

Strategic Communications (Stratcom) and “Soft Power” Weapons: The Influence of False Narrative on the American People

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In this age of pervasive media, the primary method of social control is through the creation of narratives delivered to the public through newspapers, TV, radio, computers, cell phones and any other gadget that can convey information. This reality has given rise to an obsession among the power elite to control as much of this messaging as possible.

So, regarding U.S. relations toward the world, we see the State Department, the White House, Pentagon, NATO and other agencies pushing various narratives to sell the American people and other populations on how they should view U.S. policies, rivals and allies. The current hot phrase for this practice is [“strategic communications”](#) or Stratcom, which blends psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. into one mind-bending smoothie.

I have been following this process since the early 1980s when the Reagan administration sought to override “the Vietnam Syndrome,” a public aversion to foreign military interventions that followed the Vietnam War. To get Americans to “kick” this syndrome, [Reagan’s team developed “themes”](#) about overseas events that would push American “hot buttons.”

Tapping into the Central Intelligence Agency’s experience in psy-ops targeted at foreign audiences, President Ronald Reagan and CIA Director William J. Casey assembled a skilled team inside the White House led by CIA propaganda specialist Walter Raymond Jr.

From his new perch on the National Security Council staff, Raymond oversaw inter-agency task forces to sell interventionist policies in Central America and other trouble spots. The game, as Raymond explained it in numerous memos to his underlings, was to glue black hats on adversaries and white hats on allies, whatever the truth really was.

The fact that many of the U.S.-backed forces – from the Nicaraguan Contras to the Guatemalan military – were little more than corrupt death squads couldn’t be true, at least according to psy-ops doctrine. They had to be presented to the American public as wearing white hats. Thus, the Contras became the [“moral equals of our Founding Fathers”](#) and Guatemala’s murderous leader Efraín Ríos Montt was getting [a “bum rap” on human rights](#), according to the words scripted for President Reagan.

The scheme also required that anyone – say, a journalist, a human rights activist or a congressional investigator – who contradicted this white-hat mandate must be discredited, marginalized or destroyed, a routine of killing any honest messenger.

But it turned out that the most effective part of this propaganda strategy was to glue black hats on adversaries. Since nearly all foreign leaders have serious flaws, it proved much easier to demonize them – and work the American people into war frenzies – than it was to persuade the public that Washington’s favored foreign leaders were actually paragons of virtue.

An Unflattering Hat

Once the black hat was jammed on a foreign leader’s head, you could say whatever you wanted about him and disparage any American who questioned the extreme depiction as a “fill-in-the-blank apologist” or a “stooge” or some other ugly identifier that would either silence the dissenter or place him or her outside the bounds of acceptable debate.

Given the careerist conformity of Washington, nearly everyone fell into line, including news outlets and human rights groups. If you wanted to retain your “respectability” and “influence,” you agreed with the conventional wisdom. So, with every foreign controversy, we got a new “group think” about the new “enemy.” The permissible boundary of each debate was set mostly by the neoconservatives and their “liberal interventionist” sidekicks.

That this conformity has not served American national interests is obvious. Take, for example, the disastrous Iraq War, which has cost the U.S. taxpayers an estimated \$1 trillion, led to the deaths of some 4,500 American soldiers, killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, and unleashed chaos across the strategic Middle East and now into Europe.

Most Americans now agree that the Iraq War “wasn’t worth it.” But it turns out that Official Washington’s catastrophic “group thinks” don’t just die well-deserved deaths. Like a mutating virus, they alter shape as the outside conditions change and survive in a new form.

So, when the public caught on to the Iraq War deceptions, the neocon/liberal-hawk pundits just came up with a new theme to justify their catastrophic Iraq strategy, i.e., “the successful surge,” the dispatch of 30,000 more U.S. troops to the war zone. This theme was as bogus as the WMD lies but the upbeat storyline was embraced as the new “group think” in 2007-2008.

The “successful surge” was a myth, in part, because many of its alleged “accomplishments” actually predated the “surge.” The program to pay off Sunnis to stop shooting at Americans and the killing of “Al Qaeda in Iraq” leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi both occurred in 2006, before the surge even began. And its principal goal of resolving sectarian grievances between Sunni and Shiite was never accomplished.

But Official Washington wrapped the “surge” in the bloody flag of “honoring the troops,” who were credited with eventually reducing the level of Iraqi violence by carrying out the “heroic” surge strategy as ordered by President Bush and devised by the neocons. Anyone who noted the holes in this story was dismissed as disrespecting “the troops.”

The cruel irony was that the neocon pundits, who had promoted the Iraq War and then covered their failure by hailing the “surge,” had little or no regard for “the troops” who mostly came from lower socio-economic classes and were largely abstractions to the well-dressed, well-schooled and well-paid talking heads who populate the think tanks and op-ed pages.

Safely ensconced behind the “successful surge” myth, the Iraq War devotees largely

escaped any accountability for the chaos and bloodshed they helped cause. Thus, the same “smart people” were in place for the Obama presidency and just as ready to buy into new interventionist “group thinks” – gluing black hats on old and new adversaries, such as Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad and, most significantly, Russia’s Vladimir Putin.

