

Propaganda and the Politics of Perception by Michael Carmichael

War propaganda glorifies military indoctrination as the highest form of patriotism while simultaneously demonizing the enemies of the state.

Adolf Hitler realized the power of propaganda to mold and shape public opinion. Hitler wrote a highly informed essay on the powers of propaganda in his political autobiography, *Mein Kampf*.

Modern governments employ propaganda to incite public outcries for war in order to advance their agendas in foreign policy.

War propaganda is nothing new. The dynastic Egyptians created monumental sculptures that glorified Pharaoh as a conqueror who personally executed - frequently by fracturing their skulls with a mace - hundreds of the enemies of his state. Thus, the public glorification of war and its most heinous crimes has been with us for thousands of years.

War propaganda is abundantly evident in the fabric of our culture, and it presents no symptoms of weakness or dissipation. Quite the opposite is true. The latest film by Clint Eastwood, *Flags of our Fathers*, is little more than war propaganda that glorifies American military achievements in the context of a racial enemy - the Japanese. Sadly, Clint Eastwood has a long history of manufacturing films that are nothing more than pulpish propaganda: *Where Eagles Dare*; *Heartbreak Ridge*, *Firefox* and many other glorifications of violence and the principle, "might makes right."

While the primary purpose of war propaganda is to manufacture public commitment to wars and their inevitable crimes, in George Bush's America psychological warfare aimed directly at the American public is designed to manufacture the political platform to launch a perpetual state of war that will produce a totalitarian regime headed by a Commander-in-Chief who is nothing more than a military dictator.

"Perception management" is another term used to describe the process of transforming public opinion to conform to a premeditated political agenda. Perception management establishes underlying trends and tendencies that drive the public perception of events in the direction of war. During war, perception management manipulates public opinion to accept the horrific nature of war crimes as merely nothing more than collateral damage, friendly fire and accidental mishaps that are inevitable consequences of the fog of war.

Psychological warfare training in George Bush's America has reached historic proportions. Social influence, perception management and a full range of persuasion techniques have permeated the American government and are now deeply embedded into the fabric of official culture - especially the US military. The purpose of psychological warfare is to manufacture public support for Bush's wars and for future wars as well as strengthening the powers of the state while demonizing the enemies of the Bush-Cheney regime. Concomitant with these assignments, psychological warfare camouflages the most horrific war crimes and makes them seem to be acts of virtue and valour that are absolutely essential for military, "victory."

Language lies at the heart of propaganda. The language of propaganda, psychological warfare and perception management is grounded in ancient principles that have been well known to leading sages, philosophers and intellectuals for thousands of years. Confucius believed that the disintegration of Chinese society in his time was directly attributable to a general deterioration of the language.

Confucius sought to improve language in order to improve the society and culture. He wrote,

“The correct use of language leads to the correct behavior of people”

In the Mediaeval Era of Latin Europe, Dante Alighieri realized the power of language to order society. Dante launched his quest for the perfect language to communicate the highest levels of understanding to the broadest number of people.

Dante taught that the development of a common language could lead to the political unification of Italy, and he proposed the establishment of a world government predicated on smooth, fluent and deeply integrated communications through a more perfect language.

In the Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli adapted his own theories on the political use of language to the high ideals of Confucius and Dante. Machiavelli wrote,

“Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word.”

In order to give a vivid example of a prince who used language as craft, or spin or propaganda, Dante described the political machinations of Pope Alexander VI. He wrote,

“One recent example I cannot pass over in silence. Pope Alexander VI did nothing else but deceive men, nor ever thought of doing otherwise, and he always found victims; for there never was a man who had greater power in asserting, or who with greater oaths would affirm a thing, yet would observe it less; nevertheless his deceits always succeeded according to his wishes, because he well understood this side of humanity.”

