

*Propaganda, Dirty Tricks
and The Erosion of Democracy
Attack Ads, Fear, Empty Rhetoric, Glittering Generalities,
Character Assassination, Smear, Doublespeak, and The Big Lie*

*For my son, who is now eighteen and will cast his first presidential vote in November.
And for my eighty-year-old mother who, like her father, has voted pretty much the same most of her life.*

By Michael Mendizza

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN - On Saturday last, Judge Douglas and myself first met in public discussion. He spoke one hour, I an hour and a half, and he replied for half an hour. The order is now reversed. I am to speak an hour, he an hour and a half, and then I am to reply for half an hour.

Abraham Lincoln, August 27, 1858

So began the second of seven encounters known as the Lincoln-Douglas debates, a series of political discussions between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln lost the election for one of Illinois' two Senate seats but these debates launched him into national prominence, which eventually led to his election as President of the United States.

Imagine sitting on a lawn with several hundred neighbors and listening to one of these four-hour debates, or all seven. By simple reckoning, seven debates, four hours each, is a whopping twenty-eight hours. Imagine the emotions floating in the air, the tone of each man's voice, their choice of words, how they stand, the expressions on their faces, the smell of the grass and the whispers of the crowd.

Now imagine sitting in a video-editing bay, rows of monitors flickering in the dark. Each features a different angle of our political leaders. It is late. Producers and electronic editors are at the controls, only the best, well paid professionals. There are thirty-frames of video for each second of this sixty second commercial and each is pondered with care and precision. "Let's look at take five on camera three again. Tweak the chroma to the left and raise the white levels just a bit. Fade in the flag. That's too much! Now the music. *America the Beautiful*, or should we use the *Star Spangled Banner*? Where's the roll with the Vietnam vet, the guy with no legs?"

Pump this finished spot, all sixty seconds, with its emotionally charged pictures and words, so few but so carefully chosen, into 70 million homes in-between the Lakers' playoff and the Kobe Bryant news update. Play it not once but again and again, like the instant replay of the second 747 exploding into tower two on 9/11 and ask yourself which experience would give you the deepest insight into the personality, the character, the integrity and vision of the next President of the United States. Sitting on the lawn or watching a sixty-second paid political announcement?

Propaganda has been around as long as politicians. Propaganda refers to deliberately false or misleading information that supports the political interests of those in power. Propagandist seeks to change the way people understand an issue, to change their actions and expectations in ways that are desirable to the group in power.

Propaganda fills people's heads with false information and is often used with censorship, which is the deliberate act of preventing people from knowing true information. What sets propaganda apart from other forms of advocacy is the willingness of its users to change people's understanding through deception and confusion, rather than persuasion and understanding.

As a freshman in high school I took a debate class. We studied and practiced various forms of propaganda. We called them dirty tricks, techniques to distract attention from the real issues. When the facts were not going in our favor, we were advised to attack our opponent's character. Mention how many football players are currently dating their sister. Stand on high moral ground and insult the people associated with the opposing team. Use humor to mask the attack. Use fear.

Fear, being fundamentally irrational, is one of the most widely used techniques. "A propagandist is using fear when he warns that disaster will result if voters fail to follow his policy. Specific types of fears include xenophobia (fear of foreigners), fear of terrorism, crime, economic hardship, ecological disaster, disease, overpopulation, invasion of privacy, or discrimination. With such a broad spectrum of fear, the propagandizer can pick relevant phobias and incorporate them into his/her messages. A great example is the false claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Another is Vice President Cheney's recent statement:

"It's absolutely essential that eight weeks from today, on Nov. 2, we make the right choice, because if we make the wrong choice then the danger is that we'll get hit again and we'll be hit in a way that will be devastating from the standpoint of the United States."

The immediate impact of this statement is fear. If you accept the statement at face value fear is its meaning. One must move this statement from its first-strike emotional region of the brain into the logical, intellectual centers in order to reveal its logical fallacy. This takes attention, energy, experience, practice and skill, which many people don't have. Even more dangerous, the nature and structure of mass media conditions the mind to not develop these capacities. Mass media creates the perfect environment for propaganda and with it the political and social structures that thrive on propaganda.

