

UNDERSTANDING THE “WAR ON TERRORISM”: THE CULT OF PATRIOTISM

Part 3 – Creating Commitment Through A Rationalization Trap¹

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rationalize 5. *Psychol.* To devise superficially rational, or plausible, explanations or excuses for (one's acts, beliefs, desires, etc.), usually without being aware that these are not the real motives.
– *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Second College Edition)

In this paper I will continue to analyze the Cult of Patriotism and the seven mechanisms used by the cult leader to form, perpetuate, and expand the Cult.² The Cult of Patriotism is a political cult. The Bush administration is using it to garner support for the War on Terrorism. The techniques for accomplishing this are nothing more than propaganda in its most profound sense.

In their book, *Age of Propaganda*, Pratkanis and Aronson devote one chapter to describing “How To Become A Cult Leader.”³ They outline the seven propaganda mechanisms I alluded to in the previous paragraph. They are:

1. Create your own social reality (discussed in a previous paper – PLRC-040224).
2. Create a granfalloon (discussed in a previous paper – PLRC-040516).
3. **Create commitment through a rationalization trap (to be discussed below).**
4. Establish the leader's credibility and attractiveness.
5. Send members out to proselytize for the unredeemed.

¹This paper is part of a series on understanding why we are fighting terrorism. There is nothing new in it that hasn't been published elsewhere, and of course the coverage is not comprehensive. The purpose of this paper is to compile some pertinent information together so that a pattern can be seen. In this Part 3 of a seven-part series on manipulating public opinion to form the Cult of Patriotism, I will discuss how a cult leader must create commitment through rationalization. BA

²What I describe in this paper as the Cult of Patriotism is not synonymous with true patriotism – the latter being deserved loyalty to a just government, probably more idealistic than reality today. True patriotism is good. It gives a country spirit. A true patriot seeks the well being of not only his/her own country, but of all nations.

³Pratkanis and Aronson, Chapter 36, pp. 302-317.

6. Distract members from thinking “undesirable” thoughts.
7. Fixate members vision on a phantom.

In earlier papers I have shown how the War on Terrorism is really Pax Americana – a war to establish a global empire in which American interests are of paramount priority and met to the fullest. I illustrated how the Bush administration is crafting its own brand of social reality among the American people by withholding and censoring information. Then I outlined how the Cult of Patriotism has been formed into a grandfalloon – a basically meaningless camaraderie among members which is not based on reality. In this paper I will address the mechanisms being used to make Cult members rationalize their thoughts to cooperate with the goals of the Bush administration and the neo-conservatives which control it – that is, creating the commitment of the people through the rationalization trap. It is recognized that with the literacy rate of today, where people follow the news to some extent and have an interest in politics, that public opinion is powerful. This presents a dilemma. A government cannot ignore public opinion because it needs the cooperation of the people. But at the same time, if the government has an agenda to fulfill, it cannot follow public opinion. There is only one solution to this dilemma. Public opinion must be manipulated to follow the government. The people need to be provided with information, actual or fabricated, which will make it their choice to support what the government is doing. This is the rationalization trap.

CREATING COMMITMENT THROUGH A RATIONALIZATION TRAP

*A leader or an interest that can make itself master of current symbols
is the master of the current situation.*

– Walter Lippman, Public Opinion, 1922.

Walter Lippmann played a dramatic role on the American scene during the 20th century as an influential author, journalist, and political commentator. In his Harvard days he co-founded the Harvard Socialist Club and edited the *Harvard Daily*. Early in the 20th century he supported Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive party and co-founded the *New Republic* Magazine. Then he went from socialist to democrat and became an adviser to President Woodrow Wilson, was a member of the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and helped draft the covenant of the League of Nations. During these years he had a rosy view of democracy, believing that if Americans were given the facts they would participate fully in politics and world affairs, and become an educated electorate.

After World War I, Lippmann changed this viewpoint. Seeing how the masses were manipulated through effective propaganda techniques, he adopted the belief that the populace was more like a herd of beasts which had to be guided by an intellectual elite.⁴ He maintained it could not be left to the press to form public opinion – that modern leadership required experts to formulate what the press will present, what he called “preemptive management.” Regarding the public, Lippman coined the word “manufacturing consent,” which is the core of the rationalization trap. Due to this switch in philosophy, Lippmann has been

⁴Edward L. Bernays, dubbed the Father of Spin, had a similar view of the public. Stuart Ewen described Bernays’ “hallucination of democracy” as “a highly educated class of opinion-molding tacticians [who] are continuously at work analyzing the social terrain and adjusting the mental scenery from which the public mind, with its limited intellect, derives its opinions.” (Ewen, p. 10.)

viewed as an early-day neoconservative (the technical meaning of which is one that has changed from liberal to conservative).⁵

Stuart Ewen says “Lippmann thought the average person was incapable of seeing the world clearly or of understanding it. He thought humanity saw the world primarily through pictures in their heads.”⁶ Lippmann thought that visualization, through pictures or ideologies, was generally the best way to reach the inner, subconscious thoughts of a person. Words or slogans that call up pictures or ideologies are next best.

