

# THE AMERICAN COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC PROPAGANDA

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I have been involved for the past twenty years in the practice of American diplomacy. Five of those years have been spent working closely with, or in, the American foreign information program. Despite this, the subject I have been assigned seems to me to embody a question. My immediate reaction is to assume that I must prove an American commitment to propaganda, that this is not something we can take for granted, like the American commitment to the right to private property or to baseball as the national sport. That that should be so is hardly strange to those who have lived through the history of the postwar years. But it is a measure of the tentativeness many still feel when they think about this commitment.

Our country itself is peculiarly a creation of propagandists. The inspired pamphleteers who fanned the flames of revolution in America went on to proclaim their beliefs in a Declaration evoked by "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," and then proceeded to "form a more perfect Union." These were men of the pen, publicists of the highest sort, who advanced their ends by public argument in debates which produced great state documents.

We believed, for over 170 years, that it was but necessary to say these things among ourselves, to be ourselves a beacon unto the world, and that, beyond our shores, men would see, understand, and of their own volition repair to the banner we had unfurled.

America, the exemplar, the avatar, of freedom, we thought, would draw men's minds, hearts, and hopes like a magnet and, by being itself, would work great changes in the world.

And, of course, it has done so and continues to do so.

But that something more was needed, except during the emergency conditions of wartime, was a concept foreign to American minds before 1945. Like so many new ideas, the view that the American Government should maintain a permanent organization devoted to telling the rest of mankind about the United States had a painful birth, a wretched childhood, and a stormy adolescence. If we now regard it as coming into man's estate, we do so with understandable caution.

Yet it is as clear, I think, as these things can well be that the United States is now quite thoroughly committed to speaking officially to the rest of the world about itself, about problems of common concern to it and other nations, and about its dreams, fears, and hopes for the future.

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## I

## ORIGINS OF THE UNITED STATES COMMITMENT

A great deal has been said and written about the "cold war" as the major cause which gave rise to the United States commitment to a foreign propaganda program, and there is no doubt that, on a narrow reading of the evidence, it is quite correct so to present the matter. I should like here, however, to direct some remarks towards broadening this traditional framework of thinking about our official propaganda effort.

The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the Second World War as the two superpowers. The international order had been shattered during the war and the seven or eight states which, before the war, could be considered "great powers," had undergone a sharp and radical reordering of stature. Since the two postwar superpowers possessed totally different philosophies of government and totally different ideas about the nature of international relations and, consequently, about their relationships to each other and to third states, a struggle between the two, each surrounded by its allies, was inevitable. Under these circumstances, an important part of that larger struggle was bound to be the "struggle for men's minds," to use the phrase of which we heard more ten years ago than we do today.

The Soviet Government may, with great justice, claim to have originated modern mass psychologico-political warfare, when Trotsky, at Brest-Litovsk, insisted upon publicizing each day's transactions, thus attempting to appeal over the head of the German Government to the German people and, more particularly, to the rank-and-file of the German army. Its subsequent concentration upon propaganda abroad made it the leader in this field. Confronted with so practiced an adversary, the United States was bound to react and itself to establish an organization for the conduct of propaganda abroad.

Thus, as is the case with so many other political, economic, and diplomatic phenomena of the postwar period, the "cold war" was the father of the United States foreign-propaganda effort. At the same time, historians of the subject point quite correctly to the spread of the media of mass communications, and particularly radio, during the inter-war period, as greatly facilitating this development. But to say that much, and say no more, is to explain only the immediate impulse and the timing of the initiation of the American peacetime commitment to propaganda abroad and to ignore the fact that, sooner or later, we should have made such a commitment, whether there had ever been a "cold war" or not. The "cold war" was instrumental in producing the commitment, but not decisive. The decisive factor was our emergence as a world power. Indeed, the moment when, I should say, it was first quite clear we should sooner or later embark on an overseas information program was rather the end of the First World War than of the Second.

