

A CIA propaganda apparatus aimed at the American people

By Carla Binion

October 20, 2001—The following events involving CIA propaganda aimed at the American people occurred years ago. However, some of the events' same participants and their ideological heirs are around today wielding their influence on Congress, the president and the public. One participant, Oliver North, now hosts a war stories program on Fox network. This is a little slice of history worth remembering.

Journalist Robert Parry shows why remembering the past is important in "Lost History," (The Media Consortium, 1999.) Parry is an award-winning investigative reporter who has worked at the Associated Press, Newsweek and for PBS's "Frontline." He broke a number of stories on Iran-Contra and exposed Oliver North's covert White House intelligence network.

Parry points out that certain unsavory chapters of American history have been lost to the public memory. Some unpleasant historical facts have been glossed over or whitewashed for innocuous reasons. However, the history Parry covers in his above-referenced book has not been lost through benign neglect but, in the author's words, because of "a calculated abuse of information in the cause of raw power."

Parry says that in the early 1980s, the Reagan administration debated the need for a propaganda apparatus in order to control public opinion. "Summarizing this debate," writes Parry, "Kate Semerad, an external-relations official at the Agency for International Development, expressed something like envy for the power of totalitarian states to determine what citizens see and hear."

In a memo circulated in the early 80s, Semerad wrote, "The totalitarian states whose intelligence and propaganda apparatus we face have no internal problem in denying their citizens access to information or even flagrantly lying to them. We have neither the apparatus nor the legal mechanism which would allow the success of an effort to emulate that of Moscow, Habana [sic] and Managua."

Parry adds the Semerad memo said a U. S. propaganda apparatus was necessary. "We can and must go over the heads of our Marxist opponents directly to the American people," Semerad wrote. She also said, "Our targets would be: within the United States, the Congress, specifically the Foreign Affairs Committees and their staffs, . . . the general public [and] the media."

According to Parry, "the fledgling [propaganda] operation took the initial name of 'Project Truth.' Later . . . Reagan gave the concept the name 'Project Democracy' and its ostensible focus was international." Internal Reagan administration records show that a Project Democracy draft proposal detailed plans to pay for the operation by 'harnessing financial resources from a 'coalition of wealthy individuals'; U. S. defense contractors and private foundations."

The Project Truth/Project Democracy group recruited CIA propaganda operations expert Walter Raymond, Jr. President Reagan chose Raymond to manage both the domestic and foreign “public diplomacy” campaigns aimed at the American public, the media and Congress. Raymond was assigned to the National Security Council staff in 1982.

Presidential executive orders prohibited the CIA from influencing U. S. politics and policies, according to Parry, as a “safeguard established to prevent the spy agency from corrupting U. S. democratic institutions and creating a secret shadow government.” Parry also writes that federal law barred the Executive Branch from “spending money to lobby Congress, except for the traditional practices of giving testimony, making speeches and talking one-on-one with members.”

Walter Raymond later told an Iran-Contra committee he resigned from the CIA in April 1983 so “there would be no question of any contamination of this.” However, Parry says that Raymond’s colleagues “remarked that he ran domestic public diplomacy much the same way he would have organized a CIA propaganda operation against a target nation.”

Raymond coordinated the “public diplomacy” efforts of the State Department, the Defense Department, the CIA, the NSC staff, the United States Information Agency and the Agency for International Development. Parry writes that a May 5, 1983 “public diplomacy strategy paper” discussed ways to “correct” public opinion of those opposing the Reagan administration’s support for the covert war in Nicaragua.

The strategy paper said that in order to alter public opinion, “diplomacy” efforts should be persistently directed toward Congress and the news media. The paper said, “Our public diplomacy effort must be directed to: obtaining congressional support for economic and security assistance [in El Salvador and] to foster a climate of editorial and public opinion that will encourage congressional support of administration policy.”

In addition, the strategy paper said “opinion leaders in the mass media” should be used to convey the Reagan administration’s view to the American people. Edgar Chamorro, a Jesuit-trained professor, was chosen by the CIA to help elevate the contras’ public image. His job was to sell American journalists on the idea that the contras were “no longer a bunch of murdering terrorists,” according to Parry.