In a previous paper, I discussed how “Democracy” is an ideology – an intellectual concept which may or may not hold up in practice.⁷ The “American Dream” is likewise an ideology. These intellectual perceptions are not good at motivating people to action. Propaganda adds the emotional spin to these concepts and thus sustains them as a myth. A myth works heavily on a persons emotions and is an excellent motivator to action.

During World War II there were many examples of “manufacturing consent.” Songs came out immediately, such as *Remember Pearl Harbor* and *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition*. Others glorified certain actors in the conflict: *There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere*, *Johnny Got a Zero*, *Coming In On a Wing and a Prayer*, *The Ballad of Roger Young*, and many more. These songs provoked strong emotional feelings – religion, human weaknesses, self sacrifice, glory ...

Not too much later came the patriotic movies to further glamorized the war and rally the people’s patriotic emotions – *From Here to Eternity*, *South Pacific*, *Midway*, *The Battle of the Bulge*, *Mr. Roberts*, *G.I Joe*, and over forty more. From the Korean war came *The Bridges of Toko Ri*, *Battle Circus*, *Bamboo Prison*, *Men of the Fighting Lady* and others. These songs and movies were punctuated by posters, slogans, mottos, and sensational media reporting.

A Vietnam era movie was *The Anderson Platoon*. Songs of the period were *The Battle of the Green Berets*, *Yellow River*, and *The Fighting Side of Me*.⁸ It was the latter which inspired the slogan “America! Love It Or Leave It.”

Yeah, walkin' on the fightin' side of me.
Runnin' down the way of life,
Our fightin' men have fought and died to keep.
If you don't love it, leave it:
Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin'.
If you're runnin' down my country, man,
You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me.

⁵It should be noted that after World War II, Lippmann returned to a more liberal viewpoint. During the 30-year span of his syndicated column, *Today and Tomorrow*, he upset both parties by opposing the Korean War, McCarthyism, and the Vietnam war. Over his lifetime he supported six republican and seven democratic presidential candidates. Born in 1889, he died in 1974.

⁶Ewen, p. 147.

⁷See PLRC-040516 which is part two of The Cult of Patriotism series and entitled *Creating a Granfalloon*.

⁸There were many songs from the Vietnam era that opposed the war – probably more than those of support.

You can see how those macho lyrics, and their resulting slogan, had a big effect on the Cult of Patriotism at that time. They stimulated people emotionally, and the slogan is still popular. But it does not ask any logical questions or seek any germane answers. It does not provide room for constructive criticism of our country which could lead to a dialogue that would make democracy stronger. Nor does it address what really is that “way of life” our fighting men *thought* they were fighting to keep, vis-a-vis its effect on some Americans and the rest of the world. Such simplified thought does not leave room for opposing viewpoints. Rather, they play on emotions to justify the brute, militant solution. They lead to the rationalization trap.

A similar slogan which came out about the same time, “My Country, Right or Wrong!”, was even more irrational, yet nonetheless emotionally stimulating. Is it right to *not* question a country or government that might be wrong? American youth were dying in Vietnam at the rate of about 300 a week. Were they dying for a just cause? Should we have known for sure? But until the body count got too high, and the personal griefs surpassed the imposed emotions, Americans generally did not question the motives for that war. And the surviving veterans are getting a bum rap. The Vietnam war is now widely recognized as a political debacle. Try as we might to make it so, it is not a glorious or heroic feeling to have fought in a war that never should have happened.

