

MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE

WAR MADE EASY:

How President & Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content—and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them—the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Pre-viewing Discussion Questions are designed to inspire preliminary discussion about the issues the video addresses prior to viewing.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Discussion Questions provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments for each section encourage students to engage the video in more depth—by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

OVERVIEW

War Made Easy, based on Norman Solomon's book of the same name, chronicles the government's use of propaganda to sell wars to the American people. Looking closely at the spin strategies employed by today's pundits and public officials to build support for the invasion of Iraq, the film finds stunning comparisons to the information wars waged by earlier administrations, both Democratic and Republican. The film exhumes remarkable archival footage of official distortion and exaggeration from LBJ to George W. Bush giving special attention to parallels between the Vietnam War and the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq.

In the fall of 2002, as US forces were being moved into position in the Persian Gulf in preparation for the eventual invasion of Iraq, President Bush and his key advisors began a full-scale propaganda campaign designed to convince the public that Saddam Hussein was a threat to US and world security. Officials employed an arsenal of time-tested techniques that bore a striking resemblance to tactics used to promote previous military interventions.

Once it had laid out its claims, the administration set about occupying the US news media to insure favorable coverage of its agenda. The film shatters the illusion that a free press is immune to propaganda, providing ample evidence of media collusion in championing the government's case for war. In the run-up to the war in Iraq, a compliant US media system functioned as little more than a state propaganda organ.

This study guide moves beyond partisan politics to enable educators to explore the subject of propaganda by looking at how public officials generate and filter spin through the US media system. This guide will also enable educators to delve more deeply into media issues, including the role of a free press in a democratic society, the political economy of US media, and the relationship of the news media to government, especially during times of war.

PRE-VIEWING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is propaganda? Who uses propaganda? Is all propaganda inherently bad?
2. What is the role of journalism in a democratic society?
3. What is a pundit?
4. Does the US government use propaganda? If yes, can you cite some examples?

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

- General Douglas MacArthur, aboard the USS Missouri at the signing of the Japanese Surrender on Sept. 2, 1945, prays for peace to be restored to the world and for God to preserve it always.
- Millions of people celebrate the end of WWII and the prospect of world peace. These scenes of joyous celebration are followed by a montage of US military actions undertaken in the years after WWII.
- US officials repeatedly choose to present an easier version of war by withholding crucial information about the reasons and potential costs of military action—a storyline, which is designed not to inform, but to generate and maintain support and enthusiasm for war.
- Nationally syndicated columnist, Norman Solomon, first began to see these patterns during the war in Vietnam. As people he knew went off to fight in Vietnam, he started to wonder about the truthfulness of the official statements coming from Washington.
- While the countries have changed and the circumstances of each military intervention have been different, Solomon has come to see striking parallels between the selling of the Vietnam War and the way presidents have rallied public support for subsequent military actions.
- Rarely if ever does a war just kind of fall down from the sky. The foundation needs to be laid, and the case is built, often with deception.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do the filmmakers begin the film with the end of WWII?
2. Name some of the conflicts that followed in the years after the end of WWII.
3. How have presidents built support for these military actions?
4. Why is Vietnam the starting point for Norman Solomon’s examination of pre-war propaganda patterns?
5. What does Solomon mean by “rarely if ever does a war just kind of fall from the sky”?

Assignments

1. Research one of the wars – or other US military actions – that followed WWII. What were the reasons given for the government’s actions? How accurate were the government’s claims about the need to wage war?
2. Look at public opinion polls done before wars have been launched. What are some of the reasons people have supported military action? Taking into account the obvious differences (country, time period, administration) from one situation to the next, write a short analysis of any patterns you find in public support for these military actions.
3. Write a brief biographical sketch of Norman Solomon. How might his life and work inform his analysis in *War Made Easy*?

PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

Key Points

- Leaders throughout history have used propaganda to transform populations wary of the costs of war into ardent supporters by invoking images of nationalism, and channeling fear and anger towards perceived enemies and threats.
- US leaders have utilized similar tactics often with identical language to vilify adversaries by framing the conflict as one of good versus evil and making comparisons to Hitler.
- As Aldous Huxley once said—it’s often more powerful to leave things out than it is to tell lies. Another effective propaganda technique presents a selective view of history. For example, propaganda may leave out key facts about US ties to dictators that the public is being told must be overthrown.
- Leaders often portray themselves as reluctant commanders-in-chief who wage war as a last resort and only with the noble intentions to spread freedom and democracy.
- The rhetoric of democracy can be used to convince the public that war is a benign and altruistic act, an insidious form of propaganda because it is motivated by the desire to do good.
- Every president of the last 50 years has proclaimed his commitment to peace and desire to avoid war. Paradoxically, these proclamations are often simultaneous with the president’s ordering the use of lethal violence by the Pentagon.
- War becomes perpetual when it is used as a rationale for peace.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do leaders use propaganda to promote their agendas for war?
2. How does propaganda work to persuade the public to support government plans for war? Why do you think people respond to these messages?
3. What are some common propaganda techniques shown in the film? Can you think of others?
4. Look at the Aldous Huxley quote. What is a lie of omission? How were lies of omission used as part of the propaganda campaign against Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein, who both became US targets of “regime change”?
5. What does Solomon mean by “war becomes perpetual when it’s used as a rationale for peace”? Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your response.
6. Do you hear any examples of propaganda coming from the White House currently?

Assignments

1. Respond to one the following quotes. Give a very brief bio of the speaker and explain what you think he was saying about propaganda and its use by our leaders.

“Propaganda is of no use to the politician unless he has something to say which the public, consciously or unconsciously, wants to hear.” – Edward Bernays

“We must remember that in time of war what is said on the enemy's side of the front is always propaganda, and what is said on our side of the front is truth and righteousness, the cause of humanity and a crusade for peace.” – Walter Lippmann

“Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism.” – Noam Chomsky

2. It has been said that marketing, advertising and public relations are all forms of propaganda. Compare some of the techniques used by the government to the techniques used by marketers, advertisers, or public relations specialists. Citing specific examples from an advertising, marketing or PR campaign, explain how is propaganda for war is different or similar to these other forms.
3. The Australian author Alex Carey said, “The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.” Write a response to Carey’s quote—especially the role of propaganda in relation to corporate power and democracy.

OFFICIAL PROPAGANDA

Key Points

- Americans don't think that their government uses propaganda, especially propaganda designed to take the country into war.
- The war propaganda function in the United States is finely tuned, sophisticated, and blends into the media terrain.
- As the invasion of Iraq gradually went from possible to probable to almost certain the tone of most of the media coverage was very accepting of war as inevitable.
- The US news media became equal partners with the officials in the White House and on Capitol Hill in setting the agenda for war.
- One has a great deal of difficulty finding examples of liberal bias in the major media's reporting once agenda-setting for war is underway.
- Much of the reporting has become a hostage of official sources, whom we have been encouraged to believe are the ones who make news and who should be consulted to help us understand events.
- If history is any guide, the opposite is the case: officials blow smoke and cloud reality, rather than clarify. The sources that have deceived us again and again don't deserve our trust.

Discussion Questions

1. Why don't Americans believe that their own government uses propaganda?
2. How does the government disseminate propaganda?
3. Although the government does not exercise direct control over the press, officials have successfully used the news media to promote their agendas for war. What are some of the ways that propaganda "blends into the media terrain"?
4. What is the "media echo effect," and why is it essential to a government propaganda campaign?
5. Why doesn't Solomon see any evidence of liberal bias in the way the media reported on the government's case for the invasion of Iraq?
6. How did the examples of official statements "cloud reality rather than clarify"?
7. What are the consequences of news reporters relying on official sources for much of their information?

