

The tyranny of patriotism

How despots use language to seduce and subdue the population

By Deborah Johnstone - October 11, 2017



As the class divide between rich and poor exploded in colonial America, the most effective method of controlling the burgeoning

masses of poor was to create an ideology that appeared to include everyone equally. In his 1980 book *A People's History of the United States*, the late historian Howard Zinn writes, “This was to become a critically important rhetorical device for the rule of the few, who would speak to the many of ‘our’ property, ‘our’ country.”

The rhetoric that swept the poor and working classes into a patriotic fervor during “our” country’s origin continues to be employed by those with the most to lose: conglomerates and economic elites who have attempted to co-opt every aspect of the U.S. government, primarily via campaign financing. Academic research suggests an increasingly undemocratic America. A 2014 study by Princeton University professor Martin Gilens presents empirical evidence that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.”

Because of this deeply undemocratic reality, it’s critical for those in power to persuade the masses their voices carry an equal weight in determining policy and legislation.

The government doesn’t want people questioning legislation or ideology that has been designed to indoctrinate them. In his book *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky writes about how “elementary truths” are consistently overlooked because the state

does such a good job of obfuscating what is really going on. This obfuscation is essential in a free society where there always exists the threat that a free population might hinder the mechanisms of power.

Chomsky cites the Vietnam War as an example of how a concentrated war effort was blunted by enormous resistance to America's involvement in Vietnam. By 1971, over two-thirds of Americans opposed the war. At this point U.S. leaders needed to manipulate perception: "People cannot be permitted to remember that the effective direct action of spontaneous movements—both in the United States and among the conscripted army in the field—that were out of the control of their 'natural leaders' in fact played the primary role in constraining the war makers."

Above all, it's essential that the population believe America is fully justified in its war efforts—no matter what the consequences. The most efficient way to create justification is by using propaganda delivered via patriotic slogans.

"God bless America" long ago entered the American political lexicon as an indispensable slogan. It portends hope—the idea that everyone has a fair chance to achieve success and solvency in a nation that is "blessed." But as millions of Americans are aware, this is a myth.

"Make America great again" is another patriotic slogan. You can put it on a hat and chant it at rallies, along with the isolationist mantra of "America first." President Donald Trump repeated these endlessly

and continues to employ them in his rhetoric.

Slogans and jargon serve a purpose: They seduce. They deter people from considering empirical truth while creating a new, fictional agenda. Anyone who questions the new fiction is vilified and labeled as an enemy opposed to strengthening the republic. Trump called the news media the “enemy of the American people” and accuses news gatherers of reporting only “fake news.”

Propaganda is in the business of creating an alternate reality, and slogans are integral to the process. In *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century*, historian Timothy Snyder refers to this as “shamanistic incantation.” It’s one of the hallmarks of fascist regimes. Snyder borrows Victor Klemperer’s observation that in order to obliterate critical thought, jargon is essential. It’s seductive. It is also dangerous because the subliminal message conveyed by jargon like “make America great again” is a rationalization of policies that engender hostility toward targeted minorities; dismantle protections for the vulnerable, poor and the environment; and lay the foundation for a kleptocracy.

In his brief but compelling book, Snyder dissects the largely clandestine and authoritarian actions that shape our perceptions and have the power to demoralize us to the point of compliance. Parallels to the Third Reich and the Trump administration are copious.

Snyder warns that we must “be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary.” Words become weapons and are invested with meanings that can replace reasoning and critical thought. In our age of alternative facts, where evidence and reason are discredited with fabulist conjecture, it’s no wonder shamanistic incantations have the power to lure. Snyder writes that throughout history, despots have “despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism.”

This disassociation from reality lays the foundation for oligarchic control. Once we dismiss truth, Snyder says, we will reach “post-truth”—we will have entered the era of “pre-fascism.”

Doublethink and deception

We are already learning how to tolerate Trump’s steady stream of deceptions, and the danger is that we’ll become habituated to it. Stephen Harper, author and adjunct professor at Northwestern University, charts “the dangerous normalization of Donald Trump” on journalist Bill Moyers’ blog. He believes we are experiencing “Trump fatigue.” People are simply getting worn down by the flood of bombastic, untrue declarations.

