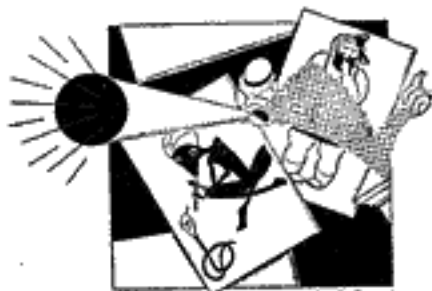


Are We Victims of PROPAGANDA?

A DEBATE



Drawing by Louis Sorel

I—Our Invisible Masters

by EVERETT DEAN MARTIN

FOR PURPOSES of this discussion, propaganda is defined as the manipulation of the public to the end of securing some specific action. The definition is abstract and inclusive. It covers many forms of activity, every sort of method, and all kinds of ends—good and bad. I do not propose to discuss a definition or an abstraction—something which exists only *in conceptu*—but something which exists *in re*. Propaganda is not something conducted in the universe of discourse for the ends of formal logic. It is a business conducted for profit or power. It is something which happens to-day in this country; and the proof of this pudding is the eating thereof.

Men have always communicated their ideas to their neighbors; have sought to convince them and to influence them for causes which seemed desirable. The right of self-expression and the desirability of the widest dissemination of truth are so important that we have de-

YES, says Mr. Martin. Propaganda is making puppets of us. We are moved by hidden springs which the propagandist manipulates.

NO, says Mr. Edward L. Bernays. The propagandist has developed a technique which minorities can employ equally well to break up majorities. Thus employed, propaganda becomes a powerful weapon against intolerance and the tyranny of the herd.

termined to secure them in this country by constitutional law. To the extent that present methods of propaganda operate to increase general knowledge and to keep open in public life an arena in which truth may have a fair deal in its endless contest with ignorance and falsehood, no reasonable mind could possibly

object to it. I am convinced, however, that propaganda does not often serve these ends. It is not designed, even at its best, for such service, but for something quite the reverse. Its aim is to "put something over" on people, with or without their knowledge and consent, and its result in general is to produce a social situation in which neither truth nor the basic values of civilization get a fair hearing.

Propaganda is not the same as public instruction. It is never disinterested information. The propagandist has an ulterior purpose. He uses information, or misinformation, for the sake of something else. He is not a disinterested

party in the pursuit or spread of knowledge. Apologists for propaganda freely admit that sometimes it is used for ends that are evil, but they argue that it is more often used for good ends. Hence there is bad propaganda and good propaganda, according to the ends served.

In reply it may be said, first, that even good ends may not justify the means commonly employed; and second, since widespread and irreparable harm may result when propaganda is employed for evil purposes, public safety requires that good propaganda — assuming it to exist — be encouraged and evil discouraged. For it is admitted by defenders of propaganda that the methods used are so effective that the average person is entirely at the mercy of those now in command of the forces by which he is manipulated.

Who, then, decides whether the ulterior end to which the public is to be led or driven, with or without its assent, is good? Decision in this all important matter is left to a few people — the very ones who have something to gain by manipulating the public. Furthermore, the identity of these people is seldom disclosed and they are responsible to no one. Propaganda is making these irresponsible and unknown persons the real rulers in American democracy. Let me quote a few passages from Mr. Edward L. Bernays' charmingly written book in defense of propaganda:*

For the masses promised to become king. . . . To-day, however, a reaction has set in. The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been found possible so to mould the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction. . . . The important thing is that it (propaganda) is universal and continuous, and in its sum total it is regimenting the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments the bodies of its soldiers. . . .

There are invisible rulers who control the destiny of millions. It is not generally realized to what extent the words and actions of our most influential public men are dictated by shrewd persons operating behind the scenes. . . . In some departments of our daily life in which we imagine ourselves free agents, we are ruled by dictators exercising great power. . . . The invisible government tends to be concentrated in the hands of the few because of the expense of manipulating the social machinery which controls the opinions and habits of the masses.

