

U.S. Government Has Long Used Propaganda Against the American People

Posted on [January 18, 2016](#) by [WashingtonsBlog](#)

The Government's Been Deploying Propaganda On U.S. Soil for Many Years

The United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities found in 1975 that the CIA submitted stories to the American press

Wikipedia [adds details](#):

After 1953, the network was overseen by Allen W. Dulles, director of the CIA. By this time, Operation Mockingbird had a major influence over 25 newspapers and wire agencies. The usual methodology was placing reports developed from intelligence provided by the CIA to witting or unwitting reporters. Those reports would then be repeated or cited by the preceding reporters which in turn would then be cited throughout the media wire services.

The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) was funded by siphoning off funds intended for the Marshall Plan [i.e. the rebuilding of Europe by the U.S. after WWII]. Some of this money was used to bribe journalists and publishers.

In 2008, the New York Times [wrote](#):

During the early years of the cold war, [prominent writers and artists, from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. to Jackson Pollock] were supported, sometimes lavishly, always secretly, by the C.I.A. as part of its propaganda war against the Soviet Union. It was perhaps the most successful use of “soft power” in American history.

A CIA operative [told](#) Washington Post owner Philip Graham ... in a conversation about the willingness of journalists to peddle CIA propaganda and cover stories:

You could get a journalist cheaper than a good call girl, for a couple hundred dollars a month.

Famed Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein [wrote](#) in 1977:

More than 400 American journalists ... in the past twenty-five years have secretly carried out assignments for the Central Intelligence Agency, according to documents on file at CIA headquarters.

In many instances, CIA documents show, journalists were engaged to perform tasks for the CIA with the consent of the managements of America's leading news organizations.

Among the executives who lent their cooperation to the Agency were [the heads of CBS, Time, the New York Times, the Louisville Courier-Journal, and Copley News Service. Other organizations which cooperated with the CIA include [ABC, NBC, AP, UPI, Reuters], Hearst Newspapers, Scripps-Howard, Newsweek magazine,

the Mutual Broadcasting System, the Miami Herald and the old Saturday Evening Post and New York Herald-Tribune.

There is ample evidence that America's leading publishers and news executives allowed themselves and their organizations to become handmaidens to the intelligence services. "Let's not pick on some poor reporters, for God's sake," William Colby exclaimed at one point to the Church committee's investigators. "Let's go to the managements.

The CIA even ran a formal training program in the 1950s to teach its agents to be journalists. Intelligence officers were "taught to make noises like reporters," explained a high CIA official, and were then placed in major news organizations with help from management.

Once a year during the 1950s and early 1960s, CBS correspondents joined the CIA hierarchy for private dinners and briefings.

Allen Dulles often interceded with his good friend, the late Henry Luce, founder of *Time* and *Life* magazines, who readily allowed certain members of his staff to work for the Agency and agreed to provide jobs and credentials for other CIA operatives who lacked journalistic experience.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, *Time* magazine's foreign correspondents attended CIA "briefing" dinners similar to those the CIA held for CBS.

When *Newsweek* was purchased by the Washington Post Company, publisher Philip L. Graham was informed by Agency officials that the CIA occasionally used the magazine for cover purposes, according to CIA sources. "It was widely known that Phil Graham was somebody you could get help from," said a former deputy director of the Agency. "Frank Wisner dealt with him." Wisner, deputy director of the CIA from 1950 until shortly before his suicide in 1965, was the Agency's premier orchestrator of "black" operations, including many in which journalists were involved. Wisner liked to boast of his "mighty Wurlitzer," a wondrous propaganda instrument he built, and played, with help from the press.)

In November 1973, after [the CIA claimed to have ended the program], Colby told reporters and editors from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Star* that the Agency had "some three dozen" American newsmen "on the CIA payroll," including five who worked for "general-circulation news organizations." Yet even while the Senate Intelligence Committee was holding its hearings in 1976, according to high-level CIA sources, the CIA continued to maintain ties with seventy-five to ninety journalists of every description—executives, reporters, stringers, photographers, columnists, bureau clerks and members of broadcast technical crews. More than half of these had been moved off CIA contracts and payrolls but they were still bound by other secret agreements

with the Agency. According to an unpublished report by the House Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Representative Otis Pike, at least fifteen news organizations were still providing cover for CIA operatives as of 1976.

Those officials most knowledgeable about the subject say that a figure of 400 American journalists is on the low side

“There were a lot of representations that if this stuff got out some of the biggest names in journalism would get smeared”

Former Newsweek and Associated Press reporter Robert Parry notes that [Ronald Reagan and the CIA unleashed a propaganda campaign](#) in the 1980’s to sell the American public on supporting the Contra rebels, utilizing private players such as Rupert Murdoch to spread disinformation:



President Ronald Reagan meeting with media magnate Rupert Murdoch in the Oval Office on Jan. 18, 1983, with Charles Wick, director of the U.S. Information Agency, in the background. (Photo credit: Reagan presidential library)

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration was determined to “kick the Vietnam Syndrome,” the revulsion that many Americans felt for warfare after all those years in the blood-soaked jungles of Vietnam and all the lies that clumsily justified the war.

