

U.S. Propaganda and the Cultural Cold War

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JAMES CHISEM, AUG 16 2012

Blue Jeans and Cola: U.S. Propaganda and the Cultural Cold War

When the Cold War is mentioned in conversation, on the news, or in text, one's mind invariably wanders to a series of distilled essences: soldiers goose-stepping menacingly across Red Square, incongruously cheerful public information films detailing what to do in the event of a thermonuclear holocaust, the intermittent bleeping of *Sputnik I*, and so forth.

For the best part of half a century, the analytical significance of this – that is to say, the importance afforded by both the White House and the Kremlin towards domestic and international propaganda[1] – was obscured by the dominance of orthodox interpretations of the conflict that had emphasised the overriding explicatory value of geopolitics[2]. In recent years, however, the study of the Cold War has expanded beyond these traditional boundaries, with the role of ideology, in particular, receiving sustained academic attention[3]. This has, in turn, facilitated the emergence of a burgeoning sub-field of literature concerned primarily with explaining the efforts made by Soviet and American policymakers to utilise propaganda and culture “not as an adjunct to policy but as an integral part of a strategy to win hearts and minds”[4].

Although it is perhaps too early to systematise this research into parsimonious categories, it is possible to identify the key axis of contention upon which it rests. This is, namely, whether, as Walter Hixson's seminal 1997 monograph concludes, the ability of Western propagandists to mobilise the private sector gave them an advantage over their communist counterparts[5]. This paper will suggest that the efficacy of Western Cold War propaganda has been overstated. Moreover, it will suggest that private economic interest groups and civil society organisations often hindered, and in some cases undermined, the implementation of a coherent propaganda strategy.

For the purpose of clarity, the narrative will focus solely on the propaganda programme of the United States. The first section will contextualise the public diplomacy policy of the United States. Section two will examine the role played by the private cultural sphere in American Cold War foreign policy. The final section will look at the economic aspects of America's attempt to influence world opinion.

Context

The United States was a relative latecomer to the world of mass propaganda and public diplomacy. Whilst the British and French had come to comprehend the potential benefits offered by supplementing conventional methods of statecraft with cultural and economic initiatives during the twilight years of the nineteenth century, decision-makers on the other side of the Atlantic were reluctant to implicate the ideas that had underpinned the domestic *body-politic* in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy[6]. Their hesitancy stemmed from a widely held belief that culture “belonged to the realm of creativity, public taste, and free enterprise”, as well as from a tendency in educated circles to associate state propaganda with manipulation and deception[7].

The emergence of structural and ideological bi-polarity in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War led to a fundamental reappraisal of this stance in Washington. In the period 1945-1947, a number of key political figures successfully argued that the propagation of ideas should be considered as one of the principal conduits for

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countering Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe and halting the global expansion of Marxism-Leninism[8]. With the ratification of the 1947 *Smith-Mundt Act* and the establishment of the *Psychological Strategy Board* in 1951, US propaganda policy concretised in the form of a “virtual crusade against communism.” The impact of the thermonuclear revolution served to further intensify this trend[9]. As Emily Rosenberg points out, US officials recognised that if American values were to “uplift the world”, then “so must its capital and products; and if its goods and capital were to circulate freely, so must American ideas”. Propagandists in the United States were, thus, not only concerned with promoting liberal democratic culture and free-market capitalism, but also with exploiting the mechanisms and apparatus of both.[10].

Hungary, McCarthy, and Cronkite: The Problem with Propaganda in a Liberal Democracy

For a nation that was struggling to systematically export a narrow vision of culture to the rest of the world, whilst simultaneously asserting that the advantage of that very culture lay in its spontaneity, the existence of a diverse, occasionally sophisticated, and often cooperative, indigenous private media infrastructure was seen to be enormously valuable. As an influential 1954 United States Information Agency (USIA) report entitled ‘*Operating Assumptions*’ surmised, the records of New Orleans Jazz virtuosos could “surmount barriers of communication and enable people to identify with the US.” In addition, Hollywood motion pictures were “an excellent medium to use to expound foreign policy without the audience knowing it”, whilst the radio-television nexus presented an opportunity to provide “five minutes of propaganda with two hours of sugar coating”[11]. Although a body of scholarship exists that effectively takes this position at face value, there are several factors, frequently overlooked, which challenge its validity.