French sociologist Jacques Ellul has studied propaganda extensively and has written several scholarly books on the subject. In his 1962 book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* he discussed the use of symbols and slogans. He says the “manipulation of symbols is necessary for three reasons. First of all, it persuades the individual to enter the framework of an organization. Second, it furnishes him with reasons, justifications, motivations for action. [The rationalization trap.] Third, it obtains his total allegiance.”⁹ Ellul goes on to say:

Furthermore, such propaganda becomes increasingly effective when those subjected to it accept its doctrines on what is *good* or *bad* (for example, the American Way of Life). There, a whole society actually expresses itself through this propaganda by advertising its kind of life. (Emphasis and example his. Remember, this was written in 1962.)¹⁰

Desert Storm, the first Gulf War, brought the taste of blood again to American lips. Flag manufacturers hit a bonanza as the patriotic fervor rose. The famous slogan from that round of violence was “Support Our Troops.” This was an atavism from at least as far back as World War II. I recall the slogan at that time as being “Support Our Boys,” which was then synonymous with getting behind the war effort. The latter day version was obviously intended to stimulate that same connection to supporting the war. I will draw again from Ellul to explain this technique. After explaining that literacy is a prerequisite for modern day propaganda, a literacy which America abundantly has, Ellul says:

This need of a certain cultural level to make people susceptible to propaganda is best understood if one looks at one of propaganda's most important devices, the manipulation of symbols. The more an individual participates in the society in which he lives, the more he will cling to stereotyped symbols expressing collective notions about the past and future of his group. The more stereotypes in a culture, the more susceptible he becomes to the manipulation of these symbols.¹¹

⁹Ellul, p. 23.

¹⁰Ellul, p. 65.

¹¹Ellul, p. 111.

So, how do we react to the slogan to “Support Our Troops”? We cannot dismiss supporting our young men and women who are caught in the morass of war. But most of us have a difficult time rationalizing support for what our troops are required to do – the killing in war, the atrocities committed on prisoners, the indiscriminate bombing of cities and mosques, and the shooting of civilian families. So how do we express our objections without putting down our youth in battle fatigues? I have saved an advice column on ethics from the San Jose paper which I believe gives a germane answer to that very question:

... you are not compelled to have any particular attitude toward the troops. Ethics deals with acts, not thoughts. But even if you translate your thoughts into action, the phrase “support our troops” is ambiguous.

To some people it means speaking out in favor of the war. (And even some who oppose it argue that the failure to make a show of support undermines the troops’ morale and stiffens the resolve of their foes, thus prolonging the conflict.) To others it means expressing sympathy with the young men and women in peril while continuing to demonstrate against the war – i.e., the foreign policy that endangers them (and other people, also an ethical consideration) – on the grounds that the best way to support the troops is to bring them home.

The right to urge your government toward what you consider wise policies (current or future ones) should not be inhibited by calls for national unity.¹²

Now we have the War on Terrorism, and the subsequent conquest of Afghanistan and Iraq (so called Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom – note the loaded word “Freedom” in both titles). Flag manufacturers are again back in business. All the old slogans have been revived. In addition, another stereotyped slogan has resurfaced – “United We Stand.” That goes back to the birth of our country – the 1768 patriotic ballad by John Dickinson, *The Liberty Song*. The fourth verse goes:

Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all,

By **uniting we stand**, by dividing we fall;

In so righteous a course let us hope to succeed,

For heaven approves of each generous deed.

The motto sprung up again during the Civil War as a rallying cry for the Union Army. In the early 20th century, labor unions adopted the slogan as a call for solidarity. In 1942 the motto was used to kick off the World War II war bond campaign.¹³

The “United We Stand” motto is a powerful cultural stereotype that worked well in the emotional aftermath of 9/11. As Ellul points out: “To act in conformity with collective beliefs provides security and a guarantee that one acts properly. ... It gives him a good conscience by making him aware of the collectivity of beliefs.



Magazine Cover for War Bonds
Campaign
1942

¹²Cohen.

¹³Song lyrics, graphic, and history for “United We Stand” obtained from Smithsonian.

Propaganda rationalizes the justification that man discovers in the prevailing ideology ...”¹⁴ Ellul explains further:

Above all, the slogan assures the continuity of the stereotype, which is fixed as a function of the past. But the individual finds himself constantly faced with new situations that the stereotype alone does not permit him to master; the slogan is the connection used by the propagandist to permit the individual to apply his old stereotypes to a new situation. He brushes up and adjusts the ready-made image; at the same time, he integrates the new situation into a classic context, familiar and unconfusing. That is why the slogan flourishes in times of crisis, war, and revolution. It explains also the attraction the slogan has: thanks to it, the individual is not intellectually lost. He clings to it because the slogan is easy to understand and retain, but also because it permits him to “find himself in it.” It tends, further, to provide stereotypes in men who did not have them before the crisis situation.¹⁵

I have illustrated how songs, slogans, mottos, and posters are being used for the rationalization trap. I will now address another means of manufacturing consent. That is through patriotic jargon. There are many words that symbolize ideologies. I will discuss only two in this paper – “Freedom” and “Patriot.”