What are the qualifications of these invisible governors? Who are they that they should command? In what virtue or wisdom are they

eminent? If there is to be any stability or order in society, those who rule must at least be known and something must be required of them; otherwise their rule is pure impertinence. When before have the governing few been unknown and hence so irresponsible? When before have the rewards been so great for wrong doing, or the means so certain and easy for those who have the power? It is not enough for gentlemen to say, "Oh yes, we admit that propaganda is sometimes abused." An enterprise so uncontrollable, so susceptible of abuse, and so constantly under the temptation to abuse, is a public menace. Hence I do not think that the admitted abuses of propaganda can be dismissed from the discussion as irrelevant.

But I am concerned about the methods and ultimate effects of propaganda even at its best. One effect of propagandist methods is greatly to increase the susceptibility of the public to slogans, catchwords, and vulgarly stated half truths. Every real educator and political philosopher in history has noted the danger of this popular tendency. Now the "knowing ones" are urged to see this mob psychology, not as a social menace, but as a natural resource to be exploited for private gain. Mr. Bernays says:

It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind. . . . The manipulators of patriotic opinion made use of the mental clichés and emotional habits of the public to produce mass reaction against alleged atrocities, the terror and tyranny of the enemy. It was only natural after the war ended that intelligent persons should ask themselves whether it was not possible to apply a similar technique to the problems of peace.

Precisely! The propagandist has learned to apply a wartime psychology to the accomplishment of any ends whatever! He proceeds by utilizing, for ulterior ends, the prejudices and passions and fixed ideas of the mob — a new rôle, I assure you, for "the intelligent few" in the history of civilization. Not even Machiavelli quite dared to propose such procedure. The intelligence of the community is thus told to abandon its historic rôle of keeping alive the values of civilization, and, by turning demagogue and sycophant, to pander ignorance in return for vulgar favors — which means that prejudice and the well-known weaknesses of human nature are to be exploited and thus en-

* *Propaganda*; Liveright, 1928.

couraged. Moreover, the regimentation of opinion so achieved (for a consideration) means standardization on a low level and greater conformity to herd opinion. This accounts, in part, for the astounding growth of intolerance in American democracy since the war. In this way also, fundamentalism, prohibition, the Ku Klux Klan, censorship, and other forms of organized crowd insanity have now become a serious menace to American liberty.

Another result of propaganda on modern society is what I would call intellectual shoddiness. To be a genuine seeker after truth disqualifies one for the career of propagandist. As Mr. Bernays says, the propagandist is a "special pleader." As Public Relations Counsel, he is chiefly occupied with the interests of his client. Of course, as counsel, he would prefer an innocent client to a guilty one. Any man without criminal tendencies would rather tell the truth than lie, other things being equal. But business is business, and even among reformers the end seems in these days to justify the means. It is probably an exaggeration to say that all propaganda is lies, but it cannot be denied that the propagandist tells only one side of his story. He is interested in producing an effect, not in unbiased research.

It must be borne in mind that everything the propagandist does or says is for effect — most commonly the effect on fools. The public wants not truth but a show? Very well, he will play the mountebank. The responsibility for the intellectual integrity of the intelligent few is now for the first time in history passed on to the public. In the future, as Mr. Bernays says, "If the public becomes more intelligent in its commercial demands, commercial firms will meet new standards." So with all propagandists. This is to say, so long as the public may be manipulated by misrepresentation and by appeal to ignorance and prejudice, it is the public's own fault if the "knowing ones" make use of questionable methods. Why worry about being decent, so long as the opposite cause has public approval? Just now it is the rule to be "low brow," to come down to the level of the man in the street. In striving for mass action, intelligence exhausts itself in the methods of gaining the attention of the ignorant and stupid and neglects consideration of ends and values. You are justified to-day by the success of your effort rather than by the worthiness of your

cause in the minds of men of uncompromising principle. Integrity now is "high brow." Superficial cleverness counts.

A public ruled by an "invisible government" of this ilk becomes like its rulers. It worships the "go-getter." Its hero is anyone who, by whatever cheap device, succeeds in capturing its attention. In this manner it is encouraged to worship itself, its own power, and the cheap greatness it can bestow. It loses what little respect it once had for intellectual honesty. Note the moving picture and the tabloid newspaper and the success of "ballyhoo" everywhere. To stuff the public mind with trash means increased circulation, which is now a necessary means of manipulating the mass. The big hits are the Snyder murder trial, the Browning scandal, and the Hall-Mills case. Hence it is good propaganda for salesmen, reformers, motion picture actresses, and even preachers to make capital of the publicity they may gain from such scandals by getting themselves into print in some kind of association with such episodes, thus grafting on them for their own private ends. In this passion for the short cut to success regardless of the means employed, propaganda has brought back to us the Roman holiday.

