

## Propaganda Blitz

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How the Corporate Media  
Distort Reality

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Foreword by John Pilger

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# Anatomy of a Propaganda Blitz

A regular feature of corporate media manipulation involves the launching of what we call a propaganda blitz, attacking and discrediting 'Official Enemies', often preparing the way for 'action' or 'intervention' of some kind.

Propaganda blitzes are fast-moving attacks intended to inflict maximum damage in minimum time. They are:

1. based on allegations of dramatic new evidence
2. communicated with high emotional intensity and moral outrage
3. apparently supported by an informed corporate media/academic/expert consensus
4. reinforced by damning condemnation of anyone daring even to question the apparent consensus
5. often generated with fortuitous timing
6. characterised by tragicomic moral dissonance.

## *Dramatic New Evidence*

A propaganda blitz is often launched on the back of allegedly dramatic new evidence indicating that an establishment enemy should be viewed as uniquely despicable and actively targeted. The basic theme: *This changes everything!*

Propagandists are well aware that media attention will rapidly move on from claims of dramatic new evidence, so the durability of the claims is not a key concern. Marginalised media websites and rare 'mainstream' articles may eventually expose the hype. But propagandists know that most corporate media will not notice and

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will not learn the lesson that similar claims should be received with extreme caution in future.

One of the most obvious recent examples of a propaganda blitz was the Blair government's infamous September 2002 dossier on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which included four mentions of a dramatic new claim that Iraq was able to deploy WMD against British citizens within 45 minutes of an order being given.

Senior intelligence officials later revealed that the original 45-minute claim referred to the length of time it might have taken the Iraqis to fuel and fire a Scud missile or rocket launcher. But that original intelligence said exactly *nothing* about whether Iraq possessed the chemical or biological weapons to use in those weapons. The Blair government had transformed a purely hypothetical danger into an immediate and deadly threat.

The fakery surrounding the Iraq War was so extreme that even the 'mainstream' media could not ultimately ignore the collapse of the case for war. But by then the powers that be had got the invasion and occupation they were seeking.

In 1964, in what became known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the US government and US corporate media launched a propaganda blitz based on the claim that US destroyers had come under attack from North Vietnamese patrol boats. The goal was to justify a massive escalation of the US assault on Vietnam. Media analyst Daniel Hallin wrote that the episode 'was a classic of Cold War management ... On virtually every important point, the reporting of the two Gulf of Tonkin incidents ... was either misleading or simply false.' Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky noted that the lies were simply 'in accordance with the needs of the US executive at that crucial moment.'<sup>1</sup>

In February 2008, the US Naval Institute reported on the release of nearly 200 declassified documents related to the incident:

These new documents and tapes reveal what historians could not prove: There was not a second attack on U.S. Navy ships in the Tonkin Gulf in early August 1964. Furthermore, the evidence suggests a disturbing and deliberate attempt by

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Secretary of Defense McNamara to distort the evidence and mislead Congress.<sup>2</sup>

As for the first ‘attack,’ US naval aggression had provoked three North Vietnamese patrol boats to pursue the US aggressor in an engagement in which the patrol boats ‘were almost entirely destroyed,’ while the US ship ‘may have sustained “one bullet hole”’.<sup>3</sup>

In October 1990, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, as the US worked hard to build a case for war, it was claimed that Iraqi stormtroopers had smashed their way into a Kuwait City hospital, torn hundreds of babies from their incubators and left them on the floor to die. In their book, *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You*, John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton described how the most powerful and heart-rending testimony came from a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl, initially known only as Nayirah:

Sobbing, she described what she had seen with her own eyes in a hospital in Kuwait City ... ‘I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital,’ Nayirah said. ‘While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns, and go into the room where ... babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the babies on the cold floor to die.’<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Nayirah was a member of the Kuwaiti Royal Family. Her father was Saud Nasir al-Sabah, Kuwait’s Ambassador to the US. Stauber and Rampton noted that Nayirah had been coached by US PR company Hill & Knowlton’s vice-president Lauri Fitz-Pegado ‘in what even the Kuwaitis’ own investigators later confirmed was false testimony’. The story of the 312 murdered babies was an outright lie. Journalist John MacArthur, author of *The Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the 1991 Gulf War*, commented:

