

AMERICAN ITSESENSUURI: A TYPOLOGY OF SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

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According to an old cliché, the first casualty of war is the truth. However, when bullets start flying, dissent and debate often follow closely behind as early victims of military expediency. This is due in part to the fact that public debate is made possible by contingent norms that change with shifting circumstances. In peacetime, democratic nations identify with the processes of open argumentation and public dialogue as unifying notions that reaffirm the citizenry's shared commitment to foundational principles such as free speech and popular sovereignty. Yet these commitments are often reassessed and deferred when war breaks out.

Numerous examples of wartime censorship reveal this as a routine phenomenon in U.S. history. Consider the Alien and Sedition Acts; the Truman administration's loyal-security program; and information control during the Persian Gulf War (Schrecker, 1986; Moynihan, 1999; MacArthur, 1993). Each of these measures hushed war dissent by increasing direct governmental control over public discourse. In the terminology of Michel Foucault (1977), this type of overt censorship was leveraged by the "juridical power" of the state, with critical dissenters subjected to criminal penalties under the law. But for every muckraker punished under these wartime regimes of speech control there were probably hundreds of other potential critics who practiced self-censorship, holding their tongues in fear of being branded as unpatriotic or even traitorous.

In contrast to top-down forms of state-mandated censorship such as prepublication prior restraint or satellite "shutter control," self-censorship results from tacit agreements between authority figures and potential critics that the "higher-order conditions" for argumentation do not obtain in a given milieu (see van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs 1993: 32-3). From a Foucauldian point of view, self-censorship is thus an especially "efficient" form of wartime speech regulation, because it can be effected through circulation of "disciplinary power." In contrast to the overt display of juridical power by the state apparatus, disciplinary power – here manifested in the ability to mobilize mass voluntary consent – is more discrete and diffuse, while also being more ostensibly consistent with norms of democratic governance.

While instances of overt government censorship in the current U.S. "war on terror" are relatively infrequent compared to previous wars, as the war drifts beyond Afghanistan, public argument is constrained by overwhelming polling data in support of the war effort and a deliberative straightjacket imposed by the Bush administration's edict that the world sorts tidily into two camps – "with us or with the terrorists." This dominant argument formation contributes to what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) calls a "spiral of silence," where pervasive self-censorship instills widespread quietism. Noelle-Neumann explains that poll-driven Western democracies experience spirals of silence when super-majority opinion survey statistics surpass their apparently neutral function as carriers of public opinion and become coercive tools of social control. The danger of voicing viewpoints outside a narrow band of acceptable consensus opinion grows. Private sanctions and penalties for dissent escalate. A hush of criticism is

drowned out amidst a cacophony of agreement. Ruth Flower, director of public policy for the American Association of University Professors, contrasts this dimension of the current spiral of silence with chilling of dissent during the Cold War: "There are some things here that hearken back to McCarthyism. But this is different, because it is not the government telling the public what it can and cannot say. This is more a matter of public sentiment dictating behavior" (qtd. in Fletcher, 2001, October 30).

In this environment, the locus of censorship shifts from the state apparatus to private organizations and individuals who adopt tacit agreements not to "rock the boat." Finns have word for this – *itsensuuri*. Finnish journalism scholar Esko Salminen (1999) describes how the *itsensuuri* phenomenon subtly yet powerfully controlled the tenor of public argument in Cold War Finland. At the Soviet embassy in Helsinki, Communist Party operatives assembled a large staff that sorted Finnish news articles into pro- and anti- piles. When Finnish journalists published material that ran against the grain of official Soviet propaganda, internal pressure was covertly applied. From 1970 to 1991, this caused slanted reporting in Finnish media on topics such as quality of life in Soviet Union, the health of Soviet premiers, the fate of political prisoners, and, in an eerie echo of the current case, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In Salminen's account (1999: 89), "the opinions of the Finnish press were restricted, as if by an unseen hand, when the USSR intervened in Afghanistan. ... In just over ten years, even the Right-wing press had begun to treat aggressive Soviet foreign policy with kid gloves." "Orwellian 'Newspeak' began to emerge" (Salminen, 1999: 172), creating a "locked public debate." Finnish psychologist Kyösti Skyttä assesses Cold War *itsensuuri* as a problem of "the rejected present," explaining that "the Finnish people are realists, but their field of action is enclosed by invisible walls" (qtd. in Salminen, 1999: 9). Skyttä's point raises a difficult methodological problem for those seeking to document *itsensuuri*: "Self-censorship is very difficult to observe in practice. As a mechanism, it operates largely on a subconscious level, and is thus a devious tool in the hands of those in power" (Salminen, 1999: 176). As a distortion of the argumentative process, *isesensuuri* is similar to the *ad baculum* fallacy (appeal to force), which may not involve explicit arguments at all. This *sub rosa* dimension of *ad baculum* argumentation poses particular problems for scholars seeking to analyze discourse through reconstruction (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs 1993: 57), just as the subtlety of *isesensuuri* complicates the task of scholarly criticism.

