be merely an instrument of defense or offense. It must be transmuted by creative leadership into a vehicle of statesmanship. If this can be done, propaganda may be returned to its original meaning—the propagation of a faith, and propaganda

will then be seen not in a narrow chauvinistic sense but as a means of continuing progress toward our ideal of the free dignity of man.

In this sense, American government propaganda in peace or in war must be guided by people who are clear about the essential meaning of American life. Not only the official propagandists but the legislators and administrators who sanction them must have an assured belief that the American scheme of living gives a satisfying explanation of the world today and will continue to provide a rationale by which the problems of tomorrow's world can be successfully resolved.