

Critical thinking during the fog of war

By Carla Binion

September 16, 2001—The well-known phrase “fog of war” and the aphorism “truth is the first casualty of war” apply to our nation’s current collective psychological state. Ever since the terrorism occurred, people who previously showed healthy skepticism regarding the corporate-owned media spin suddenly buy every word the TV talking heads say.

People are highly suggestible and controllable when in a state of numbing shock. Once in a state of shock and fear, a public is susceptible to surrendering its critical thinking. The recent terrorist attacks put the American public into just such a state.

Previously skeptical Americans are now willing to uncritically rally around George Bush, and to say, yes, we’ll trust political leaders who have deceived us in the past, and, yes, we must spend billions on an unending war on terrorism, without knowing even roughly what the blueprint for that war might be.

Let’s take the time to remember who Bush and his advisers are.

Taking a moment to review what Bush and the CIA are capable of doing to the American people doesn’t mean the U. S. shouldn’t stop terrorists. It just means we also need to realize what can happen if Congress gives Bush and the CIA a blank check.

The CIA has repeatedly shown brazen contempt for the American people by using the public as guinea pigs. It’s a matter of public record that the CIA used its infamous MKULTRA program to develop social control and mind control techniques.

According to Final Report, Book 1, Foreign and Military Intelligence, United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., April 26, 1976, the CIA’s MKULTRA program had to do with “the research and development of chemical, biological and radiological materials capable of employment in clandestine operations to control human behavior.”

The above-referenced report also says the MKULTRA program techniques included “radiation, electroshock, various forms of psychiatry, psychology, sociology and anthropology, graphology, harassment substances, and paramilitary devices and materials.” The reports goes on to say that the CIA tested LSD and other drugs on unwitting Americans.

The same government document also reveals a CIA-Army program, MKNAOMI, a project that involved the agency’s dangerous stockpiling of lethal biological and chemical materials. And that document exposes the CIA’s CHAOS program, wherein the CIA illegally collected intelligence on Americans and infiltrated non-violent antiwar, civil rights and other peaceful protest groups.

When congressional committees investigated CIA and FBI abuses in the 1970s, committee chairman Frank Church described the CIA as a “rogue elephant” with “exceedingly loose controls.” Today, in the name of fighting an unspecified kind of war on terrorism, the CIA asks for even less congressional oversight.

George W. Bush can be understood only in the context of his entire team, those people who advise and influence his political decisions. His dad, George H. W. Bush, was once director of the CIA.

Today, George W. Bush’s advisers include close allies of his father, most notably Vice President Dick Cheney. Cheney has long argued in favor of government secrecy and against congressional oversight of the CIA. Dick Cheney, of course, served as George H. W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense and was the primary architect of the U.S. role in the Persian Gulf War.

Recently, Papa Bush, former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, have appeared on TV, repeating the “we must untie the hands of the CIA” mantra. Another mantra making the rounds on TV talk shows in the wake of the terrorist attacks is the idea that the CIA has no choice but to slither up against evil characters in order to do its job.

According to Jake Tapper (Salon, 9/14/01) George H. W. Bush said on Thursday, September 13, “Human intelligence is a kind of dirty business. And in it you have to deal with unsavory people. But if we’re going to provide the president with the best possible intelligence, we have to free up the intelligence system from some of its constraints.”

Secretary Eagleburger said on Geraldo Rivera’s Wednesday, September 12, program that the CIA is forced to associate with “nasty people” in order to gather intelligence. He said we “have to get off this nonsense that was pushed to us a decade or so ago when we were all so upset because the CIA might be doing something we didn’t want them to do.”

The CIA doesn’t merely “deal with” unsavory people. The agency has supported and helped install many vicious human-rights-violating, murderous dictators, including, for example, the terrorist Augusto Pinochet. Is that the sort of brushing up against nasty people the elder Bush and Eagleburger want the public to condone?

