
Why We Fight

A Study of U.S. Government War-Making Propaganda

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Propaganda in Support of War

In this paper, we examine the extent to which officials within the U.S. government employ propaganda to influence the American public's opinion regarding going to war. We begin with a definition of propaganda as “the *deliberate* attempt to persuade people to think and behave *in a desired way*” (Taylor 1995, 6, emphasis in original), to which we add, “using means that involve either selective information or outright deception.” We concentrate primarily on the public statements or actions of the president, secretary of defense, and high-ranking members of the military, though we also allow for the products of various other agencies insofar as they relate to foreign policy.

In wartime, the U.S. government might engage in legitimate propaganda to influence the behavior of foreign people and governments. Such propaganda may attempt to convince the members of opposing armies to give up or to encourage citizens of belligerent governments to press their governments to end the war.¹ However, our focus in this paper is on propaganda intended to mislead Americans. Our main finding is that in the three wars we examine, the U.S. government has systematically misinformed

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1. See Paul 2008 for more information on U.S. information-operations doctrine, including propaganda.

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Americans about various aspects of the war, all with the goal of persuading them to support the initiation or conduct of the war or both. A reasonable case can be made that in all three instances the misinformation caused Americans to be more supportive of the war than they would otherwise have been.

Politicians leverage an information asymmetry when they engage in propaganda. We seek to identify characteristics of scenarios in which such asymmetries are more likely to exist and citizens are more susceptible to propaganda.

Scholars, military science theorists, and career officers who attend the armed services' staff colleges routinely cite the "will of the American people" as the strategic center of gravity for U.S. conflicts during the period after World War II (Schmader 1993; Von Wald 1995; Kasupski 2000; Upchurch 2009; Boylan 2015).² General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2001 to 2004, stated, "The will of the American people to carry on the war on terror prevents the enemy from meeting its objective; it is the enemy's center of gravity" (quoted in Garamone 2006). According to U.S. military doctrine, a belligerent's center of gravity is "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act" (U.S. Department of Defense 2002, 29; see also Clausewitz 2009, 144). Thus, in those instances when the will of the people is one's own center of gravity, for a military intervention to succeed the national will must be protected from attack or subversion. For example, because the U.S. government enjoyed massive technological superiority against North Vietnam, one reason the intervention there ended in strategic failure may have been that the American public simply lost its will to support the fight (Gelb 1972; Mandelbaum 1982; Summers 1995). An important lesson that political leaders and some military leaders seem to have drawn from the Vietnam experience is that they need to cultivate the public's willingness to fight and then jealously protect that willingness from harm.

For example, General Creighton Abrams was chief of staff of the army immediately following the Vietnam War and oversaw the enormous reorganization of the army's active and reserve elements. He purposely placed a large proportion of necessary combat power in the reserves in order to ensure that "they're not taking us to war again without calling up the reserves" (quoted in Sorley 1991, 45). A member of his staff confirmed that "General Abrams hoped this would correct one of the major deficiencies of the American involvement in the Vietnam War—the commitment of the army to sustained combat without explicit support of the American people as expressed by their representatives in Congress" (quoted in Sorley 1991, 46).

The importance of the "will of the American people" to scholars of military science and military history is difficult to overstate. Political scientists routinely acknowledge the salience of foreign-policy issues to American voters, especially the decision to use

2. See Eichenberg 2005 for a political science study that considers factors such as mission success, casualties, and objectives as determinants of the popularity of military interventions.

military force (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Klarevas 2002). We argue that political leaders who believe in this importance will attempt to influence people's opinions about the use of military force. It is critical to note that they seek to influence public opinion not merely for democratic reasons such as passing legislation that authorizes the use of military force in a particular situation but also because positive public opinion of a military intervention can, in their view, be a *military* necessity. Thus, anything that undercuts the people's support ultimately places military victory at risk.

Public Choice Provides a Useful Lens

One of the earliest and most important contributions to public-choice theory is Anthony Downs's (1957) paradox of voting. The paradox states that because the likelihood is extremely small that any individual's vote will be the one that decides the election, the practical benefits to voting are essentially zero. Yet the opportunity costs of voting are undeniably positive. The paradox is that people do, in fact, turn out to vote even though economic theory suggests that such behavior is irrational.³ An implication of this paradox germane to the present discussion is that, given the seeming futility of voting, individual citizens generally have little or no incentive to gather information and educate themselves about political issues. Even if economists' view of rationality is too narrow, which we believe it is, the incentive for voters to gather information and educate themselves on the issues is still low. Those who get expressive benefits from voting can still get those benefits without being particularly informed. This state of ignorance leaves them susceptible to the influence of propaganda.

Several public-choice scholars have considered propaganda and the voting public's vulnerability to it. Thomas Dalton (1977) developed a model in which ignorance of citizens' preferences results in suboptimal policies and de facto coercion.⁴ His model shows that in certain instances government may employ propaganda in an effort to influence citizen preferences and reduce the amount of perceived coercion. In other words, when government policy diverges from citizens' true preferences, government may propagandize to reduce the perceived divergence.