Empty rhetoric: essentially hollow promises—words uttered without any attempt to take the action necessary to back them up. These promises and commitments are made and then ignored or forgotten.

Bandwagon: "You're either with us, or against us." This appeals to an audience to join a ground swell of public opinion and activity because everybody else is joining. The "bandwagon" technique appeals to feelings of loyalty and nationalism, as well as the desire to be on the winning side.

Glittering generalities "Freedom" and "Democracy" are vague terms with high moral connotations intended to arouse faith and respect in listeners or readers. The exact meanings of these glittering terms are impossible to define, hence vague generalities. Glittering generalities sound sincere but they often really mean nothing.

Name-calling and **Character assassination**, an *ad hominem* argument, or argumentum ad hominem (*Latin*, literally "argument against the person"). Character assassination involves merely and often unfairly insulting the opponent. Name calling is powerful and frequently used, sometimes excessively. By linking the person or idea being attacked to a negative symbol, the propagandist hopes that the audience will reject the person or the idea on the basis of the symbol, instead of looking at the evidence.

Smear is simple and often used. It can take the form of repeated, unapologetic, systematic name-calling, or otherwise implying or asserting that opponents "are" bad, evil, stupid, "not fit to serve," untrustworthy, guilty of reprehensible acts, or part of some undesirable category.

The Big Lie: Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, is alleged to have stated that if a lie is repeated enough times it would become widely accepted as truth. The big lie is repeated again and again, in different forms, such as "Jews were responsible for Germany losing World War I."

Attack ads are short political advertizing aired during electoral campaigns - but maybe a third party ad. Attack ads are the key feature of negative campaigning and often used to discredit a key political figure. Common features include sound bites that are intended to be repeated by the public on the street and in discussions about how to vote, e.g. "not up to the job", employed by the Ontario Tories against Dalton McGuinty in 2003. Memorable conceptual metaphors can serve to smear opponents, e.g. the revolving door used to smear Michael Dukakis in 1988 by implying that he was "soft on crime.". Rather than support a position held by the advertiser, attack messages target an opponent's platform, track record, background or character.

Doublespeak is the use of words to disguise the actual meaning of thing being described, i.e. calling legislation the **Freedom Act** when the new law limits civil liberties. Other examples are: **Axis of evil:** countries to be attacked. **Choice:** legalization of discrimination. **Deregulation:** reapportioning profiteering opportunities for corporate America by reducing or removing democratically controlled regulatory oversight. **Detainee:** prisoner of war (e.g. on terrorism). **Freedom fighter:** A terrorist we agree with. **Free speech zone:** an area removed from an event for protesters. **Globalization:** expanded profiteering opportunities on global scale.

Infinite justice: revenge, as in "Operation Infinite Justice," the original code name for the U.S. war in Afghanistan in 2001. **Interrogation techniques/methods:** tortures

applied by U.S. military (e.g. in *liberated* Iraq). **Irregularities**: corporate accounting fraud. **Liberate**: invade. **New world order**: globalization; imperialization.

Propaganda: information coming from an opposing or independent source. **Regime change**: a forceful change of government by a foreign power. **Surgical strike**: military attack; this phrase evokes a medical metaphor to suggest that warfare is a form of healing, as if a regime was a "cancer" or "tumor," while the warrior-leaders are painted as trustworthy surgeons. The list goes on and on.

Hitler hired Fritz Lang, a well-known filmmaker, to produce political propaganda for the Nazi party. Mao used it to launch his Cultural Revolution. Stalin used it. The Japanese, North Koreans, and yes, political leaders in the United States, often fill people's heads with false information coupled with censorship to prevent people from knowing true information.

The nature of politics and of political propaganda changed abruptly on September 26, 1960, as 70 million U.S. viewers watched Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate. Content, the life blood of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, suddenly faded in importance. Kennedy looked good on tape. Nixon did not. From that day forward elections would be won or lost on appearance, not substance. On that day there began a steady shift of emphasis from ideas, which take time to share and even more time to digest and understand, to images, which are instantaneous. It wasn't long before we had our first actor-president, Ronald Regan. Arnold Schwarzenegger, also an actor, is rehearsing in the wings.