The fact that immediately following our nation’s tragedy, George H. W. Bush and Eagleburger would go on television and feed the public misleading half-truths in order to rally support for the CIA should raise a warning flag in the public mind. Bush’s and Eagleburger’s bending the truth for their own opportunistic political goals, at a time when the public is hurting and vulnerable, indicates their utter contempt for the American people.

The CIA has used its untied and bloody hands to propagandize, spy on and even brutalize the American public. When it comes to propagandizing, the agency steps up its efforts during times of war.

For example, during the Reagan administration, the CIA/National Security Council’s Walter Raymond, Jr., served as “propaganda and disinformation specialist” working to sell Iran-contra to the American people, according to former AP and Newsweek reporter Robert Parry.

Parry, an award-winning investigative journalist who uncovered Oliver North's covert White House intelligence network More than a year before the Iran-contra scandal broke, says the Walter Raymond public diplomacy campaign for Iran-contra was run out of the National Security Council offices.

According to Parry, Walter Raymond's subordinates threatened journalists and political figures who dared to criticize the Reagan administration's Iran-contra policies. They warned reporters and politicians that their criticism wouldn't be "cost-free."

Linguistics professor and author Noam Chomsky has said that if the ruling class in this country (the wealthiest one percent) wants to control the other 99 percent of the population, the rulers have to concern themselves with "manufacturing consent," or manipulating public opinion. This is especially true when the ruling class wants to rally the people to go to war at the public's great expense and personal risk.

Chomsky refers to this process as managing the "minds of the herd."

He points out that if a political leader can justify his policies "by the menace of military aggression" that leader and his administration will "find its power broadly unchallenged." (Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, *Keeping the Rabble in Line*, Common Courage Press, 1994.)

As fate would have it, ever since the recent terrorist attacks, Bush and the CIA can more easily justify their policies by the menace of military aggression and now find their power broadly unchallenged.

The George H. W. Bush administration concerned itself with trying to propagandize the public into supporting war. According to the November 14, 1990, New York Times, then-Secretary of State James Baker had "grown exasperated with White House speech writers" who had not yet come up with a way to sell the Gulf War to the American people. Baker said he wanted to "bring it down to the level of the average American citizen."

At first, Baker thought the American people might support the Gulf War if they feared job losses. The same issue of the New York Times said, "Mr. Baker first began to say that what was at stake in the Gulf was the 'pocketbook' and 'standard of living' of every American."

Then in the fall of 1990, according to James Ridgeway (*The March to War*, 1991), a New York Times opinion poll showed that 54 percent of respondents would support war if they thought the war would prevent Iraq from acquiring nuclear weapons. A short time later, at Thanksgiving, Bush told troops, "Every day that passes brings Saddam one step closer to realizing his goal of a nuclear weapons arsenal."

The fact was there was no immediate nuclear weapons threat from Iraq. In April of 1992, the International Atomic Energy Agency concluded Iraq was "at least three years away from making one crude atomic weapon." (Ramsey Clark, *The Fire This Time*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1994.)

The CIA and government officials have used propaganda to rally support for earlier wars, too. Jerry Fresia writes in *Toward an American Revolution*, "John Stockwell, who worked for the CIA thirteen years, was Chief of the Angolan Task Force in 1975–1976. In that position he was a

sub-committee member of the National Security Council as well as manager of CIA covert operations in Angola.”

“[Stockwell] has stated that one-third of his staff of over 140 personnel consisted of professional propagandists who fed false stories about Cuban and Soviet aggression to the press, the State Department spokesperson, and Ambassador to the United Nations [then Daniel Patrick Moynihan.]”

“Stockwell, referring to information revealed by the Church committee investigations of the CIA, noted that the ‘CIA had co-opted several hundred journalists, including some of the biggest names in the business, to pump its propaganda stories into our media, to teach us to hate Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh and the Chinese and whomever.’”