Tobias Ursprung presents a model that specifically leverages the paradox of voting to suggest that constituents are "happy to receive free information, in order to improve the basis for their 'well-founded' decision" (1994, 261). Because special interests stand to gain financially from a favorable political outcome, they may have an incentive to

3. We note that economists who conclude that voting is irrational have a narrow view of rationality: they typically do not include as a benefit the expressive pleasure people get from voting.

4. Dalton follows Breton 1974, 56, when he defines the degree of coercion as "the difference (whether positive or negative) between the amount desired of public policies (at existing tax-prices and incomes) and that provided" (1977, 85).

provide selective information to potential voters in an effort to sway voting behavior. It is important to note that this information need not always alter voters' preferences; it may work to fill in gaps in voter knowledge and change perceptions of the causes and effects of various policy proposals. Similarly, Reiner Eichenberger and Angel Serna (1996) develop a model in which voters receive information that either improves or reduces the accuracy with which they assess policy, and they examine how certain actors may engage in political propaganda. Likewise, it is not necessary for our analysis that the propaganda affect preferences, merely that it is selective information that alters *perceptions* of policy. Voters' general inability or unwillingness to overcome their informational deficiencies has long provided the foundation for democratic institutions' vulnerability to exploitation by special-interest groups.⁵

The sine qua non of public choice is imperfect information on the part of voters and citizens generally. This means that they are open to being persuaded by propaganda. Although not using an explicitly public-choice framework, two recent articles give strong evidence that government propaganda can powerfully influence behavior. David Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) shows that radio broadcasts over station KTLM by Hutu government officials inciting violence against the Tutsi minority in Rwanda in 1994–95 had a powerful effect. Specifically, 10 percent of the overall violence occurred as a result of these broadcasts. Maja Adena and her colleagues show that “after the Nazis established their rule, radio propaganda incited anti-Semitic acts and denunciations of Jews to authorities by ordinary Germans” (2015, 1885).⁶

There are a number of reasons to believe that rationally ignorant citizens are more susceptible to government propaganda about war making than to government propaganda on domestic-policy areas. First, Americans are generally less familiar with matters of foreign policy than they are with domestic issues. The geographic distances involved tend to mean that fewer Americans have direct experience with the incident or region in question, in contrast to the numbers that have direct experience with a domestic situation—say, the millions of Americans who personally experienced the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The paucity of direct experience with foreign policy means that government as a source of information becomes more important relative to a situation in which various sources are available. Another related factor is that in many international incidents, members of the military may be the only Americans involved, and information from the military is easily suppressed or shaded for political purposes.

5. See Ben-Zion and Eytan 1974 and Welch 1974 for influential articles on special interests and the economics of voting as well as Mitchell and Munger 1991 for an early survey of this literature. Kaufmann 2004 presents a case study of Iraq War failings that relies on the concept of “Arrovian manipulation.”

6. Interestingly, Adena and her colleagues also show that although Nazi radio “was most effective in places where anti-Semitism was historically high,” it also “had a negative effect in places with historically low anti-Semitism” (2015, 1885). Note that by “negative,” they mean what most of us would think of as positive: that is, the anti-Semitic broadcasts created a backlash against the Nazi regime. Similarly, Stefano DellaVigna and his colleagues (2011) show that Serbian radio broadcasts to Croatia led to more anti-Serbian graffiti and to more votes for “extreme nationalist parties.”

In addition, the president, in his role as commander in chief of the armed forces and head of state, tends to have a privileged role in foreign-policy debates with respect to voters and Congress. Since World War II, presidents have assumed the authority to commit forces to combat without first obtaining explicit permission from Congress. In such cases, the president may seek political approval from voters only after the fact. One aspect of the president's privileged position is that he has control over the government intelligence apparatus, enabling him to decide which information to publicize and which to bury as a classified secret (Kaufmann 2004, 37). Chaim Kaufmann (2004) provides a thorough discussion of the president's ability to influence the marketplace of ideas with respect to foreign policy. He makes the points that the president typically lacks "competition from an authority of similar stature" (41) and that it is often politically unpalatable for politicians and pundits to appear soft on defense, which further adds to the president's advantage here (36).

Criteria for Inclusion

We catalog instances in which either White House or Department of Defense officials selectively provide information with the apparent intent to influence American (i.e., domestic) public opinion. We examine this topic for the following reasons. First, some of the earliest attempts by the U.S. government to propagandize to advance policy measures were with respect to war—namely, in World War I and World War II. The framers of the U.S. Constitution empowered Congress to declare war and empowered the president, as commander in chief, to carry out that policy. A presidential administration that employs propaganda misappropriates the war-making approval process for its own ends.

Second, these successful enterprises of influencing public opinion may open the door for a wider breadth of topics upon which government officials may decide to propagandize. For example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found the Department of Education (Kurtz 2005; U.S. GAO 2005), the Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. GAO 2004), and the Environmental Protection Agency (Schouten 2015; U.S. GAO 2015) all guilty of violating laws against propaganda (Kosar 2005b).