Not only did the nature and quality of our politicians changed, so too did the voting public. Most get their news from television. You know the slogan, "give us twenty-two minutes (eleven of which are commercials) and we'll give you the world." Fast cuts, dramatic images, few words, claims of in-depth, fair and balanced reporting are the breeding ground for propaganda. 90% of all books are sold to 10% of the population. In 1950 the average 14 year old had a spoken vocabulary of 25,000 different words. The vocabulary of today's teens is floating somewhere between 9,000 and 10,000 words, a 60% reduction in the tools used for critical and creative thinking. But, it really doesn't matter. Words are, "like, so old."

Images are, "oh-my-god," so cool! Taken in by the sensory motor centers, their meaning is emotional, creating forth-of-July explosions of feelings radiating in the right hemispheres of the brain. What we use to think of as "content," so valued in 1858, the neocortical, symbolic and metaphoric domain of the higher brain centers, are barely scratched by today's modern media. That's right, the expertly crafted image, like a cruise missile loaded with its stealthy emotional charge, is shot directly into the brain. And then the next, and the next, salvo after salvo, so many images, so fast that only a film or video editor can appreciate artistry it took to create the frame by frame, blow by

blow, now you see it-now you don't virtual experience. And we, the passive recipients of these images, stare like rabbits in the path of an eighteen-wheeler absorbing their virus, soon repeating their slogans on demand, behaving as if we were their authors.

The strategy is well known by media buyers. Jump up and down like Chicken Little. Point to the other guy. Make him or her the enemy and repeat after me simple slogans, "the sky is falling, the sky is falling and it's his (or her) fault." Repeat endless variations of this message. Wrap it in the American flag. Toss in a vet or two with missing limbs. Blue screen the cast against an artificial video backdrop of fireworks. Cut to close-ups of chubby faces, mouths open, gazing upwards as if the second coming had just arrived. Flash the applause sign on and off. And you win the election.

An off camera announcer summed up the staged-convention-media-circus by saying, "The Republicans sure know how to do balloons and confetti." The winner is not judged by their record. The winner, as Ralph Nader points out, is the cast who does the best job of throwing the party, which in this case means stage management, lights, camera, and action. We forget this is theater, a staged performance where the special effects and shallow rhetoric is carefully crafted by special interests not to engage the intellect.

Philip Agre, Associate Professor of Information Studies at UCLA, builds a strong case in: *What Is Conservatism and What Is Wrong with It?*, that this deception and confusion is woven into the conservative worldview, and has been for thousands of years.

From the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the self-regarding thugs of ancient Rome to the glorified warlords of medieval and absolutist Europe, in nearly every urbanized society throughout human history, there have been people who have tried to constitute themselves as an aristocracy. These people and their allies are the conservatives.

The true goal of conservatism is to establish an aristocracy, which is a social and psychological condition of inequality.

The opposite of conservatism is democracy, and contempt for democracy is a constant thread in the history of conservative argument.

People who believe that the aristocracy rightfully dominates society because of its intrinsic superiority are conservatives; democrats, by contrast, believe that they are of equal social worth. Conservatism is the antithesis of democracy. This has been true for thousands of years.

What most people know nowadays as conservatism is basically a public relations campaign aimed at persuading them to lay down their capacity for rational thought.

Conservatism frequently attempts to destroy rational thought, for example, by using language in ways that stand just out of reach of rational debate or rebuttal.

The great innovation of conservatism in recent decades has been the systematic reinvention of politics using the technology of public relations.

Public relations aims to break down reason and replace it with mental associations. One tries to associate "us" with good things and "them" with bad things. Thus, for example, the famous memo from Newt Gingrich's (then) organization GOPAC entitled "Language: A Key Mechanism of Control". It advised Republican candidates to associate themselves with words like "building", "dream", "freedom", "learn", "light", "preserve", "success", and "truth" while associating opponents with words like "bizarre", "decay", "ideological", "lie", "machine", "pathetic", and "traitors".

The issue here is not whether these words are used at all; of course there do exist individual liberals that could be described using any of these words. The issue, rather, is a kind of cognitive surgery: systematically creating and destroying mental associations with little regard for truth.