A world power, such as we already were in the 1920s and 1930s, simply cannot

operate in the modern world without informing the peoples of other nations of what it is doing about matters of common international interest, and why. In fact, we were then doing so, in however crude and rudimentary a form, without adequate recognition of that fact. The issuance of press releases by the Department of State, which dates from 1922, and the inception in 1929 of press briefings by the Secretary of State or a press spokesman of the Department, were two clear symptoms of our movement in this direction. And, of course, private American efforts abroad, of an informational and cultural character, were already of long standing when the Second World War began. They found their clearest expression in the American universities and teachers in the Near East and China.

This is neither the place nor time to delve in detail into all the evidence I think exists to support the thesis that, during the 1920s and 1930s, we were moving surely, however slowly, towards the basic commitment to overseas propaganda which we now have.

If we view our foreign-propaganda effort in these terms, we can see that the "cold war" was a catalyst which greatly hastened the involvement of the United States government in organized propaganda abroad but which led us to view its goals and modes in a peculiar light, not necessarily the one which would have illuminated them if it had been the product of an evolutionary development. If we compare the development of America's effort with that of such an older great power as Great Britain, we can see that evolutionary growth of a foreign-propaganda apparatus in what we may regard as a more normal sequence. Practices and institutions developed at a relatively unhurried pace. The Foreign Office devised ways and means of communicating British views to the world through the institution of the privileged press briefing and through the quasi-official mechanisms of *The Times* and Reuters. The BBC early began to broadcast abroad because of the desirability of linking the metropole by radio with the outposts of empire. Abroad, it was the normal function of British diplomats to brief the local British correspondent. And, in time, too, the concept of the British Council grew up to deal with a longer-range type of informational and cultural activity.

I suggest, therefore, that, following the shock of forced growth of the American propaganda system evoked by the "cold war," we are now gradually resuming the development of what we should in any case have had: a nucleus of official informational, cultural, and educational activities, around which there lies a whole range of private American activities, from education and scientific research to the dissemination of American television programs.

## II

### THE MODES OF THE UNITED STATES COMMITMENT

If we recognize, then, that, as the result of a process of development which has taken place in all states of any significant power, the United States has quite naturally

developed a commitment to propaganda, that leaves us with a number of problems. The first of these is, what is propaganda?

A narrow definition of the term would conform to that which I gather from the literature distributed by the organizers of this symposium would most nearly correspond to what they have in mind. That is to say, propaganda is here treated essentially as informational, commentary, and feature materials dealing with the substance of international affairs, with the activities of the originating country that bear upon its relations with other states, and with the activities of other countries in the sphere of their relations with other states.

A broad definition would recognize the significance of materials and activities outside and apart from the narrow range of international relations. It would embrace cultural relations, relations between educational institutions, relations between scientists and technicians, relations between institutions and persons in the field of the creative and performing arts, and a whole panorama of activities, which, in this country, are the province of nongovernmental organizations but which have either a potential or an actual significance for America's relations with other countries.

It is quite clear that it is towards the broad, rather than the narrow, definition that our development in this field is tending. President Johnson's speech of September 16, 1965, at the Smithsonian Institution was a significant signpost pointing in this direction and the International Education and Health bills introduced into the Congress at the beginning of February 1966 represent a major new effort to implement this concept.

Now, it may seem misleading, or even harmful, to say that international cultural, educational, and artistic activities are "propaganda." But, if we use the word in its altogether neutral sense, as connoting the spreading of information, it is clear that they are, and the best kind of propaganda at that. In discussing the process of communication, Edward R. Murrow used to describe the thousands of miles an instruction had to travel from Washington to an American diplomatic post overseas before it could be delivered by an American official to an official of the local Foreign Ministry, and he stressed that the most crucial portion of its journey were the last six feet, from the lips of the American diplomat to the ears of the foreign official. There is no more effective medium of communication than face-to-face contact, and, increasingly, we, and the other states interested in influencing the opinions of others, have been turning to it and will increasingly do so in the future.

The need which moves us in the direction of broadening the concept of propaganda to include many forms of international communication not hitherto usually thought of under that title, arises from the increasing interpenetration of human societies. It is generally accepted that science is international, and so, increasingly, are art, literature, economics, sociology, technology, and medicine. There is scarcely a field in which we cannot learn something from other nations and they cannot learn

something from us. In that process, we inevitably learn something *about* other nations, and they learn something about us. It is this process, and its expansion, to which we are increasingly committed.

