

# “Propaganda’s casualties”

By Cara MariAnna – ICH, October, 2023

## *Our psychological and social disintegration.*

Like many American kids I was raised, in part, on Saturday morning cartoons, and one of the programs my siblings and I routinely watched was “The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.” It was no accident that the two dastardly and, not to be missed, bumbling antagonists were Russian-like spies, with Russian-like accents and Russian-like names—Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale. However amusing the show might have been, I was being taught, as was every child watching, to perceive Russians as evil and, at the same time, also incompetent and no match for their American counterparts—even if those counterparts were a flying squirrel and a bipedal moose.

**Every U.S. citizen currently alive has grown up immersed in anti-Russian propaganda. It has long pervaded American culture from film and television to novels and comic books, including public schools, mainstream media, and the news we watch and read.**

**The consequences of propaganda are as dangerous as they are destructive. These are not solely political or social: They are at the most profound level psychological, resulting in a state of alienation in which a person becomes estranged from her own mind, thoughts, and feeling, and, ultimately from other people as well. The ultimate divide-and-conquer tactic, propaganda divides us from our authentic selves, as well as from each other, leaving us hollowed out, less substantially present in our own lives and, less able to act on our behalf.**

The psychological impacts of propaganda cannot be overstated and must be considered more carefully if we are to understand how it works and, never to be missed, recognize our susceptibility to it. **Propaganda undermines our understanding of the world as it actually is: It simplifies the world and prevents us from understanding its full complexity, by turning complex situations and dynamics into mere caricatures. In that way, propaganda makes us vulnerable to policies, foreign and domestic, that are contrary to our best interests. It impairs our ability to think for ourselves, compromises our intellectual freedom, and, not least, propaganda damages our relationships with each other—all this as it erodes our very democracy.**

All of us alive at the time, and old enough to understand its import, must certainly recall the 1983 speech in which Ronald Reagan, “The Great Communicator,” famously called the Soviet Union the “evil empire”—at the very same time, it must be noted, that he and his administration were turning Central America into a [killing field](#) and supporting a jihadist insurgency in Afghanistan to trap the Soviets in a Vietnam-like quagmire. Reagan’s crude formulation resonated with many Americans. The implications were as obvious as they

were primitive: Anything the Soviet Union did was evil, while anything America did was good.

Reagan's simplistic conceit, a product of the overwrought mind of his chief speechwriter, Anthony Dolan, survives to this day. Indeed, it makes most Americans impervious to, if not completely unable to see, the wrongs committed by their own country, the lies told by their own government. Of course, it perfectly served Reagan's foreign policy agendas, just as it now perfectly serves Joe Biden's, especially in his proxy war against Russia.

**Glenn Greenwald considered this question in a recent [segment](#) of System Update. "Russia continues to be the all-purpose villain that Western elites now use whenever they get caught in any sort of scandal, any kind of failure," he noted. "They immediately point to Russia. They say, 'It's not our fault, look over there at the Kremlin.'"**

**The persistent dogma that Russia is the embodiment of evil—and this is more recently personalized to mean Vladimir Putin—enables Americans to live in a pretend world as they continue to believe, contrary to all evidence, that the war in Ukraine was unprovoked. It is a complete disconnect from reality. The dangerous consequence of this is that anti-Russian propaganda has now pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war.**

Americans, ignorant as to the history of NATO expansion, unaware of America's decades-long record of meddling in Ukraine, have no understanding of our role in provoking and prolonging the war—no understanding that America bears significant responsibility for the war and for pushing the world so closely to nuclear Armageddon.

This state of deplorable ignorance is as dangerous as it is intentional. Their very ignorance keeps a good many Americans, especially Democrats, supporting the war, and money flowing to the defense industry, while at the same time undermining any chance of a viable anti-war movement and negotiated settlement to the conflict. Ignorance, we must never miss, is a functional state. It prevails for a reason. It has a purpose.

**Of all the U.S. disinformation generated about the war in Ukraine, the single most destructive bit of it is the lie that the war was "unprovoked." As has been well explained and documented by many competent statesmen and women, many scholars, and many reputable commentators, the U.S. has been knowingly and intentionally [provoking this war](#) for the past [thirty years](#). The fact that there is even a debate on this question is grim testimony of the power of propaganda to corrupt our minds and mental processes.**

Such is the power of propaganda: People are led to believe outright lies, to think whatever their government wants them to, and to act in ways completely at odds with reality and their own best interest. Propaganda validates pre-existing biases which are themselves the product of propaganda. To put it another way:

Propaganda creates a self-perpetuating information ecosystem in which each lie, or half-truth, confirms the next so that people can no longer tell what is true from what is false, or what advances their own security and wellbeing from what actually undermines it.