The leverage for self-censorship in the Finnish case came from fear of Soviet reprisals. Finnish journalists were reluctant to publish articles critical of Soviet policy out of anxiety that such publications would prompt the Kremlin to repress Finland openly (perhaps even through a repeat of Prague spring in Helsinki). Today, a prevailing argument formation in the U.S. instills self-censorship by raising the private costs of war dissent. This essay explores American *itsensuuri* by proposing a typology of self-censorship. According to the typology, three forms of American war

self-censorship can be differentiated: Mothballing, mine dodging and patron pressure. Exploration of how each type of self-censorship responds to and shapes public discourse patterns may help elucidate deliberative dynamics of the “war on terror” and build upon scholarly analysis of the *itsesensuuri* phenomenon.

MOTHBALLING

The violent erasure of the World Trade Center from the New York City skyline on September 11, 2001 prompted many in the entertainment industry to re-evaluate projects already in the pipeline for public release. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the suicide hijackings, industry officials modified or shelved completely film, posters and television shows that depicted the twin towers or used them in storylines.

A trailer for the movie *Spider Man* was pulled by Sony because it contained images of the World Trade Center, while the same company shot retakes of *Men in Black 2* that put the Chrysler Building in place of the twin towers. CBS edited out views of the trade center in the television show *Sex in the City* (Hoberman, 2001, December 5). Suddenly, classic images of the New York City skyline became obscene symbols when juxtaposed with grim news of carnage across lower Manhattan. Yet curiously, even precient Hollywood films that had anticipated the towers' demise also fell under the censor's knife. MGM mothballed *Nose Bleed*, with Jackie Chan starring as a window washer who foils a terrorist plot to blow up the WTC: “It represents capitalism,” one of the terrorists was to explain in the scuttled film. “It represents freedom. It represents everything that America is about. And to bring those two buildings down would bring America to its knees” (qtd. in Hoberman, 2001, December 5). One episode of the cartoon strip “Helen: Sweetheart of the Internet” that had been completed before the attacks was shelved by parent company Tribune Media because it depicted a character blacking out New York with the click of a mouse. “It didn't have anything to do with a bombing,” Fred Schecker, editor of Tribune Media Services explained; “There were no planes involved. But it did turn out the lights in Manhattan, and we thought that was close enough” (qtd. in McTavish, 2001, October 20).

Perhaps these examples of World Trade Center self-censorship were manifestations of a post-traumatic stress response, with editors and producers sensing that prevailing standards of decorum required them to ease the mass pain of 9/11 by rewriting the past. But other examples of mothballing reveal how discursive restraint went further. The cooperative nature of self-censorship as a compound communicative act with interlocking elements of warning and response is vivid in the National Football League (NFL) example. There was no need for overt government censorship because the NFL's corporate brass entered into a tacit agreement with announcers that certain words should be stricken from the NFL vocabulary. The NFL issued an advisory asking announcers to refrain from using play-by-play staples such as “blitz, bomb, draft, or trenches” (Sandomir, 2001, September 21). The NFL guidelines had an effect on New York Giants Coach Jim Fassel: “I'm more cautious of some of the things that normally come out of my mouth,” Fassel said when asked about battle analogies; “Because I don't want to draw any references. Where our country is right now, I'd rather draw a fine line and not get into those terms” (qtd. in Sandomir, September 21).