Most conspicuously, the (semi) autonomous nature of most American (or American backed) cultural entities meant that successive administrations found it difficult to maintain a satisfactory link between the strategic orientation of US propaganda policy and its implementation on an operational level. The controversy surrounding the Cold War activities of Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL) – both of which were staffed by émigrés from behind the Iron Curtain were clandestinely formed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as ostensibly private organisations – is particularly revealing on this point[12]. In the summer of 1953, at the behest of President Dwight D Eisenhower, the National Security Council conducted a procedural review known as Operation Solarium, which abandoned the goal of liberation vis-à-vis the communist bloc in favour of a less confrontational policy of containment[13]. As the propaganda network that was aiming its transmitters eastward was necessarily functionally independent, it, at the same time, proved almost impossible for US authorities to ensure that this stance was reflected in the content of the programmes broadcast. The costs of this operational weak spot were rendered plainly evident during the short-lived Hungarian uprising of 1956. This was when, in a move that considerably attenuated the credibility of US propaganda in Central Eastern Europe for the next thirty years, several RFE newscasts erroneously claimed that the US was preparing to intervene on behalf of the anti-Soviet element[14]. Nor was this an isolated incident. In the early 1980s, RL’s Russian and Ukrainian language services were accused of broadcasting shows that contained virulently nationalistic, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic overtones – much to the consternation of the Reagan administration[15].

This was not a complication that confined itself to a few overzealous foreign exiles. Throughout the four-decade long East-West standoff, a formidable coalition of domestic media outlets, public bodies, and private interest groups, regularly pursued courses of action, which brought the United States into disrepute. Consequently, it undercut the government’s international public relations offensive. Perhaps the most obvious illustration of this state of affairs is the manner in which the press, mindful of the connection between sensational reporting and profits, abetted the House of Representative’s Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in its unyielding campaign to root out native communists and fellow-travellers. It is not especially controversial to assert that this so-called ‘red scare’ was *the* greatest obstacle facing the execution of “an effective foreign information programme” during the 1950s[16].

Shawn Parry Giles draws attention to Eisenhower’s irritation at the media’s fascination with the HUAC hearings and the resulting impact on the balance of international opinion. His concerns were arguably well founded[17]. In the spring of 1953, encouraged by expectant editors and network bosses, the committee’s chair, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, sent Roy Cohn and David Schine on a promotional tour of the State Department’s European

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information libraries. The trip ended with the United States being branded “the laughing stock of the world”[18]. So unsympathetic was the coverage of the event in the international press that Robert Golden was moved to suggest that it “did more to damage the reputation of the United States than years of communist propaganda”[19]. Similarly, the gloomy coverage of the 1968 Tet-Offensive by the major television networks is widely considered to have swayed public opinion against the Vietnam War. As Andrew Priest observes, the suggestion by “the most trusted man in America”, anchorman Walter Cronkite, that the US was “mired in a stalemate,” had a significant impact on the domestic political landscape, giving impetus to the peace movement and, ultimately, setting the stage for withdrawal five years later[20].

The intelligence community did endeavour to address this predicament by covertly influencing the contours of Western cinema, art, and academia. Indeed, the CIA’s cultural reach during the early-Cold War was surprisingly extensive. Not only did the agency directly interfere in the production of Hollywood films, but it also created a whole host of purportedly self-directed bodies such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In the long run, however, this turned out to be counter-productive[21]. As increasing numbers of these questionable activities were exposed in the mid-1960s, a “storm of protest” erupted in the US and overseas[22].

The unavoidable reliance of the propaganda bureaucracy on the private media-entertainment complex, therefore, presented US policymakers with a paradox not faced by their equivalents in Moscow – they were damned if they interfered and they were damned if they did not. As such, the notion that the existence of a private cultural sphere in the United States was the critical variable in the clash of ideas does not stand up to scrutiny.

Nixon in the Kitchen: Scientific Socialism v Consumerism

In 1951, sociologist David Reisman published a satirical novella entitled *‘The Nylon War’* – a fictional account of a US bombing campaign over the skies of the Soviet Union involving consumer products, rather than explosive ordinance. The protagonists in Reisman’s story carried out their somewhat odd line of attack, in the belief that “if allowed to sample the riches of America, the Russian people would not long tolerate masters who gave them tanks and spies instead of vacuum cleaners and beauty parlours”[23]. Though the actual dimensions of US economic diplomacy were not nearly as transparent as this, a concerted effort was made by the government to employ the resources and cachet of private business to sell the ‘American way of life.’ This was with the aim of sensitising the world to “the material deficiencies of life under real and existing socialism”[24].

