ONLINE JOURNAL ™

Goebbels and mass mind control: Part Three

How PR opinion-shapers undermine the people's political power

By Carla Binion

April 27, 2001—In parts one and two, we compared the methods of Hitler's propagandist, Joseph Goebbels, with the PR techniques of today's corporate spin doctors. We also looked at the ways in which corporate PR spin works against the public interest regarding health care and the environment. Now we'll explore the ways that corporate propaganda undermines the political power of ordinary citizens.

Journalist Frank Rich wrote in a recent New York Times opinion piece that he felt he was living through a "Twilight Zone" episode when he read the Palm Beach Post's scoop saying that Palm Beach's butterfly ballot cost Al Gore "about 6,600 votes, more than 10 times what he needed to overcome George W. Bush's slim lead in Florida." Rich said the reason it felt as if he had entered "The Twilight Zone," was because, beyond Palm Beach, he could find no sign such a thing had happened.

"I turned on my TV," writes Rich, "and had to search to find a mention of the Post's story. It might as well have been a hallucination."

In an article entitled "The Invisible People," (The Progressive, March 2001) June Jordan writes about Election 2000's disenfranchised African-American voters and the corporate-owned news media's neglect of the story. Jordan, a noted author and professor of African-American Studies at the University of California-Berkeley, says, "We have moved from The Invisible Man to The Invisible People. It's a raging and a sorrow at the terrible meaning of that discount—for us, and for democracy itself."

The corporate-owned news media "invents reality," as author and educator Michael Parenti has said, by instructing the American people on which news stories are real, and which facts to ignore. Parenti has also written (Land of Idols, St. Martin's Press, 1994) that our political system can be seen in one of three ways:

1. "A conservative celebration of the wonders of our free-market society, coupled with an insistence that capitalism would be still more wonderful were it not for meddlesome government regulations and the demands of undeserving, low-income people who feed out of the public trough."

2. A liberal complaint about "aberrant problems that remain in an otherwise basically good System."

3. A radical analysis "that sees ecological crisis, military interventions, the national security State, homelessness, poverty, an inequitable tax system, and undemocratic social institutions, such as the corporate-owned media, not as irrational outcomes of a basically rational system, but as rational results of a system whose central goal is the accumulation of wealth and power for the few."

Parenti adds that if you take the radical analysis perspective, you "cross an invisible line and will be labeled in mainstream circles a 'conspiracy theorist.'" He notes that Abraham Lincoln might today be dismissed as a conspiracy theorist, because Lincoln once observed in a speech, "These capitalists generally act harmoniously, and in concert, to fleece the people."

However, Parenti adds that the corporation/ruling class's mode of operation is systemic and institutional rather than conspiratorial. The fact that corporate domination is built into our existing political system, and into many of our institutions, makes it a more daunting problem than a grand and aberrant conspiracy might be.

In a brilliant article for Online Journal (4/24/01), Scott Morschhauser took up the same issue, pointing out that the label "conspiracy theory' is used by those defending corporate interests the same way they use the label 'communist.' If you are successful at pinning a person or idea with a negative label, then the public will ignore the message. It doesn't matter whether or not the label fits. The facts don't matter. All that you have to do is accuse (see the elder Bush administration for prime examples.)"

When corporate PR teams are able to confuse the public by spinning citizen dissenters as "conspiracy theorists" or as "wacko, tree-hugging environmentalists" or as "extremist fringe," they are able to marginalize activists and dilute their political effectiveness. Journalist Norman Solomon once suggested that rather than succumbing to media manipulation, we can "tune up our personal and collective 'radar screens' to track unidentified flying propaganda."

In "False Hope," (Common Courage Press, 1994) Solomon also discusses the subject of public confusion. He writes about the various ways in which corporate PR spin and media "illusion-making" confuse the public. Solomon quotes Anne Wilson Schaef on the results of this kind of confusion:

"First, it keeps us powerless and controllable. No one is more controllable than a confused person; no society is more controllable than a confused society. Politicians know this better than anyone, and that is why they use innuendo, veiled references, and out-and-out lies instead of speaking clearly and truthfully.

"Second, it keeps us ignorant. Professionals give their clients confusing information cloaked in intimidating language that lay-people cannot understand. They preserve their one-up status while preventing us from learning about our own bodies, our legal rights, and our psychology.

"Third, it keeps us from taking responsibility for our own lives. No one expects confused people to own up to the things they think, say, or do . . .

"Fourth, it keeps us busy. When we must spend all our time and energy trying to figure out what is going on, we have none left over for reflecting on the system, challenging it, or exploring alternatives to it."

A confused person will stay stuck within the corporate-dominated system, because creating new options requires mental clarity. Confusion also causes numbness and political passivity.

Frank Rich's "Twilight Zone" experience of the media's ignoring the butterfly ballot story, and June Jordan's sense that African-Americans have become invisible, are normal, healthy responses to the corporate media's lying about reality. When the people see one reality with their own eyes, and simultaneously the corporate media denies that reality, the effect is hallucinatory.

People need truthfulness about politics in order to operate powerfully in the world. Truth is one of psychologist Abraham Maslow's "meta-needs." It has always been a high priority for the world's spiritual and philosophical thinkers. Factual information is a necessary foundation in order for ordinary Americans to set priorities for political action and organize accordingly.

A high priority concern might be weighing corporate interests against the public interest. Another priority might be clearly deciding what our values are. Corporate spokespeople sometimes try to blur the distinction between, for example, good-versus-harmful effects on the environment, or good-versus-harmful health care proposals.