Causing Chaos

In 2011, led this time by the liberal interventionists – the likes of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and White House aide Samantha Power – the U.S. military and some NATO allies took aim at Libya, scoffing at Gaddafi’s claim that his country was threatened by Islamic terrorists. It was not until Gaddafi’s military was destroyed by Western airstrikes (and he was tortured and murdered) that it became clear that he wasn’t entirely wrong about the Islamic extremists.

The jihadists seized large swaths of Libyan territory, killed the U.S. ambassador and three other diplomatic personnel in Benghazi, and forced the closing of U.S. and other Western embassies in Tripoli. For good measure, Islamic State terrorists forced captured Coptic Christians to kneel on a Libyan beach before beheading them.

Amid this state of anarchy, Libya has been the source of hundreds of thousands of migrants trying to reach Europe by boat. Thousands have drowned in the Mediterranean. But, again, the leading U.S. interventionists faced no accountability. Clinton is the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, and Power is now U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

Also, in 2011, a similar uprising occurred in Syria against the secular regime headed by President Assad, with nearly identical one-sided reporting about the “white-hatted” opposition and the “black-hatted” government. Though many protesters indeed appear to have been well-meaning opponents of Assad, Sunni terrorists penetrated the opposition from the beginning.

This gray reality was almost completely ignored in the Western press, which almost universally denounced the government when it retaliated against opposition forces for killing police and soldiers. The West depicted the government response as unprovoked attacks on “peaceful protesters.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”](#)]

This one-sided narrative nearly brought the U.S. military to the point of another intervention after Aug. 21, 2013, when a mysterious sarin gas attack killed hundreds in a suburb of Damascus. Official Washington’s neocons and the pro-interventionists in the State Department immediately blamed Assad’s forces for the atrocity and demanded a bombing campaign.

But some U.S. intelligence analysts suspected a “false-flag” provocation by Islamic terrorists seeking to get the U.S. air force to destroy Assad’s army for them. At the last minute, President Obama steered away from that cliff and – with the help of President Putin – got Assad to surrender Syria’s chemical arsenal, while Assad continued to deny a role in the sarin attack. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.”](#)]

Upset over Iran

Putin also assisted Obama on another front with another demonized “enemy,” Iran. In late 2013, the two leaders collaborated in getting Iran to make significant concessions on its nuclear program, clearing the way for negotiations that eventually led to stringent international controls.

These two diplomatic initiatives alarmed the neocons and their right-wing Israeli friends. Since the mid-1990s, the neocons had worked closely with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in [plotting a “regime change” strategy](#) for countries that were viewed as troublesome to Israel, with Iraq, Syria and Iran topping the list.

Putin’s interference with that agenda – by preventing U.S. bombing campaigns against Syria and Iran – was viewed as a threat to this longstanding Israeli/neocon strategy. There was also fear that the Obama-Putin teamwork could lead to renewed pressure on Israel to recognize a Palestinian state. So, [that relationship had to be blown up](#).

The detonation occurred in early 2014 when a neocon-orchestrated coup overthrew elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and replaced him with a fiercely anti-Russian regime which included neo-Nazi and other ultra-nationalist elements as well as free-market extremists.

Ukraine had been on the neocon radar at least since September 2013, just after Putin undercut plans for bombing Syria. Neocon Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, wrote a Washington Post [op-ed](#) deeming Ukraine “the biggest prize” and a key steppingstone toward another regime change in Moscow, removing the troublesome Putin.

Gershman’s op-ed was followed by prominent neocons, such as Sen. John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, urging on violent protests that involved firebombing the police. But the State Department and the mainstream media glued white hats on the Maidan protesters and black hats on the police and the government.

Then, on Feb. 20, 2014, a mysterious sniper attack killed both police and demonstrators, leading to more clashes and the deaths of scores of people. The U.S. government and press corps blamed Yanukovych and – despite his signing an agreement for early elections on Feb. 21 – the Maidan “self-defense forces,” spearheaded by neo-Nazi goons, overran government buildings on Feb. 22 and installed a coup regime, quickly recognized by the State Department as “legitimate.”

Though the fault for the Feb. 20 sniper attack was never resolved – the new Ukrainian regime showed little interest in getting to the bottom of it – other independent investigations pointed toward a provocation by right-wing gunmen who targeted police and protesters with the goal of deepening the crisis and blaming Yanukovych, which is exactly what happened.

These field reports, including [one from the BBC](#), indicated that the snipers likely were associated with the Maidan uprising, not the Yanukovych government. [Another worthwhile documentary on this mystery is [“Maidan Massacre.”](#)]

One-Sided Reporting

Yet, during the Ukrainian coup, The New York Times and most other mainstream media outlets played a role similar to what they had done prior to the Iraq War when they hyped

false and misleading stories about WMD. By 2014, the U.S. press corps no longer seemed to even pause before undertaking its expected propaganda role.

