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Counter Propaganda:

Cases from US Public Diplomacy and beyond

by Nicholas J. Cull



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FOREWORD

By Peter Pomerantsev, Senior Fellow, Legatum Institute

The 21st century information age is seeing a new focus on propaganda from actors as diverse as Putin's Russia and ISIS. The West is starting to consider a response: from attempts by the EU to create myth-busting campaigns; NATO establishing a new Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga; attempts to reform the Broadcasting Board of Governors in the US; and a whole industry of counter-terrorism communications efforts and a renewed focus on media literacy in education.

But what can past efforts at counter-propaganda teach the present?

In this essay USC Annenberg Professor Nick Cull, one of the world's leading historians of propaganda, looks at counter-propaganda successes and failures from the Reformation to the Iraq War, from the wisdom of Samuel Johnson to the madness of McCarthyism, and draws a list of recommendations for today's counter-propagandists. Counter-propaganda turns out to be a subtle art: get it wrong and you end up strengthening the original propaganda by giving it too much attention; get it right and you end up not only fighting the enemy, but also improving your own society.

COUNTER PROPAGANDA: CASES FROM US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND BEYOND

“There is a moment when God honours falsehood.”

Aeschylus (525—456 BC), Greek tragedian. *Fragments*, l. 273.

One of the oddities of mass political persuasion—propaganda—is that the most powerful driver of its evolution has been the desire to combat the advance of the ideas of others—which is to say that much of what we consider to be propaganda can also be understood as counter-propaganda. The word originated in the middle of the sixteenth century in the vocabulary of the Jesuit order as a way of speaking of their organised attempts to ‘propagate’ the Catholic faith in response to the encroachment of Protestantism: the so-called Counter-Reformation. The massive US information campaign of the Cold War was a response to the threat of Communist propaganda from the Soviet Union. In our own time, China’s large-scale spending on cultural outreach and international broadcasting is seen by Beijing as a corrective to the western bias of global media outlets. It would seem that all propaganda at some point characterises itself as counter-propaganda in much the same way as military forces are justified as defensive. This essay will examine the evolution and nature of counter-propaganda, drawing particularly on the history of the phenomenon in the United States.

Counter-propaganda can be divided into two basic approaches:

1. Tactical counter-propaganda

This is a message or set of messages or activities deployed to push back against a specific message from an adversary. An example is the work of the United States Information Agency (USIA) to expose specific Soviet disinformation rumours in the 1980s.

2. Strategic counter-propaganda

This is an entire communication policy devised as a response to an adversary’s propaganda activity. For instance, during the 1930s the British government launched the British Council and BBC foreign language broadcasts as a riposte to the spread of totalitarian propaganda of right and left in the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere.¹

Describing a campaign as counter-propaganda has moral implications. Some political cultures which are uncomfortable with state-sponsored propaganda are nevertheless willing to launch counter-propaganda and may even demand it, as was the case with the United States during the run-up to the passage of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, which remains the legislative authority for most US exchange and information work.²

Counter-propaganda has historically included a spectrum of methods. The most basic is the negative act of censorship: forcibly preventing the adversary’s ideas from circulating within one’s own society though press restrictions, radio jamming, laws, Internet firewalls or similar activity.³ An extension of this has been the dramatic expedient of reaching into the adversary’s society to silence the source of the propaganda. Extreme examples of this include the murder of the BBC Bulgarian broadcaster



Georgi Markov by the Romanian secret service in September 1978. One might also regard the US government's decision to target the Al Qaeda propagandist Adam Gadahn as a form of counter-propaganda. If this negative action is impossible, ineffective or considered morally unacceptable, the spectrum extends to positive interventions.

While most counter-propaganda takes the form of messaging of some kind, there is also a category of broader responses which seek to alter the environment in which the messages circulate. These environmental interventions may include attempts to distract from the adversary's message or to dilute the message by ramping up the availability of entertainment (as seems to be the case in contemporary China). One of the most common counter-propaganda strategies is to generate messaging at a broader environmental level. A state may add a wide range of alternate messages to muddy the waters (which seems to be the favoured tactic of contemporary Russian international media) or launch a general campaign to demonise, ridicule or stigmatise information from a particular source without specifying a particular piece of propaganda or story it wishes to rebut.

