

September 11 and the Need for a Social Science Research Agenda

Wilhelm KEMPF

Department of Psychology at the University of Konstanz, Germany

Abstract. Comparing US propaganda strategies after September 11 with those of the Gulf War and the Bosnia Conflict the paper argues that targeted propaganda measures were not needed in order to plant military logic in the public mind. All that was needed was a lack of understanding of the terror attack and its pseudo-explanation in terms of groundless hate. It was this mind-set, which rejected any analysis of the conflict sources, which ruled out any resolution other than the elimination of the enemy, and which even denied his most essential human rights. And it is this mind set, which threatens to reduce democracy to a pure façade, to destroy its credibility and to produce even more hatred against the Western world.

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‘So great are the psychological resistances to war in modern times, that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor’ [1]. In this process, propaganda plays an important role. The aim of pro-war propaganda is to get people to strongly and personally identify with the goals of the war and to manipulate their entanglement in the conflict in order to reorganize their hierarchy of values so that winning the war is at the top, and all other values – like truth, ethical considerations and individual rights – are only subservient to this goal.

In order to win public support for war, it is necessary to produce a mindset where there is a delicate balance between the experience of threat and confidence in winning the conflict. Typical features of this mindset are its Zero-Sum orientation and the designation of force as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. It is characterized by cognitive factors like

- idealization of own rights and goals,
- denial of the opponent’s rights and demonizing his intentions,
- rejection of a peaceful settlement of the conflict,
- demonizing the opponent’s actions and emphasis on his dangerousness,
- denial of possibilities for cooperation,
- denial of superordinate rights and goals and
- justification of own side’s actions and emphasis on own strength.

And it has emotional consequences, like

- mistrust of the enemy,
- feelings of being threatened,
- denial of a threat to the opponent: If he behaves well, he has nothing to fear!
- Confidence in winning: Good will prevail over Evil!

Due to the overall cognitive and emotional mindset, outrage at the war is transformed into outrage at the enemy [2].

The idea underlying traditional propaganda strategies was to transmit propaganda messages from the top on down and to unify society in its struggle against an enemy. As Lasswell [1] put it: "Civilian unity is not achieved by the regimentation of muscles. It is achieved by a repetition of ideas rather than movements. The civilian mind is standardized by news not by drills. Propaganda is the method by which this process is aided and abetted." Accordingly, the traditional means of propaganda are:

- Restrictive methods like censorship to suppress information that might reduce patriotic spirit.
- Supportive methods like the fabrication, selection and exaggeration of information that might strengthen it.

And the professional credo is: Truth is only raw material. Lies are merely a technical, not a moral problem. If no lies are needed, so much the better.

And lies are not needed if the propagandist manages to get the public personally engaged in a conflict. This was the beginning of psychological propaganda techniques that build upon:

- Polarization of identification suggestions [3].
- Production of a specific motivational logic [3]
- Immunization of the propaganda message against criticism with measures like: harmonization of referential levels [3], double-bind communication (cf. Reimann, 2002), and two-sided messages [4].

The idea behind these techniques is: to get the public emotionally involved and then wait for those escalation-oriented changes in the cognitive representation of conflict that we can observe whenever a person, a group or a society is involved in competitive conflicts and that are due to the logic of the win-lose model underlying competitive conflicts [2].

Psychological preparation for war is a time consuming process, however: in the case of the Gulf War, it took 6 months, in the case of the Bosnia Conflict 6 years – but in case of the War on Terrorism it took only 6 weeks. In order to get the US public to support the Gulf War, it was necessary to construct a complex motivational logic that included a specific interpretation of the past, assessment of the present and promise for the future [5].

Interpretation of the past: The appeasement policy towards Adolf Hitler caused the Second World War and a world catastrophe. If Hitler had been stopped early enough, the war could have been avoided. The same goes for Saddam Hussein. If he is not stopped now, right after the invasion of Kuwait, he will go on to attack the whole Persian Gulf area.

Assessment of the present: The collapse of socialism and the triumph of Western democracy are just the right moment to restore the position of the UN and to show terrorist states that no gains can be had through violence. Economic sanctions would work too slowly. While the world was waiting, Iraq might build nuclear weapons or might attack with chemical weapons.

Promise for the future: After the war, a New World Order will be established where the rights of small nations will not be allowed to be trampled on and where the rules of international justice will be respected. The alternative scenario would be the world's oil reserves ending under the control of a nuclear-armed Iraq, and dictators everywhere would be encouraged.