Of all the accusations made against the dictator [Saddam Hussein], none had more impact on American public opinion than the one about Iraqi soldiers removing 312 babies from their incubators and leaving them to die on the cold hospital floors of Kuwait City.<sup>5</sup>

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As another war loomed in March 2003, in an article titled, ‘See men shredded, then say you don’t back war’, Labour MP Ann Clwyd claimed that Saddam Hussein’s goons were feeding opponents into a machine ‘designed for shredding plastic’ and dumping their minced remains into ‘plastic bags’ for use as ‘fish food’.<sup>6</sup>

Who, in good conscience, then, could deny the righteousness of a war against Saddam? Alas, as Brendan O’Neil commented in the *Guardian*, Clwyd had based her story on the uncorroborated claims of ‘one individual from northern Iraq. Neither Amnesty International nor Human Rights Watch, in their numerous investigations into human rights abuses in Iraq, had ever heard anyone talk of a human-shredding machine.’<sup>7</sup>

The story was baseless nonsense.

In 2011, dramatic claims were made that the Libyan government was planning a massacre in Benghazi, exactly the kind of action that Gaddafi knew could trigger Western ‘intervention’. Again, as we will see later in this book (Chapter 5, Libya – ‘It is All About Oil’), the claim was eventually exposed as baseless even by a UK parliamentary committee report. But once again, the warmongers had already achieved the regime change and control they desired.

In August 2013, corporate politicians and journalists instantly declared the Syrian government to blame for the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus. Just one day after the attacks, a *Guardian* leader claimed there was not ‘much doubt’ who was to blame, and yet, as we will see in Chapter 6, the media’s certainty was again utterly bogus.<sup>8</sup>

In May 2016, an excellent example of a propaganda blitz saw Jeremy Corbyn targeted by dramatic new ‘evidence’: namely, the discovery of a graphic posted by Naz Shah two years earlier, before she had become a Labour MP. The graphic showed a map of the United States with Israel superimposed in the middle, suggesting that a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict would be to relocate Israel to the US.

Shah’s post was highlighted by right-wing blogger Paul Staines, who writes as ‘Guido Fawkes’:



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Naz Shah ... shared a highly inflammatory graphic arguing in favour of the chilling 'transportation' policy two years ago, adding the words 'problem solved'.<sup>9</sup>

Feeding the Naz Shah propaganda blitz in the *Guardian*, Jonathan Freedland, formerly comment editor, argued that leftists view Israel as 'a special case, uniquely deserving of hatred', and that this hatred 'lay behind' Shah's call 'for the "transportation" [of Israel to America] – a word with a chilling resonance for Jews'.<sup>10</sup>

A few days later, in the *Observer*, columnist Andrew Rawnsley echoed the claim that Shah believed 'that Israelis should be put on "transportation" to America, with all the chilling echoes that has for Jews'.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, Israel-based former *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Cook, who was given a Martha Gellhorn special award for his work on the Middle East, argued that the map 'was clearly intended to be humorous rather than anti-semitic. I would make a further point. It is also obvious that the true target of the post is the US, not Jews or even Israel – making the anti-semitism claim even more ridiculous'.<sup>12</sup>

Norman Finkelstein, Jewish author of *The Holocaust Industry*, and the son of Holocaust survivors, commented that he had originally posted the graphic on his website in 2014:

An email correspondent must have sent it. It was, and still is, funny. Were it not for the current political context, nobody would have noticed Shah's reposting of it either. Otherwise, you'd have to be humourless. These sorts of jokes are a commonplace in the U.S. So, we have this joke: Why doesn't Israel become the 51st state? Answer: Because then, it would only have two senators. As crazy as the discourse on Israel is in America, at least we still have a sense of humour. It's inconceivable that any politician in the U.S. would be crucified for posting such a map.<sup>13</sup>

Finkelstein responded to the idea that Shah's posting of the image was an endorsement of a 'chilling "transportation" policy':

