

The Pentagon Propaganda Machine

“Most Americans are unaware that they are the target of a ceaseless propaganda campaign waged by the largest advertising agency in the world.” That agency, according to Senator J. W. Fulbright, is the Pentagon. “We do not realize that the U.S. military maintains an active, professional advertising department (‘information office’) on every one of its thousands of installations around the world.”¹ In the realm of advertising, the Pentagon is no different than private businesses in its aims, but it is not subject to the same set of rules and regulations or limited in resources. In 1970, with assistance from Edward A. O’Neill, Senator Fulbright compiled a book of Floor Speeches he gave in an effort to elucidate this condition. Collected under the heading *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*², this document proves to American taxpayers that they are entangled in a multidimensional web of militaristic messages that they pay the Pentagon to spin.

Senator Fulbright was an indispensable critic of American military overreach. He valiantly brought to light and sought to regulate the Pentagon’s public relations apparatus in his capacity as Chair of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relation, a position he held from 1959 until 1973. In his own words, “My aim at that time, as it is now, was to make the Senate and the public at large aware of the multifaceted and quietly pervasive nature of the Defense Department’s public relations activity.”³ For, “the military public relations campaign is directed at all of the American people (‘targets’, they are called in the manuals...) They range from school children and teachers to ranchers and farmers, from union leaders to defense contractors, from Boy Scouts to American Legionnaires. The principal target of the military PR men, however, is the media.”⁴

There is perhaps no better testament to the significance of his criticisms than the fact that it is impossible to imagine a Congressperson today writing a book called *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* in order to argue that it is not the “proper function of the department of defense to education civilians on foreign policy issues...”⁵ and to warn Americans that “we have developed into a society whose most prominent business is violence”.⁶ Thankfully, Fulbright did just that.

The Pentagon Propaganda Machine opens with a discussion of the Army’s efforts to sell its dubious anti-ballistic-missile program, ‘Sentinel’, to cities and towns across the country where its components were to be installed. Ordinary citizens from relevant locations are treated to all-expenses-paid tours of military command centers in an effort to stir up support for the weapons system. In view of the details, Fulbright concludes that the Army’s messaging around Sentinel amounts to a “concerted nation-wide propaganda and public relations campaign seeking public and congressional support for a program of arguable effectiveness and validity. A most unsettling aspect of these various campaigns was the scant attention the disclosure of their existence attracted and the lack of reaction from the American people who were being sold a bill of goods”.⁷ Fulbright recognizes that this apathy is symptomatic of a systemic pathology, namely militarism.

It seems to me that we have grown distressingly used to war. For more than fourteen of the past twenty-eight years we have been fighting somewhere, and we have been ready to fight

almost anywhere for the other fourteen. War and the military have become a part of our environment, like pollution.

Violence is our most important product. We have been spending nearly \$80 billion a year on the military, which is more than the profits of all American business, or, to make another comparison, is almost as much as the total spending of the federal, state, and local governments for health, education, old age and retirement benefits, housing, and agriculture...

We have not only been infected by militarism but by another virus as virulent — an ideological obsession about communism. The head of steam built up in the country by the late Joe McCarthy has never really been blown off, and the extremists of the right utilize it to keep the hatreds that have developed over the years as hot as possible. This heat and the ideas espoused by these extremists produce such deceptively quick and simple solutions as ‘Bomb Hanoi!’ Or ‘Overthrow Castro!’ Or ‘America: Love It or Leave It!’ If we would only proclaim and pursue our dedication to total victory over world communism, they say, root out the subversives — real and imaginary — at home, make our allies follow our lead in world affairs, all of our troubles would soon be solved.

This heated climate makes militarism luxuriate, for the military solution is also the simple solution.⁸

However, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* is more so a study of military propaganda than an analysis of its effects. Accordingly, the text contributes facts and figures of interest, products of serious oversight and privileged legal standing, to the public domain. Between the front and back cover, Fulbright distills troves of official documents, recasts numerous military directives and codes, and reproduces correspondences from high-ranking officers and private citizens alike. For example, he meticulously details the public relations escapades of the Army Exhibits Unit, which in 1968 spent roughly \$1 million to display, in towns such as Altoona, Pennsylvania, “models, pictures, and materials”.⁹ Fulbright attends to Army Regulation 360-1 Objective c., which acknowledges that one purpose of the Army Community Relations program is “to promote national security and stimulate patriotic spirit”.¹⁰ He also raises questions about public affairs junkets of the Air Force’s Distinguished Visitors Programs, which flew reporters from Oregon and California to Hawaii and Germany in order to “familiarize” them with reserve associate programs and expose them to training exercises in controlled environments.¹¹