**The casualties of propaganda are many, among them are critical thinking and the quality of discernment, defined by Abigail Gosselin in a 2012 essay titled “Cultivating Discernment,” as “a process of reflection aimed at making good judgments.” Wherever propaganda proliferates, it substitutes for the intellectual curiosity and engagement upon which good judgments are made, such that no genuine, original thinking takes place. Indeed, that is the point of propaganda—to cut off independent thought. Propaganda replaces the need to know and learn such that no thinking is necessary. Instead, people believe what they are told—belief substitutes for knowledge.**

**Propaganda makes a mockery of truth: Anything can be made to appear true so that truth itself loses all meaning and, in the process, reality itself. Consequently, the entire social and political order becomes one-dimensional and cartoon-like—a mere parody of itself as the country that boasts about defending democracy everywhere undermines it. The point cannot be overstated: It is not just the telling of truth that is lost but the ability of people to recognize it. Unable to discern what is true from what is false people are robbed of the ability to make sound decisions about the world in which they live.**

In the same way, people are simultaneously stripped of genuine freedom—the freedom to think and to act independently of the coercion and manipulation inherent in propaganda. Without even knowing it, people adopt the dominant opinions, beliefs, and thoughts conveyed in media and popular culture, in part because they confirm what we were taught at home, in school, at church, and elsewhere. Under the sway of propaganda, people enact a mere illusion of individuality and freedom.

**This dynamic is a process of enforced conformity as described by Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom*. For the most part, Fromm argued back in 1941, people do not have thoughts or even feelings of their own. Instead, they have what he refers to as “pseudo-thoughts” and “pseudo-feeling.” People think and feel what they have been taught and conditioned—propagandized—to think and feel, all while believe those thoughts and feelings are their own.**

It follows that, most of us having lost—or never actually having had—genuine freedom and independence of thought, propaganda also damages basic human intelligence, curiosity, and spontaneity—altogether the ability to judge and respond to events with a fresh and curious mind. Under the influence of propaganda, little of what a person thinks or feels is an authentic, original, response to events or situations as they are. Instead, a person responds accordingly to how she has been trained to.

**Another effect of propaganda is to induce people to believe they already know all there is to know. In consequence, propaganda undermines curiosity, and curiosity, I would argue, is essential to the vital mind. Without curiosity, there is no incentive for a person to seek out alternative sources of information, or to talk with or listen to someone who thinks differently. Indeed, it's almost impossible to discuss the facts of the Ukraine war with other Americans, including friends and family members, because most people don't want to hear anything that counters the dominant anti-Russian narratives that they assume constitute "the truth."**

**For these reasons, propaganda results in profound alienation. It destroys our most intimate human relationships such that, to borrow again from Fromm, we are left with "pseudo-relationships" in which we cannot speak freely or honestly with those who are closest to us. Instead, we must hide our innermost selves lest we lose the relationship. As a consequence, dissident voices are intentionally silenced when speaking up for the truth risks the destruction of close family ties and friendships, not to mention careers. For most people, the safety of conformity is preferable, even if unconsciously, to the threat of being ostracized by other people.**

**In the ways and for the reasons I outline, democracy itself becomes a casualty of propaganda: Democracy requires an informed citizenry, citizens who understand events in their country and world as they are, and who are capable of making judgments based upon independent thinking and discernment. Above all, it requires us to act in solidarity with each other even when we disagree with one another, which is to say that informed citizens must necessarily also engage in listening to each other, in dialogue, and in the healthy debate that a healthy democracy demands. Within a robust democracy it is the voices of dissent, the dissidents among us, those who have the courage to point out where as a people and nation we are failing, that we must listen to.**

**The United States is cynically using Ukraine to fight a proxy war with Russia that Ukraine cannot win. The United States knows Ukraine cannot win this war but Biden and the neocon monsters that surround him are content to throw away Ukrainian lives in the hope that the war will eventually weaken and destabilize Russia. To that end they want the war to continue. This is hubris at its worst. It is also morally, if not actually, criminal. The war is not weakening Russia. As Europe declines, and Germany descends into a period of deindustrialization, Russia is economically and militarily stronger than it was when the war began.**

**As Washington, desperate to stop its own decline, lurches drunkenly about the world stage trying to maintain its hegemony—threatening to provoke yet another war, this time with China—Ukraine is being destroyed. More than 400,000 people have been killed in the war so far, the vast majority of them Ukrainian but a significant number of Russians, as well. These, too, are the casualties of propaganda—everyone of them a casualty, in part, of American propaganda and lies.**

**In less than two years, close to half a million people have been killed and for no purpose other than the geostrategic agenda of the United States—and the further enrichment of America's arms dealers. That should outrage every thinking, feeling human being. That alone should be enough to wake up Americans from their propaganda-induced trance.**

The just-cited figures should make you want to learn everything you can about the truth of this war, and the shameful history behind it. **They should make you turn off CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News—if, indeed, you watch them. They should make you quit reading *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Economist*, et al.—or at least no longer read them as truthful—and instead seek out [genuinely truthful information](#) that is to be [found](#) only in [independent](#) journalism. It requires courage and time and effort. But certainly, it's the least any one of us can do.**

**The alternative, should we fail at that, would be the ultimate casualty of propaganda: our very humanity.**

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