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Cold War Propaganda and US Foreign Policy:  
How Visuals Drive the Struggle for Economic Dominance

At the peak of the era of superpowers, the world saw the advent of the greatest non-violent war, with the United States and Soviet Russia locked into a power struggle that would later come to be known as the Cold War. During this war of intimidation, some of the world's most cutting and extreme propaganda was presented to the American public. This propaganda was designed to instill a sense of blind patriotism into the average US citizen, and it began the trend of 'explaining' how and why capitalism was morally superior to every other economic policy. Cast as the savior of the modern world as we know it, this new policy of using capitalist expansion to fight the perceived threats of non-capitalist systems would become a major tenet of both US foreign policy and US politics during the Cold War decades. The propaganda posters of this era featured stark, often fear-driven images that were intended to scare people into supporting the US war effort. Often, the posters presented information of little or no factual value, but people were coerced into believing whatever they were told by their own terror. This led to a new era of American politics, in which political candidacy and policy decisions would be justified to the public by fear-mongering. The looming, threatening images of propaganda had found their way out of the mouths of politicians. The idea of capitalism's apparent infallibility and the need to blindly defend it 'or else' is demonstrated several times during the Cold War, namely in the infamous Bay of Pigs Invasion<sup>1</sup>. The influence of the new US scare tactics, however it is not limited to those few short decades. Later, the war in Vietnam would be justified in the same way, and people began to question the scare tactics and protest the war.

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1 Warner, Michael. "The CIA's Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair." *CIA FOIA*. 1996. Central Intelligence Agency, Web. 7 Dec 2009. <<http://www.foia.cia.gov/>>.

Events even as recent as the occupation and democratization of Iraq exemplify the ideals and scare tactics that were developed during those decades of paranoia. The method of American Cold War propaganda would remain long after the war, influencing US foreign and public policy for decades to come.

To begin comparing Cold War era propaganda to the methods of persuasion used in later US altercations, Cold War propaganda itself must first be examined. There was no shortage of propaganda posters during this post-WWII era, on both sides of the war. The Cold War was very much a war of ideals and a propaganda war, less so a conflict-driven dispute, as history shows<sup>2</sup>. This meant that the impact of propaganda was all the more important, and thus the American public would be presented with a vast amount of propaganda during the political struggle with the Soviet Union. The Cold War was the first US war that was policy-driven and relied on public support, as opposed to earlier wars in which public support of the war itself was important, but it was not a necessity that the public be aligned with whatever political policies the current administration was pushing. The US government was in an interesting predicament when the world saw the advent of the Cold War. The goal was to gain the support of US citizens for the anti-communist political agenda, yet there was no inherent threat of invasion. So to gain public support, propaganda was issued, presenting a scenario in which the Soviet Union was not threatening American lives, but the American *way* of life.

Visually, the Cold War posters are much more consistently fear-driven than earlier propaganda efforts by the US government. Similar propaganda was on display in the context of the second World War<sup>3</sup>, however the Cold War was the first major US war in which the

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<sup>2</sup> ,<sup>3</sup> Nelson, Richard Alan. *A Chronology and Glossary of Propaganda in the United States*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1996.

propaganda agency almost exclusively used negative, terror-inducing propaganda. One poster in particular sports a background composed of a burning flag, with a foreground depicting utter chaos, with the headline “Is This Tomorrow?” (see Fig. 1). In our present time, it is hard to see such a poster without laughing at the ridiculous and blatant attempt to strike irrational fear into the hearts of all who see it. But during the time of the Cold War, such posters were taken at face value as a direct result of the feeling of impending doom that was forced down US citizens' throats at every turn by the public addresses and public policy of the standing administration. This stark, foreboding imagery was the perfect method of persuasion for a political war. It did not display proud soldiers or looming enemy combatants, but rather distressed and seemingly helpless citizens despairing as their country falls apart around them. This was the ideal way to drive home the idea that the waxing power of Communism directly affected every American citizen, no matter what the reality of that fact may have been. The visuals in Cold War propaganda were all about creating the illusion of danger where there really was very little. For most civilians, battlefields are distant places where soldiers do battle in another realm of which the average citizen never has a concept. But if, through the means of visually terrifying propaganda, a government brings that battlefield onto their own soil and into the home of every family, then the prospect of the war becomes much more frightening, and it becomes possible to turn even the most apathetic civilians into fierce, blind patriots.