In the twentieth century, George Orwell emerged as one of the leading philosophers of the Machiavellian abuse of political language. Orwell wrote his classic dystopian novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, and he introduced his theories of Doublethink and Newspeak. Orwell defined Doublethink as,

“... the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. ... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them”

Orwell realized that the totalitarian state would redefine the purposes of language. The purpose of Newspeak, is to wage psychological warfare to manage the political perceptions of the populace. He wrote,

“The purpose of Newspeak was to eliminate the possibility of thoughtcrime … to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted … a heretical thought should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.”

For Orwell, the Machiavellian political abuse of language had distorted society into an increasingly malevolent form of tyranny. He wrote,

“Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.”

In Orwell’s depiction of the future, Newspeak and Doublethink would eradicate the possibility of protest, sedition, insurgency and rebellion against the state.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, Doublethink became the hallmark of the Bush Era. George Bush, Dick Cheney and their minions in Washington adopted Doublethink and Newspeak to coerce and impel political acceptance of their outrageous policies of perpetual war promulgated by a reactionary totalitarian government that is indistinguishable from the fascism and Nazism of the early twentieth century.

The core doctrine of the Bush Era is pre-emptive war. When Bush argues for the right to wage war to prevent war, he invokes Orwellian Doublethink by holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously while believing both of them: that war is undesirable while a war to prevent war is desirable.

The contradiction activating the Bush Doctrine is invisible to Bush, Cheney and their minions in Washington and elsewhere for they are the victims of Doublethink. In academic discourse, the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive war has been equated with the idea of committing suicide because of the fear of dying.

In the Bush Era, the American public are bombarded by a continuous stream of propaganda designed to elicit their political support for perpetual war and war crimes as well as for a strong, centralized government headed by a President who is little more than his ceremonial title indicates, a Unitary Executive functioning as Commander-in-Chief who is indistinguishable from a military dictator.

Manufacturing consent for perpetual war is the primary enterprise of the Bush-Cheney government. Not only are citizens heavily taxed to support the increasingly undemocratic policies of the Bush-Cheney government, they are subjected to a constant barrage of propaganda beseeching them to provide political support for policies that undermine their constitutional rights to freedom from unreasonable searches and seizure, habeas corpus and the freedom of speech. Many Americans are alarmed that the USA is now rated 53rd on the World Press Freedom Index where it is tied for that dubious distinction with the states of Tonga and Croatia. Bush’s propaganda engines of perpetual war are driven by: xenophobia; the demonisation of immigrants; fears of foreign cultures - especially Muslims - and the persistent application of fear and terror to the body politic.

The Bush White House governs by public relations. Tony Snow - a former news presenter for the right-wing Fox News Network - has become the official spokesman for the Bush-Cheney White House revealing the priority of propaganda to the political objectives of the Bush regime.

Confucius wrote,

“The correct use of language must begin at the very top of government.”

In contrast to Confucius, the blatant perception management and propaganda of the totalitarian regime is abundant, clear and constant. For example, Dick Cheney adopted the Hitlerian technique of the big lie to launch the Iraq War, when he promised the American people,

“I’m confident that our troops will be successful, and I think it’ll go relatively quickly … Weeks rather than months.”

Swiftly after the horrific tragedy of 9/11, Bush defined the thoughtcrime of today by stating,

“Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”

The modern state demonizes its opponents in order to manufacture public consent for war. In the Bush Era, the demonization of Muslims has been constant. Long a central theme in the fire and brimstone culture of American evangelical Christianity, the demonization of Muslims has exploded into the mainstream of western civilization. In order to understand this phenomenon more clearly, we must examine a particularly revealing aspect of this shameful legacy of American religious traditions to focus briefly on the theological work of an ancestor of the current president, George W. Bush.

The Reverend George Bush was a cousin of President George W. Bush’s grandfather. Reverend Bush’s theological writings are well known to the Bush family, but propaganda officials of the Bush government have used their powerful offices to suppress and camouflage this revealing relationship in the American media - as well as shielding it almost entirely from the global media. In April, 2005, a propaganda official named Todd Leventhal of the Office of Counterinformation confirmed that Reverend George Bush was, indeed, a relative of President George W. Bush and his father, former President George H. W. Bush.