A second problem arising from the United States commitment to propaganda is, what is its proper content? Here, we can try an answer in two dimensions: the first, narrow, the second, broad.

Narrowly considered, the problem of content is bounded by two primary criteria. The first is credibility. In an open society, it is quite impossible for an official propaganda organization to make believe that certain things do not exist and, in its output, to ignore them. The domestic commercial media and the large resident corps of foreign correspondents, subject to no constraints, will surely report those things, regardless of what the official organization does, or does not do, about them. So that, all other considerations quite apart, the official organization is compelled to deal with them if it wishes its audience abroad to rely upon it for accuracy, speed, and comprehensiveness in the treatment of news. And if the audience does not regard the official medium as credible, its sponsors might as well save themselves the time, trouble, and money of maintaining it.

The second criterion is accuracy of reflection of national policy. It is a characteristic of a free press that it thrives on criticism and conflict. The American press quite correctly prides itself upon fulfilling, to a very substantial extent, the role of a loyal opposition and of a constant critic of government at all levels. This is as it should be.

But if one of USIA's media—the Voice of America, let us say—were to restrict itself simply to parroting the headlines and leading articles of the American press, it would, on some issues, convey to its foreign audience a distorted impression which highlighted only those aspects of the event headlined in the press and ignored much of the context in which it occurred. It thus becomes a function of the Voice of America to place the news in context, to report, first of all, the facts of rioting in the Watts district of Los Angeles, then to try to explain why the Watts rioting occurred, and finally to place this event and its causes within the context of the evolution of American society and the changing relationship of the American Negro to his fellow Americans. It would be misleading if any of these elements of the story were reported without the others.

Looked at in the broad aspect, the problem of content is a good deal simpler. It rests upon the fact that Americans, whatever their occupations or interests, are going to be themselves. By and large, we are interested in other people, in their reactions to us and to our country, and are anxious to help them understand us. The foreigner who visits this country goes away, not with too little information or too few impressions upon which to form a judgment about it, but with the opposite difficulty, that of trying to bring some order into a mass of information and a welter of impressions.

The third problem is, what are we trying to achieve through our commitment to propaganda?

It is easy to be at once too modest and too demanding in our views of what can be achieved by propaganda. On the one hand, we can never measure with clinical precision the effect of this or that aspect of our effort and decide accordingly to add an hour of broadcast time in this language and take away an hour in that, to discontinue this publication and commence one of a different type, in order to achieve a calculated effect upon the audiences in question. This does not mean, however, that the effect of our efforts cannot be gauged, however roughly, by experienced propagandists. On the other hand, we should not hope to change the shape of the world through propaganda. We can hope to change attitudes, but attitudes are not synonymous with actions. Actions more often result from immediate physical and social stimuli than from appeals from abroad, however cleverly conceived.

In the narrow sense, our propaganda should convey to the rest of the world an accurate picture of what we are doing in the United States, why we are doing it, and what we hope to achieve thereby.

In the broad sense, we are attempting to impart to the world some of the lessons we have learned in coping with problems of increasing complexity in the most advanced of the developed countries. We are attempting to make our experience, in coping with our problems, relevant to those which other societies confront or will confront as they themselves develop.

We have a peculiar responsibility in this. Together with all the people of the world, we are moving at an ever-increasing pace into realms of social and economic development never before entered by man. We must solve problems of a magnitude unimaginable only twenty, or even ten, years ago. At the same time, we help other nations to profit by what we learn in doing this, just as we ourselves, throughout our history, have built upon the experience and accumulated wisdom of others.

#### CONCLUSION

I began by saying that the subject assigned me, the American commitment to public propaganda, seemed still to embody a question. And, of course, it does. The question is not whether the United States is committed to propaganda abroad. It is, and it must be. The question is whether we will deal successfully with the task. This task is not one which government can or should monopolize. It is one in which we should draw upon the whole range of our resources, using them all in proper proportion and balance. Finally, it is one to the solution of which we will all make a contribution, simply by virtue of the fact that we are citizens of America. What we do and how we do it cannot fail to interest the rest of the world. Behind the propaganda of the word is that of the deed. Neither is sufficient by itself. Together, right deeds and right words are the only effective propaganda.