Patriotism can be a dangerous thing. It discourages seeking one's own sources of information, and instills the notion that the policies of your own government are in some way *right*. Political foreign policy almost never has an effect on the lives of average civilians, thus it is intriguing that anybody would be driven to blind support of their own government's policies.

And yet the methods of propaganda that were developed during the Cold War enabled the US government to convince the American public that capitalism is somehow infallible, and that communism is inherently evil. It was presented, of course, as communism threatening American lives and possessions, but in reality, communism had nothing to do with the tensions of the Cold War. Had the USSR been a monarchy, McCarthy would have been at the throats of senators for being 'monarchs.' After the second World War, the Western powers of the US and Great Britain had been able to push a significant amount of capitalist influence into Europe, vastly increasing the global market share of capitalism<sup>4</sup>. In true capitalist fashion, anything threatening to compete in the market was seen as a force of evil, and thus communists, having the second most influence globally, were labeled as enemies. John Kent of the London School of Economics notes the economic forces behind the Cold War in his article *Cold War and the Periphery*:

“These issues were certainly dominated by questions of power and prestige and can be traced to such concepts as spheres of influence and territorial disputes of a global nature...Europe, the original source of conflict, was simply the most important area to control because it provided the main source of military manpower and economic strength. The idea that Soviet dominance over its eastern parts should be accepted by the Western allies was rejected. Yet Britain and the United States remained determined to retain dominance over areas of the globe in Asia, Africa and Latin America under the now changing forms of imperialism and the impending end of colonialism...This produced the western measures culminating in the Marshall Plan to contain the Soviet Union and maintain capitalist democracy in Europe” (lines 8-14).

As Kent observes, the main conflict stemmed from the dispute over who would control the most territory in Europe. The reason for these tensions did not come solely out of the threat of a military struggle, in fact the economic threat posed by communism was seen by the capitalist West as an equal threat compared to the prospect of a nuclear arms race.

Thus, the Cold War, a conflict involving warring economies, was brought home to US

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4 Kent, John. "Cold War and the Periphery." History in Focus (2006): Web. 17 Nov 2009. <<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/cold/articles/kent.html>>.

civilians as an actual conflict through the use of visually powerful and fear-inspiring propaganda. These tactics of fear-mongering would be applied in non-visual ways throughout the coming decades, mostly through the vector of the media, which would become the main source of terrifying images. Whether the news media realizes it or not, in our present day they have effectively become the vehicle for propagating the government's Cold War era fear policy by constantly and repeatedly showing distressing images in their broadcasts. In order to buy public support for other economy-driven wars, most notably the Vietnam war and the recent Iraq war, the US government would use the images related to the public by the media to reinforce their claims about the absolute necessity for a war policy. Visual propaganda during these latter wars was much less a part of persuading the public to support the effort, however, the fear tactics used are absolutely equitable to what US citizens saw in the form of the propaganda poster during the Cold War. War, or rather the method of compelling support for war, never changes.

The Vietnam War is arguably directly connected with the Cold War, and many would consider it a part of the same conflict. Unlike the Cold War formal, however, the Vietnam War saw significant opposition from the American public. It would become the first US war to see anti-war protests on a large scale. Yet the methods of pushing the Vietnam War remained the same as those pushing the need to contain the communist Soviet Union. In one Cold War era propaganda poster, the familiar Uncle Sam rides a boat pasted with the letters 'USA,' seemingly on a collision course for “The RED Iceberg,” as the headline reads (see Fig. 2). On this iceberg are tombstones with the names of other countries to which the influence of communism had spread. This is obviously supposed to conjure up the thought of the Titanic, and thus the message is a rather simple one: the whole country will 'sink' if it succumbs to communist

influence. The interesting thing in this case is that the communist countries are represented only as tombstones, implying that since they are communist, they are essentially dead to the world. This is eerily reflective of the attitude that was later taken in the Vietnam War, a war in which the Viet Cong were dehumanized by the US government<sup>5</sup>, and American soldiers were exalted and defended by the government, despite the numerous atrocities committed in the line of duty by US forces. Of course, the idea of the United States as the Titanic represents a certain feeling of impending doom, thus terror tactics remain present in this poster, as did they in Vietnam.