In 1837, the Reverend George Bush wrote a book titled, *The Life of Mohammed: Founder of the Religion of Islam, and the Empire of the Saracens*. It should be needless to state that the Reverend George Bush has little complimentary to say about the founder of one of the world’s great religions. Worse. Reverend George Bush launched what should be considered a deliberate attack on Mohammed, his teaching and the religious tradition that he founded, Islam. The Reverend Bush constantly referred to Mohammed as an, “impostor.” He wrote,

“(Mohammed’s) whole history makes it evident, that fanaticism, ambition, and lust were his master passions . . . An enthusiast by nature, he became a hypocrite by policy; and as the violence of his corrupt propensities increased, he scrupled not to gratify them at the expense of truth, justice, friendship and humanity.”

From the theological writings of his ancestor, it cannot be disputed that the family of President George Bush has been incubating Islamophobia for at least four generations.

In the current generation of the Bush family, the George Bushes have surrounded themselves with a fawning coterie of Islamophobic evangelical Christian Zionists. For example, Franklin Graham is a family friend of the Bushes. Franklin Graham controls a vast and influential religious network called the Billy Graham Evangelical Association that has an annual income of more than \$100,000,000 - most of which is tax exempt. Even today, although the vast majority of the American people oppose Bush's wars, Franklin Graham's followers zealously support Bush's wars and his deeply unpopular neoconservative presidency.

Franklin Graham has made explicit statements articulating his peculiar Islamophobic theology. He stated,

"The God of Islam is not the same God of the Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different God, and I believe a very evil and a very wicked religion."

This statement reveals that Franklin Graham is poorly informed in the field of comparative religions, a tragic intellectual disability for a professional evangelist.

The demonization of Muslims in popular American culture is overt, in-your-face and taken as a matter of course. In the massively popular television series 24, a Muslim villain named "Marwan" held the American hero, Jack Bauer, hostage. Muslims frequently provide the villains in 24 in a process of demonization that will reverberate for generations.

Confucius taught,

"The ruler must correct his own behavior for the people to follow his leadership."

In Bush's America, the President and his retinue frequently demonize whole nations and peoples. For example, the "Axis of Evil" statement by President Bush demonized two Muslim nations as well as one Asian nation fostering a climate of fear, terror, Islamophobia and a generalized dread of all racial minorities.

In his State of the Union address in 2002, George Bush stated,

"North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens - leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections - then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil,"

Unfortunately, President Bush, Vice President Cheney and Prime Minister Tony Blair are not the only leaders who contribute to the climate of terror and fear through the media.

Many religious leaders in America frequently demonize Islam and condemn Muslims. In Europe, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI made some insensitive remarks that many Muslims believe were hostile to Islam - because they contribute

to the growing climate of Islamophobia.

At a high-profile address in Regensburg, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI quoted Emperor Manuel II Paleologus,

“Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.”

The process of demonizing Muslims and manufacturing Islamophobia is now a global phenomenon. An example is the Disney film, Aladdin, that was released in the early 1990s. Many of the American soldiers now serving in Iraq saw Aladdin during their childhoods when they were vulnerable to psychological programming and the demonization of foreign cultures portrayed as inimical to core American values. In Aladdin, the villains are all depicted as Arabs speaking with Arabic accents, while Aladdin is portrayed as an American youth with an American accent. This tactic is nothing less than the transparent demonization of Arabs - ie. Arabophobia.

The propaganda of Islamophobia infiltrates society through the official pronouncements of government and religious leaders that lead to the contamination of the mainstream media. The headlines of newspapers in the Occupied Territories proclaiming, “Vigilantes take up arms, vow to expel, ‘Muslim Filth’” incite cultural hatred, ie. Islamophobia. These headlines expose attitudes that are the products of cultural prejudices compounded by the global media campaign designed to propagate Islamophobia as the primary strategy to promote perpetual war.

