

Nov 04, 2016 by [John H. Brown](#)

The Paradoxes of Propaganda ^[1]

When I give my course, "Propaganda and US Foreign Policy" (1) -- a historical overview of the subject -- I like to invite the class for a modest buffet dinner *chez moi*. The last time this get-together took place, it included a screening of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a film -- considered by some a propaganda classic -- that celebrates the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. As the students ate their dessert, I turned on the DVD, and the Nazi director's troubling yet spectacular black-and-white images appeared.

One member of the class remarked that the movie's opening scene -- Hitler's airplane descent toward Nuremberg -- reminded him of President George W. Bush's "mission accomplished" landing on the USS Lincoln aircraft carrier. Then a student, having far greater confidence in my linguistic abilities than I, asked me to interpret the German. I knew this was the beginning of the end. Soon the students lost interest in the film. After 15 minutes, most of them ignored it, preferring to engage in conversation.

Clearly, *Triumph* was no triumph. The students, no film-techniques fans, found it boring. They didn't see any art (and certainly no fun), they just saw propaganda. When I tried to joke that the film could perhaps be used in a deodorant ad (who wants to put up with the smelly armpit of a brown-shirt uttering *Sig Heil*), I didn't get many laughs.

This leads me to a first speculation: that, in the words of the famed World War II propagandist (and Plato scholar), Richard H. S. Crossman, "[t]he way to carry out good propaganda is never to appear to be carrying it out at all." (2) Or, as John Pike, the director of a Washington-based defense think-tank, puts it, "[a]nybody who knows about propaganda knows the first rule of propaganda is that it should not look like propaganda." (3) "When you are persuaded by something, says Stanford psychologist Lee D. Ross, "you don't think it is propaganda." (4)

This is one of the paradoxes of propaganda: the best propaganda doesn't appear to be propaganda. Take, for example, the jazz program of Willis Conover over the Voice of America, which he D-J'd for some forty years during the Cold War and which (in the words of his *New York Times* obituary) "proved more effective than a fleet of B-29s." (5) Willis's millions of listeners in Eastern Europe and the USSR loved his program for what they perceived it to be: new and exciting music, introduced by Willis's unforgettable baritone voice. They didn't see it as an effort to change their minds or behavior for the benefit of the United States. No, they saw Willis's program as anti-propaganda, and a stark contrast to the official media in their own countries.

Which leads me to a second paradox of propaganda, closely connected to the first, and again underscored by Crossman (as noted by his American admirer William E. Daugherty):

One must hate propaganda to do it well.

"...in the last war the British did better propaganda than any other nation in the world.

"We British were ashamed of our propaganda and therefore took more trouble to conceal what we were doing.

"The Russians undoubtedly did the *worst* propaganda [during World War II]. The Americans in many ways had the failings of the Russians in the propaganda field.

"The Germans, because they *loved* propaganda could not do it..." (6)

Consider the words of Archibald MacLeish, the writer and poet who worked for the Office of War Information, the World War II US propaganda agency:

I hated information work. I was asked to do it, and I always detested it. I suppose that in times of peace, so-called, you could probably devote yourself to information But in war you were always on the verge of propaganda and...although some of the propaganda you could give your whole heart to, some you couldn't. I just detested it As soon as I felt that I could honorably get out of it, I did. (7)

When a propagandist is completely comfortable with (or convinced by) his propaganda, he loses his ability to carry out effective propaganda, Crossman suggests. If he, self-assured in his own righteousness, loudly proclaims his propaganda, he is seen as propagandistic and eventually loses credibility, making it impossible for him to change minds or behavior.

There is a third paradox of propaganda: that, for propagandists, often the best propagandist is he who does not know he (or does not consider himself) a propagandist (like Willis Conover). An example of such "unaware propagandists" were the guides who accompanied US government-sponsored exhibits in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The last thing these dedicated young people would have called themselves were propagandists, but they actually were engaging in very effective propaganda when interacting with Russian audiences in their native language. The "sincerity" of the guides' observations about the nature of American society, some would contend, led to the changing of minds among ordinary Soviet citizens about their putative imperialistic archenemy. (8) The guides humanized the United States -- innocently (one could say) but (possibly) brilliantly -- and thereby scored a propaganda coup in the process. (9)

Other proxy propagandists were the intellectuals who benefited from the support of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (secretly funded by the CIA) during the Cold War. These writers and thinkers, not knowing the source of the largesse that enabled them to publish and attend conferences, believed they were engaging in the exchange of ideas (and indeed they were), not acting as purveyors of what the CIA considered very subtle propaganda to move the mental needle of the Western European intelligentsia in directions favorable to the United States. Magazines supported by the CIA like *Preuves* and *Encounter* had a considerable impact on the "thinking class" in Europe. (10)

Totalitarian propaganda is propaganda without paradoxes. Closely linked to terror, it can dull

the minds of domestic audiences (but is far less effective with foreign target groups). Loud, blatant, and repetitive, it can have short-term successes at home by mobilizing the masses through the Big Lie and slogans (*Triumph of the Will* was a hit in 1930s Germany, yet so were musicals [11]), but such propaganda eventually leads to disbelief about its contentions and intentions, creating deep popular hostility toward the propagandists who are seen as the perpetrators of lies.