From Trump’s attacks on free speech, to his racial, ethnic and religious provocations, to his vindictive antagonism toward anyone

who counters his position, Trump enjoys an unprecedented and unchecked disregard for propriety.

No one knows exactly what is happening, but everyone is riveted by the spectacle. The media can't keep up with the impolitic statements coming out of the White House. Language and symbols of propaganda work because we are diverted by the noise—the constant barrage of information and misinformation that no one has the time or inclination to decipher. Trump's blatant lies and outlandish declarations are easily reminiscent of the Orwellian notion of “doublethink.” For instance, Trump insists bankruptcy is a good thing, something that “many, many others on top of the business world do.” His deception is frightening in its simplicity.

For authoritarian concepts to foment, this type of deception is essential. He has repeatedly insisted Muslims are terrorists and should be issued religious identity cards; he has demonized Mexicans, branding them as “criminals” and “rapists”; and he has accused the press of treason. He has established an Us vs. Them scenario, which is another principle of authoritarian propaganda: Clearly identify the enemy.

The danger is that as reasoned discourse slips from our cultural and political conversations and is replaced with deceit and jargon, we grow ever closer to normalizing a climate of oppression where journalists and free speech are attacked and ethnic and religious

minorities are vilified.

Unifying patriotic frenzy

Chomsky writes that “empty slogans” are especially handy when trying to sell unpopular policies to the masses, such as going to war. The trick is to create concepts that don’t mean anything and can be easily endorsed without fear of polarization. “Support our troops” is a rallying cry for a patriotism that requires no scrutiny. It would be unpatriotic not to support our troops—but what about them are we actually supporting? It’s never been about our troops’ welfare. It’s about perpetuating a war machine that can isolate or destroy a demographic and seize resources. Service men and women see little economic gain from war. Private military contractors, or PMCs, working for multinational corporations on the other hand, can make thousands of dollars a day.

Patriotism becomes instrumental in branding war as an asset and generating public support for military actions that perpetuate atrocities and instability. In *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing Out of Catastrophe*, journalist Antony Loewenstein charts how multinationals such as G4S, Serco and Halliburton cash in on despair and vulnerability, quickly embedding PMCs, contractors and policies that function as quasi-governments in nations that have been destabilized by war. The successful corporatization of war is dependent upon a pliant society, and militaristic nationalism ensures

its cooperation. The collusion of big business and government has made it easier for multinationals to exploit resources anywhere in the world. One of the best ways to make a profit is to exploit already vulnerable populations.

Political theorist Sheldon Wolin predicted our current political maelstrom in his 2008 book *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. In it, he dissects the rise of a consolidated oligarchy that colludes with powerful corporations to create our unaccountable power base. Civil-military relations take precedence over social democracy and patriotism is a carefully manufactured construct. Theories of electoral democracy assume government is for the people, by the people, but the average American citizen has absolutely no influence in how government operates.

Thus, the perfect patriots are the masses, groomed for terror and oppression. These patriots are fearful, uncertain and constantly manipulated by messages designed to keep them in a state of turmoil. Wolin calls this a form of “anti-politics”—in which people are so ambivalent and unable to comprehend the elite forces that control their lives that their only option is to divorce themselves from critical and analytical thought. Stop thinking. Stop questioning. “Anti-politics is expressed as patriotism, anti-terrorism, militarism—subjects that brook little or no disagreements, provoking fervor while stifling thought,” Wolin writes. We stop searching for a politics that seeks to

ameliorate inequality, guarantee livable wages or provide universal health care.

Seduction equals control

In 1951, Eric Hoffer wrote what would become a modern blueprint for understanding the origins of mass movements in *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. Despite the fact Hoffer was self-educated, academics and social scientists continue to cite his eerily prescient account of how mass movements are precipitated by both deep frustration and “extravagant hope.”

