

PROPAGANDA PLAYBOOK FOR WAR

Today's elites are beating the drums for war in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia, but this propaganda is nothing new.



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Not our war: The First World War, which began in 1914, did not directly involve the United States until 1917, when Congress agreed to a declaration of war on Germany and Austria. Propaganda led much of the American public to believe the war in Europe should be joined by U.S. troops.

by Steve Byas

In 1935, retired U.S. Marine Corps Major General Smedley Butler published a short book based on a speech he had been delivering in recent years. The book by the two-time Medal of Honor award winner was titled *War Is a Racket*.

General Butler explained, “War is a racket. It has always been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious.” While Butler was naturally most concerned with American involvement in war, he noted, “It is the only one international in scope.” This “racket,” Butler continued, “is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to the majority of the people. Only a small ‘inside’ group knows what it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few at the expense of the very many.”

How the general population is persuaded to support something — a war against their own self-interest — is the result of certain techniques of persuasion that were

the subject of the 1939 book *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914-1917* by University of Oklahoma history Professor H.C. Peterson. This book details how Americans were finally dragged into the First World War despite there being no apparent threat to the United States. Of course, this “playbook” was used prior to WWI to get America involved in the Spanish-American War of 1898, principally by the “yellow press” newspapers of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, but at least that war involved an island, Cuba, less than 100 miles from our shores. The war in Europe, on the other hand, was thousands of miles away and fought by European nations that had been fighting each other for centuries. While the wars between Great Britain and France in the 17th and 18th centuries did have a rather strong impact on the Colonies of the British Empire, it is difficult to imagine just how the outcome of WWI would make much difference to the United States.

The “propaganda playbook” docu-

mented by Professor Peterson is not just an academic exercise of some interest in and of itself. We can take his analysis of how America went to war in 1917 and apply it to multiple examples of how this playbook has been used in the past century, and is still being used today. As is often the case in a football game, if a play continues to gain yardage, the coach will keep calling the play. Only when the play becomes ineffective is there any need to do something else. In the case of the propaganda used in WWI, these methods still work today, and those who desire U.S. involvement in foreign wars keep using them.

British War Propaganda

“The British campaign to induce the United States to come to their assistance affected every phase of American life; it was propaganda in its broadest meaning,” Peterson wrote. “News, money, and political pressure each played its part and the battle itself was fought not only in London, New York, and D.C. but also in American classrooms and pulpits, factories and offices.”

The British campaign to directly involve the United States in the European war began in the first few days of the war, with attempts to win the sympathy of the general public in America. Fortunately for the British, many Americans already believed they and the British were members of the same cultural sphere, and, as Peterson explained, “The language factor here played a tremendously important part.”

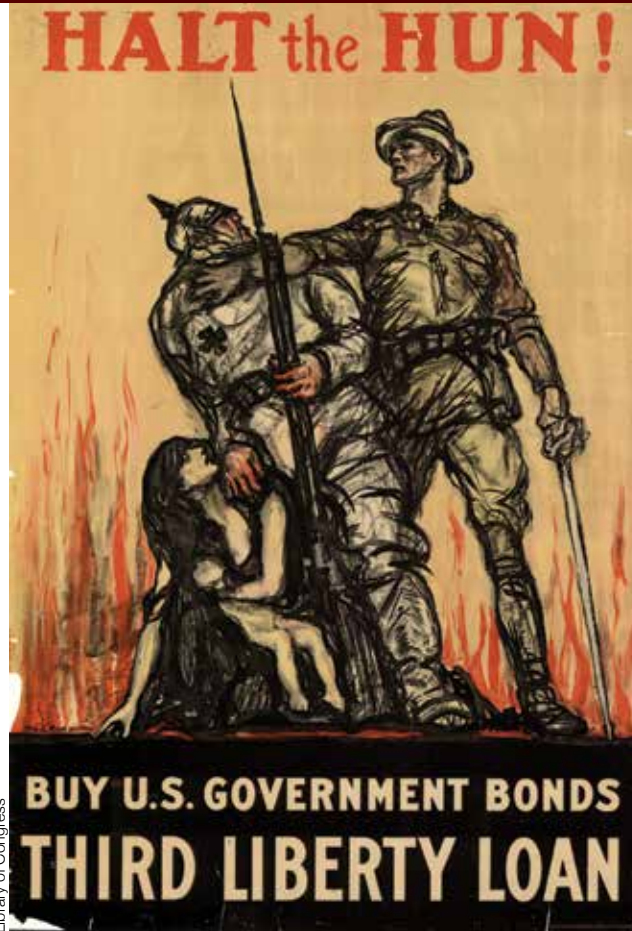
Walter Mills, a prominent newspaper publisher, wrote in his book *Road to War*, “For years, the American public had received its day-by-day picture of Europe through a distinctly British perspective.” But the British took no chances on German propaganda negating any of the natural advantages the British had. The day after the British declared war on Germany, the