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Frankly, I find that obscene. It's doubtful these Holocaust-mongers have a clue what the deportations were, or of the horrors that attended them. I remember my late mother describing her deportation. She was in the Warsaw Ghetto. The survivors of the Ghetto Uprising, about 30,000 Jews, were deported to Majdanek concentration camp. They were herded into railroad cars. My mother was sitting in the railroad car next to a woman who had her child. And the woman – I know it will shock you – the woman suffocated her infant child to death in front of my mother. She suffocated her child, rather than take her to where they were going. That's what it meant to be deported. To compare that to someone posting a light-hearted, innocuous cartoon making a little joke about how Israel is in thrall to the U.S., or vice versa ... it's sick. What are they doing? Don't they have any respect for the dead? All these desiccated Labour apparatchiks, dragging the Nazi holocaust through the mud for the sake of their petty jostling for power and position. Have they no shame?<sup>14</sup>

### *Emotional Tone and Intensity*

A crucial component of the propaganda blitz is the tone of political and corporate commentary, which is always vehement, even hysterical.

As we will see in following chapters, claims of dramatic new evidence of alleged horrors committed by 'Official Enemies' are invariably followed by expressions of deep moral outrage.

The rationale is clear enough: insanity aside, in ordinary life outrage of this kind is usually a sign that someone has *good reason* to be angry. People generally do not get very angry in the presence of significant doubt. So, the message to the public is that there is no doubt.

The picture of the world created must be clear-cut. The public must be made to feel there is no reasonable basis for uncertainty – the 'good guys' are basically benevolent and the 'bad guys' are absolutely appalling and must be removed.

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This is achieved by relentless repetition of the theme hammered home over days, weeks, months and even years. Numerous individuals and organisations are used to give the impression of an informed consensus – there is no doubt!

Thus the splenetic eruptions demanding that ‘something must be done’ to ‘save’ Syria from impending massacre delivered by journalists blithely indifferent to the consequences of their earlier moral outbursts for Iraq and Libya.

Responding to the Naz Shah ‘scandal’ discussed above, Richard Littlejohn wrote in the *Mail* under the title, ‘The fascists at the poisoned heart of Labour’:

Naz [Shah] by name, Nazi by nature, was revealed to have backed the transportation of Jews in Israel to the United States.<sup>15</sup>

The *Jewish Chronicle* commented:

Labour now seems to be a party that attracts antisemites like flies to a cesspit. Barely a week goes by without the identification of a racist party member or allegations of racist behaviour by those involved in the party.<sup>16</sup>

As we will see, these claims were pure propaganda.

In 2017, the BBC website propaganda blitz assailed its readers with endless claims that Venezuela under President Nicolas Maduro was a ‘dictatorship’ with zero freedom of expression:

‘The dictatorship is living its last days and Maduro knows it,’ former MP Maria Corina Machado told AFP news agency at the women’s march.<sup>17</sup>

On 22 May 2017, a BBC report commented: “‘Venezuela is now a dictatorship,” says Luis Ugalde, a Spanish-born Jesuit priest who during his 60 years living in Venezuela has become one of the South American nation’s most well-known political scientists.”<sup>18</sup>

One would hardly guess that Venezuela has a democratically-elected government. In fact, while recognising that the Maduro government certainly merits criticism for mishandling the current situation, ‘both economically and politically,’ political analyst Greg

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Wilpert noted that ‘none of the arguments against the democratic legitimacy of the Maduro government hold[s] much water’. Moreover, ‘polls repeatedly indicate that even though Maduro is fairly unpopular, a majority of Venezuelans want him to finish his term in office, which expires in January 2019.’<sup>19</sup>

On 11 May 2017, the BBC broadcast ‘Inside Venezuela’s anti-government protests’. The first comment relayed by the BBC:

There’s no freedom of expression here in Venezuela. There’s no freedom of any kind.<sup>20</sup>

Media analyst Joe Emersberger described the reality:

In fact the protests and the leading opposition leaders’ take on the protests are being extensively covered on the largest private networks: Venevision, Televen, Globovision. If people abroad sampled Venezuela’s TV media directly, as opposed to judging it by what is said about it by the international media and some big NGOs, they’d be shocked to find the opposition constantly denouncing the government and even making very thinly veiled appeals to the military to oust Maduro.<sup>21</sup>

### *Appearance of Informed ‘Consensus’*

A key component of a propaganda blitz is the illusion of informed consensus. For maximum public impact, the supposed dramatic new evidence should be asserted with certainty and outrage right across the media ‘spectrum’. The ‘consensus’ generates the impression that *everyone knows* that the claim is truthful. This is why the myth of a media ‘spectrum’ is so vital – an apparently credible, snowballing consensus puts pressure on dissidents to toe the line.