The evil effect of these attempts to manipulate the multitude by pampering its weaknesses — in return for material and other advantages to persons and for ends not disclosed — is clearly seen in various aspects of our common life. In politics such effects have long been deplorable. The low level on which our political counsels are now conducted is chargeable to this trickery of mass appeal. Everyone knows that political opinion can be manufactured like brick and delivered to anyone who can pay the cost. Heretofore we have been able to save certain other human interests from the kind of degradation that humiliates us in politics and has made the very word, as Emerson said, a hissing and a shame. But now, thanks to our new "intelligent few," all fences are down, the cattle are in the corn, and our cultural heritage is sold daily to the barbarians in our midst in return for their favor.

Religion, for instance, seems to be trying to worship both God and Mammon in Protestant America. It often makes use of high-powered salesmanship, thus putting itself on the same spiritual level with tooth paste and commodi-

ties advertised to prevent "halitosis." It is the trivial, the irrelevant, the sensational, the appeal to obsolete bigotry which naturally give it greatest publicity. In such publicity it becomes a mere vulgar caricature of itself.

Education also suffers grievously from propaganda. We learn that organized propaganda of electric power companies has recently so seriously menaced the sanctuary of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge that it has been thought necessary to have a national committee of leading educators to "save our schools" from this sort of thing. The committee itself will probably in turn make propaganda. But it makes all the difference, for the future of civilization, whether men seek truth in order to make a plausible case for their existing interests and profits and the preconceived ideas they are determined to believe, or whether they seek it for light on all sides of a question. The first makes the ignorant more opinionated; the second leads slowly to one's becoming an educated and civilized individual. One of the serious results of propaganda is that it has caused the public to think that education and propaganda are the same thing, and thus to make an ignorant multitude believe it is being educated when it is only being manipulated. Education aims at independence of judgment. Propaganda offers ready-made opinions for the unthinking herd. Education and propaganda are directly opposed both in aim and method.

The educator aims at a slow process of development; the propagandist, at quick results. The educator tries to tell people *how* to think; the propagandist, *what* to think. The educator strives to develop individual responsibility; the propagandist, mass effects. The educator wants thinking; the propagandist, action. The educator fails unless he achieves an open mind; the propagandist, unless he achieves a closed mind.

Perhaps the most deadly thing about propaganda is that as it more and more organizes the

vast agencies for communication and human intercourse in the interest of power and success and the dominance of certain influential groups, appealing always to "clichés and emotional attitudes," it sets up a vast system which excludes everything that is rare and challenging — except that which may produce insignificant popular sensation. Mr. Bernays says that every means of human association and communication may be made a means of propaganda — that is, may be organized for ulterior ends. Try to picture this state of affairs. This means that as such social forces become organized and controlled by the unknown few who can pay for such a vast enterprise, ideas that may not be utilized to the ends for which such organization exists cannot gain a hearing. Already we see many instances of censorship by such a controlling power. As Mr. Bernays correctly says, "of late a reaction has set in."

When the future historian, an American Sallust or Tacitus, records the downfall of our republic and its loss of liberty, he will point out the leading place that organized propaganda played in this unhappy business. Sallust tells us how such propagandist tricks as the Roman manipulators discovered — bread and circuses — brought about an unholy alliance between the passions of the mob and the ambitions of "the intelligent few." Tacitus tells us that when Augustus assumed divine attributes, and tyranny and persecution were later universal, these evils were possible because no one was able to protest. This also is the inevitable end of modern organized propaganda. Once we had an uncomplimentary word for such an industry. We called it "intrigue." The ambitious few who destroyed the freedom of the ancients won over the mob by making themselves visible. To-day, as Mr. Bernays says, their successors are setting up an "invisible government." *Republica Americana delenda est.*

P. S. They got the job!



II—Our Debt to Propaganda

by EDWARD L. BERNAYS

AS A TRUTH SEEKER and a propagandist for propaganda — the two are not incompatible — I welcome the opportunity to answer the challenge set forth in this debate. Mr. Martin's article is an example of what the public generally regards as "impropaganda." He voices the opinion of a section of the intelligent public which knows a little about propaganda, but knows more about what propagandists against propaganda believe it to be. This sweeping emotional belief is expressed in a series of unsubstantiated statements. It is my opinion that anyone reading the article secures a distorted point of view. Mr. Martin looks at the whole subject of propaganda much as a man who, asked to write on the question, "Are we victims of medicine?" would discuss only the fakers and quacks.