Assignments

1. Have you ever heard of a think tank? Do you know what they do? Go to The Center for Media and Democracy's Think Tank page:

http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Think_tanks

Explain what a think tank is and the role they play in influencing news and public opinion. Watch the network news for one week to see if you can spot any representatives from the website's Think Tank list. What was the topic? Was the person presented as someone with an agenda or simply as an expert on the topic?

2. What is liberal bias? Summarize the arguments put forward by conservatives to support their accusations of mainstream media liberal bias. For more info go to:

<http://www.mediaresearch.org/biasbasics/biasbasics1.asp>

Now summarize the arguments made by progressives to refute those arguments.

<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2447>

Watch a news story for evidence of liberal bias. Using both conservative and progressive analysis, do you find any bias that can be supported one way or the other?

3. According to Robert McChesney, a professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "professional journalism relies heavily on official sources. Reporters have to talk to the official spokesperson, the White House press secretary, the business association, the army general. What those people say is news. Their perspectives are automatically legitimate. Whereas, if you talk to prisoners, strikers, the homeless, or protesters, you have to paint their perspectives as unreliable, or else you've become an advocate and are no longer a "neutral" professional journalist."

Read FAIR's study of the network's reliance on official sources in their pre-war coverage. <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1628>

How does a reporter's reliance on official sources affect a news story? Do a Lexus-Nexus search for the following New York Times stories: *Get Out of Iraq Now Not So Fast, Experts Say* by Michael Gordon or *The Only Consensus on Iraq: Nobody's Leaving Right Now* by David Sanger. How has the use of official sources shaped these stories?

4. In their 1988 groundbreaking work, *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman introduced the "propaganda model" as a way of understanding how the political economy of the mass media affects the news in democratic societies. They argue that a symbiotic relationship between the media and parts of government is sustained by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. Instead of exercising control through censorship and repression, government influence is normalized through various institutional practices such as press conferences and press releases. Look at the following government methods used to get information out to the news media:

- Making facilities available for journalists to gather
- Giving journalists advance copies of speeches and forthcoming reports
- Scheduling press conferences at hours well-geared to news deadlines
- Writing press releases in usable language
- Carefully organizing press conferences and "photo opportunity" sessions

How might these seemingly neutral practices influence media coverage of events? Write about a news story on television that has been shaped by one or more of these elements.

MEDIA COMPLICITY

Key Points

- In the run-up to the war in Iraq, mainstream news organizations failed to raise legitimate questions about the government's rush to war. The networks' use of retired generals as supposedly independent experts reinforced a military mindset even as serious questions remained about the wisdom and necessity of going to war.
- Journalists often blame shoddy news coverage on government control rather than their own failure to do independent reporting. For example, instead of seeking more diverse and independent sources, CNN's pre-war coverage relied heavily on retired military personnel, who offered a decidedly pro-war perspective.
- A top CNN official named Eason Jordan went to the Pentagon with a list of possible military commentators, to ask Defense Dept. officials whether it was a good list of people to hire and was given a "big thumbs up on all of them."
- Instead of hiding this fact, Jordan went on CNN to proclaim his cooperation with the Pentagon. This kind of relationship runs counter to the idea of an independent press, and suggests a pattern of media avoidance when the US is involved in a war based on lies.
- In August of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared that hostile actions against United States ships in the Gulf of Tonkin required him to order the military forces of the United States to take action and reply.
- Routinely, the official story is a lie or a deception or a partial bit of information that leaves out key facts. The official story about the Gulf of Tonkin was a lie. Because the press did not challenge the story, it was much easier for Congress to quickly pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which escalated the Vietnam War.
- Years later Norman Solomon asked Murrey Marder, Washington Post chief diplomatic correspondent, if there had ever been a retraction of the Post's reporting on the Gulf of

Tonkin incident. Mr. Marder said there had not been: “if the news media were going to retract its reporting on the Gulf of Tonkin, it would have to retract its reporting on virtually the entire Vietnam War.”