Clear Channel, a consortium that delivers content to thousands of radio stations nationwide, asked affiliates to avoid playing some 150 songs including:

- Kansas, “Dust in the Wind”
- Carole King, “I Feel the Earth Move”
- Cat Stevens, “Peace Train”
- Peter Paul and Mary, “Leavin' on a Jet Plane”
- Bangles, “Walk Like an Egyptian” (see Leeds and Brownfield, 2001, September 18).

Fox suspended efforts to produce *Deadline*, a television series based on a hijacking theme (Hoberman, 2001, December 5). Gary Trudeau said he decided to withhold a number of already finished “Doonesbury” installments that were critical of the president because they no longer felt appropriate (McTavish, 2001, October 20). The decision to hold back work in progress because of an intervening event indicates something dramatic about the power of that event to control norms of public discourse. The 9/11 suicide hijackings froze a number of high-profile U.S. entertainment projects that either criticized government leadership or made references to key symbols in the attacks. In Cold War Finland, such self-censorship was also evident in popular entertainment, with songs and plays brought into the ambit of the “psuedototalitarian culture” (Salminen, 1999, p. 29) that deterred anti-Soviet discourse.

Is there significance in the fact that mothballing was so prevalent in the entertainment world? Perhaps producers felt that 9/11-related content was inappropriate to include in films in the immediate aftermath of the suicide hijackings, because it hit “too close to home.” Producer Robert Altman offered a more cynical and more ominous explanation, suggesting that post-9/11 cinema self-censorship was the manifestation of latent guilt harbored by Hollywood for inspiring the suicide hijackings with its visionary aestheticization of spectacular mega-violence: “The movies set the pattern, and these people have copied the movies. Nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie... I just believe we created this atmosphere and taught them how to do it” (qtd. in Hoberman, 2001, December 5).

MINE DODGING

Roughly one month after the 9/11 attacks, U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice held a remarkable telephone conference call with leaders of the major U.S. television networks. During this call, Rice successfully convinced the television executives to avoid airing videos made by Osama bin Laden. The president could have prohibited such broadcasting by executive order, but instead he chose to dispatch Rice to persuade television officials about the necessity of self-censorship. ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC acquiesced to the request that, according media ethics and law professor Jane Kirtley of the University of Minnesota, carried “the force of coercion if not the force of law” for companies operating in a regulated industry (qtd. in Media caught, 2001, October 12). Application of this disciplinary power reached beyond U.S. network television – The State Department warned U.S. Voice of America radio not to air quotes from a rare interview with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar (Media caught, 2001, October 12).

The response by network television chiefs to Rice's request for self-censorship was almost uniformly positive: “After hearing Dr. Rice, we're not going to step on the land mines she was talking about,” Walter Isaacson, CNN's news chairman, told the *New York Times* (qtd. in Lobe, 2001, October 11). Isaacson's minefield analogy captured aptly how the line differentiating journalists, soldiers, and Pentagon officials began to blur in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, with public spheres of deliberation dotted with mines and the theater of war doubling as a nascent public sphere.

In an appearance on the *David Letterman Show*, CBS News anchor Dan Rather said “George Bush is the President. Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where and he'll make the call” (qtd. in Mansbridge, 2001, September 21). Media magnate Rupert Murdoch seconded Rather's sentiment, commenting: “We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty” (Media mogul, 2001, October 11). CNN spokesperson Matt Furman committed unequivocally to a stance that granted government voices a place at his company's editorial table: “In deciding what to air, CNN will consider guidance from appropriate authorities” (qtd. in CNN airs, 2001, October 11). The *United Press International* reported

that by November, “all the major U.S. TV networks ... agreed to a regime of self censorship in the face of pressure from the White House, agreeing to remove language the administration deemed inflammatory” (Chatfield, 2001, November 8).

This tacit agreement between government officials and media executives to suspend rules of critical argumentation in public discourse was facilitated by a particular “argument formation” (Goodnight, 1998). According to Goodnight, unique argument formations were critical in shaping the course of the Cold War: “The Cold War had a flexible grammar, a more or less stable set of categories whose representations mapped the terrain of enemies and allies and rendered intelligible events and acts of influence” (Goodnight, 1998). In the “war on terror,” a related, yet distinct argument formation sets precedents for public deliberation and controls frames of public understanding. Features of the prevailing argument formation are embedded in official texts that establish the acceptable parameters and tone of war discussion. These texts, including public addresses, press conferences and congressional testimony by Bush administrative officials, simultaneously provide an official lens for “rendering events intelligible” and signal to multiple audiences the boundaries of acceptable speech and behavior.