However, Chamorro became disillusioned over being ordered to tell so many lies and “felt compromised when instructed to claim contra credit for military actions conducted by the CIA,” says Parry. Chamorro was also disheartened by the contras’ extensive, gratuitous brutality, including their kidnapping and killing of an elderly Nicaraguan couple he knew personally.

During the early 80s, a number of journalists also reported contra wrongdoing, including violence against innocent civilians. For example, correspondent Raymond Bonner in his series of reports for the New York Times, revealed that the U. S.-supported contras were involved in drug dealing and human rights abuses.

Walter Raymond wrote in a memo to his subordinates that it was important for the Reagan “perception management” team to work at “gluing black hats on the Sandinistas and white hats on the [Contras].” The Sandinistas were essentially labeled evildoers, while the contras were glamorized as “freedom fighters.”

A National Security Council official told Parry that the Reagan team’s propaganda campaign was (in Parry’s words) “modeled after CIA covert operations abroad where a political goal is more important than the truth.” The official said, “They were trying to manipulate [U.S.] public opinion—using the tools of Walt Raymond’s trade craft which he learned from his career in the CIA covert operation shop.”

Parry writes that another administration official told the Miami Herald’s Alfonso Chardy, “If you look at it as a whole, the Office of Public Diplomacy was carrying out a huge psychological operation, the kind the military conduct to influence the population in denied or enemy territory.”

In order to promote the idea that there was a groundswell of public anti-Sandinista sentiment (and therefore influence Congress to go along with Reagan’s policies), the CIA secretly funneled money to human rights and church groups to encourage them to promote the Reagan administration’s view of the Sandinistas, according to Parry.

He points out that in “Packaging the Contras: A Case of CIA Disinformation,” Edgar Chamorro wrote that the CIA funneled money to Nicaraguan exile Humberto Belli to help publish Belli’s “Nicaragua: Christians Under Fire,” a book attacking the Sandinistas. Chamorro added, “of course the CIA told us to say that the money for the book . . . was from private individuals who wanted to remain anonymous.”

According to Parry, in order to help control American dissenters, Oliver North urged rightwing security consultant Philip Mabry and others to ask the FBI to open investigations on contra opponents. Mabry informed the Boston Globe that North told him that “if the FBI received letters from five or six unrelated sources all requesting an investigation of the same groups, that would give the Bureau a mandate to go ahead and investigate.” (The Boston Globe, February 29, 1988.)

The FBI had already investigated the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador [CISPES] starting in 1981. Documents released under the Freedom of Information Act showed that 52 FBI field offices investigated CISPES and 138 related groups over a four-year period. Parry writes that the documents revealed that “enthusiastic FBI agents saw their job as silencing dissent, not enforcing the law.”

He quotes one November 10, 1983 memo from the FBI’s New Orleans office, saying, “It is imperative at this time to formulate some plan of attack against CISPES and specifically against individuals who defiantly display their contempt for the U. S. government by making speeches and propagandizing their cause.”

Parry also says the Philadelphia FBI office, on March 6, 1984, cited 12 organizations that had protested U. S. intervention in Central America, including the Friends Peace Committee and a hospital workers union. A December 14, 1984 FBI report from Cincinnati, Ohio targeted

individuals and groups “involved in activities contrary to the foreign policy of the United States in Central America.”

(The new Office of Homeland Security recently created by George W. Bush, will have the authority to suspend a number of citizens’ rights. This office has potential for abuse of power far more serious than the above-referenced FBI abuses.)

“While the FBI harassed these peace groups,” writes Parry, “the Reagan administration relied on the most visible arm of the Casey-Raymond ‘perception management’ network to pummel out-of-step journalists.” This public arm was a new office called the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America.

This office was opened at the State Department, and the Reagan administration chose Otto Reich, a former Miami city official, to run the operation. Part of Reich’s job was to pump the Reagan team’s Central American propaganda “through as many outlets as possible,” says Parry.