- The failure of American news media to check government distortion reached new heights when Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared before the United Nations just weeks before the war to make the case that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.
- After Colin Powell's speech to the UN, the US press immediately responded with great enthusiasm. But at the time, it was quite possible to analyze and debunk what he was saying.
- The British press and other international news sources quickly raised legitimate questions about the accuracy of Powell's presentation. However, the major US news media were virtually silent about the factual basis of his claims and near unanimous in their praise.
- Part of the war propaganda cycle is to claim that the truth can't be known in real time. While many people knew the truth about the administration's claims about weapons of mass destruction they were not, by and large, allowed on the TV networks.
- Phil Donahue was one of the few mainstream media commentators who consistently challenged the official line coming out of Washington on his highly rated MSNBC cable show. The network abruptly canceled Donahue's show just three weeks before the start of the war.
- An explicit memo from the network was leaked as the show was cancelled. It said that NBC did not want Donahue to be the network's public face as the United States went into war. Allowing antiwar voices on the show made the network appear unpatriotic making it difficult to keep pace with “the flag wavers over at Fox or CNN.” In general, news media are worried, not only about government pressure, but advertiser pressure, criticism from readers, listeners and viewers. They are afraid of raising tough questions when American soldiers are in the field.
- The call to “support the troops” is another tactic used to silence criticism of the war by conflating support for troops with support for the President's policies.
- Many other journalists have been silenced for crossing the mythical line known as objectivity. For example, NBC fired journalist Peter Arnett for participating in an interview on Iraqi state-controlled television where he criticized American war planning.
- Being pro-war is perceived as being objective while being antiwar is seen as being biased. News anchors will get no flak for making supportive statements, but wouldn't dream of making statements against the war. This is a tip-off as to how skewed the media terrain is.

- While many view CNN as a liberal network, in the fall of 2001, as the missiles were falling in Afghanistan, top news executive, Walter Isaacson issued a memo telling anchors and reporters, “You need to remind people, any time you show images on the screen of the people who are dying in Afghanistan, you’ve got to remind the American viewers that it’s in the context of what happened on 9/11.”
- Propaganda was able to flourish in the pre-war media atmosphere because antiwar voices were marginalized and shown contempt by the mainstream media. Having a free flow of information, without blockages or manipulation, is essential to democracy.
- After wars have been launched, mainstream journalists often point out that they failed to provide crucial information and real debate about the issues. But because they fail to do this reporting in real time, when matters of life and death are at stake, the truth comes out too late to make a difference.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the network’s reliance on military analysts affect the pre-war coverage?
2. What reasons does CNN news chief Eason Jordan give for visiting the Pentagon?
3. Why is Solomon critical of Jordan’s actions?
4. What was the official story about the Gulf of Tonkin incident? How did Congress and the press respond?
5. According to the former Washington Post chief diplomatic correspondent, Murrey Marder, why was there never a Post retraction about its Gulf of Tonkin reporting? What are the implications of his comment for news coverage of the Vietnam War?
6. What parallels does the film make between the Gulf of Tonkin incident and Colin Powell’s presentation to the United Nations?
7. Who is Colin Powell? Why was his presentation at the UN so significant? Why was the presentation so universally praised in the US press?
8. Compare the US press’s reaction to the Powell presentation to the European press. How can you explain these striking differences?
9. According to the leaked memo, what were network’s reasons for firing Phil Donahue?
10. How has “support the troops” become a propaganda technique?
11. How does Solomon define objectivity when it comes to war reporting?

12. Why did CNN news executive, Walter Isaacson, issue a memo to news staff in the fall of 2001? Is this an example of balanced reporting?
13. How conservative commentators characterize the anti-war movement? How did this kind of language affect the pre-war debate?
14. What is the problem with the news media's self-reflection on its pre-war coverage?