British cut the transatlantic cable between Germany and America. They set up “Wellington House” for the purpose of censoring war news inside Britain, and this was the “news” that Americans generally received.

British propaganda services even held a conference in the office of financier J.P. Morgan (a financial agent in the United States for British bankers) to devise policies for “coloring the American press.” At the time, Americans received almost all of their news from newspapers, and the British targeted the leading U.S. newspapers — most of which were based in New York — for their propaganda. Smaller newspapers would then transmit this propaganda on to their own readers. Some of these major newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, are still important tools for shaping American views on foreign conflicts, but radio, television, and the internet have ended their monopoly. However, a near-monopoly of thought still exists in the mass media for supporting American involvement in foreign wars.

The presidential administration of Democrat Woodrow Wilson was, after Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan’s resignation in 1915, uniformly in favor of the British, but remained officially “neutral.” Unfortunately for the cause of peace, leading Republicans, such as Wilson’s fellow “progressive” Teddy Roosevelt, were for the most part even more bellicose in their support for direct American involvement. In 1914-1917 — as is the case today — while Democrats and Republicans disagreed on many public issues, Americans who wanted to stay out of foreign military entanglements usually found themselves in the minority, and were often vilified for not agreeing to “go along” with the push for war.

Another group courted by the British were American industrialists and financiers, who would stand to make tremendous sums of money off the war, whether the United States got directly involved in the conflict in Europe or simply supplied



Pure propaganda: U.S. war propaganda during WWI depicted Germans as violent invaders coming to rape and pillage America. Such nonsense was used to whip people into a frenzy against a nation that was not really an enemy.

the Allied forces with whatever they needed. For example, the Navy League was formed by bankers J.P. Morgan, Thomas Lamont, and Frank Vanderlip, as well as Elbert Gary (U.S. Steel), Harry Payne Whitney (Guaranty Trust), S.H. Pell (International Nickel), Cornelius Vanderbilt (railroad tycoon), Ogden Mills (financier), and Percy Rockefeller (financier), all of whom opposed American neutrality.

Once propaganda is successful in changing a person’s mind, Peterson noted, that person often becomes an ardent propagandist himself. This was the case in the United States leading up to the 1917 declaration of war, and it is true today, as we often hear average Americans simply parroting what they have heard (over and over) about why the war between Ukraine and Russia should be of great interest to us.

The British knew that, before Americans could be persuaded that the war in

Europe was important to them, they needed to portray the fight as between the “good” British and the “bad” Germans. To do this, Peterson wrote, “The British captured the American flag and waved it in front of themselves.” Any criticism of the British by an American was eventually viewed as unpatriotic, and any attempt to present a more balanced view of the conflict was considered disloyal — even treasonous — to America. As Peterson put it, “Even the most timid isolationists were accused of being pro-German.”

For example, Robert Goldstein, the German-Jewish man who produced *The Spirit of ’76*, a movie about the American Revolution, was considered a traitor by millions of Americans and was jailed for “sedition,” as the movie made our British allies look bad. On the other hand, anything German had to be demonized. Kaiser Wilhelm II made a convenient villain, and even his upturned mustache was used as a symbol of militarism.

Demonizing the Enemy

But the kaiser was just the leader. The whole German nation was often portrayed as militaristic and bent on world domination. J.P. Morgan later testified before the U.S. Senate’s Nye Committee (investigating the financial and banking interests behind U.S. involvement in WWI), “The whole German nation had started out ... with the cry of world domination.” Peterson wrote, “Intellectually, the establishment of belief in German war guilt was a difficult task. However, with the appeal being made to emotion rather than intellect fewer difficulties were presented.”

