



THE ART OF LYING

The word propaganda is nearly synonymous with lying. Here, we examine 5 images steeped in subversive storytelling.

by **Steven Heller**

THE NOUN “PROPAGANDA” MAKES people think about the verb “to lie” because in the 20th century, “the big lie” was defined by the Nazi’s Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. In his prison memoir, “Mein Kampf” (“My Struggle”), Adolf Hitler wrote: “[I]n the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods.” He added, “It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.”

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels made that theory Nazi policy with these words: “Make the lie

big, make it simple, keep saying it and, eventually, they will believe it.”

The origin of propaganda was a little less onerous. The Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for Propagating the Faith) was a religious order established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 (it was later renamed the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) to propagate Catholicism by missionaries the world over.

Centuries later, Edward Bernays, the father of American public relations (and nephew of Sigmund Freud), wrote: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.”

Bernays was a skilled master of manipulation. Advertising and propaganda went hand in glove—the practice of propagating the public’s

faith in products or ideas by engaging them in a story that is either real or imagined. In his 1928 book “Propaganda,” he asserted: “If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without them knowing it.”

Bernays’ ideas about propaganda not only inadvertently influenced the Nazi ministry, but his storytelling fundamentals are also present in what is called the “branding narrative.” Whether commercially or politically motivated, propaganda is not easily removed in the public mind from the idea of “the big lie,” and yet the public is propagandized daily in ways that are so nuanced that lies become truth. Tell a story convincingly enough and the malleable masses will be a faithful herd.

In the following examples, the propaganda narrative intentionally enters the conscious and subconscious with predictable, albeit surprising, consequences.

Homeland Security and Anti-Propaganda

After the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Americans were vulnerable and susceptible to official decrees that promised to ensure their safety. The Patriot Act was signed into law that year, which gave the government extra powers to respond to terrorism. In 2002, Congress established the Department of Homeland Security. In 2003, the same department announced that Americans should prepare for a biological, chemical or radiological terrorist attack and assemble disaster supply kits, including duct tape and plastic sheets to seal doors and windows against nuclear, chemical and biological agents.

Not surprisingly, it caused a surge in demand for duct tape. Given the evidence of anthrax and other bacterial materials sent through the U.S. Mail, the threat appeared real. However, it also fostered a healthy distrust of government's exaggerated proscriptions and politically dubious decrees.

This anonymous guerilla poster turned the government narrative on its end by using the most recognizable images of the moment—the duct tape over President Bush's mouth, eyes and ears, painting a portrait of the president and Homeland Security authorities as being clueless in the face of threats and compensating by issuing reports designed to scare the public.



Psy-Ops: Little Black Lies

Paper bombs (leaflets and flyers) are the least sophisticated propaganda medium in the arsenal, but they can be incisive. Leafletting is the art of artlessness, designed to convey a straightforward message without artifice or conceit. There are the cautionary leaflets that offer an enemy combatant safe haven and are targeted at the survival instinct. Then there are the ones designed specifically to undermine a battle-weary soldier's morale using lies and subterfuge to enter the conscious and subconscious.

This is especially virulent when aimed at exhausted troops who are more susceptible to doubt, despair and free thought. Given the indescribable stress of battlefield encounters, after the initial adrenalin rush wears off, even the toughest veteran can be mentally vulnerable to any lies the psy-ops experts can dish out.

During the Cold War, when U.S. troops were on constant alert, the simulated enemy leaflets that the Psychological Warfare Division produced were dropped during maneuvers in an effort to teach troops that the morale-killing stories in the enemy's leaflets were fiction. This one was dropped by 505th Airborne Division in 1955.