Freedom is a word that has been used profusely. It brings to mind a familiar stereotype dear to all Americans and, for that matter, globally. Whenever the word Freedom is used it makes us think of something good – something that should be.

Earlier in this paper I pointed out how the word Freedom has been used when referring to the warfighting in Afghanistan and Iraq – “Operation Enduring Freedom” and “Operation Iraqi Freedom.” This induces one to believe the wars are being conducted for the highest of causes although the outcome of those wars indicate otherwise.

Most wars are automatically categorized as a “Fight for Freedom.” When Vice President Dick Cheney spoke to the World Economic Forum in January 2004, he warned that “the world continues to face the unrelenting threat from a sophisticated global network of terrorists opposed to the values of **freedom** and openness ...”¹⁶ The name of Cheney’s speech on the State Department news release was “Spread of **Freedom** Needed to Combat Terrorism, Cheney Says.”¹⁷ The word Freedom was used generously to connote the good while those opposed to freedom are the evil ones. There is no argument that terrorism must be stopped, but conjuring up ideologies in a misleading manner while military carnage continues only inflames more people to terrorist activities. Rather than address the root causes of the violence, it is the antithesis to a solution.

Another State Department news release is titled “Bush says US Has Responsibility to Lead Fight for **Freedom**.”¹⁸ The introductory paragraph explains that Bush “said much of his foreign policy is based on

¹⁴Ellul, p. 200.

¹⁵Ellul, p. 164 (last paragraph of footnote 3).

¹⁶*Washington File*, 24 January 2004.

¹⁷*Washington File*, 24 January 2004.

¹⁸*Washington File*, 23 February 2004.

his belief that America has a mission to promote **freedom** around the world.”¹⁹ Then the news release quotes Bush as telling the country’s governors: “A lot of my foreign policy is driven by the fact that I truly believe that **freedom** is a gift from the Almighty to every person, and that America has a responsibility to take a lead in the world, to help people be free.”²⁰ That speech not only exploits the Freedom ideology, it adds a divine mandate. Furthermore, it implies that God wants America to take the lead in this fight. It is hard for the propagandee not to go along with this idea.

The word Patriot” has also wiggled its way to the forefront in our vocabulary since 9/11. First came the **Patriot** Act. This sounded like the right way to go. In the emotional wake of the terrorists’ attack, the American populace was out for blood. Terrorists could not throw the gauntlet down before us with impunity. The **Patriot** Act was needed. Never mind that it restricted our Freedom, we have sacrificed before. Never mind that it upset human rights and due process of law, we couldn’t take a chance that a terrorist would slip through the cracks. So the **Patriot** Act was eagerly accepted by the American people – at least by those who weren’t detained under its authority.

As the months passed, some factions of society began feeling the shackles imposed by the **Patriot** Act. Retired judge and former Clinton White House counsel said the Act is “making us into the Police State of America. ... It’s a 342-page bill that changes our immigration laws, privacy laws, security, detention, the entire way the federal government treats its people, ...”²¹ With additions to the Act planned and support dwindling, Attorney General John Ashcroft went on a speaking tour to drum up enthusiasm. But he only spoke to small law enforcement groups and friendly audiences, the public was excluded. While addressing an audience of 150 in Boston, 1,200 citizens kept outside were chanting: “This is what democracy looks like.”²²

To keep the rationalization trap active, and to stimulate the emotions of 9/11, the Bush administration designated September 11th as **Patriot** Day. At the second annual observance of **Patriot** Day in 2003, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said:

A **patriot** is one who loves his land, prizes its principles and cherishes its creed. A **patriot** so reveres the ideals of his home country that he is willing to lay down his life that those ideals endure.

Throughout our history, from the earliest days of our nation up to the present time, America has been blessed with **patriots**, men and women willing to give of themselves that this nation, and the **freedom** upon which it was founded, might live.²³

Those words are inspiring. They have a sentimental meaning to all of us. But against the backdrop of Bush administration activities – the manner in which it has administered our domestic and foreign affairs and alienated the world community – they are hypocritical. No true patriot could condone such misuse of the

¹⁹*Washington File*, 23 February 2004.

²⁰Cited in *Washington File*, 23 February 2004.

²¹Cited in Regan.

²²Cited in Regan.

²³Cited in *Defense Link*, 11 September 2003.

highest office in the land. Nevertheless, those words tend to motivate the listeners to raise themselves up as “patriots” and support the present government. It is the rationalization trap in its most profound sense.