Above: Communist propaganda in Kaesong, North Korea, June 2014

A good case of a counter-propagandist taking on a whole category of information rather than a single story may be found in mid eighteenth-century England. In 1758, the great wit and polemicist Samuel Johnson decided to respond to the patriotic propaganda generated by his own country's press in its coverage of the French-Indian wars then raging in North America. Rather than naming individuals and publications or challenging specific distorted reports (such as those relating to the capture of the French fort of Louisbourg by the British in July 1758), he observed:

Among the calamities of war may be justly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates, and credulity encourages. A peace will equally leave the warrior and relater of wars destitute of employment; and I know not whether more is to be dreaded from streets filled with soldiers accustomed to plunder, or from garrets filled with scribblers accustomed to lie.⁴

The lack of specificity gave the observation a much longer shelf life⁵ than a specific rebuttal of a biased account. In a similar vein a century later, John Bright, the great British advocate of trade as a path to peace, observed: "You will find wars are supported by a class of argument which, after the war is over, the people find were arguments they should never have listened to." Dr Johnson's observation found its echo in the well-worn observation that "in war, truth is the first casualty". This quote was in circulation among anti-war (and anti-propaganda) activists as far back as 1916.⁶ It was widely used in the 1920s during the period of reflection after the First World War and revived in the Vietnam era. It has now attained the status of an aphorism, circulating as a kind of folk remedy to propaganda.⁷ Other linguistic cultures had reached similar conclusions. German folk culture has: *Kommt der Krieg ins Land/ Gibt Lügen wie Sand*—"When war comes to the land/the lies [pile up] like sand".⁸

There are other examples of aphorisms serving as a counter to media bias. These include the British saying born of the advent of the popular press: "You can't believe everything you read in the papers" or the African-American dozen street quip common in the mid twentieth century: "You talk more shit than the radio".⁹ The Internet age has thrown up a fascinating meme which makes the same point: "Don't believe everything you read on the Internet just because there's a picture with a quote next to it" with a photograph of and attribution to Abraham Lincoln.¹⁰ The existence of this kind of folk wisdom is an asset which cannot be underestimated. Political communication works best when connecting to ideas and feelings that people recognise as true. The use of a folk aphorism may blunt the force of an otherwise powerful piece of propaganda, by exploiting pre-existing ideas such as mistrust of foreigners or love of home.