Once, when Reagan became angry at CBS News for its coverage of his Central American policies, Reich visited the CBS News Washington office. Parry says Secretary of State George Schultz later sent Reagan a memo saying Reich had complained for one hour to the offending correspondent, and for two more hours to his Washington bureau chief “to point out the flaws in the information.”

Schultz also told Reagan that this was only one example of “what the Office of Public Diplomacy has been doing to improve the quality of information the American people are receiving. . . . It has been repeated dozens of times over the past months.”

Parry writes that according to Paul Allen of National Public Radio [NPR], Otto Reich “went ballistic,” demanding meetings with NPR’s executives and reporters after NPR did a story about a contra massacre of farm workers. Allen said the segment was “a long piece and very, very moving. . . . There was no particular effort to apologize for the contras. This was just a story about a bunch of people who got caught up in the war and were shot up.”

Allen says Reich and one of his aides, Jonathan Miller, “made the point that our broadcasts were being measured. . . . Miller said some ungodly number of minutes were ‘anti-contra.’ We said, ‘how could you decide what was anti-contra?’ But the point was, ‘we’re monitoring you—holding a stop watch on you.’”

Parry says that in September 1984 he received a Spanish-language manual called “Psychological Operations in Guerilla Warfare.” Most of the text was routine instruction on the use of propaganda, but, according to Parry, some of the advice “veered off into violent techniques, apparently drawn from longstanding U. S. counterinsurgency strategies.”

The CIA had prepared the instruction manual for the contras. Parry reported to the AP wires that, “The CIA produced a psychological warfare manual for Nicaraguan rebels that instructs them to hire professional criminals for ‘selective jobs’ and says some government officials can be ‘neutralized’ with the ‘selective use of violence,’ intelligence sources say.”

Parry's AP report continued, "The 90-page manual, written in Spanish, also urges the rebels to create a 'martyr' by arranging a violent demonstration that leads to the death of one of their supporters, and it tells how to coerce Nicaraguans into carrying out assignments against their will." [AP, October 14, 1984.]

The murder manual story was later picked up by the New York Times and put on the front page. Parry says congressional Democrats blasted the CIA "for publishing a booklet more befitting the traditions of communist Russia than a democracy."

Days later, Edgar Chamorro affirmed that it was common practice for the contras to execute Nicaraguan government officials. [AP, October 20, 1984.] Parry says the CIA was enraged because its "perception management" code had been violated.

According to Parry, in October 1987, while the congressional Iran-contra committee prepared its final report, he discovered a draft chapter had been written on the CIA's role in the Reagan team's propaganda apparatus. However, certain Republicans fought to eliminate the story.

The Democrats asked three moderate Republicans—Warren Rudman, William Cohen and Paul Trible—to sign the majority report. The moderates said they would sign only if the draft chapter on public diplomacy was excluded, according to Parry.

The eventual compromise allowed some parts of the draft chapter to remain. "But," writes Parry, "the full chapter with a detailed explanation of the public diplomacy operation was left on the editing room floor."

He adds, "The American people were thus spared the draft chapter's troubling conclusion: that a domestic covert propaganda apparatus had existed, run by one of the CIA's most senior specialists, sent to the NSC by [CIA director] Bill Casey, to create and coordinate an inter-agency public diplomacy mechanism [that] did what a covert CIA operation in a foreign country might do. [It] attempted to manipulate the media, the Congress and public opinion to support the Reagan administration's policies."

In the end, Otto Reich's office at the State Department was shut down. However, one senior public diplomacy operative told Parry, "they can shut down the public diplomacy office, but they can't shut down public diplomacy."

Remembering this slice of history gives context and perspective to current events. It should also inspire a healthy amount of skepticism regarding what we're being told about the war on terrorism, and an interest in learning all we can from reliable alternative news sources and not exclusively from politicians or from the corporate-owned media. If we remember these mistakes from the Iran-contra era, we might avoid repeating them as we face the era defined by the war on terrorism.