This necessitated “the omission of the consideration of certain actions by Serbia, Russia, France, and England. For instance, the responsibility of the Serbian government for the tragedy at Sarajevo was ignored.... Russian mobilization was discounted.... French encouragement of Russian pugnacity was not revealed.” Morgan even argued that “the war was

begun by Germany by the unexpected and criminal invasion of Belgium.”

Certainly, the allegations of mass atrocities by the Germans in Belgium by British propaganda artists were very effective. Germans were supposedly guilty of routinely killing babies in Belgium, usually with their bayonets, singing all the while. There were even some stories that German soldiers ate babies in Belgium. Women were raped, and some had their breasts cut off. Peterson commented that most of these stories were “purely fictitious.”

The invasion of neutral Belgium by the Germans was cited by the British as their reason for entering the war on the side of France, but U.S. Ambassador to Britain Walter Hines Page later admitted that the British were going to enter the war anyway. Besides that, the British and the French invaded neutral Greece. The king of Greece said, “It is the merest cant for Great Britain and France to talk about the

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violation of the neutrality of Belgium and Luxembourg, after what they themselves have done, and are doing here.... Just look at the list of Greek territories already occupied by Allied troops.... They plead military necessity. It was under constraint of military necessity that Germany invaded Belgium and occupied Luxembourg.”

If the invasion of Belgium was the supposed reason the British declared war on Germany, American entry into the war has been attributed to the resumption of “unrestricted submarine warfare” by the Germans, which the Germans had suspended

in 1915 to avoid war with the United States after the sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania*.

Since the days of Queen Elizabeth and the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, England had been considered the world's preeminent sea power. Germany simply could not compete with the surface navy of the British Empire. Britain used this advantage on the seas to blockade Germany, stopping the Germans from importing not only munitions, but also food and medicine. It is estimated that more than three-quarters of a million Germans died as a



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Fake news: The U.S. government claimed that North Vietnamese forces attacked the destroyers USS *Maddox* (shown here) and USS *Turner Joy* in the Gulf of Tonkin on August 4, 1964, prompting the U.S. war against North Vietnam. This attack was later shown to have never happened.



Take him out: Saddam Hussein was certainly a bad guy, but there are lots of bad guys ruling various nations of the world. A steady drumbeat of propaganda about “weapons of mass destruction” convinced Americans that it was imperative that he be driven from power, even at the cost of American lives and treasure.

result of the British blockade, either as a result of malnutrition and even outright starvation, or from a series of epidemics including scarlet fever, diphtheria, and typhus. As Winston Churchill, then the British first lord of the admiralty, bluntly explained, the blockade’s purpose was to “starve the whole population — men, women, and children, old and young, wounded and sound — into submission.” To mitigate this disadvantage, the Germans turned to submarines, which could use torpedoes to sink British surface ships and perhaps begin to break the blockade.

But British propaganda efforts were able to create the impression that submarine warfare was somehow barbaric (as though the deliberate starving of German women and children was not). After all, the submarines could sink ships that had no chance to even surrender — not that they would have surrendered, as British captains were ordered to ram into any German U-boat they saw and sink it. Even merchant ships were directed to do the same. The British were prepared to sink any ship attempting to bring anything into

Germany, even food or medicine, but if the Germans dared to sink ships attempting to bring weapons into Britain, the British used that as an example of German barbarity.

The Sinking of the *Lusitania*

The RMS *Lusitania* was a British passenger liner that included on its passenger list many non-British, including scores of Americans making their way across the Atlantic Ocean. It also included munitions. Six million rounds of small-arms ammunition and 1,250 cases of shrapnel shells were on board. The Germans ran ads in American newspapers on May 1, 1915, warning that any American who traveled on a British ship did so at his own risk. Yet, President Wilson insisted that Germany would be held responsible if any Americans died as a result of German submarines sinking British ships. He took the position that American citizens had a right to travel on British ships. Patrick Buchanan noted in his book *A Republic, Not an Empire*, “There was no major peril to American citizens from

submarines, if they traveled on American ships.”