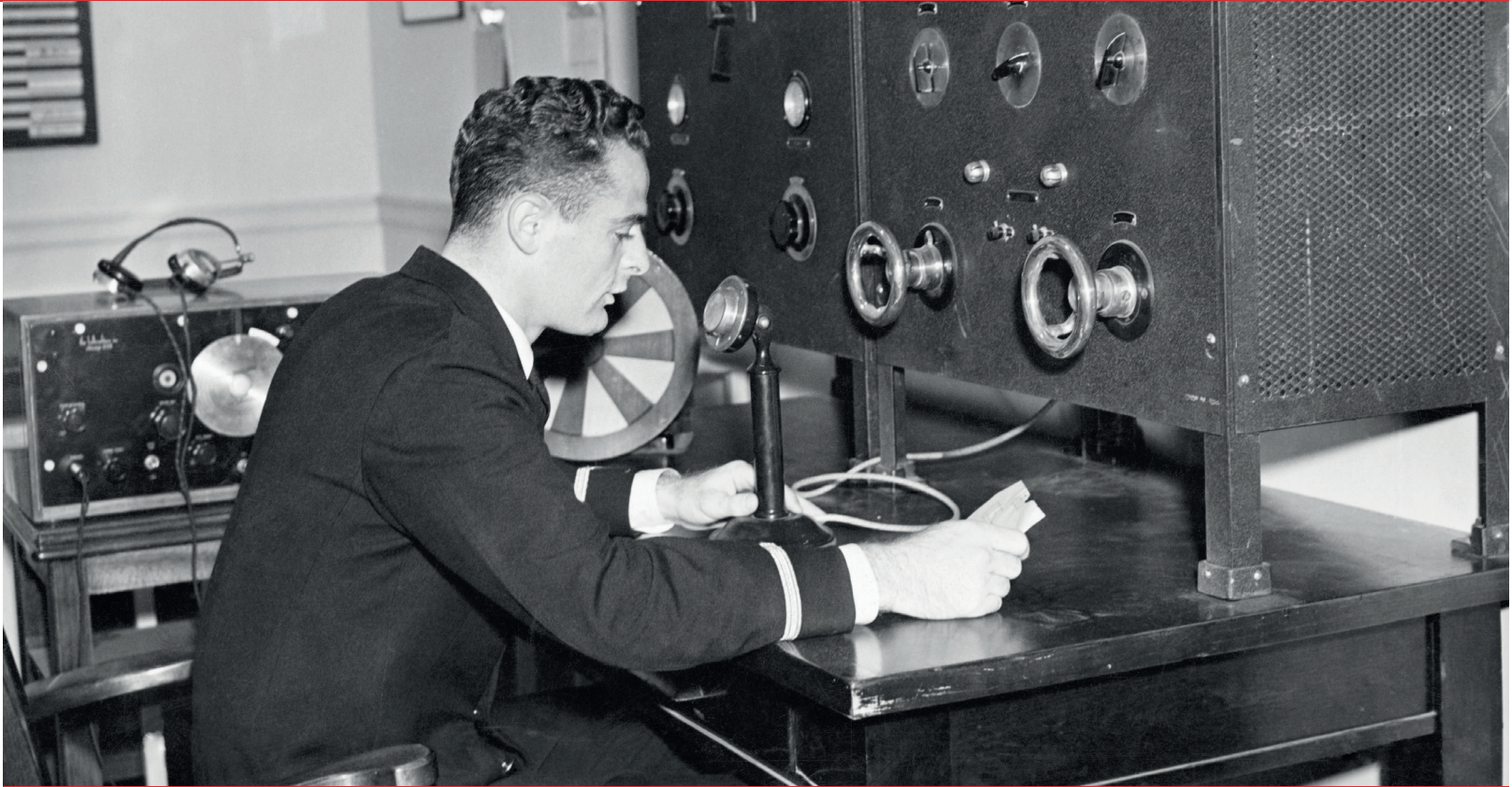
While logic suggests that counter-propaganda requires an enemy campaign to react against, that campaign does not have to be contemporaneous. Strategic counter-propaganda campaigns frequently react against the memory of a past campaign considered especially damaging. The Nazi propaganda strategy in Germany during the 1920s and 30s was counter-propaganda devised in response to the memory of the Allied psychological assault on the Kaiser and his allies during the Great War. The most significant US example, however, is the massive intellectual mobilisation against propaganda launched by American intellectuals between the wars in response to the alleged role of British propaganda and vested domestic US interests in drawing America into the Great War. Besides the usual tales of rape and baby-killing, which the British wisely sourced to a well-respected former Ambassador to the US, Lord Bryce, the most bare-faced invention of the war was the claim that the Germans had created a 'corpse conversion factory' at Vimy Ridge to turn human remains into war material. German-Americans were not amused when the British came clean. That effort bears close examination.

COUNTER-PROPAGANDA IN THE INTER-WAR UNITED STATES

The earliest exponents of American counter-propaganda during the inter-war years were the public intellectual Walter Lippmann, whose book *Public Opinion* in 1922 coined the term 'stereotype', and Harold Lasswell at the University of Chicago, who in 1927 published *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. Other books about foreign propaganda included H. C. Petersen's *Propaganda for War: The Campaign Against American Neutrality, 1914-1917* (1940). Influential British books finding a US audience included Arthur Ponsonby's *Falsehood in War-Time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War* (1928). This collective intellectual effort in the field of propaganda studies developed into a full-blown exercise in pre-emptive counter-propaganda: scholars worked to protect the United States from future war propaganda in the same way that an epidemiologist seeks to inoculate a population against a future plague. The effort is now recognised as a key development in the evolution of the discipline of communication studies. By the mid-1930s this mission was attracting major funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. The projects it supported included the path-breaking Radio Research Project, directed by Austrian émigré Paul Lazarsfeld first at Princeton and later at Columbia.¹¹ Other milestones included the foundation of the journal *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Clayton Dewitt Poole in 1937 and the creation of an Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) in New York City that same year under the leadership of Clyde R. Miller, an education professor from Columbia University, and Kirtley Mather, a Harvard geologist and campaigner for academic freedom.¹²

