

## SECRECY, DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA: a personal statement

Strictly speaking, this is about freedom of information, not freedom of expression, and so falls inside the Campaign's remit only in so far as accurate information is essential for honest creative work.

### SECRECY

Here I should declare an interest. I grew up in a seaport town, in an area scattered with naval bases. My notion of a genuine official secret is surrounded by a fence topped with barbed wire and has a sentry on the gate with a gun. Everything else is only intended to stop politicians being embarrassed. The number of official secrets which really need to be secret is very small indeed.

In wartime, the number of genuine official secrets does increase a little. By war, I mean a conflict in which there are two sides actually fighting each other. I do not mean what happened to former Yugoslavia, which was not a war but a Nato exercise with live ammunition and real targets, nor what has happened to Afganistan, which is a great power intervening in somebody else's civil war in order to further its own ends. And I certainly don't mean 'the war on terrorism', which doesn't exist.

A World War Two veteran once explained to me what, in wartime, is the only important secret. It is not what you know, it is that you know it. To take the simplest example; the other side is sending coded messages and you break the code. You don't tell anybody, because if you do they will change the code and you will have to start the decoding process all over again. The secret is not what you've done, it's that you've done it.

The same applies to all weapons technology. The laws of physics and biology are not, and never can be, secrets. The secret is not that a chemical or atomic weapon can be made, it is that it has been. Once it has been used, it isn't a secret any more and it's a waste of time to try to treat it as though it was.

It follows that the number of secrets which really affect national security is very small. All claims that releasing information will jeopardise it should be greeted with disbelief unless they meet the criterion; does it matter if the other side know that you know? If there is no other side, if nobody is actually fighting you, if the so-called other side is only individuals with a mindset different from yours, the answer is probably no.

### DISINFORMATION

It also follows that the information which governments allow to reach the public domain is either unimportant or untrue.

Disinformation in wartime is another face of secrecy. If you can fool the other side into thinking that your attack will come on one area so that they rush troops to defend it, you then have a better chance of success when you attack somewhere else - as you were planning to do all the time. There is no better way of doing that than to surround the feint with lots of secrecy and then leak it. It follows that, in and out of wartime, a leaked secret should be treated with scepticism. It may be unimportant. It may be a lie.



Wartime is very stressful and information acquired under stress tends to stick in the mind. The veteran referred to above still believed, and spoke of as portentous, things which later release of documents showed to be either unimportant or false. This does not matter when an old man is only trying to escape from old age by recreating the atmosphere of his youth. For a great many people of his generation, the years 1939 to 1945 were the only time in their lives when they knew exactly what they were doing and why they were doing it. They were also the only time in their lives when those lives were seriously at risk of coming suddenly to an end and therefore the time when they felt most alive. (There is nothing like not being killed to make you feel alive.) It does matter when a lie sticks and is still believed and being acted upon fifty or sixty years later. We in this country have an aging population and should be on our guard not against letting old people live in the past - they will anyway - but against letting them persuade younger people to live in a past which is not even theirs. The key question, which all young people should be encouraged to ask, is: "How do you know?"

#### PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is not the same as lies. A propaganda story may be entirely false, like the one about the Kuwaiti babies, but it is much more likely to be partly true. An outright lie will, sooner or later, be exposed as such and people who have been fooled once may be on their guard against being fooled again. Therefore successful propaganda will be truth, but truth touched up, doctored or spun.

We have to be careful here, because to a lot of people 'propaganda' does mean 'lies'. Somebody got into frightful trouble for suggesting that the famous picture of a Serbian prisoner of war camp was a fake. It wasn't a fake. But nobody is ever going to persuade me that the man with his shirt off and his ribs showing had not been deliberately placed at the front and the shot of people behind barbed wire was not deliberately taken at such an angle as to recall images of the Nazi death camps. That is propaganda.

I believe that our role in CAC should be to suggest to people, whenever we get the chance, that quite a lot of what appears in our media, and passes for news, has been spun. This may be inevitable. The mainstream media are entirely staffed by people who have acquired the mainstream mindset, or they would not be there. We are not accusing anybody of lying. We are saying to the reader or viewer: "Careful! Are you being manipulated? And if so, why? What do the people manipulating you want you to think about this? What do they want you to do?" Probably nothing. That's usually what governments want. Those in power want those they rule to remain passive and if they cannot do it by consent they will do it by fear. What 'the war against terrorism' actually means is 'be afraid'. You can't have a war against terrorism. Terrorism is not an ideology, it is a method. It is the method of fighting forced on people who are otherwise powerless to obtain their freedom or their rights. We are being told to be afraid of the powerless. Worse, we are being told just to be afraid and presently somebody in Washington will decide, and tell their stooges in Westminster, who we are to be afraid of next. The hell with that!

"He who has suffered you to impose on him, knows you." - William Blake.

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