“HELL, THE MUSICAL COMES TO THE VATICAN” read the headline on the BBC News coverage of the announcement that the Vatican has recently authorized a new popular opera based on Dante’s Divine Comedy - one of the greatest works of Christian literature. But, is there a hidden agenda behind the launch of this major new artwork? The BBC reported,

“(Marco Frisina), a Vatican composer is to stage an opera based on Dante’s Divine Comedy, with visions of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory; Organisers have asked permission for the premiere to be held at the Vatican in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI.” BBC

While this story seems innocuous enough, we should turn to The Divine Comedy to examine its potential for promoting the demonization of Muslims and Islamophobia.

In Dante’s Inferno, the first part of The Divine Comedy, Dante wrote his description of the torments of Hell. In the Inferno: Canto XXVIII, Dante places ‘Mahomet,’ ie. Mohammad, in one of the most terrible, tortuous and tormenting tableaux in Hell. Undergoing an infinite series of traumatic mutilations, Dante’s ‘Mahomet’ is tormented by a Satanic torturer armed with a massive sword called a ‘falchion.’ The sword-wielding demon slashes, lacerates and mutilates ‘Mahomet’ repeatedly in an eternal cycle of Satanic vengeance. After each one of these horrific woundings, ‘Mahomet’ wanders along a circuitous path whereupon his mortal wounds heal only to be confronted again by the same sword-wielding demon who slashes him - again and again and again in an unending cycle of Hellish torture, mutilation and punishment. When Dante witnesses this dreadful scene, ‘Mahomet’ turns to him, opens the gaping wound in his chest and says,

“See now how I rend me;(How mutilated, see, is Mahomet;(In front of me doth Ali weeping go,(Cleft in the face from forelock unto chin;(And all the others whom thou here beholdest,(Disseminators of scandal and of schism.(While living were, and therefore are cleft thus.(A devil is behind here, who doth cleave us. (Thus cruelly, unto the falchion’s edge(. Putting again each one of all this ream…

In 1869, the Christian artist, Gustave Dore illustrated Dante's Inferno. Dore's illustration of 'Mahomet' did not create global pandemonium at the time. In the twentieth century, Salvador Dali produced some of the most outstanding Christian works of art including: Christ of St John of the Cross and The Madonna of Port Lligat. One of his lesser-known works is his 'Mahomet,' whom he depicts as slashed and lacerated following the model in Dante's Inferno.

Given the course of events in the first years of the twentieth century from the language and wars of the Bush-Cheney government and the statements of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg, it is only prudent to ask the following question. Will the forthcoming Vatican opera contain any Islamophobic elements that might enflame international tensions and foment wars against Muslim nations?

Confucius taught that the ruler must govern via his moral authority. He wrote,

'The moral character of the ruler is the wind, the moral character of those beneath him is the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends.'

We have seen how the rulers, presidents, vice-presidents, religious leaders and the Pope have contributed to the demonization of Muslims and the fomentation of Islamophobic wars.

The death toll for the wars of the Bush Era is a secret number. Highly qualified scientists at Johns Hopkins University calculated that 655,000 Iraqis had died in the first three years of the war. It is now one year later. We do not know the number of the deaths, dismemberments, disabilities, disfigurements, ravages, rapine and capricious slashings, shootings, woundings, burnings, explosions and anarchic homicides of the Bush Era, but we do know that secret number is still ascending.

For his leading role in manufacturing wars and the infinity of war crimes that are boiling out of the cauldrons of war, George Bush is an indictable war criminal. Last year, the European press reported that Bush had negotiated the purchase of a vast rancho in remote parts of Paraguay, a nation that refuses to extradite war criminals.

Driven by despair and disgusted with the treachery of their leaders who have cooperated with the warmongers, the people of the planet are mobilizing like never before in human history.

Empowered by their common sense of decency, their desire for justice and their love of peace the people of our planet are revolted by their disastrous leadership. There is a growing sense of urgency.

The pace of change is gaining momentum. The people are seizing the moment to make an impact on their political institutions to bring war criminals to justice.

The future is in the hands of ordinary people - like those who are reading these words.

(A version of this paper was delivered at the War Crimes Conference meeting in Kuala Lumpur in February, 2007.)