The IPA set about circulating a regular 'Propaganda Analysis' bulletin to opinion formers including editors and college presidents to ensure that they were on the look-out for propaganda. Its first edition included one of its most famous formulations: seven basic propaganda devices which recur in the literature of propaganda like the seven deadly sins. They were: **Name-Calling** (tarring an adversary with a word calculated to lower their prestige or credibility such as 'Fascist' or 'warmonger'); **Glittering Generality** (presenting one's agenda in a vague but enticing form, such as promising 'a shining city on a hill'); **Transfer** (unjustifiably associating an argument with an admired category of thought such as religion or patriotism); **Testimonial** (enrolling or citing an intermediary with some special credibility to the audience); **Plain Folks** (identifying the speaker or position being promoted with folk wisdom and familiar home values); **Card Stacking** (creating a false comparison to give an illusion of a balanced argument and introducing a disproportionate quantity of information on your side); and **Band Wagon** (engineering the appearance of a large number of people already conforming to the view you wish to promote, to take advantage of the well-known social pressures to conformity). The institute's output deepened to include books and school texts including *The Group Leader's Guide to Propaganda Analysis* (1938), *Propaganda: How To Recognize and Deal With It* (an experimental unit of study materials in propaganda analysis for use in junior and senior high schools) (1938), *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin's Speeches* (1939), and *War Propaganda and the United States* (1940).

The 'discovery' of the susceptibility of populations to propaganda and the readiness of governments to engage in it was widely covered in the American media. *The Saturday Evening Post* ran a three-part story on the dangers of propaganda in the summer of 1929 and the whole of the 1930s were characterised by a widespread 'propaganda phobia' and panic. One offshoot of this fear was the creation of committees of the House of Representatives to root out foreign influence, starting with



the McCormick-Dirksen Committee of 1934 to 1935 (more properly the Special Committee on Un-American Activities Authorized to Investigate Nazi Propaganda and Certain Other Propaganda Activities) and then the ultimately notorious House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), established in 1938 to root out foreign Fascist and Communist propaganda under the chairmanship of Martin Dies. The investigations led to a legal intervention in the form of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), which required all foreign publicists operating in the US to be documented and their publications to be labelled and shared with the Department of Justice. American anxiety reached such levels that the British government decided that any attempt to directly influence American public opinion would be counterproductive. The British Council did not operate in the US until the 1970s. The British approach to American opinion focused on answering questions and cultivating American journalists in the US and the UK.¹³

AGAINST RUMOURS IN WARTIME

The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe prompted a redoubling of research into propaganda and counter-propaganda. The Rockefeller Foundation launched foreign radio monitoring and analysis projects at Princeton and Stanford (for the Pacific Theatre) and a project to study

'Totalitarian Communication in Wartime' at The New School overseen by Ernst Kris and Hans Speier (in cooperation with Britain's BBC). In time, the US government subsumed this work into a formal Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). A particular area of concern was how best to respond to the circulation of rumours both spontaneous and deliberately engineered as a viral form of propaganda. The scholars swiftly noted that propaganda rumours work even when presented in a negative frame: repeat a rumour even as you deny it and you run the risk of further advancing the rumour. Moreover, a denial can be understood by an audience as evidence that the rumour is true—hence the aphorism "there's no smoke without fire". With this in mind, the Morale Division of the US government's Office of War Information (OWI) wisely decided not to go forward with a national radio programme exposing German propaganda rumours on the grounds that the rumours were more colourful, memorable and impactful than any boring old fact. It did, however, track rumours carefully, collecting them systematically from teachers, barbers, beauty shop workers and others exposed to public discussion, and used the information to shape public information. It found that the best place to engage with a rumour was locally, within the community in which it was already endemic. OWI established a network of 'rumour clinics' that identified rumours and placed counter-material in the local newspaper.¹⁴ The director of the Boston office, Robert Knapp, published his findings in 1944. They included a list of six directives for effective rumour control:

1. Assure good faith in the regular media of communication
2. Develop maximum confidence in leaders
3. Issue as much news as possible, as quickly as possible
4. Make information as accessible as possible
5. Prevent idleness, monotony, and personal disorganisation
6. Campaign deliberately against rumour-mongering.

