"The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country… We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized…"

So opens Propaganda (1928), one of several strikingly frank analyses of western social psychology written by Edward Bernays. This nephew of Sigmund Freud founded the public relations industry in the United States.

Mr. Bernays lived a fascinating life. He first got involved in high stakes politics when he "warmed up" the dour Calvin Coolidge by arranging the first presidential celebrity photo op in 1928. For the private sector, Bernays engineered a most notorious publicity stunt for the American Tobacco Company, by single-handedly neutralizing the taboo against women smoking in public. He organized a "Torches of Freedom" march down Broadway by ten smoking debutantes during the 1929 Easter Parade. With the help of feminists – some of whom understood the "right to smoke" as liberatory – Bernays expertly publicized this spectacle, thus setting in motion the expected stir on op-ed pages across the land.

For Bernays, truth in public affairs did not exist *per se*. Rather, truth was the product of the "public relations counsel" forging prevailing "public opinion." It should be said that he readily recognized the ethical implications of his work, as witnessed in his later anti-smoking advocacy, after the dangers of cigarettes became known in the late-1950s. He could also be, in his own curious way, a humanitarian – as reflected in his work promoting the NAACP and anti-syphilis public education.

For Bernays, however, the necessity of controlling the public mind was a crucially important matter confronting the better element, a group in which he clearly included himself. In his first work, the hugely influential *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), Bernays noted that the establishment of public education and the gradual extension of the right to vote caused consternation...
among western elites. The use of public relations techniques, then, was a way for the minority to "so mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction."

**Pandora’s Box Opens in the Century of the Self**

In the early 20th Century, the public came to associate the words "propaganda" and "war" with one another. This was no accident. Bernays wrote in *Propaganda*: "It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the [First World] war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind."

Bernays is here referring to the "idealistic" Wilson administration’s Committee on Public Information (CPI), a massive propaganda ministry set up shortly after America’s entry into the First World War in April of 1917. The CPI was headed up by George Creel, a progressive journalist, who once remarked that "people do not live by bread alone; they also live by catch-phrases." Bernays was an advisor to the CPI. So was Walter Lippmann, a former socialist turned liberal who would become the dean of mid-20th Century American journalism.

These revolutionary psychological insights had actually been percolating in France and Great Britain since the first years of the 20th Century. They were duly appropriated by Hitler, who wrote in *Mein Kampf* (1925): "But it was not until the [First World] War that it became evident what immense results could be obtained by a correct application of propaganda. Here again, unfortunately, all our studying had to be done on the enemy side…" In Bernays’s 1965 memoir *Biography of an Idea*, he acknowledged that *Crystallizing Public Opinion* significantly influenced Josef Goebbels.

In post-World War II America, Bernays provided his services to the United Fruit Company and the Eisenhower administration. In 1954, the democratically elected New Deal-style Arbenz government in Guatemala began expropriating—with compensation—some of that corporation’s largely fallow lands. In due time, Bernays launched a media blitz which made palatable the (clandestine CIA-backed) coup which would overthrow the "communist" government.

In our era, President Reagan employed new media management techniques that built upon the foundation laid by Bernays. The "great communicator" employed a cadre of shrewd "spin doctors," prominent among them Michael Deaver and David Gergen, who would go on to also work for Bill Clinton. Gergen was soon enough displaced by another bipartisan operator, a former consultant to Jessie Helms, named Dick Morris. He successfully "triangulated" Clinton, "the man from Hope" who "felt our pain," into a second term.

Bernays, with his detached air of studied bemusement, had this to say to liberal social reformers. "Good government can be sold to a community just as any other commodity can be sold." Today we witness not the penny ante fibs of liberals, but the astounding rightist machinations of Karl Rove.

**The Public & Its Problems**

The title of this segment is borrowed from the great pragmatist philosopher and educator John Dewey, who engaged in a heated public debate with Lippmann—and by proxy Bernays—during the 1920s. Lippmann felt that the efficacy of
propaganda during the war, in tandem with the meteoric subsequent rise of the Ku Klux Klan, demonstrated that the public’s suggestibility was a real danger to democracy. In Lippmann’s reality, “the herd” was too ignorant to participate in democracy beyond selecting from what he called the choice between "tweedledee and tweedledum." Dewey sharply disagreed; he thought, as FDR later did, that public education could at least mitigate the irrational element in human nature.

Some readers might at this point aver that the bygone writings of Dewey, Lippmann and some obscure flack don’t amount to much today. After all, we already know to be skeptical of advertising glitz, to say nothing of political promises.

There is however the little matter of the Bush administration’s rhetoric and the socio-psychological context it created in the aftermath of the horrific onslaughts of 9/11. Even some of the President’s realist supporters now concede that he wasn’t entirely above board when it came to invading Iraq. So the question must be asked: how does an American president communicate with the public? Well, his words are calculated and his persona is molded by the modern political descendants of the public relations counsel.