Assignments

1. Read the New York Times expose on the Pentagon's use of retired military officials as unofficial media spokesmen.
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/washington/20generals.html?_r=1&oref=slogin
 What are the issues raised by the Pentagon program and the network's reliance on these men as commentators?
2. Read the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics.
<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>
 Which ethics apply to the news media and its use of retired military analysts? Why?
3. Research media coverage of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. What were the sources used to report on the incident? Could the stories have included any other perspectives? Is there context in the story that might help people understand the events?
4. Solomon says that at the time it was possible to "analyze and debunk" the information Colin Powell presented to the world community at the UN. Find some news analysis that questioned or challenged Powell's assertions. How does the author make his or her case? Contrast the piece to one that praises Powell's presentation.
5. Objectivity in journalism has been defined as "expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations." Or as Doug McGill, a former New York Times reporter, once joked "I'm a reporter. It's not my job to think." Read McGill's piece, "The Fading Mystique of an Objective Press" <http://www.mcgillreport.org/objectivity.htm> and then summarize his position on why objective reporting fails to achieve its stated goal of providing the public with un-biased, balanced news coverage.
6. Study the media ownership chart.
<http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/front.shtml#chart>
 How might the economic structure of the mass media affect journalistic practices and news reporting? How might it relate to the news media's receptiveness to government spin?

COVERING WAR

Key Points

- Once public support for war is in place, the news media turn from covering rationales for the war to covering war itself.
- Conventional wisdom has long held that negative media coverage of the Vietnam War turned the American people against the war and forced US withdrawal. Since that time, and beginning with new urgency during the 1991 Gulf War, the Pentagon has worked with increasing sophistication to shape media coverage of war.
- During the Gulf War former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney noted the importance of public perception saying, “I looked on it as a problem to be managed. The information function was extraordinarily important. I did not have a lot of confidence that I could leave it to the press.”
- In the early stages of war, news about war is more like PR.
- The invasions of Grenada and Panama in '83 and '89, and the Gulf War in 1991, were like Pentagon-produced TV shows. In the case of the Gulf War, the Pentagon made footage available to the TV stations, and held nonstop briefings utilizing the increasing importance of cable television. These tactics can be seen as an era of manipulation by the US government to control media coverage of war.
- The war in Iraq in 2003 marked a shift in Pentagon tactics. As US forces geared up for an invasion of Iraq, the Pentagon's launched a media-friendly campaign, which included inviting scores of journalists to accompany military units deployed to Kuwait and creating a \$300,000 Hollywood-designed set for war briefings.
- The Pentagon's influence on war coverage is also evident in the news media's focus on the technical sophistication of the latest weaponry. From the Vietnam War to the present, journalists have demonstrated a fascination with the military's lethal weapons.
- Despite the fact that US military technology has become increasingly sophisticated with the development of so-called smart bombs and other forms of precision-guided weaponry, civilian casualties now greatly outnumber military deaths, a grim toll that has steadily increased since World War I:
 - During World War I, 10% of all casualties were civilians.
 - During World War II, the number of civilian deaths rose to 50%.
 - During the Vietnam War 70% of all casualties were civilians.
 - In the war in Iraq, civilians account for 90% of all deaths.