These and other subprograms are meticulously managed and centrally planned by the Pentagon. Department of Defense Directive 5410.18 of 1968 delineates a Community Relations Program that “evaluates public attitudes, identifies the mission of a military organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance”¹² through such venues as the Defense Industry Bulletin, a magazine produced by the Pentagon for arms industry leaders. As specified in Department of Defense Directive 5122.5 of 1969, 218 people working under the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs preside over “an integrated DoD public affairs program which will: (1) Provide the American people with maximum information about the

Department of Defense consistent with national security. (2) Initiate and support activities contributing toward good relations between Department of Defense and all segments of the public at home and abroad.” To this end, trained public relations officers at the Pentagon manage everything from “a Magazine and Book Branch that acts as a literary agent, seeking out commercial markets for material written by members of the armed services; to an Organizations Division that maintains liaison with 500 defense-oriented private groups, including veterans organizations, and mails material to 287 of them on a regular basis; to a Projects Division that schedules everything from parachute jumpers and aerobatic teams to marching bands and color guards for fairs, celebrations, and other public events.”¹³

In 1966 the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs maintained five news and camera crews in Vietnam, more than most major networks.¹⁴ These crews were tasked with filming episodes of ‘The V Series’ for American broadcast television. Come to find out, many ‘V Series’ episodes, including the 1969 release ‘South Vietnam’s Fire Dragons Rule the Night Sky’, were staged in an effort to inspire domestic support for American-allied forces.¹⁵ Not only does the Pentagon employ a cadre of private filmmakers with public funds in order to counterbalance genuine war correspondence, but it also strong-arms blockbuster and independent TV and movie producers. In keeping with a desire to control the narrative, The Department of Defense requires, from any commercial film seeking resources over which the Pentagon presides, compliance with Instruction 5410.16 in order to ensure that the production is in the “best interests” of the Pentagon or else assigned a project officer.

To make any film, whether it be a feature motion picture or a television documentary that largely depends for its dramatic effect on factual authenticity of military scenes, the cooperation of the armed services is practically a *sine qua non*. In the archives of the Department of Defense are millions of feet of film shot in combat or in training— dramatic footage of planes, weapons, warships, and men in action. From the Pentagon’s archives the producer can purchase at low cost appropriate footage to give reality to dramatic incident or to tell a documentary story. Also, the military services have the equipment and personnel that can be photographed in the kind of action or scene a script may require.

But before a producer can obtain the assistance he needs from the military to make his film, his project is subject to a process of review by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs that in effect makes the Department of Defense an overseer of the production. The producer first must submit in writing to the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs his proposal for a motion picture or television documentary ‘stating the story objectives of the project and the identifiable benefits for the DoD, and agreeing to abide by the provisions’ of pertinent regulations. The Assistant Secretary’s office then gives its reaction to the project and, if asked, will ‘give guidance, suggestions, and access for technical research in the producer’s endeavor to prepare a script which might qualify the project ultimately for assistance’. If assistance is desired, four copies of the film’s script must be submitted for ‘evaluation and review’, and an itemized list of the kinds of assistance needed from the military must be provided. Only after the script is approved are arrangements made to provide shooting assistance. This can range

from the sale of reels of action film to making a submarine available — as was done for nine days in the making of *Ice Station Zebra*, starring Rock Hudson — or to turning over a sizable part of a military installation to the filmmaker — as was done for John Wayne's *The Green Berets*.¹⁶

In Chapter 7, 'Twisted Images', Fulbright reports that 60 films (give or take) were rejected by the Pentagon over the five year period prior to the publication of his book. Among them were *Palomares Incident* and *The Weapon*, two documentary projects that sought to chronicle major nuclear accidents that few Americans know occurred. In a statement respecting these and other "turn downs" furnished Senator Fulbright, the Pentagon concedes that "There are few projects submitted to DoD which can be considered wholly acceptable in accordance with DoD criteria without some revisions."¹⁷

The Senator's studies are suitable to the complexity and granularity of his target. Fulbright investigates military propaganda branch by branch. For instance, he apprises readers of the fact that the Navy's Office of the Chief of Information Audio-Visual Branch maintains liaison with 600 television stations and 5,000 radio stations.¹⁸ In the fiscal year 1969, between 2,500 and 3,000 uniformed Sailors and 31 Naval Reserve Public Affairs Companies under contract and based in such places as Sioux City, Iowa and Topeka, Kansas, worked on Navy public relations at a cost of \$14,340,000. Allocated a portion of this budget, even The Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery sustained 80 PR projects, not least among them: promotion of the supposed medial benefits of Project Deep Freeze in Antarctica.¹⁹ After tally, Navy public affairs reached upwards of 10 million Americans over the course of the year thanks to Boy Scout Cruises and other questionable programs. What's more, a variety of stunts — such as the provisioning of six tons of Wrigley chewing gum to Latin Americans — directed international attention to Navy symbols.²⁰

