

Battles of the mind

One man's dream is another man's nightmare. **Philip Taylor*** looks for a voice of reason in the world of propaganda wars

American Psychological Operations (Psyops) forces have already dropped leaflets on Iraqi troops. One simply announces the frequencies on which their flying broadcast platform -- a converted Hercules EC 130 aircraft known as Commando Solo -- is transmitting messages about why American and British forces are building up in the Middle East in anticipation of another war against Iraq. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the Americans are also sending messages to Iraqi commanders via e-mail, urging them to defect or desert. For all the speculation about when the shooting war against Iraq will begin, the propaganda war has already begun.

Psyops have become a tried and tested part of battlefield propaganda by Western military forces. During the last Gulf War in 1991, 29 million leaflets were dropped on Iraqi troops in Kuwait and southern Iraq. During the Kosovo conflict of 1999, 103 million leaflets were dropped on the Serbs and, more recently, in Afghanistan over 80 million leaflets were disseminated. Commando Solo was also in action in those previous conflicts. The Americans make no secrets about this; indeed, Central Command places the leaflets and transcripts of the broadcasts from the current crisis on its Web site within hours of dissemination. So why do they invest so much effort in communicating directly with Iraqi troops prior to any military engagement which might kill them?

The simple answer is that they want to save lives -- on both sides. For people who are anti-American, or anti-military, this will be an unpalatable statement. That is the problem with propaganda. When someone you don't like is trying to persuade you to do something, or indeed, not to do something (like not firing on US or British aircraft patrolling the no-flight zones), it is dismissed as "propaganda" and therefore a lie. However, to assume that propaganda is about lying, or at best half-truths, is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of propaganda. In the popular mind, it is historically associated with Hitler and Stalin, or it is something only the enemy does. "We", of course, only tell "the truth".

In fact, the democratic tradition of conducting war propaganda has evolved through experience from the First World War onwards on the basis of what was called the "strategy of truth". This does not mean that the whole truth was told. Indeed, because one person's truth is another person's lie, we really should dispense with this word "truth" in trying to analyse propaganda. At best we should talk about "our truth" and "their truth". Better still, we should really be talking about credibility. Propaganda, like any other process of persuasion, is about communicating "our truth" to a particular target audience. As a process it is value-neutral, just like a television or radio set is value-neutral. It is the programming -- or content -- which should be the subject of our scrutiny, and if the content is to be credible to a target audience it needs to be based on facts and information that can be believed because they are patently true rather than false.

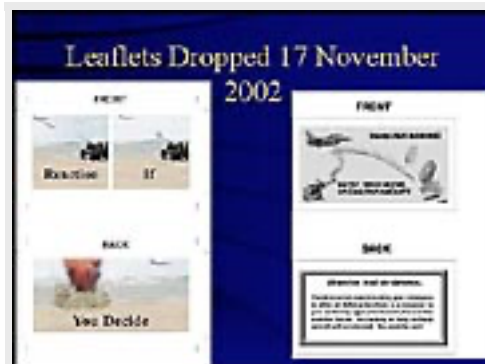
Herein lies the first real propaganda challenge for the administration of George W Bush. What *is* the connection between the events of 11 September 2001 and the need for "regime change" in Iraq. This is not a problem in the United States itself, where recent polls have indicated that one in two Americans believe Saddam Hussein to be behind the attacks on New York and Washington.

How this has come about is remarkable in its own right. It vindicates the old maxim of Hitler's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, that if you repeat something often enough, people will believe it, whether it is true or not. This is perhaps understandable in the aftermath of 11 September and as Americans debate "why they hate us so much". Saddam Hussein clearly hates America -- the "Great Satan" -- so he therefore must be involved. He has been identified as one part of an "axis of evil" and the American media, with the exception of some liberal elements in the east coast press, have bought into this explanation uncritically and wholeheartedly.

The problem, as Washington has come belatedly to recognise, is that it is not only Saddam Hussein who hates America. Despite enormous world-wide sympathy for Americans in the aftermath of 11 September, America's credibility as a self-perceived "force for good in the world" has come under enormous attack. This would suggest a serious failure of US propaganda outside the borders of the United States, especially in the Islamic world. The president's initial use of the word "crusade" was, of course, an enormous mistake; as was the labelling of the war against terrorism "Operation Infinite Justice". Both terms send completely the wrong messages to those very parts of the world where the terrorist attacks were quietly -- and sometimes very loudly -- being celebrated. But the very fact that some extremists were suggesting that "America got what it deserved" merely compounded the problem in the minds of the American media and public in reinforcing their support for a government now prepared to take on militarily all those who hated America.