Third, since the end of World War II, Congress has generally taken a dim view of propaganda targeted at the American people. The Smith–Mundt Act of 1948 outlines how the U.S. government is allowed to engage foreign audiences but is prohibited from distributing to domestic audiences any material intended for foreign ones (Palmer and Carter 2006). The act has been modified several times to further ensure that propaganda intended for foreign employment is not released to the American people.⁷ The Department of Defense is not explicitly mentioned in the

7. For information regarding the most recent changes in the Smith–Mundt Act, made in 2013, see Kelly 2013.

act, so the extent to which this law applies to its activities is ambiguous. Interestingly, Article 20 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) specifically forbids promulgating propaganda for war purposes and requires signatories to enact legislation outlawing this practice.⁸ The United States is a signatory but has specifically refused to agree with this article (Collins 2009, 823).⁹

Finally, and perhaps most important, we study past instances of government propaganda so that it can be identified in future cases. For example, the term *Cold War consensus* refers to the bipartisan cooperation and support of national security policy that most presidential administrations enjoyed throughout the Cold War (Fordham 1998). It seems reasonable to stipulate that at various times during the Cold War the Soviet Union may have posed a severe or even existential threat to the United States. But the evidence also indicates that the U.S. government may have overblown the threat to generate support from the American people for certain policies in particular instances. “Historians have generally agreed that, from 1947 onward, the president and his advisers believed they could best drum up popular support for their Cold War policies by ‘scaring the hell out of America,’ by using overheated rhetoric that locked U.S. policy into an ‘ideological straightjacket,’ perhaps even engendering a ‘war scare’ to ‘deceive the nation’” (Casey 2008, 4).¹⁰

The United States sent military forces abroad dozens of times in the twentieth century (Torreon 2016). These events ranged from brief incursions into countries to evacuate American citizens from an embassy to regional wars that lasted for years. We limit the scope of our discussion to conflicts that occurred after World War II for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is that the president’s role in committing American forces abroad steadily increased during that time.

To be included in this study, a conflict

1. Must be substantial in terms of either intensity of combat, size of the American force involved, duration of operation, or some combination of these aspects. The larger the conflict, the more important popular support tends to become.

2. Would have lacked popular support or would have enjoyed much less popular support had the administration that initiated it not engaged in propaganda at the beginning of or in the lead-up to the conflict.

Table 1 outlines a list of candidate conflicts. Entries shown in bold satisfy both of our criteria and are discussed at length in this paper. Briefly discussing conflicts that do not meet our criteria can be helpful. For example, two conflicts of relatively high intensity fail our criteria: Korea and Afghanistan. Both were of sufficiently high intensity and importance to bear further discussion, but given that

8. For the text of this covenant, see <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx>.

9. See Kosar 2005a for a summary of the legal issues, especially from the executive branch’s perspective.

10. See Freeland 1972; Gaddis 1972, 351–52; Paterson 1979, 3–4; and Kofsky 1993 for more on the use of scare tactics during this period.

Table 1
Candidate Conflicts for Inclusion in This Study

Conflict	Duration	Hostile U.S. Deaths	Intensity	Propaganda
Korea	1950–53	36,574	High	
Vietnam	1964–75	58,220	High	Yes
Dominican Republic	1965–66	27		Yes
Lebanon	1982–83	256		
Grenada	1983	18		
Panama	1989–90	23		
Gulf War	1991	148	High	Yes
Somalia	1992–94	29		
Afghanistan	2001–present	1,843	High	
Iraq War	2003–2011	3,481	High	Yes

Sources: DeBruyne and Leland 2015 for casualty statistics; Torreón 2016 for events and approximate dates; and Yates 1988 for information on the Dominican Republic intervention.

each was initiated as a response to overt aggression, we do not believe that propaganda contributed significantly to the political narrative to justify the initiation of hostilities. In other words, these wars would have been relatively popular at their starts regardless of the extent to which propaganda was employed. The Johnson administration engaged in a public justification for the intervention into the Dominican Republic in 1965 that differed from the president’s genuine intent (Yates 1988), but that conflict was simply not large or intense enough to bear further consideration at this time.

History of War Making from World War I to the War on Terror

The World Wars

A brief discussion of the two world wars gives a sense of how the U.S. government used propaganda for war in the past. In both world wars, the United States entered after belligerents had been fighting for several years. The presidents had already picked their side long before the United States began fighting. Whereas opposing Hitler’s program of expansion in World War II was more easily justified, the case for backing Britain in World War I was much less clear.