As the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 (12) suggests, Americans are uncomfortable with US government propaganda, even when it is directed at foreign audiences on behalf of American national interests (whatever that indefinable term may mean). When the secret CIA funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom was revealed in the mid-1960s, for example, there was a national uproar against this activity and it was terminated by Congress.

The morality of propaganda is beyond the scope of these observations. (13) I am simply speculating about the paradoxical side of this phenomenon, or, as the French say, *je constate*. And what I am suggesting, in a nutshell, is that *Casablanca*, as propaganda, is a far better tool than *Triumph of the Will*. It's Sam's "As Time Goes By" that really wins persons over to the "good guys." (14)

But that's for my students to decide.

(1) The syllabus of the course can be found at http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/johnbrown_detail/070110_pdpbr_addendum/. My favorite definition of propaganda is found in Lindley Fraser's admirable little book, *Propaganda* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962): "Propaganda may be defined as the activity, or the art, of inducing others to behave in a way in which they would not behave in its absence" (p. 1). What is missing from this definition, however, is that the propagandist employs propaganda for his (or his organization's) benefit, and not necessarily for the benefit of his target audience. This "selfishness" of propaganda is what distinguishes it from, if I may say, public health campaigns and (among other characteristics) education.

(2) W. E. D., "The Creed of a Modern Propagandist: A statement of the views of a leading British propagandist on how and when to employ psychological warfare," in William E. Daugherty, ed., *A Psychological Warfare Casebook* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. 45.

(3) Pike is cited in Andrew Buncombe, "The US Propaganda Machine," *The Independent*, March 30, 2007.
<http://news.independent.co.uk/world/americas/article354473.ece>

(4) Ross cited in Shankar Vedantam, "Two Views of the Same News Find Opposite Biases," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2006.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/23/AR2006072300512_pf.html

(5) Robert Mcg. Thomas Jr., "Willis Conover, 75, Voice of America Disc Jockey," *The New York Times*, May 19, 1996.
<http://honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/archive/WillisConover.html>

(6) Daugherty, *op. cit*

., p. 38.

(7) See Walter L. Hixon, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), especially pp. 151-213. Perhaps the most important of these exhibits is the one that took place in Sokolniki Park in Moscow in 1959, the setting for the famous "kitchen debate" between Nixon and Khrushchev. The confidential policy guidelines for the exhibit noted that "[n]o propaganda operation of the U.S. government since the war will be under as intense a spotlight of press, public, and congressional attention as will this exhibit" (Hixon, p. 167). "Aware of the critical role the guides would play as direct representatives of American society, Eisenhower summoned the young people for a personal meeting before they departed for Moscow." (Hixon, *op. cit.*, p. 171). Ike in no small part was interested in meeting with the guides because they included four African-Americans. "Eisenhower could not have been oblivious to the fact that should any one of the African-American youths emerge as a critic of the United States while in Moscow, the action would deliver the Russians a propaganda bonanza" (Hixon, p. 171).

(8) Cited in Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York, 1999), pp. 152-153. MacLeish is evidently talking about OWI's domestic information activities, but what he says is applicable to propagandists dealing with information programs directed abroad.

(9) Of course, life -- and a minor part of it, propaganda -- can never be fully explained by generalizations. Jack Harrod, a distinguished former Foreign Service officer with extensive experience in Eastern Europe, had this to say about the exhibits and their guides, in an e-mail he was kind enough to send me in response to an earlier draft of this article:

John -- Exhibits, of course, visited various parts of the former Soviet Union -- and not only the Soviet Union. I had direct experience with exhibits in Poland as well. What struck me was that a large percentage of Russian visitors (and here I use the word deliberately, since Georgians or Lithuanians, for example, reacted radically differently -- see below) discounted, rejected or refused to believe a lot of what they were seeing and hearing due to a combination of ignorance about the wider world, ideology and national pride (the "*u nas luchshe*" [it's better in our homeland] syndrome I think we all remember). My first job with USIA [United States Information Agency, founded in 1953 as a propaganda implementator of the US government that organized many of the exhibits] as a lowly summer intern in 1967 was to translate and analyse the "comment books" (*knigi otzyvov*) from two exhibits -- I've still got a copy somewhere with the statistical breakdown of the comments.