That is the problem with propaganda wars: they can spiral out of control and make war even more likely. If words and policy are not conducted hand in hand at the same time, no amount of subsequent words can rescue the policy. So whereas Western politicians insist that this is not a "clash of civilisations" and certainly not a war against Islam, there are now many who are convinced that this is exactly what the current crisis is all about, and they marshal their "evidence" to prove their case. The emotive issue of oil is a case in point. Because the United States can only make the linkage between Iraq and the war against terrorism as being one whereby Saddam Hussein *might* one day provide weapons of mass destruction to the anti-American terrorists, this remains only a possibility. As such, it is an imponderable and thus the argument has some logic but, at the moment, it lacks credibility. No matter how much Washington insists that the war against Iraq is not about oil -- why 2003 and not, say, 1997 if it really is? -- its opponents point to the Bush family connections with the Texan oil industry and indeed the corporate links of many White House cabinet members to the oil industry.

The same happened with Afghanistan a year ago. Opponents argued that 11 September was a CIA/Mossad conspiracy to provide a pretext for a long planned military campaign in Afghanistan to secure oil pipelines planned to run through that country. They fuelled rumours that "4,000 Jews failed to turn up for work" in the World Trade Center on 11 September as further "evidence" for this "truth". They countered American claims about Mohamed Atta's passport being found in the rubble when the doomed aircraft's flight boxes had not survived and they even pointed out that none of the cell phone transcripts from the passengers contained the word "Arab". Nor was this nonsense confined to the Islamic world; a Web site was created in France which fuelled the conspiracy theory that the planes had been brought



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Leaflets

down by some secret American technology operating from the ground. From Latin America came the allegation that footage shown on CNN of celebrating Palestinians on the West Bank had been taken during the Gulf War and not on 11 September (this was also untrue).

In times of conflict, rumours have always been rife. Thanks to the Internet, they can now spread around the world instantaneously. This is a new medium in the propaganda arsenal. Old or traditional mass media, such as print, radio and television, remain the principal source of information for most people in the world and they are thus the front line weapons in any propaganda struggle. The need for governments to ensure that the mass media reflect the official point of view varies from the authoritarian model in which the media are largely state-controlled to the democratic model in which free media are influenced by a variety of pressures and management techniques.

The West has traditionally lumped Arab media into the authoritarian model, and this is why *Al-Jazeera* is so important because it didn't fit readily into that model. Dubbed the "Arab CNN", in fact a good number of its staff were trained within the public service broadcasting tradition of the BBC. Central to this tradition is the principle that if one point of view is represented then this has to be balanced by a contrary viewpoint. This type of broadcasting had never been seen before in the Middle East and the Qatar-based station quickly grew in popularity throughout the region. Barely noticed in the West until Osama Bin Laden's exclusive interviews with the station in 2001 and 2002, when these interviews were transmitted the knee-jerk reaction was to brand it a propaganda outlet for the Taliban. When Washington asked commercial television stations not to rebroadcast the interviews for fear that they contained coded messages to terrorist sleepers, the West was once again charged with hypocrisy over its supposed value of freedom of speech.

Hypocrisy is indeed one of the main charges of anti-American propaganda. After years of being exposed to Hollywood films and American television programmes which portray American democracy at work -- in which marriage breakdowns, violence and promiscuity all feature prominently -- there was a degree of scepticism about the merits of the so-called American dream. This, added to the accelerated rate of globalisation which was felt to be driven by US multinational corporations like Nike, McDonalds and Microsoft -- provided a backdrop of resentment to the charges that America was getting rich on the back of the Third World. This was why the World Trade Center was chosen as a main target by the terrorists. It was not just an attack on America but an attack on free market liberal capitalism that had "triumphed" in the Cold War: an attack on modernity itself.

That the West failed to see how this growing resentment could translate into such atrocious acts of terrorism was, paradoxically, due to a failure of American propaganda in the 1990s. There is a paradox here because the United States stands accused of coca-colonialism in its attempt to McDominate the world but, if this was true, it was clear that they were not explaining themselves very effectively. In fact, with the Cold War won, the US downgraded in significance its official propaganda machinery, culminating in the 1999 reincorporation of the United States Information Agency back into the State Department. Voice of America broadcasts were reduced as were cultural exchange programmes. In other words, unlike during the Cold War when the global battle for hearts and minds was a central aspect of US foreign policy, in the decade that followed American power was left to speak for itself. This created a perception vacuum which was filled by anti-American propaganda. So when accused of hypocrisy about intervening in Haiti but not in Rwanda, very little was done to counter the charge of selectivity in US foreign policy. Nor was anything really done to advertise American interventions on behalf of Muslim populations in Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor.

All the anti-Americans could see was Israel, America's "Zionist lackey" in the Middle East. This has become such an emotive subject that it is almost impossible to be objective about it. But it is at the core of the propaganda battle in which sides apparently have to be taken with a rigidity that almost defies rational analysis. Because America supports Israel while most Arabs sympathise with the Palestinian cause, it is a cause which defines who are the good guys and bad guys on either side. In such a climate, propaganda is bound to flourish.