So, the challenge for the U.S. government became: how to present the actions of “enemies” always in the darkest light while bathing the behavior of the U.S. “side” in a rosy glow. You also had to stage this propaganda theater in an ostensibly “free country” with a supposedly “independent press.”

From documents declassified or leaked over the past several decades, including [an unpublished draft chapter](#) of the congressional Iran-Contra investigation, we now know a great deal about how this remarkable project was undertaken and who the key players were.

Perhaps not surprisingly much of the initiative came from the Central Intelligence Agency, which housed the expertise for manipulating target populations through propaganda and disinformation. The only difference this time would be that the American people would be the target population.

For this project, Ronald Reagan's CIA Director William J. Casey sent his top propaganda specialist Walter Raymond Jr. to the National Security Council staff to manage the inter-agency task forces that would brainstorm and coordinate this "public diplomacy" strategy.

Many of the old intelligence operatives, including Casey and Raymond, are now dead, but other influential Washington figures who were deeply involved by these strategies remain, such as neocon stalwart Robert Kagan, whose first major job in Washington was as chief of Reagan's State Department Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America.

Declassified documents now reveal how extensive Reagan's propaganda project became with inter-agency task forces assigned to develop "themes" that would push American "hot buttons." Scores of documents came out during the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987 and hundreds more are now available at the Reagan presidential library in Simi Valley, California.

What the documents reveal is that at the start of the Reagan administration, CIA Director Casey faced a daunting challenge in trying to rally public opinion behind aggressive U.S. interventions, especially in Central America. Bitter memories of the Vietnam War were still fresh and many Americans were horrified at the brutality of right-wing regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador, where Salvadoran soldiers raped and murdered four American churchwomen in December 1980.

The new leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua also was not viewed with much alarm. After all, Nicaragua was an impoverished country of only about three million people who had just cast off the brutal dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza.

So, Reagan's initial strategy of bolstering the Salvadoran and Guatemalan armies required defusing the negative publicity about them and somehow rallying the American people into supporting a covert CIA intervention inside Nicaragua via a counterrevolutionary force known as the Contras led by Somoza's ex-National Guard officers.

Reagan's task was made tougher by the fact that the Cold War's anti-communist arguments had so recently been discredited in Vietnam. As deputy assistant secretary to the Air Force, J. Michael Kelly, put it, "the most critical special operations mission we have ... is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us."

According to the draft report, the CIA officer who was recruited for the NSC job had served as Director of the Covert Action Staff at the CIA from 1978 to 1982 and was a "specialist in propaganda and disinformation."

federal law forbade taxpayers' money from being spent on domestic propaganda or grassroots lobbying to pressure congressional representatives. Of course, every president and his team had vast resources to make their case in public, but by tradition and law, they were restricted to speeches, testimony and one-on-one persuasion of lawmakers.

But things were about to change. In a Jan. 13, 1983, memo, NSC Advisor Clark foresaw the need for non-governmental money to advance this cause. “We will develop a scenario for obtaining private funding,” Clark wrote. (Just five days later, President Reagan personally welcomed media magnate Rupert Murdoch into the Oval Office for a private meeting, according to records on file at the Reagan library.)

As administration officials reached out to wealthy supporters, lines against domestic propaganda soon were crossed as the operation took aim not only at foreign audiences but at U.S. public opinion, the press and congressional Democrats who opposed funding the Nicaraguan Contras.

At the time, the Contras were earning a gruesome reputation as human rights violators and terrorists. To change this negative perception of the Contras as well as of the U.S.-backed regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala, the Reagan administration created a full-blown, clandestine propaganda network.

In January 1983, President Reagan took the first formal step to create this unprecedented peacetime propaganda bureaucracy by signing National Security Decision Directive 77, entitled “Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security.” Reagan deemed it “necessary to strengthen the organization, planning and coordination of the various aspects of public diplomacy of the United States Government.”

Reagan ordered the creation of a special planning group within the National Security Council to direct these “public diplomacy” campaigns. The planning group would be headed by the CIA’s Walter Raymond Jr. and one of its principal arms would be a new Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America, housed at the State Department but under the control of the NSC.

In the memo to then-U.S. Information Agency director Charles Wick, Raymond also noted that “via Murdock [sic] may be able to draw down added funds” to support pro-Reagan initiatives. Raymond’s reference to Rupert Murdoch possibly drawing down “added funds” suggests that the right-wing media mogul had been recruited to be part of the covert propaganda operation. During this period, Wick arranged at least two face-to-face meetings between Murdoch and Reagan.