The difficulty propagandists have in pleading any cause is that they must deal with facts, not only as they are abstractly, but as they appear to be to individuals or groups who react emotionally. In approaching a subject which should be faced impartially, such individuals or groups bring to it a definite bias of their own. Mr. Martin's article represents this attitude, which every propagandist for any cause has to face continually. In meeting his arguments, I, as the special pleader for propaganda, am put to a particular disadvantage. The critic has known how to surround the word *propaganda* with all the atmosphere of suspicion, distrust, and downright condemnation which grew up about it in the public mind during the years of the war and immediately after.

It is my belief that propaganda serves a useful purpose. It increases general knowledge. It tends to keep open an arena in public life in which the battle of truth may be fairly fought. Propaganda of the past and present gives an enormous amount of evidence of this. Great religious leaders have been propagandists, and so being, have served a definite and useful purpose in lifting the moral tone of their times. In politics, all the great leaders I can recall

have been propagandists for their points of view. They believed their theses and propagandized for them. Abraham Lincoln may not have regarded himself as a propagandist, but certainly he proved himself one of the ablest when, in his debates with Stephen A. Douglas, he aroused the conscience of the nation on the slavery question. And what man can be found to-day who will say that Lincoln demeaned himself or victimized the public when he won it over to his own most profound convictions?

To be sure, there have been propagandists in every field who have been rewarded by position, by money, by fame, by power. Lincoln himself was so rewarded. But who shall dare to proclaim that the desire for these rewards has been the only motive, or even the principal motive, behind the propagandist? One must take a very sinister view of human nature, indeed, to believe that men may not be as profoundly concerned for the success of their ideas as for the rewards that may come to them as a result of that success. Mr. Martin comes dangerously near to assuming this position.

Of course, the strongest condemnation is meted out to the business activities of propagandists. If we accept the premise that our present economic system demands mass distribution of products and ideas, it follows that businesses must propagandize for their own products and their own points of view, and hence that propagandists are indispensable to this civilization. But it does not follow from this reasoning that the public generally must become victims of the business man. Any business man who makes or distributes products that are unsound or socially destructive is, and should be, condemned. He is the quack, the faker, in his field. The conscientious propagandist — and there are many such — will have nothing to do with a product or a cause that is socially vicious, just as a conscientious doctor — and no one denies that there are conscientious doctors — will not practise quackery. In short, to say that propaganda is

vicious because certain quacks use propaganda to further their anti-social schemes is about as logical as to say that religion is opposed to progress because the Fundamentalists of Tennessee and Arkansas passed laws forbidding the teaching of evolution.

When society is organized as it is to-day, the happiness of a nation is very largely dependent upon its economic well-being. Those business men, therefore, who have propagandized successfully for basically sound products, have not only added to the economic stability of their communities, but, by doing so, have also contributed indirectly, but none the less surely, to the happiness of the people generally. This seems to me to be an obvious statement of fact — so obvious that it hardly needed to be formulated. But Mr. Martin, and perhaps others equally sincere, cannot escape a suspicion that somewhere in this relationship between the business man and the public sinister forces are at work. If business is piling up huge profits for itself through skillfully directed propaganda, it must be at the expense of the public — as if it were impossible to conceive of a bargain in which both parties derived equal profit and advantage!

As a matter of fact, the ambitious man striving for power, the inventor, the innovator who has produced a new idea, the manufacturer who has brought forth a new product and wants it to be accepted, has succeeded only because public interest and private interest have coincided. The manufacturer of a vacuum cleaner engages in intensive propaganda to get the public to accept his product. For his own private advantage he would like to place one of his vacuum cleaners in every home. But if the housewives of the country had not needed the vacuum cleaner and had not desired it, once they learned of its value to them, the private interest of the manufacturer might have expended itself in a series of futile efforts. That this did not happen was because his private interest was found to coincide with the public's interest, to their mutual benefit. It is sheer nonsense to say that either party to such a bargain is the victim of the other.