“Leslie Gelb, the heavyweight of the New York Times, was exposed for having been working covertly with the CIA in 1978 to recruit journalists in Europe to print stories that would create sympathy for the neutron bomb.” (Fresia’s source: John Stockwell, in a talk delivered at the University of California at Santa Barbara, 8 April 1986. Tape available through The Other Americas, UCSB, Santa Barbara, CA.)

In Unreliable Sources (Carol Publishing Group, 1992), journalists Norman Solomon and Martin A. Lee quote reporter Carl Bernstein: “There is ample evidence,” says Bernstein, “that America’s leading publishers [have] allowed themselves and their news organizations to become handmaidens to the intelligence services.”

Solomon and Lee say that hundreds of journalists “have lived double lives, maintaining covert relationships with the CIA that went beyond the normal give-and-take between reporters and their sources,” according to Bernstein’s estimate. They add that many reporters “have altered or killed stories and disseminated propaganda at the request of the Agency.”

In Inventing Reality (St. Martin’s Press, 1993), media critic Michael Parenti says, “according to officials at the United States Information Service (USIS), the government has teams of propagandists in Washington who crank out stories that are wired daily to USIS’s 206 offices in 127 countries. Many of these news plants appear in the foreign press, then return as ‘blowback,’ that is, they are picked up by U.S. correspondents abroad and transmitted to an unsuspecting American public.”

Parenti also points out that mainstream media executives have discouraged journalists from reporting news that doesn’t promote the conventional wisdom about given wars. For example, Parenti says when Jon Alpert, an NBC stringer, returned from Iraq, during the Gulf War, with revealing footage of civilian areas devastated by U.S. aerial attacks, NBC news president Michael Gartner not only refused to air the film but terminated Alpert’s 12-year relationship with the network.”

Some reporters are hired because they already go along with their employer’s tendency to accept conventional wisdom. Parenti says “hiring practices for journalists sometimes include screening tests, psychological quizzes that single out potential reporters more inclined to go along with authority, less inclined to make waves.”

Ever since the recent national tragedy, TV reporters have spoken in one voice, saying we must all rally around Bush and go along with everything he suggests. The TV networks have repeatedly shown glowing images of religion and patriotism. The networks have interwoven those images with sound bites that promote Bush and war on terrorism.

It's understandable that all of us are seeking spiritual, or, in the case of agnostics and atheists, humanistic comfort at this time. It's also natural and good that we're all expressing love for America. But we should be wary of TV networks that repetitiously juxtapose images of religion and patriotism with promos for Bush and war, as if to suggest that our personal spiritual and patriotic inclinations automatically equate to support for George W. Bush and his policies.

The TV networks aren't merely offering up common-folks talk about contemplative prayer to a personal deity, or quiet, private patriotism. Instead, they are repeatedly promoting God-and-country talk that redefines spirituality and patriotism as surrendering one's critical thinking to a politician and his goals.

Does any of this mean Americans should not be willing to have our government track down terrorists and prevent future terrorism? Of course not. We should all be in favor of combating terrorism.

However, we shouldn't rally blindly or give Bush and the CIA a blank check and completely untied hands. One of the most important things we can do is contact members of Congress and tell them we think the CIA should be subject to careful congressional oversight, maybe now more than ever before.

Here's some food for thought: Political leaders who had your own best interests at heart wouldn't exploit or propagandize you at a time when you're especially vulnerable to manipulation. They wouldn't try to push you to uncritically rally behind all their plans. And wouldn't anyone with your best interests at heart do everything possible to encourage you to question the herd mentality?

All I'm saying, in a nutshell, is let's keep our critical thinking in this time of crisis. We need to fight terrorism, but we also need to put today's events into historical context, remembering the histories of the CIA and of George W. Bush and his friends. Let's not allow the "fog of war" to make us forget that challenging our political leaders' conventional wisdom may be the most patriotic thing we can do at a time such as this.

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