

Propaganda, American-style by Noam Chomsky

Pointing to the massive amounts of propaganda spewed by government and institutions around the world, observers have called our era the age of Orwell. But the fact is that Orwell was a latecomer on the scene. As early as World War I, 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. In this instance, the U.S. government wanted to silence opposition to the war. This represents a version of Orwell's 1984, even 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." This phrase is an Orwellian euphemism for thought control. The idea is that in a state such as the U.S. where 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 in its domestic freedoms. It's essentially a country run by the bludgeon. It's very easy to determine what propaganda is in the USSR: 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 it attacks our enemies. If Orwell had dealt with a different problem--ourselves--his book wouldn't have been so popular. In fact, it probably wouldn't have been published.

In totalitarian 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. Since the voice of the people is allowed to speak out, those in power better control what that voice says--in other words, control what people think. One of the ways to do this is to create political debate that appears to embrace many opinions, but actually stays within very narrow margins. You have to make sure that both sides in the debate accept certain assumptions--and that those assumptions are the basis of the propaganda system. As long as everyone accepts the propaganda system, the debate is permissible.

The Vietnam War is a classic example of America's propaganda system. In the mainstream media--the New York Times, CBS, and so on-- there was a lively debate about the war. It was between people called "doves" and people called "hawks." The hawks said, "If we keep at it we can win." The doves said, "Even if we keep at it, it would probably be too costly for use, and besides, maybe we're killing too many people." Both sides agreed on one thing. We had a right to carry out aggression against South Vietnam. Doves and hawks alike refused to admit that aggression was taking place. They both called our military presence in Southeast Asia the defense of South Vietnam, substituting "defense" for "aggression" in the standard Orwellian manner. In reality, we were attacking South Vietnam just as surely as the Soviets later attacked Afghanistan.

Consider the following facts. In 1962 the U.S. Air Force began direct attacks against the rural population of South Vietnam with heavy bombing and defoliation . It was part of a program intended to drive millions of people into detention camps where, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, they would be "protected" from the guerrillas they were supporting--the "Viet Cong," the southern branch of the former anti-French resistance (the Vietminh). This is what our government calls aggression or invasion when conducted by some official enemy. The Saigon government had no legitimacy and little popular support, and its leadership was regularly overthrown in U.S.-backed coups when it was feared they might arrange a

settlement with the Viet Cong. Some 70,000 "Viet Cong" had already been killed in the U.S.-directed terror campaign before the outright U.S. invasion took place in 1972.

Like the Soviets in Afghanistan, we tried to establish a government in Saigon to invite us in. We had to overthrow regime after regime in that effort. Finally we simply invaded outright. That is plain, simple aggression. But anyone in the U.S. who thought that our policies in Vietnam were wrong in principle was not admitted to the discussion about the war. The debate was essentially over tactics.

Even at the peak of opposition to the U.S. war, only a minuscule portion of the intellectuals opposed the war out of principle--on the grounds that aggression is wrong. Most intellectuals came to oppose it well after leading business circles did--on the "pragmatic" grounds that the costs were too high.

Strikingly omitted from the debate was the view that the U.S. could have won, but that it would have been wrong to allow such military aggression to succeed. This was the position of the authentic peace movement but it was seldom heard in the mainstream media. 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. For the past 22 years, I have searched in vain for even a single reference in mainstream journalism or scholarship to an "American invasion of South Vietnam" or American "aggression" in South Vietnam. In America's doctrinal system, there is no such event. It's out of history, down Orwell's memory hole.

If the U.S. 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 gone on thinking whatever they wanted. They would have plainly seen that we were attacking Vietnam, just as we can see the Soviets are attacking Afghanistan. People are much freer in the U.S.; they are allowed to express themselves. That's why it's necessary for those in power to control everyone's thought, to try and make it appear as if the only issues in matters such as U.S. intervention in Vietnam are tactical: Can we get away with it? There is no discussion of right or wrong.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. propaganda system did its job partially but not entirely. Among educated people it worked very well. Studies show that among the more educated parts of the population, the government's propaganda about the war is now accepted unquestioningly. 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 have jobs in management, media, and academia and therefore work in some capacity as agents of the propaganda system--and they believe what the system expects them to believe. By and large, they're part of the privileged elite, and share the interests and perceptions of those in power.

On the other hand, the government had problems in controlling the opinions of the general population. According to some of the latest polls, over 70 percent of Americans still thought the war was, to quote the Gallup Poll, "fundamentally wrong and immoral, not a mistake." Due to the widespread opposition to the Vietnam War, the propaganda system lost its grip on the beliefs of many Americans. They grew skeptical about what they were told. In this case there's even a name for the erosion of belief. It's called the "Vietnam Syndrome," a grave disease in the eyes of America's elites because people understand too much.