The September 14, 2001 Congressional resolution authorizing initial use of force in the “war on terror” not only gave a green light for military reprisals. It also delegated a presidential prerogative to *define* key terms – “he determines” the people who “planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks.” This delegated authority extended to executive action “in order to prevent any further acts of international terrorism.” This language established long-term authority for the president to define terrorism and then to act on such definitions by ordering preemptive military strikes.

In his September 20, 2001 address to Congress, President George W. Bush (2001a) acted on this power by making an important definitional move. By using the word “harbor,” he extended the war to accessories and assistants supporting acts of terrorism. A map of how this argument formation structured subsequent discourse can be found in President Bush’s (2001a) extension of the “harboring” doctrine into a guilt-by-association formula with the declaration: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” The word “us” in this statement simultaneously presumed and called into existence a consensus, an agreement based on the assumption of a concluded discussion. This consensus was reinforced later when subsequent official discourse operationally defined “us” as the administration’s policy, then broadened the scope of “with the terrorists” not only to include foreign states that harbor terrorists, but also those persons critical of administration policy.

Definitional drift here snared foreign governments “harboring” terrorists and critics questioning administration policy in the same disciplinary net. Such drift was especially evident in Attorney General John Ashcroft’s (2001) testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, where he said: “[T]o those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve.” Some senators bristled at Ashcroft’s intimation that their tough questions about the *USA PATRIOT Act* were unpatriotic. At a press conference following Ashcroft’s testimony, Department of Justice spokesperson Mindy Tucker displayed the flexibility of the *itsesensuuri* phenomenon, denying official censorship in one breath, then issuing new veiled warnings in the next: “Anyone who reported this morning that he [Ashcroft] criticized anyone who opposed him was absolutely wrong and in doing so became part of the exact problem he was describing” (qtd. in Benjamin, 2001, December 7).

In a similar register, an American Council for Trustees and Alumni report (2002) quoted President Bush’s zero-sum framework to justify its indictment of “equivocal” dialogue in universities as the weak link in the war on terror. Most recently came Americans for Victory Over Terrorism, a Beltway lobby group formed by Reagan administration officials William Bennett and Frank Gaffney, joined by former CIA head James Woolsey. Early indications suggest that the purpose of this organization will be to chill war dissent, using Gaffney’s formula that the “second guessing, the questioning, the criticisms” are dangerous because such activity “emboldens” enemies (qtd. in Corn, 2002).

The “with us or with the terrorists” argument formation, laid out in President Bush’s September 20, 2001 address, and extended by these private lobby organizations, created strong incentives for media executives to err on the side of self-censorship. According to Daniel Hallin, political scientist at the University of California at San Diego, a spiral of silence has gripped network television executives: “The television networks are kind of running scared in the sense of being very cautious about putting anything on the air that’s controversial or that might be seen as unpatriotic by either their advertisers or a lot of their audience” (qtd. in Lobe, 2001, October 11).

PATRON PRESSURE

The case of Bill Maher, host of the ABC television show *Politically Incorrect*, illustrates dramatically how patron pressure drove a third type of American self-censorship in the early stages of the “war on terror.” On Sept 17, 2001, *Politically Incorrect*’s first night back on the air after the 9/11 attacks, Maher said: “We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2000 miles away, that’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it. That’s not cowardly.” In response to Maher’s comments, Sears and Federal Express pulled advertisements and the ABC network affiliate WJLA in Washington, D.C. canceled *Politically Incorrect*.

On Sept 26, 2001, White House spokesperson Ari Fleischer was asked about Maher’s comments. Fleischer’s response carried the heavy weight of an ominous threat: “There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is” (Fleischer, 2001b). Fleischer’s words mirrored earlier “watch what you say and do” warnings issued in Cold War Finland (Salminen, 1999, p. 166), but in another curious layer of self-censorship, his comments were not included in an official written transcript of the briefing (see Fleischer, 2001a). The Maher incident “kind of set the mood for what was going to be tolerated and what wasn’t going to be tolerated,” says Gary Daniels of the National Coalition Against Censorship (qtd. in Jurkowitz, 2002, January 27). In this climate, editors came under strong pressure from their patrons to rein in radical reporting by retracting stories and firing journalists.