Alarmed at a CIA director participating so brazenly in domestic propaganda, Raymond wrote that “I philosophized a bit with Bill Casey (in an effort to get him out of the loop)” but with little success.

Another part of the office’s job was to plant “white propaganda” in the news media through op-eds secretly financed by the government. In one memo, Jonathan Miller, a senior public diplomacy official, informed White House aide Patrick Buchanan about success placing an anti-Sandinista piece in The Wall Street Journal’s friendly pages. “Officially, this office had no role in its preparation,” Miller wrote.

Other times, the administration put out “black propaganda,” outright falsehoods. In 1983, one such theme was designed to anger American Jews by portraying the Sandinistas as anti-Semitic because much of Nicaragua’s small Jewish community fled after the revolution in 1979.

However, the U.S. embassy in Managua investigated the charges and “found no verifiable ground on which to accuse the GRN [the Sandinista government] of anti-Semitism,” according to a July 28, 1983, cable. But the administration kept the cable secret and pushed the “hot button” anyway.

As one NSC official told me, the campaign was modeled after CIA covert operations abroad where a political goal is more important than the truth. “They were trying to manipulate [U.S.] public opinion ... using the tools of Walt Raymond’s trade craft which he learned from his career in the CIA covert operation shop,” the official admitted.

Another administration official gave a similar description to The Miami Herald’s Alfonso Chardy. “If you look at it as a whole, the Office of Public Diplomacy was carrying out a huge psychological operation, the kind the military conduct to influence the population in denied or enemy territory,” that official explained. [For more details, see Parry’s [Lost History](#).]

Parry notes that many of the same people that led Reagan’s domestic propaganda effort in the 1980’s are in power today:

While the older generation that pioneered these domestic propaganda techniques has passed from the scene, many of their protégés are still around along with some of the same organizations. The National Endowment for Democracy, which was formed in 1983 at [the urging](#) of CIA Director Casey and under the supervision of Walter Raymond’s NSC operation, is still run by the same neocon, Carl Gershman, and has an even bigger budget, now exceeding \$100 million a year.

Gershman and his NED played important behind-the-scenes roles in instigating the Ukraine crisis by financing activists, journalists and other operatives who supported the coup against elected President Yanukovich. The NED-backed Freedom House also beat the propaganda drums. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[A Shadow Foreign Policy](#).”]

Two other Reagan-era veterans, Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan, have both provided important intellectual support for continuing U.S. interventionism around the world. Earlier this year, Kagan’s article for The New Republic, entitled “[Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire](#),” touched such a raw nerve with President Obama that he hosted Kagan at a White House lunch and crafted the presidential commencement speech at West Point to deflect some of Kagan’s criticism of Obama’s hesitancy to use military force.

Rupert Murdoch’s media empire is bigger than ever

An [expert on propaganda](#) testified under oath during trial that the [CIA now employs THOUSANDS of reporters and OWNS its own media organizations](#). Whether or not his estimate is accurate, it is clear that many prominent reporters [still report to the CIA](#).

John Pilger is a highly-regarded journalist (the BBC’s world affairs editor John Simpson remarked, “A country that does not have a John Pilger in its journalism is a very feeble place indeed”). Pilger [said](#) in 2007:

We now know that the BBC and other British media were used by the British secret intelligence service MI-6. In what they called Operation Mass Appeal, MI-6 agents planted stories about Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, such as weapons hidden in his palaces and in secret underground bunkers. All of these stories were fake.

One of my favorite stories about the Cold War concerns a group of Russian journalists who were touring the United States. On the final day of their visit, they were asked by the host for their impressions. “I have to tell you,” said the spokesman, “that we were astonished to find after reading all the newspapers and watching TV day after day that all the opinions on all the vital issues are the same. To get that result in our country we send journalists to the gulag. We even tear out their fingernails. Here you don’t have to do any of that. What is the secret?”

Nick Davies [wrote](#) in the Independent in 2008:

For the first time in human history, there is a concerted strategy to manipulate global perception. And the mass media are operating as its compliant assistants, failing both to resist it and to expose it.

The sheer ease with which this machinery has been able to do its work reflects a creeping structural weakness which now afflicts the production of our news. I’ve spent the last two years researching a book about falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media.

The “Zarqawi letter” which made it on to the front page of The New York Times in February 2004 was one of a sequence of highly suspect documents which were said to have been written either by or to Zarqawi and which were fed into news media.

This material is being generated, in part, by intelligence agencies who continue to work without effective oversight; and also by a new and essentially benign structure of “strategic communications” which was originally designed by doves in the Pentagon and Nato who wanted to use subtle and non-violent tactics to deal with Islamist terrorism but whose efforts are poorly regulated and badly supervised with the result that some of its practitioners are breaking loose and engaging in the black arts of propaganda.

