

Fighting the propaganda war

by Frank Clarke

Whenever we turn on our television or radio for the news, we like to believe that we are receiving the most accurate and up to date news possible on the Gulf War. But are we really being told the full story, or rather are censorship and propaganda preventing a complete objective analysis of the events.

In his book *Behind Enemy Lines*, Edward Boehm defines propaganda as "... any ideas or beliefs that are intentionally propagated ... from selfish, deceitful, and subversive effort to honest and aboveboard promotion of things that are good ... It uses drawings, graphs, exhibits, parades, songs, and other devices."

The objective of propaganda in wartime, he continues, is to "demoralize enemy moral" and "break down their will to fight." This, he claims, is done in several ways:

- * picture the military successes on the propagandist's side.

- * picture the armed might and economic power that the enemy has to face.

- * picture the moral superiority of the cause against which the enemy is fighting.

The use of propaganda is certainly nothing new to the North American experience. In World War I, the Germans were referred to as "Huns" by the Canadian media. In his study of propaganda during the first world war, Jeff Keshen argues that the Canadian authorities were determined through the use of the media and censorship to safeguard pro-war and pro-imperialist sentiment. Thus the war was presented as "a war fought for principle, not capital-

The situation was different in Vietnam, where journalists and photographers were able to roam free and — much to the chagrin of US military officials — presented the war for what it really was; a bloodbath. Images of Vietnamese children running from napalm attacks or that of a Buddhist monk being devoured by flames shocked Americans. The result was a turning of public opinion against the war, a situation that US officials are determined to prevent from happening in this war.

The US invasion of Panama in 1989 provides further examples of propaganda in action. With the enthusiastic assistance of the media, George Bush presented Manuel Noriega as public enemy number one. Noriega was trumpeted as a despot, a criminal who had to be brought to justice for the threat he posed to America's security. To prove this to the American public, American troops revealed the shocking "discovery" of 23 kilograms of cocaine and "voodoo artifacts" that were found in Noriega's home. It turned out that the cocaine was actually tamale flour, while the "voodoo artifacts" were items normally found in a kitchen.

The present war in the Persian Gulf is as much a propaganda war as it is a military one. Even before it began, the propaganda machines of both sides were in full swing.

A few days before hostilities commenced, the Pentagon claimed that six Iraqi military helicopters had defected into Saudi Arabia. When pressed for evidence the Pentagon couldn't

What would your mother say



if this dead soldier were you?

A propaganda flyer dropped by the Nazis in WWII

Where was the United Nations to defend international law when Panama was invaded? Why is Iraq's aggression subject to punishment while the United States' isn't? The hypocrisy is astounding, but it seems that it has been conveniently forgotten by those who support the war.

It is obvious that the US (I will be criticized for not saying "the coalition forces" but it is obvious that the US is in complete control of the war effort) is trying to prevent a repeat of Vietnam. Strict censorship is imposed upon the media wherein reporters must travel in military pools and are only allowed to send home film footage that the military will permit to be shown.

While some censorship is necessary for security reasons, the Pentagon is so strict in its censorship that photographers are not even permitted to show pictures of dead soldiers. The military, as General Schwarzkopf vehemently declared, refuses to "get into the body count business." This is a deliberate attempt to blind us to the realities of war to ensure public complacency and in fact, resembles the totalitarianism of Saddam Hussein.

Rather than seeing the carnage that constant allied bombing is creating, we are instead treated to a sanitized version of war with aerial video footage that shows a target being destroyed but not the dwellings or people around it as some of these targets are located in populated areas.

Similarly, catch phrases like "surgical bombing" and "sorties" also serve to sanitize and dehumanize the war. Even the reporting of civilian deaths is sanitized by the military phrase "collateral damage."

Censorship and propaganda complement each other well as propaganda serves to fill the information gaps that censorship leaves behind.

It is ironic that while allied propaganda boasts that this is a "just war" for "freedom and democracy" against the aggression of a dictator, totalitarian methods are being practiced in the United States and even more so in Britain.

In the US the comic strip *Doonesbury* has been banned because its critical view of the war was considered inimical to the war effort. This is a complete contradiction of the fundamental ideology of free

speech in a democracy.

The same can be said of Britain when it banned the playing of such peace songs as John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance". Even more alarming in Britain was the rounding up of British citizens of Iraqi descent without formal charges being laid. Now in internment, these people (many of whom have held British passports for years) have been denied access to legal counsel and without any substantial proof against them, are subject to deportation upon the whims of the foreign secretary. Such actions raise serious questions as to whether the West upholds democracy or just the appropriate rhetoric of it.

An ambiguous piece of propaganda is that of George Bush's pledge to create a "new world order." Just what does this mean? Upon whose values and ideals will this "new world order" be created? American? Will the people of Islam have a say in this or will it be forced upon them?

Bush has said that when the war is over, Iraq will be able to participate in this venture.

That's nice of him, but by that time Iraq will have no choice but to comply with whatever the west demands.

The "new world order" is based upon Western arrogance and a smug sense of superiority. The west believes that it is justified in imposing its own culture over that of other nations. The histories of India and South Africa (and more recently, Panama) demonstrate this quite clearly.

In another sense, propaganda is just as destructive as the bombs that are flattening Baghdad. It blinds us to the reality of war, a grim reality that is clearly depicted in such books as Erich Maria's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or in such films as Oliver Stone's *Platoon* or Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*.

Whenever Saddam Hussein calls upon Arabs worldwide to wage a holy war against the West, he serves only to increase hatred and suspicion towards Islamic people in the West. The same can be said of George Bush when after relentless bombing of Iraq, he calls upon the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Hatred begets hatred.

Rather than consider a negotiated settlement to the war by dealing with some of the root issues such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict, these self-serving leaders would rather make political gains from the pro-war jingoism that they have created than risk losing face. The result is that thousands of soldiers and civilians have been and will continue to be massacred over this madness. It will be a sad legacy indeed that the "new world order" will have been created upon such a foundation.

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ist greed — a conflict in which few died, and always heroically, and where little suffering or blood appeared." Banned, therefore, from publication or distribution were letters or films "advocating pacifism or even peace ... war as a gruesome affair ... or any other image which according to the Chief Censor detracted from the drive toward victory."

During the second world war, the use of propaganda had become much more sophisticated. In fact, by late 1944, Allied public relations headquarters in Paris had the staff and facilities to censor, slant or occasionally pass each week more than three million words from nearly 1,000 correspondents, plus 35,000 photographs and 100,000 feet of newsreel film.

provide any. It turned out that the claim was nothing but propaganda, attempting to demoralize the Iraqi military.

Both sides have claimed this to be a war of good versus evil. While George Bush has compared Saddam Hussein to Hitler, the latter has referred to Bush as being akin to Satan.

When the United Nations sanctioned the use of force against Iraq, it claimed that it was necessary to preserve "international law and order" in the face of aggression. This reasoning has been stressed repeatedly, and yet, it rings hollow when one remembers the invasion of Panama. For example, both Panama and Kuwait are sovereign nations and the invasion of both countries was clearly a violation of international law.

COURTESY OF EDWARD BOEHM