Journalist Dan Guthrie of the *Oregon Daily Courier* wrote a column on September 15, 2001 entitled, “When the Going Gets Tough, the Tender Turn Tail.” In it, Guthrie said President Bush “skedaddled” on September 11, flying on Air Force One to Nebraska rather than returning to Washington, D.C. “The picture of Bush hiding in a Nebraska hole,” Guthrie wrote, was “an embarrassment.” One week later, Guthrie was fired for the story, even though editor Dennis Roler initially signed off on it. Roler’s final statement of good riddance included an apology to readers for printing Guthrie’s piece in the first place: “In this critical time, the nation needs to come together behind the President. Politics, and destructive criticism, need to be put aside for the country’s good. Unfortunately, my lapse in judgment hurt that positive effort, and I apologize” (qtd. in Rothschild, 2002).

Reporter Tom Gutting of the *Texas City Sun* met a similar fate after he penned a story on September 22, criticizing Bush for

staying away from the Capitol on 9/11. The day the piece appeared, the *Sun's* publisher assured Gutting that his job was safe, but a few days later this editor also flip-flopped, firing Gutting and issuing a printed apology, saying Gutting's column was "not appropriate to print at this time" (qtd. in The first amendment, 2001). On the other end of the political spectrum, *National Review* columnist Ann Coulter was fired for suggesting that the U.S. should crusade to convert all critics of the war to Christianity (Kurtz, 2001, October 2).

Similar examples of speech chilling took place in the entertainment world. Aaron McGruder's cartoon, "The Boondocks," was pulled from papers around the country for having characters say that the CIA helped train Afghan rebels like Osama bin Laden and that the U.S. funded the Taliban (Robinson, 2001, October 9). Todd Persche, cartoonist for the *Baraboo News Republic* in Wisconsin, was axed for drawing cartoons featuring captions such as: "When the media keeps pounding on the war drum ... it's hard to hear other points of view" (qtd. in Rothschild, 2002).

More subtle patron pressure has shaped content decisions in the television industry, where corporations employ "screeners" to evaluate the acceptability of program content in network television programming. "If the advertiser doesn't want to be associated with a particular episode of a series, it's easier for a network to pull the show than to scramble for substitute sponsors" (Ostrow, 2001, August 21). There is little institutional momentum in the leadership of news organizations to counteract this patron pressure. Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, believes that at a time of "decreasing circulation and decreasing ratings," bottom-line pressures "rendered news organizations less willing to endure the slings and arrows of public opinion" (qtd. in Jurkowitz, 2002, January 27).

CONCLUSION

The typology of self-censorship explored in this essay shows how public deliberation in the early "war on terror" was structured by three distinct forms of discourse control. Mothballing involved the shelving of content completed or still being made before the 9/11 attacks. Mine dodging took place when loyalty-minded reporters steered discussion away from areas designated as minefields by administration officials. Patron pressure resulted in the direct termination of employment contracts held by critical journalists and also influenced programming content on network television.

Two net effects of this self-censorship were a homogenization of public dialogue and a slide in journalistic standards of reportage. A January 2002 study by the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism showed minimal coverage of war dissent in the U.S. media and slippage of journalistic standards of reporting, due to the dearth of knowledge created by official information controls coupled with "spiral of silence" pressure to conform: "The study found that during the periods examined the press heavily favored pro-Administration and official U.S. viewpoints – as high as 71% early on. Over time the balance of viewpoints has broadened somewhat. Even then, what might be considered criticism remained minimal – below 10%" (Project for Excellence, 2002). The Columbia group also found that the lack of official information available has shifted journalistic work more in the direction of interpretation and speculation, away from factual reporting (see Project for Excellence, 2002).

According to Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs, higher-order conditions for critical discussion are background conditions necessary for argumentation to get off the ground and for the force of better argument to guide the course of discussion. First-order conditions address access – parties to a dispute must have opportunities to issue arguments and respond freely. Second-order conditions speak to the psychological makeup of arguers, focusing on their motivations to engage in critical discussion (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs 1993: 32-

3). Widespread war self-censorship in the United States subverted these higher-order conditions by creating a situation where interlocutors were not physically or psychologically prepared to engage in the vigorous give-and-take of argumentation.