Early in both wars, government organizations responsible for propaganda were created. President Woodrow Wilson formed the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and named George Creel its chairman. Perhaps the CPI’s most memorable effort was to recruit 75,000 local pillars of communities as “Four-Minute Men”—that is,

people who would volunteer, after having been vetted by at least “three prominent citizens,” to generate enthusiasm for the war. According to David Kennedy, the Four-Minute Men were “encouraged to use atrocity stories” about the Germans (1980, 62). Again, such stories were propaganda: one can be sure they did not use stories about the British trying to starve German civilians, even though that happened. Similarly, early in World War II President Franklin D. Roosevelt set up the Office of War Information. One of the office’s duties was to “[f]ormulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government.”¹¹ The Office of War Information commissioned director Frank Capra to make the memorable film series *Why We Fight*. Near the end of the first movie in the series, a graphic is shown in which the whole world, including the United States, is covered in German swastikas or Imperial Japanese flags, broadcasting the clear message that if we didn’t stop them, they would take us over. Of course, Hitler’s main interest was in taking over land east of Germany, and the Japanese, ruthless as they were, wanted land in Asia, not in North America.¹²

In the subsequent conflicts in which we deem propaganda to have played an important role, officials did not employ it as overtly and unapologetically as they did in the world wars. There are a number of political and legal reasons for this change in approach, but it means that the propaganda they did employ was more subtle and carefully hidden.

Vietnam and the Johnson Administration’s Credibility Gap

In addition to being the second-longest-lasting conflict for the United States in the post–World War II period, the Vietnam War was also the most costly in terms of American lives lost and Americans wounded (58,000 killed in action and 150,000 wounded in action [Debruyne and Leland 2015, 3]). It is also unique in the unprecedented level of controversy surrounding American involvement in and conduct of a war. The Johnson and Nixon administrations resorted to a remarkable degree of propaganda and deception in an attempt to overcome these challenges and maintain sufficient popular and political support for the war (Gravel 1972). So great was the Johnson administration’s reliance on propaganda and dissembling that the term *credibility gap* was popularized during this time to refer to the distance between the administration’s and military officials’ statements and the truth (Kenworthy 1966; Wicker 1966; Sheehan 1988).¹³

11. Executive Order 9182, establishing the Office of War Information, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16273>.

12. See the film *Prelude to War* (1942), at minute 50:20 and following, at <https://archive.org/details/PreludeToWar>.

13. Senator J. William Fulbright is generally credited with popularizing the term *credibility gap*, especially with respect to the Johnson administration and Vietnam in 1966. See “Excerpts from Fulbright’s Speech on Vietnam War” 1966.

In this section, we examine the public justification for American entry into the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. grand Cold War strategy continued to be a version of containment strategy. After the French government departed Vietnam in the mid-1950s, the U.S. government had steadily intervened there in an effort to foil attempts by North Vietnam to unify the region under its Communist government. The United States propped up the Diem regime in the 1950s and early 1960s and provided the South Vietnamese regime with American military advisers to train and assist the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam to resist the North-backed Viet Cong insurgency. The South Vietnamese government's capacity to govern continued to erode, however, and, unbeknownst to the public, the Kennedy administration supported a coup that ended the Diem regime in the fall of 1963, but subsequent regimes were just as ineffective (Prados 2003). A classified report from Defense Secretary Robert McNamara written in March 1964, several months after Johnson took office, makes clear that "[t]he situation [in South Vietnam] has unquestionably been growing worse," with the Viet Cong controlling more than 50 percent of the territory in twenty-two of the forty-three provinces in the South.¹⁴

On August 5, 1964, President Johnson addressed the nation on prime-time television to say he had ordered airstrikes against North Vietnam in retaliation for two separate confrontations between U.S. Navy vessels and North Vietnamese patrol boats in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin in the previous two days (Hallin 1986). In his address, Johnson stated, "Aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Vietnam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America" (quoted in Gravel 1972, 3:718). The first such incident occurred on August 2 and involved the U.S.S. *Maddox* and as many as three North Vietnamese torpedo boats, two of which were damaged or sunk. Within hours of the second attack, President Johnson ordered the retaliatory strikes.

Thus, the official public narrative was that American destroyers had suffered unprovoked attacks at the hands of North Vietnamese forces on two separate but recent occasions and that the United States was entirely justified to retaliate with force against targets in North Vietnam. However, the second of the two attacks may never have occurred. (See Hanyok 1998 for a declassified detailed discussion of the incidents.)

On the moonless night of August 4, the U.S.S. *Maddox* and U.S.S. *Turner Joy* were steaming through the Gulf of Tonkin on a DESOTO patrol. DESOTO was a clandestine signals intelligence operation intended to map out North Vietnamese air defenses. The ships' personnel believed they detected North Vietnamese boats on their radar and in the ensuing chaos and confusion believed that they had been fired upon with torpedoes and that in returning fire they had possibly sunk one of the enemy boats. However, there was no physical evidence of this exchange, and Captain John J. Herrick, commander of the task force, reported to headquarters: "Review of action makes many

14. Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense to the President, March 16, 1964, in U.S. Department of State 1992, doc. 84.

reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. . . . Freak weather effects and overeager sonarman may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by *Maddux*. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action” (quoted in Hallin 1986, 17).

A subsequent cable from Herrick, a mere three and a half hours before Johnson’s address, casts further doubt on whether the “attack” actually occurred. Though navy officials were attempting to be forthright about the incident, the accuracy of the reported attack appeared to make little difference to the administration.