I think we may overemphasize the effect the guides had, although it was still certainly a "positive" one in the long run. Even if only a minority of visitors were influenced by the information they received and the openness I hope they perceived, it had a lasting effect. But I think we tend to remember the good experiences and forget about the large gaggles of middle-aged folks in identical coats who sometimes asked us what language we spoke in the US.....

On the other hand, in Poland the guides had a reverse problem -- most of the Polish visitors weren't ready to believe anything bad about the US at all.

Unemployment? Racial tensions? Vietnam? Who cares? (One Pole, re Vietnam in 1972, said we should kill all the Commies when we have the chance....).

I suppose I could say something similar about all the Lithuanians who came to our exhibit in Minsk in 1975 and loved to hear me explain our official policy about not recognizing the incorporation of the Baltic States....("we know," said one guy, "but we always like to hear it again").

So I'm a little leery of making any broad generalizations about exhibits or exhibit guides, unless we're being very specific as to time, place and audience.

David Monk, another distinguished retired USIA and State Dept. Foreign Service officer equally kind to respond to my piece, said this in an e-mail:

John, I think you overstate our "innocence" regarding our propaganda role as exhibit guides. I believe that our training made it explicit, while also stressing that we should feel free to express our individuality when we judged it appropriate, as that would authenticate us as Americans speaking for a free and diverse U.S., and thus make us more effective propagandists. I doubt that any of us was unaware of the political purpose of the exhibits program.

Some Soviet visitors enjoyed asking several of us the same question, whether factual or provocative, and comparing our answers, sometimes engaging us directly about the differences in our individual replies. In reply, I liked to tell them about my visit not long before to the "Soviet youth" exhibit in Baltimore -- a counterpart to USIA's efforts in the negotiated cultural exchange program. None of the "youth" guides appeared to my then-youthful eyes much younger than about 35; we USIA guides were for the most part in our 20s. Everything the Soviet guides said sounded over-rehearsed. There were no detectable inconsistencies among them, and they dodged controversy. My account of this drew knowing nods.

On the Bicentennial exhibit, I was uncomfortably stationed in the "giant Constitution" room right in front of the ceiling-high Second Amendment, and if asked, would state my personal concern about its application and my agreement with some visitors' criticism that firearms were too readily available in the U.S. I think many visitors were impressed that I was allowed to stand there and say such things. Regards, David Monk "Technology for the American Home," "Bicentennial of the USA, 1975-76."

(10) See the controversial book by Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press 2000). Interestingly, Riefenstahl claimed *Triumph of the Will* was not a propaganda film (and she, therefore, not a knowing propagandist): "If you see this film again today you ascertain that it doesn't contain a single reconstructed scene. Everything in it is true. And it contains no tendentious commentary at all. It is history. A pure historical film... it is film-vérité. It reflects the truth that was then in 1934, history. It is therefore a documentary. Not a propaganda film. Oh! I know very well what propaganda is. That consists of recreating events in order to illustrate a thesis, or, in the face of certain events, to let one thing go in order to accentuate another. I found myself, me, at the heart of an event which was the reality of a certain time and a certain place. My film is composed of what stemmed from that." Cited in Wikipedia at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triumph_of_the_Will#Controversy

(11) Andrew J Horton, "Forget the Fascism - Give us the Schmaltz! Escapist films of the 1930s by Austrian and German directors" (*Central Europe Review*, vol.1, no 4, 19 July 1999). Wikipedia notes, regarding *Triumph of the Will*, that "there were few claims that the film would result in a mass influx of 'converts' to fascism and the Nazis apparently did not make a serious effort to promote the film outside of Germany."

(12) On the Smith-Mundt Act, see the Wikipedia entry.

(13) On this issue, see John Brown, "Two Ways of Looking at Propaganda". (*Public Diplomacy Blog*, USC Center on Public Diplomacy, June 29, 2006)

(14) For a comparison of *Casablanca* with a Soviet propaganda film (which, like *Triumph of the Will*, shows the Leader [in this case Stalin] -- much like George W. Bush coming down from heaven to land on a US Navy ship -- getting off an airplane after its descent from the skies), see the videos at "For Your Weekend Viewing," The *Belmont Club: History and History in the Making* (Saturday, February 17, 2007)

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