- Another very insidious aspect of war propaganda is the acculturated callousness towards what happens at the other end of US weapons.
- There's a bias in the way the news media present the US military's use of high-tech weaponry to kill people from a distance as a moral action, while the act of strapping on a suicide belt and blowing people up is seen as immoral.
- The embedding of journalists with the military during the invasion of Iraq was another Pentagon strategy for shaping news. Despite being widely praised as a new form of realism, this strategy raises serious questions about the ability of embedded reporters to convey balanced information.
- Hundreds of journalists participated in the embedding process becoming, in a sense, part of the invading apparatus.
- Correspondents for the major US TV networks bonded with the US soldiers. This may have made for good TV, but it has nothing to do with independent journalism, which is crucial in times of war.
- On the surface, the embedding process seemed to grant journalists greater access to information when it was actually nothing more than a shrewd propaganda strategy designed to spin the news.
- The embedding process, praised a step forward in balanced war reporting, has often invoked comparisons to media coverage of the Vietnam War.
- A myth has grown up after the Vietnam that the reporting was very tough and showed the brutality of the war as it unfolded. People often hark back to it as a standard that should now be emulated.
- There was exceptional reporting, but it was the exception, for example, CBS's Morley Safer reporting on the GI's burning down the huts of a village.
- Very little about the tremendous violence in that war was conveyed through the television set especially when the US government was responsible for the human suffering.
- It is taboo to show in detail, graphic human detail, what's involved when US weapons, paid for by US taxpayers, do what their designed to do ... which is to kill and to maim.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the Vietnam Syndrome?
2. What did GHW Bush mean when he said that winning Gulf War had “kicked Vietnam Syndrome once and for all?”
3. What do the polls from WWII, Vietnam, and Iraq show about public support for war? How do they disprove the Vietnam Syndrome?
4. Compare the arguments against withdrawing from Vietnam to current arguments about withdrawal from Iraq. Do you hear any similarities? What are they?
5. How did both LBJ and Nixon characterize the antiwar movement? Compare their criticisms to the attacks on Congressman Murtha.
6. What comparison does Solomon make between 1968 newspaper editorials on the subject of withdrawal from Vietnam and today’s media establishment?
7. What was Nixon’s strategy of Vietnamization? How is it similar to current policy in Iraq?
8. What is a quagmire in political/military terms?
9. What is Solomon’s critique of the discussion about Iraq being a quagmire?
10. How has Cronkite’s famous “stalemate” commentary on CBS in 1968 been characterized over time? What is Solomon’s criticism of his comments?

Assignments

1. Ronald Reagan first used the term Vietnam Syndrome in a 1980 campaign speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars.
<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.18.80.html>
How is the idea of a Vietnam Syndrome being used to articulate his foreign policy objectives?
2. Using Lexus-Nexus, track public opinion polls on the invasion of Iraq. Look at pre-war polls from early in 2002 after Bush’s State of the Union address named Iraq as part of the axis of evil. How did public opinion change as the administration stepped up its propaganda campaign? How has public support for the war changed over time? Do you think the media has played a role in changing public opinion about the war?
3. Read Judith Coburn’s piece comparing Vietnamization to the current “Iraqization” policies if the Bush administration. <http://www.alternet.org/story/39868/?page=2>

What lessons might the current administration learn from its predecessors with regard to the war in Iraq?

4. Solomon says that a key part of both strategies is an increased use in air power. Research the number of air strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Do you find evidence to support Solomon's claims? Document your findings.
5. As historian Daniel Hallin notes, "By the fall of 1967, polls were already showing a majority of Americans expressing the opinion that it had been a "mistake" to get involved in Vietnam." Yet many continue to cite Cronkite's remarks as having turned the tide of public opinion against the war. Read the transcript of Walter Cronkite's "stalemate" commentary: <http://faculty.smu.edu/dsimon/Change%20--Cronkite.html>

Why do you think people continue to regard his comments as pivotal? Do you think the media reflect/mirror public opinion or shape it? Now read Jeff Cohen's piece The Myth of the Media's Role in Vietnam <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2526>

What is Cohen's argument about the media's role in shifting public opinion about Vietnam?

6. Solomon's main critique of Cronkite's statement and the quagmire debate is that they are mainly concerned with whether the war is winnable or not, and do not question if the war is just or not. For Solomon, the issue is the US's prerogative to wage pre-emptive war. President Bush first outlined his doctrine of a pre-emptive war Iraq in a West Point commencement speech in June of 2002. What is the doctrine of pre-emption? Is it legal? What does the UN charter have to say?