The directives still make a lot of sense.¹⁵

At the end of the Second World War, the United States undertook an unusual programme of mass counter-propaganda in the 're-education' of Germany and Japan. Both campaigns began with the standard American Progressive/New Deal assumption that social evils flowed from social flaws and that by fixing the social structures social behaviour could also be shifted. Germany and Japan were seen as 'sick' societies needing to be cured of the disease of totalitarianism, and propaganda was understood to be the means by which the sickness had taken hold. Interestingly, the two initiatives took divergent approaches. In Germany, the approach retained an inherently democratic model focusing on the nurturing of a free press, liberal education and healthy civil society in the place of the propaganda-driven Nazi public sphere. In Japan, the perception of an imminent regional threat from the Soviet Union foreshortened the activity. It was characterised rather by an avoidance of major political reconstruction (such as purging of extreme nationalists from the education system) and a preference for simply redirecting the imperial propaganda machine to new democratic purposes. Surprising decisions included keeping the notorious imperial thought police—*Shiso Keisatsu*—in place for several months. The impression was of running new fluid through the same old system of pipes. There were attempts in both societies to develop free media. A fascinating element in the Japanese programme was the decision to launch the radio game show as a genre to promote the ideas of the individual and competition as antidotes to a past diet of centralised imperial propaganda.¹⁶

THE COLD WAR

The Cold War brought massive ideological mobilisation on the part of the United States in the name of counter-propaganda. One major insight was the understanding that the credibility of a message often hinged not on its content but on the nature of the messenger, whose effectiveness was enhanced by similarity with the audience. This underpinned a number of counter-propaganda initiatives, including the sponsorship of a range of radio stations under the brand of Radio Free Europe (RFE). This employed emigrés to provide an open media source in the local language for major nations behind the 'Iron Curtain'. Two particular challenges for the US in its counter-propaganda were to contest the association of the USSR with peace and with the intellectual community. One effective mechanism for combatting the latter idea was the publication in 1949 of a book of autobiographical essays entitled *The God that Failed*, written by intellectuals who had once been communists but had later rejected the philosophy. The collection was the brainchild of the British Labour politician and veteran of Second World War propaganda, Richard Crossman, who served as editor. Crossman brought together six writers, Louis Fischer, André Gide, Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender and Richard Wright, who represented a number of nationalities and ethnicities and had credibility with audiences. The job of the American and British governments was to ensure that the book was translated and available as widely as possible around the world.¹⁷

The need for counter-propaganda was one of the rationales used to bolster the argument that the mainstream international broadcasters operated by the US and UK governments—Voice of America and the BBC—should be allowed to develop credibility through balanced news coverage. This credibility was, however, undermined by attempts to cash in on a reputation for objectivity and, instead, sell a lie. The US government was caught out in 1960 when President Eisenhower insisted that an American aircraft lost over Russia was a weather plane off-course, only to have Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev expose the deceit by producing the pilot, Gary Powers.

The domestic Cold War generated spectacular examples of propaganda and counter-propaganda. Some of the pre-war analysts were still on the scene. In 1947 Walter Lippmann coined the term 'Cold War'. In 1948 Clyde Miller revived his old propaganda analysis to create a pamphlet, 'What everybody should know about propaganda: how and why it works' for the New York Commission for Propaganda Analysis and Methodist Federation for Social Action. His partner, Mather, campaigned against the conspiracy theories of Senator Joseph McCarthy in academia. McCarthyism, a spectacular example of propaganda in the name of counter-propaganda, demonstrated the astonishing ability of a meme—in this case that of a vast communist conspiracy—to gain currency through a mixture of the confirmation of existing fears or prejudices and intimidation against breaking ranks. However, the fate of McCarthyite propaganda showed the disproportionate power that a single credible voice could have in disrupting public acceptance. CBS broadcaster Edward R. Murrow exposed McCarthy's techniques on his *See It Now TV* television programme on March 9, 1954. That broadcast called out the senator for multiple distortions, bullying and political excesses in the name of anti-communism at a time when the rest of the mainstream media remained silent. The report is often cited as the high water mark of US television news and was the focus of the 2005 film *Good Night and Good Luck*.¹⁸ The controversy provided evidence for the theories of social science. In 1951, Professor Solomon Asch of Swarthmore College had published the striking results of the first of a series of experiments on conformity. He found that a majority of test subjects

placed alone in the midst of group of confederates giving erroneous answers to a perception test would largely defer to the view of the mass, but that introducing a single voice of dissent—a counter-propagandist, if you will—broke the spell of acquiescence. Disturbingly, Asch also noticed that if the voice of reason was withdrawn from the experiment midway, test subjects slipped back into conformity.¹⁹