We know from the Pentagon Papers that by the summer of 1964, the Johnson administration was looking for ways to bring more pressure to bear against North Vietnam (Gravel 1972, 3:510–17). After McNamara’s report, military leaders began planning for “retaliatory actions” and “graduated overt military pressures.”¹⁵ It may not be accurate to suggest that Johnson deliberately provoked the North Vietnamese to attack in the Gulf of Tonkin under the guise of the DESOTO program, but it was certainly fortuitous that the U.S. ships happened to be in the area when the North Vietnamese decided to respond. The Gulf of Tonkin incident presented the administration with a golden opportunity it thoroughly exploited.

On August 7, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution with only three dissenting votes.¹⁶ Until the resolution was repealed seven years later, it served as the entire legal authorization for the American military action in Vietnam. Some 3 million U.S. servicemen and servicewomen were sent to Vietnam during the intervening years in a buildup that reached its peak in 1969, when more than 500,000 Americans were in the country (Kane 2004).

Several aspects of the situation with Vietnam in 1965 might help identify future situations in which propaganda is likely to be employed. Perhaps most important, the government was literally the sole source of information regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and the incident was such that it would have been nearly impossible for any independent organization to corroborate. Second, American involvement in the civil war had been slowly ramping up for several years, and the administration was strongly considering increasing that involvement.

The Gulf War, 1990–1991

After Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, President George H. W. Bush moved quickly to send troops to Saudi Arabia. In an address to the nation on August 8, Bush made three claims:

15. Mike Gravel’s edition of the Pentagon Papers contains six different documents dated after Secretary McNamara’s report mentioned earlier and before the retaliatory airstrikes that offer proposals for the application of military force against North Vietnam.

16. The number of dissenters is usually reported as two—Democratic senators Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska. Left out because, due to his absence, his no vote was “paired” was Republican House member Eugene Siler of Kentucky. See Beito and Beito 2006.

- That he had sent the troops after “exhausting every alternative.”
- That “[o]ur country now imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic independence.”
- That “[t]he mission of our troops is wholly defensive. Hopefully, they will not be needed long. They will not initiate hostilities, but they will defend themselves, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and other friends in the Persian Gulf. (G. H. W. Bush 1990)

The first of these claims seems implausible, and the other two, aside from the factual claim about oil imports, were false or highly likely to be false. Of course, that does not mean that Bush engaged in propaganda—especially on the second claim, that the United States could be “fac[ing] a major threat to its economic independence,” which President Bush probably believed.

Consider the first claim. We do not know everything Bush did behind the scenes. It is quite conceivable that he tried many approaches to persuade Saddam Hussein to pull his troops out of Kuwait. It does seem implausible, though, that when someone has tried various approaches over a period of only five days (August 3 to August 8), he has exhausted “every alternative.” Diplomacy generally takes time, and even threats take time.

Bush’s statement that the United States imported half of its oil is absolutely correct, but his claim that Hussein’s actions could cause the United States to “face a major threat to its economic independence” is probably exaggerated. It has been estimated that even if Saddam Hussein had been able to take over Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, he would have been unlikely to cut oil output in the Persian Gulf region by more than one-third and that such a cut, which would have amounted to about 6.7 percent of world output, would have caused U.S. gross national product (GNP) to fall by less than 0.5 percent (Henderson 1990b). Moreover, the estimate was biased upward by the assumption, contrary to fact, that other oil producers would not increase their production in response to the higher world oil price. A less than 0.5 percent loss in U.S. GNP would hardly threaten U.S. economic independence.¹⁷ Two Nobel Prize winners in economics, Milton Friedman and James Tobin, when asked by a reporter if they agreed with this estimate, said they did.¹⁸ As Tobin put it, “The ultimate loss to a \$5,500 billion economy is less than 1 percent” (Marshall 1990). Of course, as noted, it is entirely conceivable that President Bush expected a much bigger loss in U.S. GNP because one other economist estimated a larger impact,¹⁹ and so by

17. At the time, U.S. economists and the federal government focused on GNP, not gross domestic product (GDP). Note that the differences between U.S. GNP and U.S. GDP, then and now, were and are small.

18. We note that when Friedman and Tobin were asked to evaluate the claim in Henderson 1990b, a later article (Henderson 1990a) had raised the estimate of the worst-case price per barrel from \$27 to \$30. That still left the estimated loss in GDP at about 0.5 percent, however.

19. Helkie 1991 estimates, using a large-scale econometric model, that a 4 million barrel per day cut in world output at the time would have reduced real GNP by 1.8 percent.

the standard of propaganda—information intended to mislead—he was not engaging in propaganda.

Finally, consider Bush's statement that the mission was wholly defensive and that U.S. troops "will not initiate hostilities." If Bush meant that Saddam Hussein was the initiator of hostilities, which he clearly was, then of course Bush's statement was true. But it was strange that he made it. Everyone understood that Hussein was the initiator, so why say it? Bush seemed to be saying that the U.S. troops would wait until they were attacked before fighting back. Moreover, in testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on September 5, 1990, Secretary of State James Baker stated: "United States military objectives are to deter an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia and to ensure the effective implementation of the United Nations sanctions. Our military forces are also there to protect American lives and to provide an effective and decisive military response should Iraq escalate its aggression to active combat with the multinational force" (U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 1990, 9–10). So it does appear that the Bush administration misstated its intentions.