During the last twenty years there has hardly been a single new idea, new invention, or new product accepted by the public which was not made available for the public's benefit through the use of propaganda in one form or another.

Schools, colleges, churches, the theatre, literature, art, music, charities and other forms of social service — all have used propaganda effectively. And the mere fact that propaganda may have behind it a personal, self-interested, or ulterior motive does not preclude the possibility that the final end accomplished may not coincide with some great public good. Indeed, when one begins to talk about the motives behind propaganda, it becomes extremely difficult to see how a charity drive differs in essentials from a campaign to make vacuum cleaners available to every housewife.

Just here Mr. Martin asks: "Who, then, decides whether the ulterior end to which the public is to be led or driven, with or without its assent, is good?" He answers by saying that "decision in this all important matter is left to a few people — the very ones who have something to gain by manipulating the public." This is the central point of Mr. Martin's argument, and I want to take direct issue with him upon it because I am convinced that his conclusions are entirely erroneous.

Propagandists have existed ever since Eve persuaded Adam to eat the first apple, and they will exist as long as one person attempts to convince another of anything. In all ages leaders of the people have employed propaganda. Sometimes these leaders have conducted their own publicity campaigns; again, professional propagandists have placed themselves at the disposal of leaders to make their appeals more effective. In any case, the person directing propaganda has himself insured the public against his own dominance, because he has developed a technique which is available to his opponent as well as to himself. This technique has enabled all factions to make themselves heard. To-day, one of the great social advantages of propaganda is that it has made



vocal scores of minority groups of all factions, who, without propaganda, could never bring their views before the public. As long as this remains true, it can never be justly said that the public is being "led or driven, with or without its assent," by a few designing men bent on private gain.

Mr. Martin is also unduly nervous because propagandists are anonymous; and since they are not known to the public, he is sure that they must be irresponsible people. It is true that the public rarely knows who the propagandists are. But the propagandist does not work in a vacuum. He works in behalf of the leaders of public opinion, and he must adopt the same point of view as the man who accepts his services. Thus, though the propagandist may remain in the background, the man or the group or the cause to which he devotes himself becomes known to the public, and these the public not only can but does hold responsible whenever propaganda is used for anti-social ends.

I am convinced that propaganda has been the most effective weapon against intolerance and other forms of post-war madness. The *New York World* and other courageous newspapers employed propaganda to fight the Ku Klux Klan and check its threatening advances. Through effective propaganda Al Smith brought a new point of view to hundreds of thousands of American citizens. Clarence Darrow made propaganda his ally in fighting bigotry at Dayton, Tennessee. Similarly, propaganda has wrought a very definite series of material and economic changes in American life which have completely transformed the habits and standards of the people.

Propaganda should not be confused with "press notices." The most important function of propaganda is to modify the actions of an individual or a group to conform to some definite end desired. Thus defined, propaganda is not a new phenomenon; men knew how to mold public opinion long before there was a press. But when printing was discovered and newspapers grew up, and, more recently, when the motion picture and the radio made the people more accessible, public opinion became vastly more important than it had ever been before. And just as experts developed in the law, in public health, in engineering, so experts in public opinion came forward whose

business it was to give advice in this important field.

It is of these men that Mr. Martin says: "To be a genuine seeker after truth disqualifies one for the career of propagandist." As a propagandist I can testify that the reverse of this statement would be more nearly accurate. A propagandist can function only when his first step is a search for the truth. He must acquaint himself with all the facts and implications of the cause or product in which he is interested. He must find out the intrinsic value of the new ideas he is to expound. To take a concrete example, he must learn all that science can tell him about cancer before he attempts to tell the public about the methods prescribed for its prevention.

Finally, Mr. Martin would have us believe that propaganda is chiefly concerned with humanity at its worst. "Everything the propagandist does or says," writes Mr. Martin, "is for effect — most commonly the effect on fools." The fact is, of course, that the whole structure of group psychology makes it necessary for leaders to accept an idea before the masses accept it. Consequently, the very first effort in propagandizing for a new cause or a new idea is usually directed at the intelligent few.