Some corporate spokespeople claim terms such as "good" or "truth" or "justice" can only be vague, misleading "weasel words," despite the fact that philosophers from Aristotle, to the various Enlightenment-era philosophers, to today's best political thinkers have used such terms freely, and have helped clarify their meaning.

For example, the dialogues of Plato explore the meaning of the word "justice." Harvard Professor John Rawls has said, "A just basic structure will be one which produces a proper distribution of prospects of obtaining primary goods, such as income and health care."

How do we define "good" or "harmful" for purposes of the subject at hand? Let's just play with possible working definitions, for the sake of argument. Those options which are "good" could be defined as options that promote health, safety and well-being for the largest number of people, in a kind, egalitarian manner, without discrimination against race, sexual orientation, religion or lack of religion.

Those options which are "harmful" might be defined as ones that destroy health, safety and well-being for large numbers of people in order that corporations can increase their profits, without regard for kindness, egalitarianism, and with (at times) discrimination based on race (as during the Florida election debacle, racial profiling, etc.), sexual orientation, religion or lack of religion.

Are there gray areas within those definitions? Yes. Are there complexities, and is there room for debate? Of course. However, the lines between good and harmful; right and wrong; public health

and public detriment are not as blurry as many corporate spokespeople would have us think . . . or, more precisely, would "confuse" us to think.

Most of our founding fathers, Jefferson and Paine among them, didn't want the people confused. Jefferson said repeatedly that democracy could work only if the electorate were "fully informed." He said, "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate power of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion."

Thomas Paine, in "The Rights of Man," urged "education for one million and thirty thousand children," saying that "the poor laws, those instruments of civil torture will be superceded" by an informed public given a modicum of "comfortable provision" by government.

Paine also wrote that as a result of a better informed and educated public, and of government's providing some assistance for the poor, "The hearts of the humane will not be shocked by ragged and hungry children, and persons of seventy and eighty years of age begging for bread. The dying poor will not be dragged from place to place to breathe their last . . . The poor as well as the rich, will then be interested in the support of government, and the cause and apprehension of riots and tumults will cease."

Pop-propagandists such as Rush Limbaugh and his many clones often say, in their usual Orwellian style, that government assistance for the poor actually hurts the poor. Never mind that the Limbaugh types also generally claim to be of the Judeo-Christian tradition. It's interesting to contrast their "screw-the-poor" comments with those attributed to Christ, such as, "What you do for the least of these, you do for me," or with a typical Hebrew proverb, such as, "When a needy man stands at your door, God stands at his side." And, of course, to corporate mouthpieces such as Limbaugh, agnostic or "pagan" humanists (such as Thomas Paine) who might suggest assisting the poor don't count at all.

Limbaugh clone and radio talk show host, Neal Boortz, has said, "That bum sitting on a heating grate, smelling like a wharf, is there by choice. He is there because of the sum total of the choices he has made in his life." ("The Terrible Truth About Liberals," Longstreet Press, 1998.) Boortz implies people are never poor due to being laid off from a job by a corporation that moved offshore in order to pay slave wages; or due to sudden overwhelming medical bills; or, least of all, due to flaws within the corporate-dominated system itself.

Boortz also says this country is a republic rather than a democracy. He claims that the view that this country is meant to be a democracy is an "insidious idea planted by the Left, by liberals anxious to expand the role of government and their own power." Limbaugh often says the same about democracy, and such antidemocratic views have been popular among many right-wing groups in recent years, just they were in Nazi Germany.

The fact is, America is not merely a republic, but a democratic republic. This country has a strong democratic lineage. The above comments by Jefferson and Paine have to do with enhancing American democracy. Activists who worked toward civil rights, women's rights, labor rights and many other social causes, have helped strengthen democracy within the nation.

In parts one and two, we showed that Hitler and his propagandist, Goebbels, worked to dismantle democracy. They accomplished their goal in part by using PR spin, in order to confuse the people and convince them that democracy wasn't good for them. Through propaganda, Goebbels created a national "Twilight Zone," making the Jewish people invisible, marginalizing dissenters and rendering potential activists powerless.

Somehow, it has turned out that corporate America's PR spin has also taken aim against democracy, confused the people, created a national "Twilight Zone," made ordinary Americans (especially Jewish and African-Americans) invisible, marginalized dissenters and rendered potential activists powerless.

Ordinary Americans have been rendered at least so powerless that we have not yet found a way to persuade our elected representatives to enforce laws that would curb corporate excesses when it comes to polluting the environment; to create legislation that would give this country affordable pharmaceutical drugs or a good health care system; or to bring back the Fairness Doctrine or create similar new legislation, so that our nation's news media is not entirely corporate-controlled.

In a Showtime movie aired this week, Varian's War, the lead character (played by William Hurt) helped bring around 2,000 artists and intellectuals to America, to escape the Nazi Holocaust. A character played by the actor Alan Arkin described the Nazis as "destroying everything they do not understand, which is everything that makes life beautiful and sweet and pure."

Corporate polluters, health care opponents, and illusion-makers, probably don't understand that they are contributing to the destruction of (almost) everything that makes life beautiful, sweet and pure. However, it is up to ordinary Americans with clear vision to toss a little light on the subject. In our proposed working definition of "good," working to preserve the beautiful, sweet and pure things in life has to figure in somewhere. It is a better way to spend a life than screwing the poor, plundering the earth and grubbing for corporate profit.