While it is tempting to conclude from the examples of Asch or the Murrow that the right piece of counter-propaganda can be a magic bullet against propaganda, subsequent experiences have found this not to be the case. It is clear that most audiences do not appreciate having their errors pointed out and that a powerful argument against a political point can actually be counter-productive. Social psychologists have identified what is commonly known as a 'backfire effect', a marked response of holding more firmly to one's initial position (i.e., the position of the original propaganda) and vehemently rejecting the new position (that of the counter-propaganda).²⁰ One explanation for this is 'confirmation bias'—the tendency of individuals to prefer information that confirms the first thing they are told on any subject. But the backfire effect is not merely about timing: it involves emotional attachment to the original explanation, especially when it becomes a component of self-identity. In short, the backfire effect suggests that a sustained and explicit counter-propaganda campaign may be a counterproductive path to take.²¹

In the middle years of the Cold War the concept of counter-propaganda remained popular. It was part of the annual budget justification of the United States Information Agency, and inspired some notable campaigns. From 1954, the agency circulated a thrice-weekly bulletin tracking Soviet bloc propaganda under the title *Soviet Orbit Propaganda*, which must have seemed ironic when the Soviets achieved their greatest propaganda coup by actually putting something in orbit. The bulletin ended the decade as *Propaganda Intelligence Review*.²²

USIA's famous worldwide publicity theme of 'people's capitalism', launched in 1956, was explicitly designed to rebut Soviet claims that the American system befitted only a few. Similarly, the great USIA photo exhibition 'The Family of Man' countered the Russian claim to have a monopoly on the 'brotherhood of humanity'. There was more to come.

US COUNTER-PROPAGANDA IN THE 1960S AND 70S

The Kennedy administration imagined itself as coming from behind in a war for men's minds. President Kennedy alluded to this in his inaugural address. His administration devoted much energy to challenging the idea that the Soviet Union was the wave of the future and the best model for Third World development. Quite apart from the communication initiatives undertaken by the USIA, it is possible to see key policies of the 1960s as driven partly by the need to provide counter-propaganda by deed. The space programme, the Peace Corps, the military commitment to Vietnam and aspects of the federal response to the Civil Rights issue were strongly driven by counter-propaganda concerns. Without a background of Soviet propaganda and a contrasting Soviet example, US policy would have unfolded very differently.²³

The Vietnam War brought obvious challenges for American counter-propaganda. Existing Cold War research-driven methods were ill suited to the realities of war in the developing world. In the spring of 1964 the CIA suggested that the US embassy in Vietnam begin analysing local Viet Cong propaganda themes so that effective counter-themes could be devised. With some irritation the Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, reminded Washington that when a guerilla enemy is conducting

propaganda through face-to-face conversation the process leaves few documents to study.²⁴ The US government was soon aware that the best way to counter domestic and foreign scepticism about the war (which was shared by the pioneer of propaganda study Walter Lippmann) would have been to empower the South Vietnamese to explain the war themselves. But, despite appeals from American diplomats, the leadership of South Vietnam remained largely silent on the international stage.²⁵ The North Vietnamese were more forthcoming and credible than the United States government when they talked about a war in their own country.

