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Book Review

Norman Solomon, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons. 2005)

Jim Hale

A few weeks before I had had the opportunity to read Norman Solomon's new book, a friend and I were discussing how difficult it was to be proud of our country under current circumstances. After a thorough reading of *War Made Easy — How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*, the truth of the matter was made even clearer to me. Our problems, I learnt, are not new, rooted in current foreign and domestic policy. The troubles go back several decades, through a number of presidencies.

Solomon, author of several media-focused books, including *The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media*, reveals the "classic patterns" in government decision-making and media routines that lead to an atmosphere of misinformation in the United States. Beginning with a look at the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo, he has analyzed U.S. military actions in Panama, Grenada, and Haiti to show that while the "safety of Americans" was often the official reason given for intervention it was more likely that fear of "leftist takeover" was the driving motivation.

In each case, the newspapers and broadcast networks repeated information handed out to them by government sources, thus cheer-leading the "restoration of democratic process" through military actions. Walking hand-in-hand with federal officials and their public relations professionals, media outlets helped perpetuate a number of myths that make war easy. David Halberstam, relating the experiences of NBC correspondent Garrick Utley, wrote about this synergy, "The people who ran World News Tonight were, in ways they did not entirely understand, keying in on what the Bush and then the Clinton administrations thought was important, on the theory that what the president and his people thought was important was, in fact, important" (163).

The list of war-spin is headed by the notion that America is a fair and noble super-power, a view directly opposite to that held by citizens in many other countries. Solomon quotes columnist Charles Krauthammer, who wrote that there is no

“serious challenge to American hegemony” because it is “so benign.” Another writer called it “empire lite.”

Second on the list is the belief that our leaders avoid war, that they love peace and hate war. *War Made Easy* provides several examples of President Lyndon Johnson and Vice-President Hubert Humphrey talking about peace throughout the 1960s, right in the midst of increasing U.S. military activity in Viet Nam.

In chapters devoted to “Our Leaders Would Never Tell Us Outright Lies” and “This Guy is a Modern-Day Hitler” Solomon notes that the government is not always guilty of lying. Sometimes the method is “not telling us things” or demonizing an individual through selective use of information, as with Milosevic in Yugoslavia and Saddam in Iraq. In most of the cases cited, the individual is demonized after years of good relations with the United States. Noam Chomsky has noted the same propaganda tactic in his *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*. Chomsky writes that the U.S. government had known, at least since 1972, that Noriega was involved in drug trafficking. However, Chomsky explains, it was only in 1988, when Noriega was finally indicted, that charges related to activities that took place before 1984 (during the time the U.S. continued to consider Noriega as an ally) were brought against him.

Solomon dissects the selective attention to human rights violations and international law, then lays some of the blame on Congress, whose members consistently fail to question motives and methods. Representatives and Senators are often guilty of playing “follow the leader” during the preparation for war.

“Don’t expect the media to tell us if the war is wrong,” Solomon cautions. President Dwight Eisenhower warned us about the military/industrial complex decades ago and that complex now includes corporate media. Why? It’s a matter of money, prestige and career options, according to longtime foreign correspondent Reese Erlich. The lines between government and media have increasingly blurred as retired generals work as “news” analysts and CNN clears on-air talent with government officials. The chapter, “This Is Not at All About Oil or Corporate Profits,” makes for interesting reading in this context.

Solomon writes, “Given the extent of shared sensibilities

and financial synergies within what amounts to a huge military-industrial-media complex, it shouldn't be surprising that ... the USA's biggest media institutions did little to illuminate how Washington and business interests had combined to strengthen and arm Saddam Hussein during many of his worst crimes" (114). Indeed, Ben Bagdikian had revealed in *The New Media Monopoly* that Hussein used U.S.-supplied poison gas against Iranians and Kurds.

Readers will find evidence that media coverage does not really bring the war into our living rooms, because there is no fear projected through our television screens. We are often "spared" the gruesome details of war while the talk of pursuing peace continues. One method — appreciation of the sacrifice made by the dead but no attention paid to the wounded who might "undermine the next war effort."

Accusing dissenters of siding with the enemy has always been a tactic of U.S. presidents and media pundits, beginning long before the conflict in Iraq. Lyndon Johnson "defamed dissenters" during the Viet Nam War. War protestors in 1991 and 2005 have been characterized as "aging hippies on a sixties nostalgia trip." Solomon points out that media coverage seldom asks: why do people want to stop war? He cites former USIA specialist Nancy Snow's explanation that calling someone "anti-American" is "a favorite name-calling device to stain the reputation of someone who disagrees with official policies and positions" (159).

The spin tactics also include claims such as, "This Is a Necessary Battle in the War on Terrorism" and "The Pentagon Fights Wars as Humanly as Possible." In a classic case of treating the symptoms and not the cause, the Pentagon hires a large public relations firm to make its actions look good. As Solomon explains, no war can live up to its advance promotion, which is why a massive P.R. campaign becomes necessary somewhere along the way. The newspapers and television outlets often rely on this campaign as their sole source for news. Chomsky comments on this in relation to the government-media alliance in the current U.S. led war against Iraq. In response to questions regarding the war, Chomsky writes that the P.R. exercise had a standard answer: we were told that Iraq's aggression was a unique crime, and thus merited a uniquely harsh reaction. But, Chomsky concludes, the U.S. wasn't upholding any high

principle in the Gulf, nor was any other state. The reason for the unprecedented response to Saddam Hussein wasn't his brutal aggression — it was because he stepped on the wrong toes. As Solomon concludes:

For the White House and its domestic allies in the realms of government, media, think tanks, and the like, the political problem of war undergoes a shift after the Pentagon goes into action in earnest. Beforehand, it's about making the war seem necessary and practical; if the war does not come to a quick, satisfactory resolution, the challenge becomes more managerial so that continuation of the war will seem easier or at least wiser than cutting the blood-soaked Gordian knot (235-36).

That “managerial” challenge has been part of federal government and media job descriptions for many years.

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