Before the development of satellite television, the existential battle between the free-enterprise system and the planned economy primarily played itself out on the grounds of a series of demonstrative international trade fairs that popped up in cities across Europe and North America during the 1950s and 1960s. The most prominent of these, the 1959 American National Exhibition (ANE) in Moscow, was what Hixson and Robert Haddow describes as the most important symbolic venture of the Cold War, in that it demonstrated the tangible and unmatched benefits of Western capitalism[25]. However, a compelling 2007 research paper written by Barrie Jakobovics casts doubt on this conclusion. According to Jakobovics, the overwhelming attention paid by the media and political establishment to the consumer goods on display at the exhibition was reflective of a broader anxiety, post-Sputnik, that America’s star had been on the wane.

Indeed, the surreal debate between US Vice-President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the ANE’s \$250,000 Whirlpool Kitchen, in which the latter alleged that the USSR was close to surpassing American economic productivity, raised substantial questions regarding the sustainability of the liberal economic model[26]. Contrary to the view propounded by orthodox historians, Soviet-style planning was enormously appealing to Third World leaders at the height of the Seven-Year Plan (1958-1965), especially in light of the United States’ increasing focus on conspicuous consumption[27]. It is also worth pointing out that the most expensive American propaganda initiative of the Cold War, Project Apollo, was almost entirely funded by the state, and, in many ways, reliant upon the adoption of command-economy management and procurement techniques[28].

Admittedly, the much vaunted arrival of red plenty never came. At the same time, the last three decades of the Cold War bore witness to an astounding increase in the global influence of American-based private corporations, as well

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as the American political economy, in general[29]. And yet, far from enhancing the international image of the United States, this actually gave rise to another, more salient problem. From the mid-1950s onwards, a number of distinguished intellectuals began to vocalise the growing concern in Paris, Bonn, and other European capitals, that creeping Americanisation was threatening the continent's "sovereignty, traditions, and social order". Raymond Aron, for instance, declared that the French found the importation of America's "big industry [and] mass production" to be abhorrent. As Jessica Geinow-Hecht notes, this initial academic criticism laid the foundations for the "surge of anti-American feeling" that swept the streets and university campuses of Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s[30]. The forceful promotion of US economic interests by organisations such as the USIA also proved to be a key factor in the Soviet Union's relative success in persuading vast swathes of the Third World that the voyage of American business and capital abroad was a "form of imperialism under an economic disguise"[31].

Crucially, the Kremlin orchestrated its most impressive propaganda coup of the Cold War – the campaign to prevent the deployment of the neutron bomb – with a parallel narrative in mind. In 1977, the Soviets launched an international information barrage, portraying the neutron bomb as a "typically capitalist" invention designed to obliterate people but preserve property for "subsequent exploitation". The resulting public uproar was enough to convince the Carter administration to cancel the development of enhanced radiation weapons in the following year[32]. It is evident, then, that the fixation of US propagandists on vigorously proselytising the wonders of free market capitalism, along with the participation of the American business community in such endeavours, in many cases, alienated state leaders and international popular opinion.

Conclusion

The interrelation between US propaganda, the contribution of civil society groups and private business to it, and the ebb and flow of power politics during the Cold War is far more complex than has previously been suggested. Although America's cold warriors expended a considerable amount of resources in an attempt to profit from the willingness of individuals and autonomous organisations to promote capitalist democracy, there is not enough evidence to indicate that this was the decisive factor in the bi-polar battle of ideologies.

Indeed, the emphasis placed upon the private sector by those in the corridors of power often served to undermine the coherence and attractiveness of the propaganda programme's message. In spite of the fact that the Western media largely subscribed to the Cold War consensus, its independence meant that US policymakers were engaged in a constant struggle to keep it singing from the government's hymn sheet. When it decided to whistle its own tune, the consequences could be exceptionally unpalatable. The unremitting expansion of the American economic sphere of influence after 1945, in combination with the tendency of US public figures to equate capitalism with consumerism, was also counter-productive, in certain contexts.

Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper has not been to imply that American statesmen did not use the extensive wherewithal of America's multifaceted social tapestry to their benefit during forty-six years of confrontation with the Soviet Union. Rather, it is chiefly concerned with challenging the undue weight afforded by much of the existing literature on Cold War propaganda to the global spread of US commercial culture. A more nuanced understanding of this process – one that recognises that the "independence associated with rock and jeans not only embraced individual freedom but also the freedom to resist US foreign policy" – would greatly add to the existing historiography on the subject[33]. In essence, any new research agenda should be careful to avoid foregrounding the events of 1991.

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