In tactical counter-propaganda, the defender is forced to fight on terrain picked by his adversary, but sometimes the adversary chooses badly. This proved to be the case in the early Nixon period, when the Soviet media began drawing attention to the continuing problems of Civil Rights in the US. In 1970, Soviet outlets around the world—and especially in Africa—directed particular attention to the American pursuit, arrest and trial of Angela Davis, a Communist academic and Civil Rights activist who was accused of supplying a handgun to militants who later used the weapon in a deadly courtroom shooting. They predicted what amounted to a legalised lynching. USIA flagged the case for its Public Affairs Officers, noting that “while on the surface the Davis case seems made for to order for hostile propaganda, the facts are pretty disarming and offer plenty of ammunition to counter Communist propaganda”.²⁶ USIA used the Davis case to demonstrate the virtue of the open American legal system, contrasting the rights extended to Angela Davis with those denied in the Soviet Union. It sent legal experts to the field to speak directly to African audiences about the case and arranged for a party of African jurists to monitor the trial for themselves. The counter-propaganda value of the case was demonstrated when the all-white jury acquitted Davis. Similar decisions in the trials of the Soledad Brothers and the Black Panther invalidated Soviet predictions.²⁷

Detente brought an interlude in which the architects of US public diplomacy considered developing an entirely new model of outreach. However, the coincidence of a lack of bureaucratic imagination, a desire to protect the bureaucratic status quo and a resurgence of Soviet adventurism brought a return to counter-propaganda as the *raison d’être* of US foreign public engagement. But the threat was shifting. As the Soviet Union moved into economic stagnation in the later 1970s, it became harder to sell its system in terms of positive benefits or virtue, and the Kremlin’s propagandists increasingly turned to the circulation of fabricated rumours or ‘disinformation’. When the Soviet campaign ramped up in the early 1980s, the United States Information Agency co-ordinated an inter-agency response which is now considered a classic counter-propaganda campaign. Key elements included systematically tracking and exposing Soviet rumours and faked evidence in a newsletter circulated within the US government called *Soviet Propaganda Alert* and collating the material in the full-scale reports of the inter-agency Active Measures Working Group. As the campaign progressed, it became obvious that there was particular value in sharing an example of propaganda with an audience other than the intended one; in this way, the approach would seem awkward, obvious and even humorous and would undermine the credibility of its originator. The USIA’s master of counter-propaganda, Herbert Romerstein, had great fun showing European audiences examples of the Soviet ‘ethnic bomb’ rumour crafted for the developing world. The idea of a bomb which killed black people but left white people unharmed was terrifyingly plausible in the global South but absurd to Europeans, especially in its Middle Eastern incarnation in which the bomb killed Arabs but spared Jews.²⁸



There are other examples of counter-propaganda by selective republication. Sometimes creative reframing or recontextualisation can help. Hence in 1917 British propagandists made much capital in the US by mass-producing and recirculating a German medallion commenting on the sinking of the ocean liner *Lusitania* which had originally been struck as one of a private series of artistic pieces. In the British reframing, the medallion became an official crass stand-alone souvenir created by the German government to celebrate the death of hundreds of innocents.²⁹ Similarly in the Second World War the US government routinely used Nazi propaganda, peppering its own *Why We Fight* recruitment films with clips from German films such as *Triumph of the Will*, though always taking care to use only brief clips lest the film somehow regain its original purpose and inflate the image of the German military. Finally, in our own time those sympathetic to Israel have understood the value of taking anti-Israeli or pro-Jihadi propaganda produced for a local audience and circulating it outside the Middle East. The most successful agency doing this work is the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), founded

Above: A stamp printed in Vietnam shows Vietnamese people's war with USA (c1964)

in Washington DC in 1998 by a veteran of Israeli military intelligence named Yigal Carmon. MEMRI translates and circulates online examples of propaganda from the region. One item that achieved particular prominence was a 2007 clip from a Palestinian children's television programme, *Pioneers of Tomorrow*, in which a character named Farfour strongly resembling Mickey Mouse was punched to death by an Israeli government official.³⁰

THE POST-COLD WAR PERIOD AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Like the entire apparatus of American foreign engagement, the counter-propaganda/counter-disinformation element of US public diplomacy did not prosper in the years following the Cold War. Despite valuable work in tracking and heading off enemy distortion during the first Iraq war and the distortions from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the US government's counter-disinformation unit dwindled. Its staff eventually retired or was transferred to unrelated duties. An ad hoc capability developed during the NATO campaign in Serbia/Kosovo, and the Clinton administration attempted to promulgate a comprehensive reform of strategic information including a counter-propaganda capacity under Presidential Decision Directive 68 of December 1999.³¹ The new International Public Information (IPI) structure was designed to address what the 'National Security Strategy for a New Century' called an 'obligation' to 'counter misinformation and incitement, mitigate inter-ethnic conflict, promote independent media organisations and the free flow of information, and support democratic participation' to 'advance US interests abroad'. Despite the gravity of this task it became mired in turf wars. Budgets and infrastructure remained in decline. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on America found the country essentially unprepared to combat disinformation or any other form of propaganda, foreign or domestic, and at the very moment when the Internet gave rumour-mongers their biggest boost since the invention of the telephone a century before.³²