Considering Hoffer’s writings in the era of Trump, nothing could be truer. Trump’s ascent reveals America’s entrenched discord—a battleground of class hierarchy, rampant inequality and expanding oligarchic control.

We have been primed for extravagant hope. We’ve been deceived into thinking that if we work really, really hard, we’ll own that dangling carrot. But nothing could be further from the truth. The cult of the self and the idea of “rugged individualism” is a metaphor for having been blessed with enough privilege to tolerate extensive risk. But the idea of personal responsibility is effective propaganda in an age where corporate malfeasance and globalization has destroyed upward mobility. We have little left except “hope.” You see it in the throngs that march in compliance on designated days of dissent brandishing pink hats or in the confined encampments of Zuccotti

Park. We are a nation awash in hope.

“The hopeful can draw strength from the most ridiculous sources of power—a slogan, a word, a button,” Hoffer writes. These morsels obscure the complexity of issues. “Make America great again” is short enough to appear on a hat and just long enough to be a campaign sound bite. Its simplicity is comforting to a population desperate for the promise of something better—something that will alleviate the desolation of their lives: mounting debt, inadequate skills, stagnant wages and the threat that one illness could wipe out their life’s savings. Witness any Trump rally and watch his fanatical base succumb to xenophobic hysteria and extravagant hope.

Fanaticism and patriotism operate as close allies. Their cadence permits a lens of normalcy in which otherwise obtuse or reprehensible acts become acceptable.

The inability to discern evidence and reason from mythology informed Gustave le Bon’s treatise, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. First published in English in 1896, his analysis of mass behavior still holds currency in an era where whoever can supply the illusion easily controls perception. Le Bon, writes, “It is not with rules based on theories of pure equity that [the crowd] are to be led, but by seeking what produces an impression on them and what seduces them.”

Seduction equals control, and that control demands spectacle. Journalist Chris Hedges predicted our pre-fascist, spectacle-laden epoch in 2010. His article “American Psychosis” is a prescient account of how dying empires endure a surfeit of illusions. A perceptive strongman who can deliver a slick illusion will always galvanize the masses more than the reasoned and erudite leader.

“Day after day,” Hedges writes, “one lurid saga after another ... enthralls the country despite bank collapses, wars, mounting poverty or the criminality of [the] financial class.” We are riveted by illusory spectacle. We are giddy voyeurs, responding to sound bites, slogans and symbols with incoherent and vague meanings—blinded and led at the same time. Patriotism is part of that spectacle. It entices us to assume the existence of a government that actually cares about its people as opposed to the interests of millionaires and corporations. Rallying nationalistic fervor is even more critical as people increasingly harbor enmity toward government, believe their vote to be useless, and fall into despair and serfdom.

Dark ages of the intellect

As the gap widens between the illusion and reality, as we suddenly grasp that it is our home being foreclosed or our job that is not coming back, we react like children. We clamor for a savior, someone who promises us revenge, moral renewal and new glory. It is not a new story. A furious and sustained backlash by a betrayed

and angry populace, one unprepared intellectually, emotionally or psychologically for collapse, will sweep aside the Democrats and most of the Republicans and will usher America into a new dark age.

That moment has arrived. The erosion of democracy and its replacement with patriotic propaganda is insidious and pervasive. The ubiquity of social media ensures an endless stream of trite and duplicitous information. Government and social programs continue to be eroded by deregulation. Corporate power has established a political economy that favors the rich. And globalization has created a permanent underclass of precariat workers—a low-wage workforce whose political participation is subjugated by their need for survival.

Language that sounds like hyperbole will eventually become normalized if those in positions of authority repeat it at length. It will assuage our gravest doubts and render us complicit in the most heinous deeds. We will cease to ask why we scream a slogan and never consider the intent behind the words. We won't ask what real patriotism looks like: health care for all, wages that allow us to pay our rent, the annihilation of demagogues. In the same way we've normalized war and unaffordable health care, we'll normalize a totalitarian regime. All the while, quasi-government corporations will be reaping a profit at our expense.

It all starts with a vague mantra. Make America great again.

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