The Pentagon has now designated “information operations” as its fifth “core competency” alongside land, sea, air and special forces. Since October 2006, every brigade, division and corps in the US military has had its own “psyop” element producing output for local media. This military activity is linked to the State Department’s campaign of “public diplomacy” which includes funding radio stations and news websites. In Britain, the Directorate of Targeting and Information Operations in the Ministry of Defence works with specialists from 15 UK psyops, based at the Defence Intelligence and Security School at Chicksands in Bedfordshire.

In the case of British intelligence, you can see this combination of reckless propaganda and failure of oversight at work in the case of Operation Mass Appeal. This was exposed by the former UN arms inspector Scott Ritter, who describes in his book, *Iraq Confidential*, how, in London in June 1998, he was introduced to two “black propaganda specialists” from MI6 who wanted him to give them material which they could spread through “editors and writers who work with us from time to time”.

The government is [still paying off](#) reporters to spread disinformation. And the corporate media are acting like [virtual “escort services”](#) for the moneyed elites, selling access – for a price – to powerful government officials, instead of actually investigating and reporting on what those officials are doing.

One of the ways that the U.S. government spreads propaganda is by making sure that it gets its version out *first*. For example, the head of the U.S. Information Agency’s television and film division – Alvin A. Snyder – [wrote](#) in his book *Warriors of Disinformation: How Lies, Videotape, and the USIA Won the Cold War*:

All governments, including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. **The key is to lie first.**

Another casualty, always war's first, was the truth. The story of [the accidental Russian shootdown of a Korean airliner] will be remembered pretty much the way we told it in 1983, not the way it really happened.

In 2013, the American Congress [repealed the formal ban](#) against the deployment of propaganda against U.S. citizens living on American soil. So there's even *less* to constrain propaganda than before.

Another key to American propaganda is the *constant repetition* of propaganda. As Business Insider [reported](#) in 2013:

Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, a highly-respected officer who released a [critical report regarding the distortion of truth](#) by senior military officials in Iraq and Afghanistan

From Lt. Col. Davis:

In context, Colonel Leap is implying we ought to change the law to enable Public Affairs officers to influence American public opinion when they deem it necessary to “protect a key friendly center of gravity, to wit US national will.”

The Smith-Mundt Modernization Act of 2012 appears to serve this purpose by allowing for the American public to be a target audience of U.S. government-funded information campaigns.

Davis also quotes Brigadier General Ralph O. Baker — the Pentagon officer responsible for the Department of Defense's Joint Force Development — who defines [Information Operations](#) (IO) as [activities undertaken](#) to “shape the essential narrative of a conflict or situation and thus affect the attitudes and behaviors of the targeted audience.”

Brig. Gen. Baker goes on to equate descriptions of combat operations with the standard marketing strategy of repeating something until it is accepted:

For years, commercial advertisers have based their advertisement strategies on the premise that there is a **positive correlation between the number of times a consumer is exposed to product advertisement and that consumer's inclination to sample the new product. The very same principle applies to how we influence our target audiences when we conduct COIN.**

And those “**thousands of hours per week of government-funded radio and TV programs**” appear to serve Baker's strategy, which states: “**Repetition is a key tenet of IO execution, and the failure to constantly drive home a consistent message dilutes the impact on the target audiences.**”

Of course, the Web has become a huge media platform, and the Pentagon and other government agencies [are influencing news on the web](#) as well. Documents released by Snowden show that spies [manipulate polls, website popularity and pageview counts, censor videos they don't like and amplify messages they do.](#)

The CIA and other government agencies also put enormous energy into pushing propaganda through [movies, television](#) and [video games](#).

In 2012, the Pentagon launched a massive smear campaign against USA Today reporters [investigating unlawful domestic propaganda by the Pentagon](#).

End Notes:

(1) One of the most common uses of propaganda is to sell unnecessary and counter-productive wars. Given that the American media is [always pro-war](#), mainstream publishers, producers, editors, and reporters are [willing participants](#).

(2) A [4-part BBC documentary](#) called the “*Century of the Self*” shows that an American – Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays – created the modern field of manipulation of public perceptions, and the U.S. government has extensively used his techniques.

(3) Sometimes, the government plants disinformation in American media in order to mislead foreigners. For example, an official government summary of America’s overthrow of the democratically-elected president of Iran in the 1950’s [states](#), “In cooperation with the Department of State, CIA had several articles planted in major **American** newspapers and magazines which, when reproduced in Iran, had the desired psychological effect in Iran and contributed to the war of nerves against Mossadeq” (page x).

This entry was posted in [Politics / World News](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).