Secretary of State Bryan was exasperated. “Why be shocked by the drowning of a few people, if there is to be no objection to starving a nation?”

The Germans did sink the *Lusitania*, as they had warned they would, and 128 Americans died as a result. For a while, it appeared that Wilson might ask for a declaration of war against Germany, but the Germans apologized and promised to suspend unrestricted submarine warfare. In contrast, Bryan argued that Americans who opted to travel on belligerent ships were being “selfish,” because not only were they putting their own lives in danger, but they were putting their fellow Americans at risk of involvement in the Great War. Bryan decided to resign rather than continue in a presidential administration that was holding the Germans to a higher standard than the British. He feared that this lack of neutrality would drag Americans into a war they had little reason to be involved in.

Rather than side with Bryan against Wilson’s policies, Theodore Roosevelt, the unofficial leader of the Republican Party, condemned Bryan, calling him “contemptible.” The *New York World* chimed in, arguing that Bryan had “betrayed” Wilson. The *Atlanta Constitution* dismissed him as a “public nuisance,” adding that they would no longer print any of Bryan’s anti-war statements.

This is not much different from today, with the major media largely supportive of U.S. involvement against the latest “bad guys,” bombing them, invading them, or at least undermining them with aid to their enemies. As is the case with the politicians, the media — whether it be Fox News or MSNBC — tend to repeat the war propaganda of the party in power.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* did not immediately lead to U.S. entry into the war, but it was resurrected as an excuse to go to war in early 1917 when the Germans gambled that they had to again resort to unrestricted submarine warfare, even at the risk of war with the United States. In 1937, the sinking of the U.S. gunboat *Panay* on the Yangtze River in China by a Japanese bomber almost resulted in war. The *Panay* was there to protect a Standard Oil tanker. Of course, there was also the 1964 incident in the Gulf of Tonkin,

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in which North Vietnamese were alleged to have attacked a couple of U.S. Navy destroyers in the gulf off the coast of Vietnam. The supposed attack, which actually never happened, led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the deployment of U.S. conventional forces to South Vietnam.

The Propaganda Playbook Continues Today

More recent examples of propaganda that led Americans to support foreign wars include the months of allegations in late 2002-early 2003 that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons against his own people, had “rape-rooms,” and was working on weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), with the implication these would eventually be used on America. After the events of September 11, 2001, there were suggestions made, without evidence, that Hussein had something to do with the downing of the World Trade Center in New York City and the attack on the Pentagon. This was so widely be-

lieved that many Americans signed up in the armed forces so they could retaliate against the Iraqi strongman.

Hussein was even compared to Adolf Hitler, a common propaganda strategy to villainize an opponent. To the War Party, it is always 1938, and every adversary is Hitler. When in a recent church class I mentioned Hitler and Joseph Stalin as examples of individuals often thought of as “great sinners,” one of the women in the class added, “and Putin.” When I said that Putin is a bad guy but he is not Hitler, the woman cocked her head in obvious disbelief. I tried to put it into perspective: “Putin has not killed millions of people, like Hitler did with the Jews (and others) in the Holocaust.” To this, she responded, “Not that we know of.”

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Make no mistake; Putin *is* a bad guy, and he did invade Ukraine, but there are many bad guys in the world today, and we (fortunately) do not involve ourselves in every territorial dispute around the world. Amazingly, many of the same propagandists who insist that Putin is the next Hitler have not always been so opposed to Russian strongmen. In fact, during the Cold War, many in the media and on the left side of the political spectrum tended to portray Soviet dictators as being not all that bad. For example, when former KGB chief Yuri Andropov emerged as the top man in the Soviet Union in 1983, he was greeted with accolades by leftists in America. After all, they opined, he can speak English, he likes jazz music, and he drinks Scotch instead of vodka.

This praise of Russian leaders continued with Putin himself, at least until fairly recently — and it was bipartisan, just as the current demonization of Putin is bipartisan. President George W. Bush said of Putin, “I looked the man in the eye. I found him very straightforward and trustworthy.... I was able to get a sense of his soul.” Then-Senator Joe Biden said he was “amazed” that Putin was “throwing his lot with the West.” Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even presented Putin’s foreign minister with a red “reset button” to symbolize improved relations, as the Obama administration was working to get Putin’s Russia into the World Trade Organization.