The years following 9/11 have seen the slow process of rebuilding the US government's international communication capacity. Counter-propaganda has not been a particular strength. The careful counter-rumour strategy of OWI's Robert Knapp contrasted starkly with the response of the US Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Karen Hughes, during the middle years of the George W. Bush presidency. She forbade her staff from engaging with rumours—such as those alleging US complicity in 9/11—lest the rumour merely gain greater currency, but without the important follow-up at local level. Many conspiracy theories went unchallenged by attempts to explain, for example, the true motives behind US policies such as its support for Israel.

Counter-propaganda remains a driving force of US public diplomacy. During the early Obama years, public diplomacy was framed as a necessary response to a Chinese charm offensive made up of 'Confucius Institutes', huge public relations exercises and expanded broadcasting. Counter-radicalisation became a special priority. Instruments included a cross-agency Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, established in 2011 with the State Department as the lead agency.³³ The later Obama years have been dominated by the need to respond (or to be seen to be responding) to both the Islamic State and Russia, and by controversy over the shortcomings of that response. Are there any policy recommendations which can be extracted from this century of experience? The following points are worth making:

1. The systematic study and discussion of media bias and propaganda is an important part of any counter-propaganda strategy and may be seen as equipping a population with an important tool of citizenship.
2. Rumours and fabrications need careful handling to avoid simply perpetuating them. A multi-tiered approach is necessary and explicit counter-messaging should be restricted to communities/networks in which the rumour is already endemic.
3. More can be achieved by communicating good news than by grappling explicitly with the negative and sparking a 'backfire effect'.
4. Well-chosen deeds can be more eloquent in rebutting propaganda and negative images than well-chosen words.
5. Sustained listening is an essential foundation of all public diplomacy, including counter-propaganda.

Finally, it is worth noting that not all propaganda is best countered in the communication sphere. Like pain in the body, hostile propaganda is not necessarily best understood as a phenomenon in its own right but rather as a symptom of an underlying problem. Just as treating the whole body can remove local pain, so addressing the source of the propaganda can prove an effective strategy for counter-propaganda. In the late 1980s, the US government was able to end the widespread Soviet dissemination of the claim that AIDS was created in an American biological warfare laboratory by threatening to end scientific cooperation in the field of AIDS research. Diplomats noted that the story disappeared from the media as effectively as if someone had turned off a tap.³⁴ It may thus be that the ultimate answer to propaganda is to work with the propagandist to give them a greater stake in the truth, rather than engaging in continued deception.

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19. Solomon Asch, 'Effects of group pressure on the modification and distortion of judgments.' in H. Guetzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men*, Carnegie Press, Pittsburgh, 1951, pp. 177-190.
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21. Medical communicators have found it best not to reiterate the nature of the vaccine/autism propaganda when trying to persuade parents to vaccinate their children, but rather to speak only about the benefits of vaccination and majority compliance with the procedure. This builds on the readiness of people to go along with the group in their beliefs or behaviours—the bandwagon effect.
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23. A major review of US propaganda in 1960 noted that only a really dramatic achievement such as manned flights to the Moon or Mars could counter Soviet propaganda based on Russia's image of technological superiority. See Eisenhower Library, DDE Papers as President, (Ann Whitman file), Administrative Series, box 33, Sprague Committee file 1, Conclusions and Recommendations of the President's Committee on Information Activities Abroad, December 1960, section IV.
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25. A lament along these lines may be found in the Lyndon Johnson Library, WHCF CF, box 135, CF USIA 1967, Leonard Marks (USIA director) to president, via Maguire, 14 February 1968.
26. USIA's acting director Henry Loomis authorised the agency to 'discreetly note President Nixon's acknowledgement that his early comments on the charges against Davis should not have been made'. In the US, despite Nixon's comments, the accused was innocent until proved guilty. Cited in Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, p. 318
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