The medium, after all, is the message. This observation by Marshal McLuhan is as true today as it was in 1963. The content of media is not the illusion that media creates, what we think of as programming. The deeper meaning of media is how well the limitations of this technology can be exploited to keep us believing that what we are experiencing really matters. When in fact we are all staring at two-dimensional screens in darkened rooms with thousands of little dots flashing on and off.

As long as we are glued to the tube, that is, connect to the world primarily through media, the fact that 10 million people worldwide who took to the streets on February 21, 2003, in opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the largest simultaneous protest in world history, doesn't matter. That an estimated 408 species could be extinct by 2050 if the global-warming continues doesn't matter. That the US military budget for 2004 is \$401.3bn doesn't matter. That far more money is spent on advertising than on education doesn't matter. That, as of this writing, 1,000 young men and women have died in Iraq, 7,000 have been wounded or lost limbs, over 1,000 wounded or killed last month alone, while we were home watching the so called news, doesn't matter.

Like so many aspects of our lives, the public political process is completely shaped by media. The private political process, the agenda behind the media spin, is another matter. We are living in a mediated reality, what Jerry Mander, author of the classic *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, calls "the belly of the beast."

In one generation, out of hundreds of thousands years in human evolution, America had become the first culture to have substituted secondary, mediated versions of experience for direct experience of the world. Interpretations and representations of the world were accepted as experience, and the difference between the two was obscure to most of us.

A new muddiness of mind was developing. People's patterns of discernment, discrimination and understanding were taking a dive. They didn't seem able to make distinctions between information, which was preprocessed and then filtered through a machine, and that which came to them whole, by actual experience. Perhaps seeing was believing in a way that overrode the conscious mind.

At the same time, no one was even writing about how the machine changed information. Very few people understood it. Only advertisers studied the way the machine altered

data, because that was the basic work of advertising to alter and confine information in advance so that it would have the desired effect. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent discovering how to do this.

It was suddenly possible for an entire nation of 200 million people to be spoken to as individuals, one to one, the television set to each person or family, all at once. I was chilled at the thought, realizing that these conditions of television viewing - confusion, unification, isolation especially when combined with passivity and what I latter learned are the effects of implanted imagery - were ideal preconditions for the imposition of autocracy [dictatorship, despotism, fascism].

My fears were encouraged one day in 1971, as I sat around my office reading the morning New York Times and noted a small item. It concerned a Pentagon proposal to President Nixon that an electronic gadget be attached to every television set in the country. Capable of being activated directly by the president, it would switch on every set in the country at once. It was to be used, of course, only in the case of extreme national emergency. My mind flew into a paranoid pattern:

It's 4:00 A.M. Two hundred million people are awakened by the national anthem. Where is it coming from? There's the president!

"My fellow Americans, it is with extreme regret that I awaken you from your well-earned rest. Yet we are all met with a crisis so grave as to require it.

"An exhaustive investigation by your law enforcement agencies has uncovered a massive conspiracy to destroy our democracy, a conspiracy which enjoys at least the tacit support of thousands of students, journalists, attorneys and even certain judges and elected officials.

As your commander in chief, I have ordered the immediate arrest of the terrorists and the individuals in their support groups, whatever their rank or prestige. I have invoked the implied powers of the President to govern in such times of grave crisis, freed from the usual encumbrances.

I am hopeful and confident that these emergency measures, taken to safeguard our democracy, will be short lived. Thank you, Godspeed and good night."

The set switches off by itself. Was it a dream? Back to sleep. A few months later I saw a follow-up story in the Times that said the Pentagon proposal has been scrapped. Apparently the administration felt people might "misinterpret the intentions of such a project. "

In retrospect, I know that my scenario was fantastic and unsophisticated, deriving from my simple-minded notion that autocracy interventions can take place only through a single leader of coup. But whatever the intention of the Pentagon, and President Nixon, who has since asserted that presidents can create their own laws, it was clear that the existence of the technology itself had created a new potential.

We can all be spoken to at the same time, night or day, from a centralized information source. In fact we are. Every day a handful of people speak and the rest listen. Brutal and heavy-handed means of confining awareness, experiences and behavior may actually be a thing of the past. In many ways television makes the military coup and mass arrests of my imagination unnecessary.