**The Triumph of "Turd Blossom"**

Karl Rove – given the above nickname by our jocular President – is an extraordinarily keen student of American psychology and history. He is well aware of the back story to contemporary political fixtures like the focus group – a technique innovated by Edward Bernays. Consequently, it doesn’t take too much effort to discern the afterimage of Bernays’s teachings in Bush’s rhetoric.

In *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays related how governments and advertisers can "regiment the mind like the military regiments the body." This discipline can be imposed because of "the natural inherent flexibility of individual human nature." He also instructed that the "average citizen is the world’s most efficient censor. His own mind is the greatest barrier between him and the facts. His own ‘logic proof compartments,’ his own absolutism are the obstacles which prevent him from seeing in terms of experience and thought rather than in terms of group reaction."

In addition to what Bernays saw as a widespread individual resistance to reason in public affairs, he contended "physical loneliness is a real terror to the gregarious animal, and that association with the herd causes a feeling of security. In man this fear of loneliness creates a desire for identification with the herd in matters of opinion."

Once within the "herd," the "gregarious animal" still wishes to express his or her opinion. Therefore, the public relations counsel must "appeal to individualism [which] goes closely in hand with other instincts, such as self-display."

Quoting Wilfred Trotter and Gustav Le Bon [two leading turn-of-the-century social psychologists], Bernays agreed that "the group mind does not think [emphasis in original] in the strict sense of the word… In making up its mind, its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader. *This is one of the most firmly established principles in mass psychology.*" [Emphasis mine] To sum up, what Bernays called the "regimentation of the mind" is
accomplished by taking advantage of the human tendency to self-deception, gregariousness, individualism and the seductive power of a strong leader.

The allure of determined leadership – one can read all about it in management and self-help books – is heightened in times of turmoil. The last election almost certainly turned on the question of whose leadership could best "keep America safe." George W. Bush, thanks to Karl Rove, absolutely rolled John Kerry on this question. Kerry, the decorated vet, was successfully depicted as a French-loving, wind-surfing "liberal flip-flopper." And then we all heard, ad nauseum, that he "betrayed his comrades" in Vietnam by "throwing away his medals" at some hippie protest or other. That these smears had nothing to do with Kerry’s program ended up being irrelevant.

Bernays expressed this deep-seated yearning for strength and decisiveness repeatedly in *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. "We have to take sides. We have to be able to take sides. In the recesses of our being we must step out of the audience onto the stage and wrestle as the hero for the victory of good over evil. We must breathe into the allegory the breath of our life." Bill Clinton, another astute observer, had this to say about Bush’s public appeal: "it’s [politically] better to be strong and wrong than right and weak."

The term individualism is rather at the core of the Republican Party’s rhetoric, most often preceded by the quintessentially American modifier "rugged." The individual is free to autonomously "pursue happiness." Once the suburban pioneer has achieved happiness, which today means financial success, his or her strivings should not be punished. Or so the story goes. And soon enough one finds ordinary, ambitious middle class folks clamoring for upper class tax cuts.

Bernays and Rove both recognized the need for Americans in particular to feel as if they belong to something larger than themselves. We are after all by far the most religious post-industrial society on the planet. The American people want to embrace something that provides clarity, something that plays to their vanity and hence self-understanding. Having won the "leadership" and "individual initiative" battles, Rove delivered victory to George W. Bush for an additional underlying reason.

Rove very cleverly marketed the President’s message via easily digestible catch phrases that elicited in the consumer a deep connection. The Republicans stand for "security," "strong defense," "individual liberty" and "moral values." The Democrats stand for…well; it depends on who you ask. The Democratic Party means many things to many people, often based on very personal – and hence disparate – notions of identity. The Republican Party appropriated the bedrock symbolism of "American togetherness" and thereby again cleaned the Democrats’ clock.

Bernays underlined the importance of such symbols in *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. "Mental habits create stereotypes just as physical habits create certain definite reflex actions… these stereotypes or clichés are not necessarily truthful pictures of what they are supposed to portray."

The aforementioned Walter Lippmann’s work is quoted extensively by Bernays; Lippmann was his unacknowledged American mentor. In fact, Bernays wrote *Crystallizing Public Opinion* one year after Lippmann’s seminal *Public Opinion* appeared; similarly, *Propaganda* appeared one year after
Lippmann wrote his deeply pessimistic *The Phantom Public*. In this 1925 work, Lippmann belittled what he saw as the nostrums of American democracy held so dear by so many in our country. "A false ideal of democracy can lead only to disillusionment and to meddlesome tyranny. If democracy cannot direct affairs, then a philosophy which expects it to direct them will encourage the people to attempt the impossible; they will fail, but that will interfere outrageously with the productive liberties of the individual. The public must be put in its place… so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd."

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