But the tremendous diversity of public opinion in America cannot be summed up in one sentence. How can one dismiss in a few derogatory and sentimental tirades the whole field of propaganda, which takes in at one sweep the Rockefeller Foundation's fight against disease and all of the thousands of campaigns for civic and moral improvement waged by different groups all over the country? I have indicated in this article that propaganda, like any other powerful force or agency, may at times be made to serve harmful ends; but, as Bruce Bliven recently said: "The cure for propaganda is more propaganda." It enables minorities to break up dominant groups. It is the advance agent of new ideas and new products. Since it is available to all, it is an insurance against autocracy in government and against standardization and stagnation. It seems to me that the future historian will ascribe to propaganda a very large share of responsibility for America's progress, and that he will point to us, not as victims of propaganda, but as its beneficiaries.

III—Rebuttal

by EVERETT DEAN MARTIN

I SPECIFICALLY stated that I would discuss the evils of propaganda at its best; Mr. Bernays replies that I am like one who, in writing about the medical profession, "would discuss only the fakers and quacks." I quoted passages from Mr. Bernays' recent book to show that propaganda tends to set up an invisible and irresponsible government. The language quoted is plain. In reply Mr. Bernays makes three points, in all of which I think his logic is weak.

1. He cites the example of history and refers particularly to Lincoln. But, in contrast with modern propagandists, people knew who Lincoln was. He did not have ulterior purposes which were undisclosed. His methods were just the opposite of those of modern propaganda. He tried to enable people to do some critical and independent thinking. The propagandist seeks to "put something over" on people.

2. Mr. Bernays says in effect, "Let the public hold responsible those who employ these unknown propagandists." But as he has himself stated in his book that once such propagandists are on the job they proceed with such scientific efficiency that the public is really at their mercy, I wish he would explain how the public, being so manipulated, can rationally hold anyone to account.

3. Mr. Bernays says, "To-day, one of the great social advantages of propaganda is that it has made vocal scores of minority groups of all factions, who, without propaganda, could never bring their views before the public." In other words, propaganda enlightens the public. How? By the post-war trick, as he tells us, of appeal to popular emotion. Why, it is by just such appeal to unreason that the propagandists seek to "regiment" the largest majority possible—a queer way to enlighten the public and break up majorities!

Mr. Bernays does not really discuss my argument, that the methods used by propagandists, even at best, in the necessary attempt to translate all things into such terms that one hundred and twenty millions of people can be "reached," make for cheapness, in-

sincerity, and intolerance. His argument is in substance that propaganda serves the truth by giving both sides of an issue a hearing. But is it true that, as things are, each side of an issue gains a fair and equal hearing? Is it not a fact that the little business and the unpopular cause—those that have not the money to pay for the services of high-pressure salesmen and large-circulation advertising, however worthy they may be—are increasingly unable to compete for a hearing with forces organized on a nation-wide scale?

It seems to me that Mr. Bernays is primarily concerned with specific and immediate results—good results I readily grant—but let the end justify the means. I am more concerned about the effects of the method employed even in the service of a good cause. Mr. Bernays' impressive reference to colleges, churches, and other national agencies now employing propagandist methods for worthy ends only tends to substantiate my contention that we are living at a time when the very most sacred, rare, and hitherto carefully guarded treasures of civilization are obliged to turn to ballyhoo and sell caricatures of themselves to open-mouthed idlers in the market place.

I did not, as Mr. Bernays seems to think, bring severest criticism against propaganda in business. I am primarily interested in preserving our cultural inheritance. Doubtless propaganda in the form of advertising works less harm than elsewhere. The man who advertises soap generally sells what he advertises. Even the sale of an occasional gold brick is not the worst evil of propaganda. What I object to is the nation-wide sale of cultural gold bricks.

Mr. Bernays' quotation from Mr. Bruce Bliven has literary value, but surely this passage carries no weight as argument. It is summed up in the slogan—"The cure for propaganda is more propaganda." One remembers similar "cures"—that for democracy is more democracy, and so on. As Shaw once said, such reasoning is to say that the way to cure measles is to infect everybody with smallpox.