Like the Cold War, the Vietnam war was very much about suppressing the economic threat posed against capitalism by the socialist model. Unlike the central Cold War, Vietnam was not about preserving economic assets or capitalist systems abroad. Rather, the Vietnam War was a war of ideology and a way to reinforce to the public that the 'war on communism' was a constant and intrinsically important struggle. The war, even had it been a success, would have provided minimal, if any, return to the billions upon billions of dollars that the US government spent waging it. People began to question Vietnam when it appeared that the government was not intent on 'helping' the Vietnamese, and no amount of scare tactics would be able to stop the protests this time. In his book *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets*, Mark Peceny aptly lays out the paradox that had been the basis for much of the protest:

“America's experience in Vietnam poses puzzles for both the domestic liberal and realist approaches. America fielded a half million soldiers in combat and spent tens of billions of dollars on the war in Vietnam before the institutional constraints emphasized by the domestic liberal argument began to place significant limits on U.S. Intervention there. The United States also engaged in a variety of behaviors that violated liberal values. While the realist argument can account for some of these illiberal actions, it cannot explain why the United States would waste so many financial and human resources in a war that had only a peripheral impact on American national security” (83).

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5 Martini, Edwin A. *Invisible enemies: the American war on Vietnam, 1975-2000*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2007. 54. Print.

While presented as a way to bring democratic policy to the rest of the world that was 'suffering' under the influence of our rival economic model, the Vietnam war was clearly no relief effort, and the public could not be fooled in the face of direct military conflict.

Whereas the government's supposed purpose in the Cold War with the USSR was only stated, and never really acted upon, the Vietnam war consisted of actual armed conflict, at which point it was impossible to cover up this inherently imperialist method of foreign policy as a defense of the American homestead. Despite the rather striking difference in the methods of execution of these two wars, the government continued to rely on the same methods of fear propaganda, methods which had already been tested and widely used during the early Cold War years. An article from the Museum of Broadcast Communications cites the media's role in striking fear in the hearts of US citizens:

“Television crews quickly learned that what New York wanted was 'bang-bang' footage, and this, along with the emphasis on the American soldier, meant that coverage of Vietnamese politics and of the Vietnamese generally was quite limited”  
(Hallin, lines 50-52).

The media, while it was not necessarily trying to push the war as a just cause, was fulfilling the role of scaring the public by showing this 'bang-bang' footage. As Hallin notes, there was very little coverage of the condition of the Vietnamese, or what was actually going on in the country, a decision based on ratings more than anything else. However, a large portion of the US public saw that there was information missing from these flashy, terrifying reports on the war. This began a drive to seek more information, and to formulate an individual opinion on the war from the big picture, rather than the few short clips and sound-bytes that showed a frightening atmosphere. From a propaganda standpoint, as well as a military standpoint, the Vietnam War

was an utter failure. The government was unable to convince the US public that the war was for the good of the world and for the defense of the American nation. Support for the war was thin, despite use of the same fear-mongering tactics and threats of communist 'encroachment' as US citizens saw during the conflict with the Soviet Union. The era of terror propaganda was not over, however. These same tactics would see another surge decades later, after the most iconic national tragedy of our present time.

The fear that struck American citizens after the infamous September 11 is very much equitable to the fear that many Americans felt when they learned that the Soviets had successfully tested nuclear weapons. The US government looked back onto their Cold War era tactics, and treated civilian fear in the same way as it had been addressed during the Cold War decades. It's interesting how very familiar it is too look at the September 1961 cover of *Time*, which sports a threatening-looking Khrushchev standing in the foreground of a nuclear explosion (see Fig. 3). The visual construction, of this magazine cover reflects some of the images of the World Trade Center that US media agencies would show the public following the national tragedy. While propaganda posters were a thing of the past by the time of Iraq (not to say that a magazine cover is government pro-war propaganda), the same methods of scaring the public into obedience would grow from the public's vulnerability and suggestibility in the weeks and months to come after September 11, 2001. The ensuing chaos and general feeling of fear that swept the nation after the events of 9/11 echoed the public reaction to the idea of Soviet nuclear tests during the Cold War conflict.