Consider also the importance the president placed on keeping neighbors such as Saudi Arabia safe. In September 1990, about six weeks after Hussein had invaded Kuwait, the U.S. government claimed that there were 250,000 Iraqi troops stationed in Kuwait and that these troops might invade Saudi Arabia. But a reporter from the *St. Petersburg Times*, a Florida newspaper, reported on January 6, 1991, that there was "no evidence of a massive Iraqi presence in Kuwait in September" (quoted in MacArthur 1992, 173). The *St. Petersburg Times* news story quoted Peter Zimmerman of George Washington University, who had examined satellite photos that the *Times* had obtained. Zimmerman concluded, "The Pentagon kept saying that the bad guys were there, but we don't see anything to indicate an Iraqi force in Kuwait of even 20 percent the size the administration claimed" (quoted in MacArthur 1992, 173). By all appearances, the Iraqi troops were in Kuwait to hold Kuwait, not to invade Saudi Arabia.

Another way the Bush administration used propaganda to persuade Americans to support the war was in its mischaracterization of the Iraqi invaders' actions. On February 15, 1991, in the middle of the war, Vice President Dan Quayle stated in a speech at Fort Hood, Texas, "There are pictures Saddam doesn't want us to see. Pictures of premature babies in Kuwait that were tossed out of incubators and left to die" (quoted in MacArthur 1992, 73). After the war ended, John Martin of ABC News interviewed Dr. Mohammed Matar and Dr. Fayeza Youssef. Matar was the director of Kuwait's primary health-care system. Youssef, his wife, was the chief of obstetrics at Kuwait City's maternity hospital. Youssef stated categorically that Iraqis did not take the babies from the incubators. The babies had died, though, because many of Kuwait's doctors and nurses had stopped working or fled (MacArthur 1992, 73). It is possible, though, that Vice President Quayle was simply ignorant of the facts.

Thus, the Gulf War was a popular undertaking and in many ways is often thought of as a model for American military intervention. However, we include it in this paper because the administration's case for war was dramatically overstated in terms of the

threat Iraq posed to Saudi Arabia and the United States and of the atrocities the Iraqis were supposedly committing.

The Iraq War

Along with Vietnam, few other armed conflicts in U.S. history have generated such acrid controversy as the U.S. government's invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq in 2003. The putative objective of the war was to "defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq" and to "enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq" (Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution 2002). Congress passed the authorization to use military force against Iraq thirteen months after the terrorist attacks in New York and near Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001 (9/11). The authorization cites a long list of grievances, but chief among them were that Saddam Hussein had long been suspected of harboring nuclear ambitions and that he had a record of relationships with terror groups, the combination of which some feared meant that Iraq posed a serious threat to the United States and the rest of the world.

The American and coalition military forces performed well in the initial invasion and subsequent conventional battle. Baghdad fell in the third week of the operation. Although it was unclear at the time, we know now that the conflict in Iraq was just getting under way instead of being over quickly, as seemed to be the case. The George W. Bush administration, in addition to finding itself drawn into a quagmire of nation building amid a determined enemy in a counterinsurgency, was unable to uncover evidence of the massive weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program that it had argued made Hussein's Iraq such a critical threat to world peace. The question then shifted to whether the intelligence community had failed to paint an accurate picture of Hussein's intent and capabilities and whether policy makers, in selling the war, had deceived the American people.

Many books and news articles discuss the extent to which George W. Bush and other administration officials may have lied. Ultimately, the evidence is mixed (see Kaufmann 2004; Pfiffner 2004; U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2004, 2006, 2008; Altheid and Grimes 2005; Jervis 2006; Kumar 2006; Badie 2010). The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence investigated the extent to which the intelligence community supported the administration's public statements in its case for war (see U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2004, 2008). The report the committee issued in 2008 focuses on the public statements the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and the national security adviser made in various venues from the summer of 2002 until the invasion in March 2003. Other authors cited earlier cover much of the same territory.

In its report (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008), the Senate Select Committee considers the following broad categories: nuclear weapons, biological weapons, chemical weapons, WMD (generally), methods of delivery, links to terrorism,

regime intent, and assessments of the postwar situation in Iraq. For nearly every category, the committee concludes that a relatively wide swath of the public statements made by the administration officials were substantiated in some degree by intelligence findings available at the time. However, in several cases, the committee concludes, the policy makers either failed to publicly acknowledge the uncertainty or ambiguity of the intelligence assessments or made statements that were contradicted by available intelligence.

