

The Techniques of Propaganda

from "How to Detect and Analyze Propaganda" by Clyde R. Miller

In examination of propaganda the first logical thing to do is to define the term. A little over a year ago a groups of scholars organizing the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, after a good many hours of argument, arrived at this definition: "As generally understood, *propaganda is an expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups, deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends.*"

That means if you and I have an opinion and express it with intent to influence some individual or group, we are, to that extent, propagandists.

And are acts propaganda too? Yes. The Boston Tea Party was a propaganda act plotted and planned and beautifully timed by that master propagandist of the American Revolution, Samuel Adams, to crystallize the feeling of hatred by the Colonists against the British Tories. The burning of the Reichstag when Hitler came to power may have been a propaganda act. Certainly Hitler took advantage of it by placing blame for it on "Jews" and "Communists," labeling those whom he did not like "Jews" and "Communists" whether they were or not, blaming them for the fire and putting them in prison. By such propaganda acts Hitler was able to dispose of many of his enemies at the very outset of his dictatorship.

We are fooled by propaganda chiefly because we don't recognize it when we see it. It may be fun to be fooled, but, as the cigarette ads used to say, it is more fun to know. We can more easily recognize propaganda when we see it if we are familiar with the seven common propaganda devices.* These are:

1. The Name-Calling Device
2. The Glittering Generalities Device
3. The Transfer Device
4. The Testimonial Device
5. The Plain Folks Device
6. The Card Stacking Device
7. The Band Wagon Device

Why are we fooled by these devices? Because they appeal to our emotions rather than to our reason. They make us believe and do something we might not believe or do if we thought about it calmly, dispassionately. In examining these devices, note that they work most effectively at those times when we are too lazy to think for ourselves; also, they tie into emotions which sway us to be "for" or "against" nations, races, religions, ideals, economic and political policies and practices.

1. *Name Calling* is a device to make us form a judgment without examining the evidence on which it should be based. Here the propagandist appeals to our hate and fear.

He does this by giving "bad names" to those individuals, groups, nations, races, policies, practices, beliefs, and ideals which he would have us condemn and reject. For centuries the name "heretic" was bad. Thousands were oppressed, tortured, or put to death as heretics. Anybody who dissented from popular or group belief or practice was in danger of being called a heretic.

*From *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

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Today's bad names include Fascist, demagogue, dictator, Red, Financial oligarchy, Communist, alien, outside agitator, economic royalist, Utopian, rabble-rouser, troublemaker, Tory.

2. *Glittering Generalities* is a device by which the propagandist identifies his program with virtue by use of "virtue words." Here he appeals to our emotions of love, generosity, and brotherhood. He uses words like truth, freedom, honor, liberty, social justice, public service, the right to work, loyalty, progress, democracy, the American way.

These words suggest shining ideals. All persons of good will believe in these ideals. Hence the propagandist, by identifying his individual group, nation, race, policy, practice, or belief with such ideals, seeks to win us to his cause. As Name Calling is a device to make us form a judgment to reject and condemn, without examining the evidence, *Glittering Generalities* is a device to make us accept and approve, without examining the evidence.

In the Name Calling and *Glittering Generalities* devices, words are used to stir up our emotions and to befog our thinking. In one device "bad words" are used to make us mad; in the other "good words" are used to make us glad.

3. *Transfer* is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept. For example, most of us respect and revere our church and our nation. If the propagandist succeeds in getting church or nation to approve a campaign in behalf of some program, he thereby transfers its authority, sanction, and prestige to that program. Thus we may accept something which otherwise we might reject.

In the *Transfer* device symbols are constantly used. The cross represents the Christian Church. The flag represents the nation. Cartoons like Uncle Sam represent a consensus of public opinion. Those symbols stir emotions. At their very sight, with the speed of light, is aroused the whole complex of feelings we have with respect to church or nation. A cartoonist by having Uncle Sam disapprove a budget for unemployment relief would have us feel that the whole United States disapproves relief costs. By drawing an Uncle Sam who approves the same budget, the cartoonist would have us feel that American people approve it. Thus, the *Transfer* device is used both for and against causes and ideas.

4. The *Testimonial* device is employed to make us accept anything from a patent medicine to a program of national policy. The propagandist secures statements or letters from prominent people with the expectation that the crowd will follow the leader. Almost every newspaper and magazine contains a number of testimonials extolling the virtues of this and that. The point for the reader to remember, however, is that no person's recommendation is particularly valuable except in that person's chosen field of work. Henry Ford's opinion about an automobile qualifies as expert testimony, but Henry Ford's opinion of the virtues of a new tooth-paste is probably worth very little. On reading any testimonial, the reader should ask himself the question, "Can this testimonial be considered expert opinion?"

5. The *Plain Folks* device is used by politicians, labor leaders, business men, and even by ministers and educators to win our confidence by appearing to be common people like ourselves—"just plain folks among the neighbors." In election years especially do candidates show their devotion to our little children, flourish the cards which show that they are members in good standing in some important labor union, or have their pictures taken while they are pitching hay.

6. The *Card Stacking* device is employed by the propagandist when he tells us only part of the truth. He uses under-emphasis and over-emphasis to dodge issues and evade facts. He draws a red herring across the trail to confuse and divert those in quest of the truth. The principal of a small private school met the criticism that his faculty had no teaching experience by issuing the statement that the average experience of each member of the faculty was five years. This statement was technically true: there were five teachers in the school including the principal, but the latter neglected to mention that he had had the twenty-five years of experience while the remaining four members had had none.

7. The *Band Wagon* device is used to make us follow the crowd, to accept the propagandist's program *en masse*. The theme of this type of propaganda may be summed up in the statement, "Everybody's doing it; come along and follow the great majority, for it can't be wrong." In dealing with this type of propaganda, the reader should remember the words of Lincoln, "You can fool all the people some of the time."

Observe that in all these devices our emotion is the stuff with which propagandists work. Without it they are helpless; with it, harnessing it to their purposes, they can make us glow with pride or burn with hatred; they can make us zealots in behalf of the program they espouse.

To say this is not to condemn emotion, an essential part of life, or to assert that all predetermined ends of propagandists are "bad." It is simply to say that the intelligent citizen does not want propagandists to utilize his emotions, even to the attainment of "good" ends, without knowing what is going on. He does not want to be "used" in the attainment of ends he may later consider "bad." He wants to know the facts and among these is included the fact of the utilization of his emotions.

Remember that there are three ways to deal with propaganda—first, to suppress it; second, to answer it by counter-propaganda; third, to analyze it. Suppression of propaganda is contrary to democratic principles, specifically contrary to the provisions of the United States Constitution. Counter-propaganda is legitimate but often intensifies cleavages. Analysis of propaganda, on the other hand, cannot hurt propaganda for a cause that we consider "good."¹

¹From "How to Detect and Analyze Propaganda," an address given at Town Hall, 1939, by Clyde Miller.