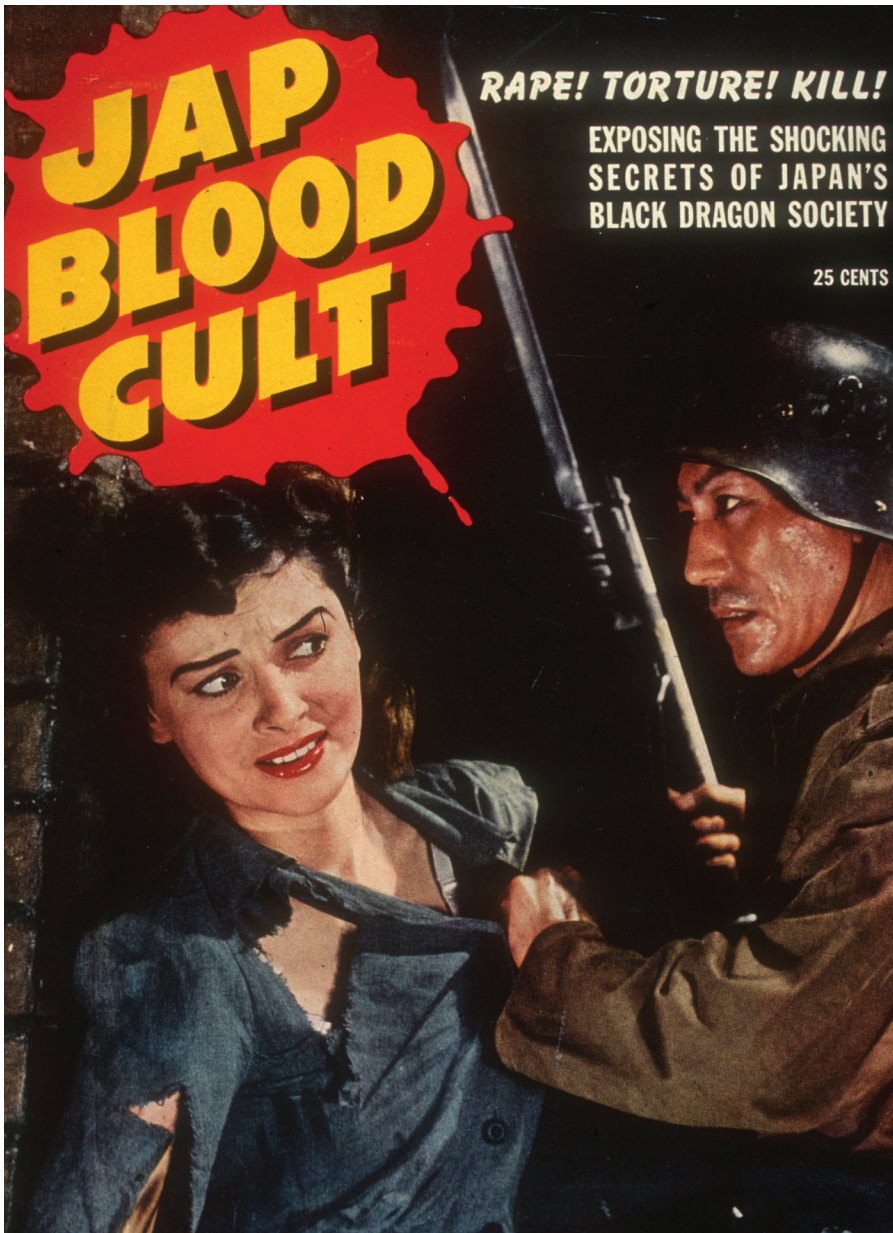
Camel Cigarettes: Smoke Signals

During the late 1980s into the early 2000s, the RJR Nabisco Co. saturated American media with its Camel cigarette's "Smooth Character" campaign. The original Camel trademark—a gritty pen-and-ink rendering done in 1913 of Old Joe, a dromedary owned by the Barnum and Bailey circus—had considerably more charm than the updated anthropomorphic play-beast seen here. The trade character who peers off massive billboards and thousands of deli counters is what one advertising critic refers to as "moron fodder that is so much a part of life that if we are not careful, we forget to be insulted by it."