In a 1968 directive to Air Force Commands around the world, General J. P. McConnell states that "in view of current events and notable diverse public views concerning our nation's defense... information efforts must make clear that this changing and increasingly complex world demands that our nation's military power be superior".²¹ Correlatively, the Air Force was in collaboration with the arms industry on public relations activities of mutual interest.²² Turning to the Army, Fulbright reports that the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, comprising channels for broadcasting American media internationally to the benefit of servicemen deployed abroad, constitutes the world's largest television and radio network.²³ The Army's Home Town News Center in Kansas City, Missouri is a matter altogether separate. This institution is especially active around Christmas and Mothers Day, given that it serves to produce biopics of individual soldiers for dissemination in their hometowns. The so-called News Center shares depictions of heroism and volunteerism with 12,000 and counting local news, TV, and radio stations with which the Army has a connection.²⁴ Finally, Fulbright is concerned to investigate Army Speechmaker Kits, which contain one or more of 20 prewritten lecture scripts. One canned talk entitled 'The Army — Ready for any Mission' proves rather troubling: "the Army must be ready at all times to... prevent the occurrence of total nuclear war or, if it occurs, to make certain that the United States brings it to the most favorable conclusion possible."²⁵ These speeches, hawkish as they are, often accompany even

darker visual materials. In one instance a menacing “red, slant-eyed” octopus is shown sitting atop the globe and enveloping all of Asia in its tentacles.²⁶

“Of course the military needs an information program. But it should be one designed to inform, not promote or possibly deceive” concludes Fulbright.

There is no need for production of self-promotional films for public consumption. There is no need for flying private citizens about the country to demonstrate to them our military might. There is no need for sending speakers at taxpayers' expense anywhere from Pensacola, Florida, to Portland, Oregon, to talk to luncheon clubs and veterans organizations. There is no need for setting up expensive and elaborate exhibits at state and county fairs. There is no need for taking VIP's on pleasant cruises to Hawaii aboard aircraft carriers. There is no need for ‘Red’, ‘White’, and ‘Blue’ teams criss-crossing the country, ‘educating’ people about the dangers of communism, the need for patriotism, and the Gross National Product of newly independent lands. There certainly is no need for military production of television shows for domestic, commercial use showing ‘feature’ aspects of the Southeast Asian war.

What can be done about the situation?

An obvious answer comes at once to mind — legislation that would again set a ceiling on Defense Department public relations spending...²⁷

But if, as time goes on, our country continues to be chronically at war, continues to neglect its domestic problems, and continues to have unrest in cities and on campuses, then militarism will surely increase. And even if the military itself does not take over government directly, it could — because of increasing use in domestic crises — come to acquire power comparable to that of the German General Staff in the years before World War I. It may not seem likely now, but it is by no means so inconceivable that we need not warn against it and act to prevent it.²⁸

(For what it's worth, I should mention that as I wrote this I was subjected to Air Force fighter jets and cargo planes in flight on exercise. Not only do these machines pollute our atmosphere with emissions, but they pollute our minds with piercing bellows and deafening rumbles. These violent reverberations, arbitrarily imposed upon our consciousness, exemplify the power, preparedness, and prowess of the military and thereby carry subliminal threats. As far as I'm concerned, they are a psychologically devastating form of aural propaganda.²⁹)

- 1 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 88 (quoted from a letter due to a public relations officer at Lackland Air Force Base)
- 2 <https://archive.org/details/pentagonpropagan00fulb>
- 3 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. vii
- 4 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 28
- 5 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 41
- 6 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 143
- 7 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 11
- 8 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 11-15
- 9 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 77
- 10 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 78
- 11 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 95
- 12 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 44
- 13 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 32
- 14 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 104
- 15 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 105
- 16 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 112
- 17 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 116
- 18 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 61
- 19 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 52
- 20 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 56
- 21 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 87
- 22 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 88
- 23 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 47
- 24 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 72
- 25 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 82
- 26 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 84
- 27 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 150
- 28 *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* p. 142

29 <https://academic.oup.com/illinois-scholarship-online/book/42536/chapter-abstract/356852797?redirectedFrom=fulltext>