

Psychological Warfare

By Sue Ann Martinson

War is no longer simply an instrument to be used by political powers, but a form of rule, a general condition of the social order itself— a permanent social relation and coordinating principle that affects all aspects of society.(1)

—Henry A. Giroux, “Politics as Pathology in the Warfare State”

Christopher Simpson’s book *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945-1960*(2) explores the development of mass communication research in the field of social science and its relationship to U.S. military programs and agencies. The links between the social sciences in academic institutions and U.S. foreign relations policy produced what Simpson calls the “science of coercion,” a massive psychological warfare program of domination-through-communication. As we have moved into the 21st century, the use of these techniques has increased within the United States, threatening and sometimes decimating democratic institutions and values. The direction that the social sciences were to take in the development of mass communication as psychological warfare originated with two social scientists, Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell. Active after WWI and during WWII in the fledgling field of communication research, their influence has lasted well into the 21st century. “Put most bluntly,” Simpson says, “they contended that communication’s essence was its utility as an instrument for imposing one’s will on others, and preferably on masses of others.”(3)

“Lasswell and Lippmann favored relatively tolerant, pluralistic societies in which elite rule protected democracies from their own weaknesses—a modern form of noblesse oblige so to speak. But the potential applications of the communication-as-domination zeitgeist extended far beyond the purposes that they would have personally approved.”(4)

Lippmann and Lasswell established the concept of “communication as domination.”(5) While Lippmann’s analysis took the direction of psychological warfare later known as “white” propaganda, Lasswell’s darker interpretations resulted in the field of “black” propaganda and operations.

In 1947 the National Security Act established two key organizations, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC)(6). President Harry Truman authorized the National Security Agency (NSA) in a memo, which was formalized on November 4, 1952.(7) Since Truman's memo was a classified document, the existence of the NSA was not known to the public at that time and it was referred to as No Such Agency.(8)

During these critical years the NSC created documents that covered two areas: the first was “white” propaganda such as Voice of America, scholarly exchange programs, cultural centers abroad, and similar overt programs put in place “to counteract effects of anti-U.S. propaganda.”

White propaganda was followed by the creation of a “top secret” black area that encompassed black psychological operations, authorizing the CIA to conduct “officially nonexistent” programs.(9) Under the auspices of the CIA, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) was created; its tasks included:

...propaganda; economic warfare; preventative direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground movements, guerrillas and refugee liberations [sic] groups and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world. OPC simultaneously created a specific branch for managing assassinations and kidnapping of “persons whose interests were inimical” to the United States, as well as for murdering double agents suspected of betraying U.S. intelligence agencies.(10)

Intelligence projects created during WWII such as the “analysis of newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasts and postal censorship intercepts”(11) were a basis for the development of psychological warfare in mass communication.



Albert Hadley Cantril, another “founding father” of mass communication, “specialized in international surveys intended to determine how factors such as class, nationalism, and ethnicity affected stereotypes present in a given population,” and how in turn they affected national behavior toward the U.S. If foreign audiences did not view U.S. goals as good for them, they had misunderstood U.S. intentions—not that Western behavior itself could possibly be flawed.(12)

The CIA funded much of Cantril's work during the 1950s. Simpson notes examples of studies and counterinsurgency worldwide and says that "international communication studies are largely an elaboration of methods for imposing one's national will abroad."(13)

Increasingly sophisticated tools of covert psychological warfare are constantly being developed and include special operations (CIA and classified military actions), targeted assassinations, random acts of disruptive violence by mercenaries, and cyber warfare (e.g., computer viruses).(14)

According to Simpson, social science researchers offered very little resistance to the direction of mass communication as psychological warfare because funding came from government and connected foundations, the military, and the CIA. Careers, prestige, and academic status were tied up in this research. Those who criticized the prevailing paradigm of domination were ostracized and discredited.(15)

The NSC policy decisions also helped insulate the social scientists from the reality of the often violent end-results of their work. Simpson notes:

...the phrase "psychological warfare" enjoyed multi-layered, often contradictory meanings. ...For the public, the terms seems to have implied basically overt, hard-hitting propaganda. ...For the national security cognoscenti and for psychological warfare contractors, the same phrase extended to selected use of violence—but defining exactly how much violence was often sidestepped, even in top-secret records.(16)

Linkages and networks included foundations, academics, military personnel, Wall Street, and media. The seeds were planted early in 1942 during the war, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed Wall Street lawyer William "Wild Bill" Donovan director of the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).Donovan was "among the first in the United States to articulate a more or less unified theory of psychological warfare." He called it the "engineering of consent" with the idea that peacetime propaganda campaigns could effectively be adapted to open warfare.(17)

Also in 1942, the White House redirected "white" (official) propaganda functions into a new agency, which became the Office of War Information (OWI); Donovan reorganized the intelligence, covert action, and "black" propaganda functions under deeper secrecy as the OSS,(18) echoing the earlier divisions established by Lippmann and Lasswell in the communication-as-domination paradigm.