I will conclude with an example that uses both Freedom and Patriotism for propaganda purposes. In 2002 an organization called Together For Freedom helped the Pentagon put on a public relations webcast.²⁴ An April 2002 Pentagon news release was titled “Servicemembers to Discuss **Patriotism** and **Freedom**.”²⁵

It said: “The Department of Defense will participate in a nationwide discussion about **patriotism** and **freedom** through a webcast ... broadcast from Bertie Backus Middle School in Washington, DC, ...”²⁶ This was a live webcast especially for Middle School students – a very impressionable age – from Washington DC to Los Angeles, California.²⁷

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said: “I commend the Together For Freedom organization for initiating a national dialogue about the meaning of **freedom** and the importance of **patriotism**, and increasing support for our troops at home and abroad.”²⁸ What is this organization Together For Freedom? Its website seems to be no longer available,²⁹ but it is/was ostensibly a “non-profit organization dedicated to promoting **patriotic** initiatives so that America’s strength and spirit will endure.”^{30, 31} And who was one of the co-founders of this organization? None other than Doro Bush Koch, President George W. Bush’s sister. It certainly looks more political than non-profit. The organization bears all the markings of a front organization for the neoconservatives – apparently to target youth for military service. Let me continue.

ABC television reporter and Cokie Roberts was moderator of this webcast called “Celebration of **Patriotism**.” She announced: “We’re going to be talking to thousands of middle school students simultaneously about **freedom** and **patriotism** and what it means to kids today.”³² The B1B bomber pilot

²⁴Other sponsors for this webcast were Compaq Computer’s “Give Thanks America” community relations program and Sorenson Media (a leader in video compression and streaming media services).

²⁵*Defense Link*, 24 April 2002.

²⁶*Defense Link*, 24 April 2002.

²⁷This webcast, broadcast on 30 April 2002, had 14 participating middle schools hooked up through satellite TV. They are located in California, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC. But all the schools across the country and Defense Department schools overseas were able to dial up the webcast.

²⁸Cited in *Defense Link*, 24 April 2002.

²⁹The home page for Together For Freedom is <http://www.togetherforfreedom.org> but it seems to be no longer accessible.

³⁰Compaq Computer News Release.

³¹Together For Freedom also created the **Freedom Bracelet** “which stands as a symbol of the **freedom** we enjoy as Americans, and reminds us that our **freedom** must never be taken for granted. The **Freedom Bracelet** is dedicated to the service men and women who continue to fight for our **freedom** every day.” (Compaq Computer News Release.)

³²Cited in Williams, 3 May 2002.

panelist, Lt. Kathryn M. Gries, told the children: “Every opportunity is available to women on the war fighting team.” And when asked what **freedom** meant to her, she responded: “Freedom means you can choose what you want to do,” and added that she was able to become a bomber pilot because of **freedom** in America.³³

Besides Air Force Lieutenant Gries, the panel had representation from Army, Navy, Marines, and others who were certain to present the picture desired by the Pentagon. Each one of them gave information hyping the military and disparaging the conditions “over there.” After the webcast, Together For Freedom co-founder Doro Bush Koch explained that they selected middle school children because “they’re just the right age before they’re making important decisions and choices in their lives. So we thought it was a good time to educate them on **patriotism**.”³⁴

Yes, she is right. Children that age are extremely vulnerable to sensational suggestions. It takes very little effort to imagine how their thoughts were being guided. Propagandizing our impressionable youth in this heavy-handed manner is the most vicious application of the rationalization trap.

What I am illustrating here is that all these songs, mottos, slogans, posters, patriotic jargon, and stereotyped words are aimed at one goal – to stir up strong emotions that will perpetuate the myth of blind patriotism. They provide the necessary, and usually limited, information for a person to rationalize compliance with the administration’s policies regardless of how corrupt those policies may be.

To really achieve Freedom as we envision it ideologically, it is incumbent on Americans to pay attention and inform themselves, and then to participate in democracy fully and responsibly. Informing oneself doesn’t mean reading only selected literature and accepting only what one wants to hear. It means paying attention to the entire environment, and asking themselves searching questions when something disturbs them. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States have to be comprehended fully and taken seriously. True patriotism is not something inspired by platitudes. It is not a stereotype. It is a sincere dedication to what is right for our country. When a vested-interest faction seizes the reins of government and makes a mockery of democracy, that is not good for the country. At that time a true patriot’s conscience calls on him or her to buck the tide of public opinion and oppose that faction. That takes a lot of courage. I hope this paper inspires some of that courage.

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³³Quotation cited in Williams, 3 May 2002.

³⁴Cited in Williams, 3 May 2002.

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³⁵If the links don't work, key the URL into your browser address bar.