So, after Yanukovych's ouster, when ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine rose up against the new anti-Russian order in Kiev, the only acceptable frame for the U.S. media was to blame the resistance on Putin. It must be "Russian aggression" or a "Russian invasion."

When a referendum in Crimea overwhelmingly favored secession from Ukraine and rejoining Russia, the U.S. media denounced the 96 percent vote as a "sham" imposed by Russian guns. Similarly, resistance in eastern Ukraine could not have reflected popular sentiment unless it came from mass delusions induced by "Russian propaganda."

Meanwhile, evidence of a U.S.-backed coup, such as [the intercepted phone call](#) of a pre-coup discussion between Assistant Secretary Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt on how "to midwife this thing" and who to install in the new government ("Yats is the guy"), disappeared into the memory hole, not helpful for the desired narrative. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Still Pretends No Coup in Ukraine.](#)"]

When Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, the blame machine immediately roared into gear again, accusing Putin and the ethnic Russian rebels. But some U.S. intelligence analysts reportedly saw the evidence going in a different direction, implicating a rogue element of the Ukrainian regime.

Again, the mainstream media showed little skepticism toward the official story blaming Putin, even though the U.S. government and other Western nations refused to make public any hard evidence supporting the Putin-did-it case, even now more than a year later. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[MH-17 Mystery: A New Tonkin Gulf Case.](#)"]

The pattern that we have seen over and over is that once a propaganda point is scored against one of the neocon/liberal-hawk "enemies," the failure to actually prove the allegation is not seen as suspicious, at least not inside the mainstream media, which usually just repeats the old narrative again and again, whether its casting blame on Putin for MH-17, or on Yanukovych for the sniper attack, or on Assad for the sarin gas attack.

Instead of skepticism, it's always the same sort of "group think," with nothing learned from the disaster of the Iraq War because there was virtually no accountability for those responsible.

Obama's Repression

Yet, while the U.S. press corps deserves a great deal of blame for this failure to investigate important controversies independently, President Obama and his administration have been the driving force in this manipulation of public opinion over the past six-plus years. Instead of the transparent government that Obama promised, he has run one of the most opaque, if not the most secretive, administrations in American history.

Besides refusing to release the U.S. government's evidence on pivotal events in these international crises, Obama has prosecuted more national security whistleblowers than all past presidents combined.

That repression, including a 35-year prison term for Pvt. Bradley/Chelsea Manning and the forced exile of indicted National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, has

intimidated current intelligence analysts who know about the manipulation of public opinion but don't dare tell the truth to reporters for fear of imprisonment.

Most of the "leaked" information that you still see in the mainstream media is what's approved by Obama or his top aides to serve their interests. In other words, the "leaks" are part of the propaganda, made to seem more trustworthy because they're coming from an unidentified "source" rather than a named government spokesman.

At this late stage in Obama's presidency, his administration seems drunk on the power of "perception management" with the new hot phrase, "strategic communications" which boils psychological operations, propaganda and P.R. into one intoxicating brew.

From NATO's Gen. Philip Breedlove to the State Department's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Richard Stengel, the manipulation of information is viewed as a potent "soft power" weapon. It's a way to isolate and damage an "enemy," especially Russia and Putin.

This demonization of Putin makes cooperation between him and Obama difficult, such as Russia's recent military buildup in Syria as part of a commitment to prevent a victory by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Though one might think that Russian help in fighting terrorism would be welcomed, Nuland's State Department office responded with [a bizarre and futile attempt to build an aerial blockade](#) of Russian aid flying to Syria across eastern Europe.

Nuland and other neocons apparently would prefer having the black flag of Sunni terrorism flying over Damascus than to work with Putin to block such a catastrophe. The hysteria over Russia's assistance in Syria is a textbook example of how people can begin believing their own propaganda and letting it dictate misguided actions.

On Thursday, Obama's White House [sank to a new low](#) by having Press Secretary Josh Earnest depict Putin as "desperate" to land a meeting with Obama. Earnest then demeaned Putin's appearance during an earlier sit-down session with Netanyahu in Moscow. "President Putin was striking a now-familiar pose of less-than-perfect posture and unbuttoned jacket and, you know, knees spread far apart to convey a particular image," Earnest said.

But the meeting photos actually showed both men with their suit coats open and both sitting with their legs apart at least for part of the time. Responding to Earnest's insults, the Russians denied that Putin was "desperate" for a meeting with Obama and added that the Obama administration had proposed the meeting to coincide with Putin's appearance at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Monday.

"We do not refuse contacts that are proposed," said Yuri Ushakov, a top foreign policy adviser to Putin. "We support maintaining constant dialogue at the highest level." The Kremlin also included no insults about Obama's appearance in the statement.

However, inside Official Washington, there appears to be little thought that the endless spinning, lying and ridiculing might dangerously corrode American democracy and erode any remaining trust the world's public has in the word of the U.S. government. Instead, there seems to be great confidence that skilled propagandists can discredit anyone who dares note that the naked empire has wrapped itself in the sheerest of see-through deceptions.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen

Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes America's Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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