Based on this motivational logic, the right balance between threat and confidence could be established rather easily, and even more so, since most average citizens didn't know much about Iraq or Saddam Hussein, and human rights organizations, as well as pacifist groups, had already been opposed to Saddam Hussein during the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988), at a time when Saddam Hussein was still an esteemed ally of the United States.

In former Yugoslavia, the situation was much more complicated [6]: Serbia, which had been part of the anti-German alliance during two world wars, was holding on to socialism. This was not in accordance with the interests of the European Union. German and Austrian diplomacy supported the struggle for independence in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. As these countries were ready to open their economy to the European market, this coincided with EU interests as well.

Croatia and Bosnia had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, however, and their current leadership was rather suspect: In his book *Wastelands of Historical Reality*, Croat President Tudjman had made statements that could easily be interpreted as anti-Semitic, and in his book *The Islamic Declaration*, Bosnian President Izetbegovic openly advocated creating a fundamentalist Islamic state.

Although the Bosnia Conflict involved a similar motivational logic as the New World Order concept, this was not sufficient to unite the European nations against Serbia and to get the United States involved. In order to produce the necessary balance between threat and confidence, propaganda could not simply take sides against the Serbs, but differences in the media images of the three ethnic groups developed gradually and were mainly due to the different roles in which the groups were portrayed by the media. The most positive role was constructed for the Muslims, who were depicted as least confrontational and most often in a defensive position. Both Serbs and Croats, on the other hand, were portrayed more as aggressors.

Although the military logic on the Serbian side was the least reported, the negative image of the Serbs resulted from other factors, however. First, Serbian actors were covered by the media twice as often as each of the other groups, and Serbian behavior was depicted as most confrontational. Second, Serbian rights and intentions were given little attention, and as possibilities for cooperation between the Serbs and their opponents were accentuated, confrontational Serbian behavior appeared to be even less justified. Third, the press stimulated the least outrage about the opponents of the Serbs and rather downplayed the suffering on the Serbian side. Fourth, incentives for social identification with Serbian victims were extremely low, and there was even a considerable amount of dehumanization of Serbian victims.

While it is not surprising that the international media portrayed the Muslims in a defensive role and assigned the Serbs the role of evil-doers, the really striking move was to get the Croats out of the line of fire, and even more so, since the Croats placed the greatest emphasis on military logic and rejected the logic of peace more decisively than the other parties. Both the Croat emphasis on military logic and the rejection of peace logic by the Croats could seemingly be justified, however, by giving the highest priority to their rights and intentions, as well as by the rejection of cooperative alternatives.

Nonetheless: although the international press reported quite unequally about the three ethnic groups, the coverage was quite ambiguous about all three of them. The press identified itself with none of the Bosnian war parties, but rather with the international community, which had a problem with the ethnic groups in Bosnia.

In doing so, the media supported a policy of peace enforcement (by military intervention) rather than a policy of peacemaking (by third-party mediation efforts). The more deeply the international actors got involved in the conflict, the greater was the media sympathy for them. The more they managed to stay in a neutral position, the more they were criticized, and the more negative was their press coverage.

In the case of the Afghan War, things were completely different, and far less propaganda was needed to persuade the public to support the war. In order to understand this, we must be aware that the emotional and motivational correlates of warfare are not only a consequence of the respective cognitive mind set, but also that the cognitive correlates result from emotional entanglement in the conflict. There is a circular relationship between emotions and cognitions, and each influences the other [7].

In the case of the Afghan War, the public's emotional entanglement in the conflict was the greatest possible from the start. All that was necessary in order to motivate the public to support the war was to identify the enemy, to justify military action as an appropriate response and to make victory appear probable.

The attacks of September 11 were certainly criminal acts of horrendous proportions, the threat was real, and it could be experienced first hand by anybody. Thousands of innocent people were killed in the heart of the USA, and as life is the most essential human right, there was no need to idealize US rights and goals. There was also no need to demonize the attack: that it was a brutal act of terrorism was self-evident. And there was no need to emphasize the opponent's dangerousness: The threat was real, and what happened on September 11 could have happened anywhere.