U.S. centers of psychological warfare during WWII included the U.S. Army, the Department of Agriculture, Treasury Department, and Library of Congress, and were led by various social scientists, army personnel, and the OSS and OWI. Dozens of prominent social scientists participated in these organizations.(19) Participants

later became the heads of foundations such as Carnegie, Russell Sage, Rockefeller and Ford, which then funded social science research in the 1950s and '60s.(20)

Other OWI participants later became the publishers of Time, Look, and Fortune, and editors of magazines like Holiday, Coronet, Parade, and Saturday Review, and included newspaper editors, partners in large advertising agencies, and noted social scientists.(21)

During the war, these parties had “engaged in tacit alliances” and “shared several important conceptions about mass communication research. They regarded mass communication as a tool for social management and as a weapon in social conflict.”(22) Interlocking committees and commissions that linked mainstream academia with U.S. military and intelligence communities enabled these former OWI leaders to exercise power as part of the ruling “elite” in America.(23) This networking has carried forward into the present.

A recent example from October 2016 of using mass communication as a weapon of psychological warfare is the work of the public relations company Syria Campaign, which was created to garner support for U.S. involvement in Syria. Max Blumenthal describes the Campaign: “Posing as a non-political solidarity organization, the Syria Campaign leverages local partners and media contacts to push the U.S. into toppling another Middle Eastern government.” As part of the campaign, the White Helmets were promoted as international heroes helping civilian victims, particularly in Aleppo. In this extremely slick campaign, they were featured in the mainstream corporate media, including TIME magazine and on the major TV and radio networks, and even on the alternative news program Democracy Now! The idea was to win the “hearts and minds” of the American people who are drawn to “do-gooders” or “shining knights.” But this seemingly impartial group was funded by the U.S. to create sympathy for U.S. military intervention and regime change in Syria by over-vilifying Assad, just as Saddam Hussein was over-vilified in Iraq.(24) The legacy of the science of coercion continues.

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Endnotes

1. Henry A. Giroux, “[Politics as Pathology in the Warfare State](#),” Web. Tikkun, September 23, 2016
2. Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994). A digital edition with a preface by Christopher Simpson and an introduction by Robert McChesney is available on the web: [New York: Open Road Integrated Media](#), 2014. A later edition available in print: Oxford University Press; Reprint

edition (March 14, 1996).

3. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 17-19

4. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 21

5. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 18-19

6. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 37. Also "[Truman signs the National Security Act](#)," Web. History

7. Andrew Glass, "[The National Security Agency is established, Nov. 4, 1952](#)," Web. Politico, November 4, 2010

8. Anne Gearan, "[No Such Agency' spies on the communications of the world](#)," Web. The Washington Post, June 6, 2013

9. In December of 1947 the NSC created two important documents: NSC 4 covered "white" propaganda such as Voice of America, scholarly exchange programs, cultural centers abroad, and similar overt programs put in place "to counteract effects of anti-U.S. propaganda." NSC 4-A, followed six months later by NSC 10/2, was "top secret" and described covert psychological operations. It authorized the CIA to conduct "officially nonexistent" programs. NSC 10/2 created the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) under the auspices of the CIA. "It was translated to mean that a declaration of war had been issued with equal if not more force than if the Congress had so decided." Simpson, Science of Coercion, 37-41

10. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 40

11. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 25

12. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 80

13. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 72

14. Mary Beaudoin, "[On the 12th Anniversary of the U.S. War on Afghanistan](#)," Web. Rise Up Times, October 9, 2016

15. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 97-98

16. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 41

17. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 24

18. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 24-25

19. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 26

20. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 28

21. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 28-29

22. Ibid.

23. Simpson, Science of Coercion, 61

24. Max Blumenthal, "[How the White Helmets became international heroes while pushing US military intervention and regime change in Syria](#)," Web. Alternet, October 2, 2016 and "[Inside the Shadowy PR Firm That's Lobbying for Regime Change in Syria](#)," Alternet, October 3, 2016