What are the consequences for public discourse when such higher-order conditions are under attack in a war-stressed nation? Current news analysis dwells on the arcane details of Homeland Security Office reorganization and CIA/FBI "intelligence failure." However, an "accidental public" (Farrell and Goodnight, 1981) that only comes into existence in periods of grave crisis is vulnerable to a different kind of intelligence failure triggered by a suffocating shortfall of heuristic energy created by a lack of critical discussion in the public sphere.

Similar concerns that appear to have motivated CBS News Director Dan Rather's recent reflections on the self-censorship phenomenon. The same Rather who stood ready in September 2001 to go "wherever [President Bush] wants me to" expressed grave reservations about self-censorship in a May 2002 interview with *BBC Newsnight*. Rather began by raising explicitly the topic of self-censorship: "What we are talking about here – whether one wants to recognize it or not, or call it by its proper name or not – is a form of self-censorship" (Rather says, 2002, May 17). The veteran CBS News reporter then made a startling analogy, comparing American self-censorship on the "war on terror" with the practice of "necklacing" in South Africa under apartheid:

It is an obscene comparison ... but you know there was a time in South Africa that people would put flaming tyres around people's necks if they dissented. And in some ways the fear is that you will be necklaced here, you will have a flaming tyre of lack of patriotism put around your neck. Now it is that fear that keeps journalists from asking the toughest of the tough questions, and to continue to bore in on the tough questions so often. And again, I am humbled to say, I do not except myself from this criticism (qtd. in Buncombe, 2002, May 17).

It is tempting to be reassured by explanations that wartime censorship is a temporary phenomenon that will dissipate once the war is over. Yet the value of such reassurance is lessened by the Bush administration's tired mantra that the world should prepare for a lengthy, open-ended war with no exit strategy and no definitive end in sight. As civil libertarian Harvey Silverglate observes, "This is a situation where the enemy is among us.... and there's not going to be a surrender on the battleship Missouri" (qtd. in Jurkowitz, 2002, January 27).

As citizens prepare for the "long war," analysts increasingly concur that the most basic defense against terrorism is one that defuses it. As analyst Ivan Eland (1998) recommends, when it comes to protecting against terrorist attack, "The Best Defense Is to Give No Offense" (subtitle of his 1998 Cato Institute briefing paper). This strategy works to counter the resentments that breed hatred and terrorism, while also cooperating with other nations to stem worldwide trafficking in weapons-grade biological, chemical, and nuclear materiel. Apparently, this desire to influence world opinion was one motivation behind the Bush administration's decision, on December 13, 2001, to release a videotape purporting to show Osama bin Laden implicitly acknowledging his involvement in the 9/11 attacks. President Bush stated that the video would be a "devastating declaration of guilt" for bin Laden.

However, skeptics in the Arab world and beyond discounted the veracity of the video, claiming that the Pentagon had doctored it. President Bush (2001b) answered that it was "preposterous for anyone to think that this tape is doctored," and that such skeptics were making a "feeble excuse to provide weak support for an incredibly evil man." Perhaps one factor accounting for skepticism in Arab public spheres regarding the veracity of the December 13 video was the fact that the Pentagon's credibility had already been undermined there by an official propaganda campaign

including air drops of propaganda leaflets over Afghanistan. Some leaflets included digitally manipulated images that were doctored to encourage Taliban and Al Qaeda defections and “win” the “battle for the hearts and minds” of Afghan peoples.

Pentagon propaganda leaflet AFD56b depicted Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders with skulls superimposed on their faces and ominous scenes of human hangings in the background. Pentagon propaganda leaflet TF11RP03 showed bin Laden with his beard removed, dressed in Western clothing, coupled with the following caption: “Usama bin Laden the murderer and coward has abandoned you” (see Friedman, 2002). These clear instances of digital image manipulation for propaganda purposes may help explain skepticism of American claims in Arab public spheres and beyond.