This is crucial because while a demonising propaganda blitz may arise from rightist politics and media, the propaganda *coup de grace* ending public doubt often comes from the ‘left-liberal’ journalists at the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the BBC and Channel 4; and also from non-corporate journalists who crave acceptance by these media. Again, the logic is clear: if *even* celebrity progres-

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sive journalists – people famous for their principled stands, and colourful socks and ties – join the denunciations, then there *must* be something to the claims. At this point, it becomes difficult to doubt it.

Thus, in 2002, it was declared ‘a given’ by the *Guardian* that Iraq still retained WMD that *might* be a threat, despite the fact that both claims were easily and completely refutable.<sup>22</sup>

In 2007, George Monbiot wrote in the *Guardian*: ‘I believe that Iran is trying to acquire the bomb.’<sup>23</sup> As even 16 US intelligence agencies confirmed – it wasn’t.

In October 2011, Monbiot wrote of NATO’s attack on Libya: ‘I feel the right thing has been happening for all the wrong reasons.’ In fact, illegal bombing in pursuit of regime change was very much the *wrong* thing happening for the wrong reasons.

At a crucial time in August 2013, with a full-on US-UK propaganda blitz preparing for an all-out military attack, Monbiot affirmed: ‘Strong evidence that Assad used CWs [chemical weapons] on civilians.’<sup>24</sup>

As we will see in Chapter 6, the claim was as questionable as it was inflammatory.

In February 2011, as NATO ‘intervention’ clearly loomed in Libya, the *Guardian*’s Owen Jones tweeted:

I hope it’s game over for Gaddafi. A savage dictator once tragically embraced by me on left + lately western governments and oil companies.<sup>25</sup>

On 20 March 2011, one day after NATO bombing began, Jones wrote:

Let’s be clear. Other than a few nutters, we all want Gaddafi overthrown, dead or alive.<sup>26</sup>

In 2012, news of the killings of Syrian ministers in a bomb explosion was greeted by Jones with: ‘Adios, Assad (I hope).’<sup>27</sup>

Jones tweeted that ‘this is a popular uprising, not arriving on the back of western cruise missiles, tanks and bullets.’<sup>28</sup>

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As was obvious then and is indisputable now, Jones was badly wrong – the West, directly and via regional allies, had played a *massive* role in the violence. The *New York Times* reported that the US had been embroiled in a dirty war in Syria that constituted ‘one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A,’ running to ‘more than \$1 billion over the life of the program.’<sup>29</sup> The aim was to support a vast ‘rebel’ army created and armed by the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to overthrow the Syrian government.

As though reading from the NATO playbook, Jones added:

I’m promoting the overthrow of illegitimate and brutal dictatorships by their own people to establish democracies.<sup>30</sup>

As we will see in the next chapter, both Monbiot and Jones publicly dumped Corbyn in early 2017, which again added enormously to the propaganda blitz attempting to see him ousted as Labour leader.

This is why the mythology of the ‘liberal-left’ *Guardian* and *Independent*, with their handful of noisy, tub-thumping progressives, is so important and why we work so hard to challenge it. It is why expressions of progressive support for the *Guardian* – with occasional articles appearing by Noam Chomsky and others, and with Russell Brand, for example becoming a ‘*Guardian* partner’ – are so important. It is why we focus so intensely on the *Guardian* and its more progressive commentators. The public is not for one moment fooled by a hard-right consensus. Agreement *must* appear to have been reached by ‘all right-thinking people,’ the ‘lefties’ at the *Guardian* included.

With regards to the propaganda blitz targeting Corbyn over Naz Shah’s comments, the propaganda *coup de grace* was again supplied by a *Guardian* leftist. Owen Jones tweeted:

John McDonnell [Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer] was right to swiftly force Naz Shah’s resignation – but now the party has to suspend her.<sup>31</sup>