This story is best illustrated by a 1990 open letter to Louis V. Gerstner, RJR Nabisco's chief executive officer, from Mark Green, who then was the New York City consumer affairs commissioner: "As the father of two young children, I am appalled at your ... campaign, which risks addicting children to cigarettes."

Joe Camel does things most adolescent boys dream about—gets the girls, drives neat sports cars and flies fighter bombers. The characters are rendered in an ambient airbrushed cartoon style and have metaphoric attributes similar to those of the popular Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The human characteristics, while seemingly unthreatening, seductively hypnotize the younger viewer into believing he's a pal. The Marlboro man speaks to a post-adolescent need for machismo; it's not aimed at kids in the same way. But this cocksure camel would be neutered if not for a brilliant, if sinister, marketing strategy that made it ubiquitous.

When it launched the "Smooth Character" campaign in the U.S., RJR Nabisco sought to recapture its faltering market share, but even the most clever advertising ploy must ultimately fail when the product kills the conscripted, as this piece of propaganda aptly illustrates.



Racial Hatred: Blood Story

Otherness is a euphemism for “not like us,” “alien scum,” “dirty stinkin ...” or, as the Nazi motto goes in the weekly Nazi newspaper “Der Stürmer,” “The Jews Are Our Misery.” Whatever the reasons for hate, racist propaganda that selects (or in today’s parlance, “profiles”) some group or individual for persecution follows similar narratives and plot lines. The offending racial, ethnic or religious group is portrayed as “sub-human,” “parasitical” or “beastial,” all of which is substantiated by drawn or photographed stereotypes and caricatures that emphasize the ugliest physical char-

acteristics and evil behaviors imaginable. In Germany, the story about the Jews situated them as either an elite class that profited off the misery of the post-war German population—traitors who sold the nation into ignominy for personal financial gain—or as poor Eastern Europeans equated with vermin that multiplied and spread disease. In Nazi terms, they were a cancer that had to be eradicated.

In the U.S., the propaganda was no less venomous, just aimed at a different target. With America at war with Japan, it was incumbent upon propagandists to draw

portraits of monstrous creatures void of human emotion but full of a lust for Americans’ blood.

The Office of War Information in Washington, DC, created many of the grossly distorted depictions that were transmitted through media to civilians at home and soldiers overseas. The public had to be constantly reminded of the ruthlessness of the enemy, while soldiers had to be encouraged to kill them without remorse. This was only accomplished through relentless dehumanization. The ends justified abominable graphic means.



Weapons of Mass Destruction

Propaganda is the art of making a small truth into a big lie. In 2002, before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, propagandists were promoting the idea that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling lethal weaponry, notably biological and chemical agents. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had helped Hussein build up his arsenal of deadly weapons a few years earlier. But as early as 1988, the Iraqi strongman clearly used chemicals against Kurdish people in the north of his country.

The propaganda war was launched against Hussein almost immediately after the dictator announced plans in 1990 to invade Kuwait, which he said had stolen

petroleum from Iraqi fields. The Gulf War was fought to free Kuwait from a brutal occupation, and the propaganda justifying an invasion was pervasive. Fought almost entirely with “smart bombs,” Hussein quickly lost the ground war. While his retreat allowed him to retain his elite Republican Guard and much of his equipment, he was sanctioned by the United Nations and forced into destroying his chemical and biological weapons.

Although UN monitors were repeatedly kept from reporting on the destruction of these weapons, apparently Hussein had markedly reduced his stockpile to insignificant numbers. Yet by 2003, saber rattling

in Washington focused on Iraq’s buried weapons of mass destruction. This pre-war front page of the “New York Daily News” might well have been government propaganda. The double entendre of the headline humorously masks the subtitle of the real story: “Inspectors Find Mustard Gas Shells.” No one denied Hussein used chemicals in the past, but after the allied victory, no one could find any actual weaponry either. ■

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