Asked during a January 4, 2002 press conference about the credibility problem these doctored leaflets might present, Secretary Rumsfeld first responded that he “had not thought about it” (2002). Then he went on to imply that such lying and deception might be justified because everything that Osama bin Laden does is “premised on lies.” Perhaps Rumsfeld was close here to repeating his statement in a September 25, 2001 press conference that in wartime, “truth is so precious it must be accompanied by a bodyguard of lies” (Rumsfeld, 2001), echoing Winston Churchill’s famous dictum that “In war-time, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”

Although Rumsfeld asked, even pleaded with reporters not to quote his recitation of Churchill’s rationale for strategic deception, it only took a whiff of trickery to trigger a torrent of media skepticism about the veracity of Pentagon statements. Of course, deception in wartime has long been accepted as a legitimate military strategy. However, expanded deception programs designed to manipulate domestic and allied public opinion raise their own set of unique dilemmas.

While deception strategies may be effective as military levers deployed to complicate enemy planning (witness Operation Barbarossa, Operation Bodyguard, and of course the Trojan Horse), they are less useful as “weapons of mass communication” propaganda tools designed to influence public opinion writ large. Such a propaganda strategy is built on the foundation of skewed communicative norms, with U.S. government officials positioned as dominant information sources, using top-down communication infrastructure to transmit manipulated images and patronizing propaganda to passive recipients. This is a Madison Avenue model of communication in practice, not a framework for equal deliberative exchange. With receivers of such messages positioned as passive and inferior communicative actors, it is understandable why this communication model might sow anti-American resentment and alienation. A recent report by the Inter American Press Association further points out how American self-censorship undercuts the credibility of U.S. statements made on the world stage: “This self-censorship sends the wrong message to the Muslim nations about the values of openness and

press freedom that the United States and its allies uphold and denies the American public the right to be fully informed” (qtd. in America’s press, 2001, October 17).

It is difficult to see how the Bush administration can build the global trust necessary to defuse terrorism when it secretly creates disinformation factories like the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). Tasked with the job of persuading the world about the rightness of the war, funded out of the \$10 billion “blank check” war appropriation from Congress, and headed by Air Force Brig. Gen. Simon P. Worden, this Pentagon office envisioned using a mix of phony e-mails and press releases to influence foreign media (Dao and Schmitt, 2002, February 19). After existence of the office was leaked to the press, the ensuing firestorm of worldwide criticism caused Secretary Rumsfeld to backpedal and shut down the office. OSI may be gone, but it is not forgotten – the simple revelation that such an office existed was enough to stimulate worldwide skepticism about the veracity of U.S. claims and cause many to wonder whether, somewhere deeper in the Pentagon basement, there are other secret propaganda offices still churning out disinformation.

The Bush administration might improve its strategy to defuse terrorism by “winning hearts and minds” if it embraced a different vision of dialogue, perhaps one closer to Iranian president Mohammed Khatami’s (2000) proposal for a “dialogue of civilizations.” Khatami’s address to the United Nations in 2000 suggested that individual citizens have the power to avert Samuel Huntington’s tragic “clash of civilizations,” by pursuing reciprocally respectful dialogue across national, cultural, and religious boundaries. Such patterns of communication have the potential to percolate upward, energizing and informing government-to-government diplomacy in a way that enhances collective security by improving mutual understanding. In developing a theory of international relations that highlights the constructive role of public sphere dialogue, political scientist Marc Lynch (1999) notes that “shared understandings and communicative action – rather than an artificial isolation and silence – could produce different patterns of identity formation and [state] behavior” (pp. 15-16).

Another recommendation comes from David Hoffman (2002), president of the Internews Network. Since anti-American sentiment on the Arab street can be fanned by propaganda published by centralized (and often state-owned) Arab media outlets, Hoffman (2002) calls for U.S. assistance in supporting independent and locally owned media in the Arab world. However, Hoffman (2002) cautions that this approach is exclusive with the OSI propaganda model, because the United States “will appear duplicitous if it tries to support independent news outlets while simultaneously manipulating information or engaging in counterpropaganda” (p. 95). A more judicious deliberative posture is suggested by Harvard terrorism scholar Jessica Stern (2001): “[T]he United States has to learn to dictate less and listen more” if it wants to fight the scourge of terrorism, which is “now spread, in tiny packets of fury and pain, around the world” (p. 357).

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