As a criminal act, the terrorist attack of September 11 could have been dealt with on the basis of international law. The Taliban could have been persuaded to turn over Osama Bin Laden to a neutral country, and an independent court could have tried him. Terrorist organizations all over the world could have been fought by police operations subject to control by courts, and the struggle against terrorism could have been fought in compliance with the democratic principle of the division of power. Perhaps this is what critics like the German author Günter Grass or German President Johannes Rau were thinking of when they called for a civilized response to the terrorist acts. Obviously, however, such a civilized response was not on the political agenda. The events of September 11 were not only a terrorist attack against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they were also a symbolic act that humiliated the US by demonstrating what had been unimaginable before: the vulnerability of the American homeland.

In a situation like this, it was only a natural impulse that American self-confidence needed to be restored and strength needed to be demonstrated by fighting back. Fighting back needed to be justified, however. It could not look like pure vengeance, and to accomplish this, the attack had to be seen as more than criminal and humiliating. By interpreting the attack as an attack against civilization in general, the planned war could be made to seem like a sort of civilized police operation employing all available means, including armed force, which would add to the expectation of victory. And as every nation in the world was given a choice between unconditional solidarity with the US or being regarded as part of the terrorist network, the war presumably would not threaten any civilized country either.

One month after the terrorist attack, on October 11, 2001, US President George W. Bush [8] came to the climax of this interpretation and even aggravated it by expressing an inability to understand what had happened and why:

“How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I’ll tell you how I respond: I’m amazed. I’m amazed that there’s such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us. I am – like most Americans, I just can’t believe it, because I know how good we are.”

The rest of the mind set that was needed to gain public support for the War against Terrorism was due to pure automatism: outrage at violence was replaced by outrage at the enemy, literally anyone could be suspected of anti-Americanism, any negotiations with the Taliban could be rejected, and higher-order rights could be denied: Any state which did not cooperate with the USA would be a legitimate target. Any sort of peaceful settlement of the conflict had to be rejected, and the entire mind-set turned into a zero-sum game where warfare was the only acceptable option.

Naturally, these are all traditional propaganda contents, and the media were saturated with them. Targeted propaganda measures were not needed to plant them in the public mind. All that was needed was a lack of understanding of the terror attack of 11 September and its pseudo-explanation in terms of completely groundless hate, through which the initially still unknown enemy was demonized, the US idealized, and the search for possible conflict causes became taboo.

Nonetheless, it can be assumed that George W. Bush’s statement was not a deliberate propaganda message. It sounds like the honest words of a somewhat simple-minded man facing an unbelievable excess of violence against his own people, expressing what millions of people felt at this moment. People who never gave much thought to other people in some distant corner of the world, to whom our wealth and abundance is their poverty and starvation, our liberties destroy their culture, and our way of life is an insult to their concept of honor.

Nonetheless, these words were destined to set the world on fire. They declared total war, rejected an analysis of the sources of conflict, ruled out any resolution other than the elimination of the enemy and even denied his most essential human rights. That the US government later decided that thousands of imprisoned suspected or actual Al-Qaeda terrorists were neither combatants (otherwise they would have been entitled to the protection of the Geneva Conventions) nor criminals (otherwise they would have been entitled to the protection of American criminal law), but rather belonged to a third category without rights or claims to respect for their human dignity, was merely the logical consequence. For words like these are also words suitable to destroy the so-called “civilized world” from within. – And all this, without calls for revenge, without enthusiasm for war in the true sense of the word and out of the pure necessity of dealing with the emotional burden imposed by the terror of September 11.

Even if President Bush is right, and there is this vitriolic hatred against the US and Western civilization in some corners of the world, fighting terrorism exclusively by military means bears the danger that the values of democracy will gradually be reduced to a pure facade. The US concentration camp at Guantanamo and the torture of Iraqi prisoners of war offer alarming signals that point in this direction. And the more Western democracy loses its credibility, the more hatred will increase.

Wiping out the roots of hatred can only be accomplished on the basis of cultural change, and it is not only those societies where this hatred is present, it is our own societies as well that need to progress in the direction of more respect for others. How

this cultural change can be stimulated by an open intra- and intercultural discourse, what sort of input the media can provide in order to stimulate such a discourse and how the media can offer a platform for this discourse are among the questions that urgently need to be put on the research agenda.

There is no need to say that the aim of such an agenda cannot be to justify terrorism. The aim must be to understand the roots of terrorism. And these roots cannot be found in the Islamic culture per se. They need to be searched for in the Western world as well, and particularly in the interaction between the two.

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