But now these accolades are a distant memory. In an effort to smear Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton alleged that Putin was trying to interfere in the election to help Trump and that Trump was “Putin’s puppet.” Both Democrats and Republicans have largely fallen in line with this anti-Putin narrative in the context of the Ukraine-Russia War. As was the case before both world wars, Ukraine’s war against Russia is seen as somehow being *our* war.



Bad guy: Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has led to a propaganda effort to frame him as the new Adolf Hitler (as was done with Saddam Hussein before). Since Russia is bad, Ukraine must be good. But the truth is, both governments are bad.



AP Images

More bad guys: According to Western leaders and news outlets, China and Iran are part of a global “Axis of Evil,” along with Russia and North Korea. Calls for war with Iran are becoming louder, and talk of war with China over Taiwan is gaining traction.

And, since it is *our* war, to be opposed to getting more deeply involved in that war is seen as somehow unpatriotic and pro-Putin, just as being opposed to entering WWI was seen as unpatriotic and pro-German. One does not have to be a conservative Republican to be branded as a traitor, either. When former Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii) opposed U.S. involvement in the war in Ukraine, Hillary Clinton accused her of being a “Russian asset” who was being “groomed” by Putin. “She’s the favorite of the Russians,” Clinton said. Gabbard responded, calling Clinton “the queen of warmongers.”

The New York Times and CNN have also promoted the idea that Gabbard is a Russian asset.

Americans have been treated to a steady stream of atrocity stories blamed on Russian troops, in similar fashion to the demonization of the Spanish in 1898, Germans in 1917, and Iraqis in 2003. In the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War, the *Chicago Tribune* published a story describing Hussein’s “anti-inflation” efforts in 1992, in which he “rounded up, tried and executed 42 food merchants in one day.”

According to Wikipedia, “Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian military and authorities have committed multiple war crimes,” including the massacre of civilians, “torture and rape of women and children, torture and mutilation of Ukrainian prisoners of war, and indiscriminate attacks in densely populated areas.” Additionally, according to Wikipedia and the mainstream media, Russians have bombed houses, hospitals, schools, historic buildings, and churches.

All of this could very well be true, but any mention of war crimes by *Ukrainian* actors opens one up to accusations of being “pro-Putin.” But among the techniques used by Ukrainian armed forces are waterboarding and strangling. Ukrainians have been known to send prisoners into minefields. Of course, little is said of this in most of the media or among American politicians, so most Americans are not aware that Ukrainians are also guilty of atrocities.

According to an article by the libertarian Mises Institute, “This is because numerous parties — in both governments and the media outlets themselves — are

working hard to bend the American public’s perception of the war to their benefit.” For example, Western photojournalists asked a group of Ukrainian soldiers to remove from their uniforms patches using “Nazi” symbolism before they did a photoshoot. As Mises author Connor O’Keeffe said, “By doing so, these journalists crossed the line from documenting their subjects to staging them.”

And, as the chosen “enemy” in all of these scenarios is often designated as “Hitler,” in the case of the war between Ukraine and Russia, Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky is predictably cast as “Churchill.” This “morality play” can lead to harsh retaliation against anyone who gets in the way of such propaganda. As Professor Peterson wrote in his book, this was quite common in the propaganda efforts to get the United States into WWI. But one does not have to be pro-Kaiser Wilhelm or pro-Putin to stay out of a war, just pro-America.

In an article for *The American Conservative* about the propaganda campaign of the pro-Ukraine crowd, author Ted Galen Carpenter wrote, “The Ukraine lobby is the latest example of a foreign government and its American supporters having a dangerous outside impact on U.S. policy.... Activists have attempted to harass and silence opponents of the fawning U.S. support for Zelensky’s government,” thus “chilling debate regarding policy” toward Ukraine.

Carpenter has also written for the libertarian Cato Institute, and noted that they received a letter, signed by several major donors to the think tank, urging Cato to support sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. Several of Carpenter’s articles critical of the repressive domestic policies of the Ukrainian government were soon removed from the Cato website.

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The internationalist warmonger elites will continue getting us into endless wars as long as their propaganda playbook keeps working. ■

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