Although the Senate Select Committee failed to find outright lying, it did find clear evidence that policy makers selectively released information and oversold aspects of certain intelligence findings—findings that happened to justify their preferred policy position. Policy makers who engage in this behavior engage in propaganda. Substantial evidence exists that Bush administration officials purposely sought out intelligence that confirmed the administration’s preferred hypothesis regarding Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions and made organizational changes within the executive branch to facilitate acquiring this information. For example, in the summer of 2002 the Office of Special Plans was formed in the Department of Defense to assess raw intelligence on Iraq to counter the CIA’s more risk-conservative position on Iraq (Piffner 2004). Robert Jervis, in his excellent insider’s summary of the intelligence community and subsequent investigations of its failings, notes that the fact the intelligence community did not bother to reexamine its assessments of Hussein’s nuclear program once the United Nations inspectors failed to find WMD is evidence of its politicized relationship with the administration (2006, 37). In short, the policy makers had what they needed—intelligence that justified their desire to topple Hussein—so there was no need to update that intelligence to accommodate the new information.

We now turn to a brief outline of the most glaring instances of propaganda employment in the run-up to the invasion. The administration justified entering into war with Iraq to the American people and to Congress using the following claims.

1. *Iraq has resumed its nuclear weapons program.*

The administration stated that the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein had reconstituted its nuclear program. Evidence for this claim included evidence of new activity in and around old sites known to be related to the nuclear program, the attempted acquisition of “dual-use” technology such as aluminum tubing, and attempted acquisition of actual nuclear material. The administration also stated that Iraq, given its active program, was very close to building a bomb. Finally, the administration claimed that the United States could not tolerate a nuclear (or other WMD) armed Iraq because the regime might give such weapons to terrorist organizations.

In a speech in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002, President Bush stated: “The evidence indicates that Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program. Saddam Hussein has held numerous meetings with Iraqi scientists. . . . Satellite photographs reveal that Iraq is rebuilding facilities at sites that have been part of its nuclear program

in the past. Iraq has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes and other equipment needed for gas centrifuges, which are used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons” (White House 2002a).

In the same speech, Bush stated, “If the Iraqi regime is able to produce, buy or steal an amount of highly enriched uranium a little larger than a single softball, it could have a nuclear weapon in less than a year.” Finally, he issued the following warning: “We could wait and hope that Saddam does not give weapons to terrorists, or develop a nuclear weapon to blackmail the world. But I’m convinced that is a hope against *all evidence*” (White House 2002a, emphasis added).

A few weeks earlier Vice President Richard Cheney had made similar claims during a speech in Casper, Wyoming: “But we now have *irrefutable evidence* that [Saddam Hussein] has once again set up and reconstituted his program, to take uranium, to enrich it to sufficiently high grade, so that it will function as the base material as a nuclear weapon” (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008, 14, emphasis added).

In his memorable address to the United Nations on February 5, 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated the same claims: “Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb. He is so determined that he has made repeated covert attempts to acquire high-specification aluminum tubes from eleven different countries, even after inspections resumed. . . . We have no indication that Saddam Hussein has ever abandoned his nuclear weapons program. On the contrary, we have more than a decade of proof that he remains determined to acquire nuclear weapons” (Powell 2003).

The key pieces of corroborating evidence the policy makers presented to clearly indicate a resumption of Hussein’s nuclear program were the continued attempts to purchase production inputs such as uranium and attempts to acquire dual-use items such as the now notorious aluminum tubes. President Bush drove these points home in his State of the Union Address on January 28, 2003. “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa. Our intelligence sources tell us that he has attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes suitable for nuclear weapons production” (G. W. Bush 2003). As Jervis (2006) notes, Bush’s unstated implication—that U.S. intelligence *agreed* with the British government’s claim about Hussein’s seeking uranium from Africa—was untrue. U.S. intelligence did not agree (Kaufmann 2004, 26; Pfiffner 2004, 30).

According to the administration, despite crippling sanctions and intense scrutiny by the United Nations weapons inspectors, the recalcitrant Iraqi regime continued to make progress in developing a nuclear weapon. Admittedly, the intelligence community’s views at the time were rather mixed. In the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq issued in October 2002, the majority view was that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program (U.S. Central Intelligence Agency 2002; U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008). The State Department and scientists at the Department of Energy, though, expressed dissenting views regarding the attempt to purchase dual-use technology, arguing that the aluminum tubes were poorly suited for development of nuclear weapons. Finally, even the majority view of the National

Intelligence Estimate was that Iraq could produce a weapon in five to seven years. Thus, the Senate Select Committee concluded, the policy makers' statements were "generally substantiated by intelligence community estimates but did not convey the substantial disagreements that existed in the community" (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008, 15). The policy makers consistently and substantially overstated the speed with which Hussein could develop a nuclear weapon and failed to acknowledge dissenting views within the community, specifically the view from nuclear experts in the Department of Energy that the aluminum tubes could not be used in a nuclear program (Kaufmann 2004, 19–24; Pfiffner 2004, 34–36). After the invasion, the Iraq Survey Group found "no evidence" that Iraq had attempted to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program since 1991 (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008, 16).

2. Iraq holds close ties to terrorists and intends to harm the United States.

Among the most compelling aspects of the administration's case for war was that a nuclear Iraq could not be tolerated due to Hussein's close relationships with terrorist organizations. In the shadow of the 9/11 attacks, this view was arguably the key for a great number of Americans to support the invasion.