While the Cold War era Soviet nuclear tests were not direct attacks on American soil, they nonetheless instilled a certain amount of fear in the psyche of the average US citizen.

During the Cold War, the US government used these events to spur huge ad campaigns and 'education' campaigns that would forever embed the idea of communist 'evil' in the minds of Americans living during that time period. This would eventually lead to the acceleration of the US war effort and war industry, as well as a sudden swelling of public support. Seeing the public's propensity for sudden blind support in times of national crisis, the Bush administration jumped at the opportunity to send the United States into another economic war. The parallels to Vietnam are in some ways too clear to ignore, and yet the Iraq war, much like the Cold War, would see very little protest, especially during the advent and in the initial years of conflict.

Like Vietnam, the Iraq War was presented to the public as something that it was not. Also like Vietnam, the government was unwillingly aided by news agencies who showed constant footage of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks many months after the event itself. After the public was exposed to such a huge amount of such footage, the administration's necessity to use fear-mongering was greatly reduced, thanks to the exposure that terror-inspiring images were already receiving via the major US media outlets. Unlike Vietnam, the administration seemed to change its mind several times regarding what the purpose of the war was<sup>6</sup>, yet this did not seem to conjure any red flags in the collective mind of the US public. In reality, the current administration had several things to gain through the war, including but not exclusive to the infamous oil contract granted to Halliburton, as well as practically a guarantee for re-election if the war was still raging at the end of the term. In short, the true reasons for the Iraq war were far from those that the government claimed, much like the Vietnam war before it. The causes presented to the public by the Bush administration were analogous to the ideas of 'liberating' the

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6 Rutherford, Paul. *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War against Iraq*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

communists in Europe during the Cold War, or preserving national security during the Vietnam War. Saddam Hussein was in no way related to the tragedy at 9/11, thus the government was deceiving the public, no matter what their reasons for invading were. This similarity to the disinformation that the US public was exposed to in Vietnam would have one expecting another round of widespread protest in opposition to the Iraq war. And yet, the government's deception did not seem to matter to the American public, as is evident from the complete lack of public protest in the early months of the invasion. In his cunningly titled *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War against Iraq*, Paul Rutherford mentions repetition, a technique not foreign in the least to the visual unity of Cold War posters:

“Bush and company set out to exploit the fears and desires of Americans, the fears of more terror attacks and the desires for peace and security. Once more, Washington drew on a lesson of advertising: one key to persuasion was repetition—keep telling the public how evil, how dangerous Saddam Hussein was to ensure that some of the charges stuck” (31).

In the end, it did not even occur to the public to question whether Iraq had something to do with the attacks that the nation had suffered on September 11. All the Bush administration had to do is loosely connect the word 'terrorist' to Iraq, and the war was as good as sold<sup>7</sup>. To anyone who was mildly informed and was paying attention to the throwing around of fiery terms, the word 'terrorist' conjured up images of Cold War propaganda all over again. Even several decades later, the US government is still using the tactic of labeling everything with a potent fear-driven word, the 'communists' of the Cold War have simply become the 'terrorists' of Iraq and beyond.

Over several decades, the face of propaganda has not changed. While the medium may have, the message and tactics employed remain very much unchanged. The reason is that it is

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<sup>7</sup> Rutherford, Paul. *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War against Iraq*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

effective. The same visual images that were effective at striking fear into the American public during the Cold War have become the words that politicians now speak to explain why their war is the only possible method of foreign policy. The public may, on the whole, be more informed and more attentive to moderate media (if such a thing exists) nowadays, but they delude themselves when they believe that simply keeping informed makes them less susceptible to the underhanded tactics of a skilled propaganda artist. No matter what the war, or who the enemy, somewhere in the explanation of the war policy, if you look or listen close enough, you'll find burning American homes in the looming shadow of a red devil.

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