Any professional persuader knows that the hardest task of all is convert the already persuaded. Propaganda works most effectively when it reinforces existing views and values. Those values and views are formed at an early age through family, education, religion, ethnicity, gender and experience. Scholars have debated for decades whether the mass media also play a part and, while there is no universal agreement on, for example, whether violent television programmes encourage violent behaviour on the part of those watching them, many believe that they do. By default almost, therefore, they also believe in the power of the media to influence all kinds of behaviour that might not otherwise take place. In other words, they believe in the power of the media to actually change behaviour which means that by default they believe in the power of propaganda to change minds. If that propaganda is blatantly out of step with existing belief systems, it will be dismissed simply as "enemy propaganda". The answer would seem to influence the target audience while it is still young.

This requires a long-term campaign which must be sustained for at least a generation, normally defined as 25 years. This is why President Bush has warned that the war against terrorism will be "a long haul". If America is to win this new propaganda war, it cannot be won overnight. Nor can it be won without a gradual configuration of image and policy. That policy will have to be consistent, credible and convincing. Within the democratic propaganda tradition, it must explain and persuade through the deployment of credible information that must be consistent with what America says it is doing, and why. It has already begun to put the appropriate machinery together. In the White House, the Office of Global Communications has been created to coordinate this world-wide campaign, Voice of America broadcasts have increased and more money is flowing into cultural exchange schemes. And, in the short-term, the leaflets are already falling on Iraq.

If war against Saddam Hussein does break out in the coming weeks or months, the number of leaflets dropped will intensify and Commando Solo will increase its broadcast output. But the real battle will be on the wider front of global public opinion. Outside of the United States, and even within, the justification of an overt foreign policy of "regime change" raises many doubts about whether this will be a "just war". In a sense we have been here before, but in one crucial aspect we have not. For 10 years, many in the West have asked why the coalition failed to finish off Saddam Hussein in 1991. In fact, that was not the objective of that war; UN resolutions only allowed for the liberation of Kuwait. As a result, Saddam's survival was hailed as a triumph in some quarters because he had taken on the West and had survived, and he had attacked Israel. That should have provided a clue as to where the allegiances of some people in the Middle East really lay. George Bush Senior failed to secure re-election for a second term despite his military victory, opening the way for anti-American propaganda now that the current crisis is really about "unfinished family business" on the part of his son. This makes as much sense as the argument over oil, but again there is a logic of sorts to it and it is widely believed. It therefore has to be confronted with credible alternative arguments.

So here we are with the world's media focussed on UN weapons inspectors searching for weapons of mass destruction as perhaps the final crucial issue in the propaganda war. The world totters on the edge of another Gulf war on the basis of whether such weapons *might* exist. If they are found,

then war will be declared on the basis that Saddam must be removed because he *might* one day provide such weapons to the terrorists. There is a logic here and it has some credibility amongst opponents of Saddam Hussein. But for propaganda to be effective, it usually needs to be rooted in some credible truth. And whether you believe it or not depends on which side you are on. That does not make it *the* truth, merely *your* truth.

The greatest challenge of our times is to see through the fog of propaganda being generated all around us by interested parties who are trying to seize the moral high ground to serve their own interests. How to do this requires effort, research, verification and a high degree of scepticism. We used to expect that investigative journalism would do this for us. But the profession of journalism -- with some notable exceptions -- have now become part of the problem. The American media for the most part have bought into the policy of the American government, and they have done this voluntarily, without coercion, which is the only real difference from the authoritarian model. The effect is the same. Government and media speak with the same voice, both on behalf of a public opinion which would appear to support them. In Europe and elsewhere, dissenting voices are louder which may act as some sort of break on any decisions to go to war made by democratically elected politicians who need continued popular support if they are to remain in power.

The current president's father found that, even in victory, war did not guarantee re-election. But the current president's own election was so controversial that maybe he is working on the erroneous assumption that another war with Iraq will see him elected clearly for the first time. So maybe Clausewitz was right: war is the continuation of politics by other means.

Saddam Hussein has always known a variation of this, namely that survival in war against the United States, or Iran before it, is the continuation of his politics by means other than authoritarian control. If a new war should come, it will be a war of survival for all the leading political figures. Militarily, Iraq cannot win this one anymore than it could the last "Mother of All Battles". Nor, it would appear, will he be allowed this time to survive. What comes after the new battle is the largest imponderable of all. But it would appear that we are no longer dealing with the world as it is, but with what it might be. In such a world, propaganda is no longer a weapon of war but an instrument for dream making. And one person's dream is another's nightmare, just as the American dream is Osama bin Laden's and Saddam Hussein's nightmare. If wars begin in men's minds, we normally expect their eyes to be open.