For example, in his speech on October 7, President Bush stated:

We know that Iraq and al Qaeda have had high-level contacts that go back a decade. Some al Qaeda leaders who fled Afghanistan went to Iraq. These include one very senior al Qaeda leader who received medical treatment in Baghdad this year, and who has been associated with planning for chemical and biological attacks. We've learned that Iraq has trained al Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gasses. . . . Saddam Hussein is harboring terrorists and the instruments of terror, the instruments of mass death and destruction. And he cannot be trusted. The risk is simply too great that he will use them, or provide them to a terror network. (White House 2002a)

In his State of the Union Address in 2003, President Bush claimed: "Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own" (G. W. Bush 2003).

The Senate Select Committee concluded that the public statements the policy makers made were "substantiated by intelligence information" (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008, 71). However, the committee made a point of declaring that the president and secretary of state's implications of an alliance or partnership between Iraq and al-Qaeda were "not substantiated by the intelligence" (71). The intelligence community essentially acknowledged that certain members of al-Qaeda and Iraqi intelligence may have met throughout the years under a variety of circumstances but asserted that the likelihood that they would ever collaborate, given the widely divergent

goals and values of their organizations, was minimal. The administration, in contrast, seemed predisposed to see—and publicly claim—any contact as evidence of a dangerous partnership (Kaufmann 2004, 16–19; Pfiffner 2004, 26–28).

In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 12, 2002, President Bush stated: “In cells and camps, terrorists are plotting further destruction, and building new bases for their war against civilization. And our greatest fear is that terrorists will find a shortcut to their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale. In one place—in one regime—we find all these dangers, in their most lethal and aggressive forms, exactly the kind of aggressive threat the United Nations was born to confront” (White House 2002b).

Of course, the “one regime” to which Bush referred was Saddam Hussein’s in Iraq. Vice President Cheney struck a similar chord in a speech in Tennessee on August 26, 2002. He claimed Hussein was “prepared to share [WMD] with terrorists who intend to inflict catastrophic casualties on the United States” (White House 2002c).

The Senate Select Committee found these and similar statements regarding Iraq’s intent as “contradicted by available intelligence information” (U.S. Congress 2008, 82). The intelligence community found it far more likely that Hussein wished to acquire WMD for purposes of achieving “regional preeminence.” It also noted Hussein’s desire to gain strength relative to neighbors and, ironically, to “deter hostile foreign powers” (U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee 2008, 74).

In summary, the record strongly suggests that certain members of the Bush administration held ambitions of regime change as soon as his term began. The 9/11 attacks seem to have increased the administration’s sense of urgency, perhaps for very sincere reasons. Although administration officials rarely overtly deceived the public in their statements, they, including President Bush, dramatically overstated the certainty with which intelligence suggested that Hussein had revived his nuclear program and wished to use it to threaten the United States. Much like the buildup to the Vietnam War, the buildup to the Iraq War was a continuation of a long history of American involvement in Iraq. David Altheide and Jennifer Grimes (2005) make a case that the Project for a New American Century, a right-leaning think tank comprising numerous key members of the George H. W. Bush administration, had been making the case for regime change in Iraq for years and saw their opportunity with 9/11. And as in the Vietnam case, the vast majority of the information the administration shared with the American people was intelligence information. Americans should be on their guard if similar situations arise in the future.

Discussion

In this paper, we demonstrate that from a military and political perspective, officials have reason to believe that the support of the American people is an important requirement to wage a successful war. At the same time, public choice suggests that the American

people tend to be more susceptible to propaganda on foreign policy than on domestic policy. In the three wars we discuss—the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War—U.S. presidents and members of their administrations frequently offered propaganda to sell war to the American people. We note that in all three cases government officials were the sole source of critical information used to justify military action. In two of the cases, the Vietnam War and the Iraq War, outright combat was initiated after a long history of less-intense U.S. military involvement.

Propaganda is a major problem for the citizenry. Although there are no simple solutions to this problem, one solution that every citizen can choose is to be aware that in wars as well as in domestic situations government officials often propagandize. We noted earlier that most citizens are “rationally ignorant.” That is, they do not know much about government’s actions because it is difficult for them to affect those actions, meaning, in turn, that they do not have an incentive to learn about them. Therefore, one solution for rationally ignorant citizens, given the recent historical record, is to assume that U.S. government justifications for future wars will also contain substantial elements of propaganda. In addition, citizens should be especially critical of information for which the U.S. government is the sole source and be wary of attempts to ramp up the intensity of conflicts in regions where the American military might already have a limited or supporting presence.

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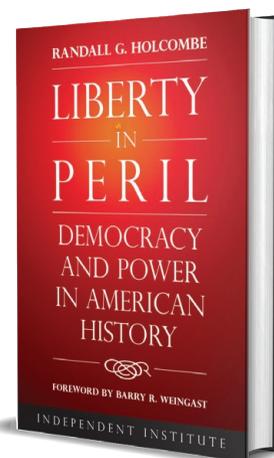
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