CONCLUSION

Key Points

- The Vietnam Syndrome is the common belief, after the bloody and protracted conflict in Vietnam, that the American public no longer had the stomach for war unless guaranteed swift, easy and decisive victory.
- Like President Reagan before him, President George H.W. Bush explicitly set out during the first Gulf War to rid the national psyche of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome.
- The actual course of public opinion shows there's been a real willingness to support wars without exception at the beginning.
- Public support for the Second World War never fell below 77%, according to opinion polls. But during the Vietnam War, public support fell to about 30%, and within a couple of years of the US occupation of Iraq public support was down to almost 30% among the US population.
- The difference is that in WWII, the public never felt that the war was fundamentally based on deception. When it emerges that the war can't be won quickly, and that the war was based on deceptions, then people turn against the war.
- After the public has been sold on the need to attack and the war is under way, presidents put forward the idea of withdrawal as an unacceptable option.
- Many propaganda lines, such as "cut and run," and "stay the course," become stock and trade of those who started the war in the first place.
- Because it's easier to start a war, than to stop one, there is an incentive for presidents to lie, deceive, and manipulate sufficiently to get the war started. Once the war has momentum it will continue long before there is a substantive challenge to end it.
- During the Vietnam War, public opinion polls showed into the early 1970's that a majority of Americans felt the war was wrong, even immoral and yet the war continued because the momentum was there. The same has been the case in terms of the occupation of Iraq.
- In November of 2006, Democratic Congressman John Murtha of Pennsylvania called for US troops to be withdrawn from Iraq. Despite his pro-military credentials and having been an initial supporter of the war and, his recommendations were not taken seriously by the media and were discounted by pundits. Yet polls showed that a majority of the public agreed with him.

- In February of 1968, the Boston Globe surveyed 39 different major US daily newspapers and could not find a single paper that had editorialized for withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam.
- An analysis of public opinion data, laid side-by-side with what news media are or are not advocating in terms of editorials, will show that the media establishment is way behind the grassroots.
- In 1969, in response to declining public support for the war, the Nixon administration put forward the strategy of Vietnamization, which called for the increased use of air power in order to pull out US troops and let the military burden fall on the allies inside that country. This is also the goal of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq.
- The media and political focus on the word quagmire is a good example of how an issue can be framed very narrowly. Quagmire seems to be a positive way of debating about the war. Calling the war a quagmire is really a false critique because it characterizes the problem in terms of what the war is doing to the United States. Are we able to win?
- The media focus sees the war through the eyes of the Americans, through the eyes of the occupiers, rather than those who are bearing the brunt of the war in human terms.
- In early 1968, Walter Cronkite told CBS viewers that the war could not be won and that it would end in a stalemate.
- This was instantly, and through time heralded as the tide has turned, as Lyndon Johnson is reputed to have said, "I've lost middle America." It was presented as not only a turning point, but also as sort of a moral statement by the journalistic establishment.
- While this was an acknowledgement that the United States, contrary to official Washington claims, was not winning the war in Vietnam, and could not win, it was not a statement that the war was wrong.
- Instead of being a condemnation of the war, this critique says the war is bad because it's not winnable, which leaves open the idea of the next war being winnable.
- This critique doesn't challenge the prerogatives of military expansion or aggression, or empire. A deeper critique would say, "Whether you can win or not, either way, empire enforced at the point – not of a bayonet but of the cruise missile -- is not acceptable."

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Rep. Barbara Lee vote against giving President Bush the authority to use force in the days after 9/11?
2. What is Wayne Morse's reading of the Constitution?
3. How did you react to IF Stone's statement that "All governments lie"?
4. How did you respond to the words of Martin Luther King Jr. in the film's closing montage? Why did the filmmakers end with King's comments?

Assignments

1. What was the reaction to Barbara Lee's vote? Do a Lexus-Nexus search of both print and broadcast commentary and editorials. Summarize the response to her actions.
2. Research the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Why did Senators Morse and Gruening vote against Congressional authorization of the use of force in Vietnam?
3. Who was IF Stone? Why was he so greatly admired and reviled in his time?
4. Read the transcript of MLK's *Beyond Vietnam* speech, which the film excerpts in the final montage. What are King's main reasons for opposing the Vietnam War? What parallels can be drawn between the Vietnam War and the war in Iraq?