We can begin to grasp the irrelevance of such acts that now a more subtle coup is underway. It takes place directly inside the minds, perceptions and living patterns of

individual people. A technology makes it possible, and perhaps inevitable, while dulling all awareness that it is happening.

That was written in 1977. We zoomed past Orwell's 1984 and it is now 2004. Given current events, the swashbuckling rhetoric, the censorship of the press, the blatant use of dirty tricks to keep us looking in the wrong direction... *(Flash, based on confirmed intelligence reports, the secretary of homeland security has raised the eminent threat of a terrorist attack to condition orange)*, the special effects and the unending media blitz, Jerry's fantasy feels less and less simpleminded every day.

Paranoid conspiracy? Not at all. *The Medium is the Message*. The medium, meaning the nature of the technology, determines who uses it, how it is used, the nature and quality of information that is passed through it, and equally important, what is filtered out. As Jerry describes so beautifully, the manner in which public political life is now shaped by the media is implicit in the technology. And that technology is not neutral! It does not treat all information the same. It has an enormous, built-in bias to appeal to our basic instincts, sex and violence, rather than deepening nuance. Mass media, by its nature, is the perfect medium for propaganda. And the more polarized the environment, the more likely the message will be crafted to appeal to our lower instincts.

"The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all diverting. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway. I do not speak of your "little men," your baker and so on; I speak of my colleagues and myself, learned men, mind you. Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had. There was no need to. Nazism gave us some dreadful, fundamental things to think about - we were decent people - and it kept us so busy with continuous changes and "crises" and so fascinated, yes, fascinated, by the machinations of the "national enemies," without and within, that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us. Unconsciously, I suppose, we were grateful. Who wants to think?"

"To live in this process is absolutely not to be able to notice it - please try to believe me - unless one has a much greater degree of political awareness, acuity, than most of us had ever had occasion to develop. Each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion, "regretted," that, unless one were detached from the whole process from the beginning, unless one understood what the whole thing was in principle, what all these "little measures" that no "patriotic German" could resent must some day lead to, one no more saw it developing from day to day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head."

"If, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in "43" had come immediately after the "German Firm" stickers on the windows of non-Jewish shops in "33". But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not so much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you at Step C? And so on to Step D."

And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying "Jew swine," collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything, has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in – your nation, your people – is not the world you were in at all. The forms are all there, all untouched, all reassuring, the houses, the shops, the jobs, the mealtimes, the visits, the concerts, the cinema, the holidays.

But the spirit, which you never noticed because you made the lifelong mistake of identifying it with the forms, is changed. Now you live in a world of hate and fear, and the people who hate and fear do not even know it themselves; when everyone is transformed, no one is transformed. Now you live in a system which rules without responsibility even to

God. The system itself could not have intended this in the beginning, but in order to sustain itself it was compelled to go all the way.

Once the war began, the government could do anything "necessary" to win it; so it was with the "final solution" of the Jewish problem, which the Nazis always talked about but never dared undertake, not even the Nazis, until war and its "necessities" gave them the knowledge that they could get away with it. The people abroad who thought that war against Hitler would help the Jews were wrong. And the people in Germany who, once the war had begun, still thought of complaining, protesting, resisting, were betting on Germany's losing the war. It was a long bet. Not many made it."

Milton Mayer

From: *And They Thought They Were Free*

If even just a portion of what Mander, Mayer and Agre are describing is true, and I encourage everyone to read *The Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, the first and best analysis of our mediated reality and why it is a much greater threat to democracy than the Taliban, my question is: What about our children? If we are living in the belly of the beast, like a fish unaware of the water it swims in, how do we raise children to respond with insight and intelligence in such an environment? This question, I believe, gives new meaning to Mayer's title, *And They Thought They Were Free*.

For more information:

On Jerry Mander and Media see:

TTF Newsletters, Corporate Exploitation of Children

<http://tffuture.org/services/newsletters/pdf/97fall.PDF>

<http://tffuture.org/services/newsletters/pdf/97winter.PDF>

On Milton Mayer see: *And They Thought They Were Free*

http://thirdreich.net/Thought_They_Were_Free.html

On Philip Agre see: *What Is Conservatism?*

<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/conservatism.html>