

# Detrimental Consequences: Effects of the Use of Propaganda by World Leaders

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## Abstract

The present study examines the use of propaganda during World War II, the last major global conflict, to better understand leadership ethics and the effectiveness of manipulation in influencing populations. For this research, propaganda, the perception of a situation, was analyzed as a manipulation tactic, a means to expedite action, and a tool for unifying a community. The contrasting situations for this study were the United States under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. The analysis highlights that while propaganda can be a powerful and effective means of fostering unity and accelerating collective action, it poses significant long-term risks, including erosion of trust, the perpetuation of discriminatory practices, and the undermining of legal and ethical principles. Findings suggest that, although propaganda may be expedient in times of conflict, it can harm democratic values and reduce trust in leadership. These findings underscore the importance of avoiding manipulative tactics and instead fostering trust within a community. By prioritizing transparency, equality, and ethical leadership, leaders can mitigate long-term consequences, cultivate a more united populace, and strengthen confidence in governance.

## Introduction

Manipulation, often in the form of propaganda or rhetoric, is a controversial yet effective leadership tactic employed by leaders worldwide. William L. Gardner, Director of the Institute for Leadership Research at the Texas Tech University, and academic researcher Kelly M. Davis argue that “crisis serves as an antecedent for charismatic leadership” highlighting that there is a noticeable increase in the use of rhetoric during a time of crisis. Before and during World War II, leaders such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt used manipulation tactics, most notably propaganda, to unite the country and boost morale. Other infamous leaders such as Adolf Hitler, utilized these same tactics to commit war crimes during a time of economic hardship in Germany. Considering these opposing circumstances: To what extent is propaganda as a form of manipulation a justifiable leadership tactic for

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leaders to use during a time of war? An analysis of the use of propaganda during World War II -the last major global conflict- will allow for a better understanding of the ethics of leadership and the effectiveness of manipulation among a population. While propaganda is a powerful and effective tactic for unification and the expediting of a solution, it can cause long-term issues such as the deterioration of trust, discriminatory practices, and the undermining of legal and ethical principles.

### **Propaganda as a Manipulation Tactic**

Manipulation in the form of propaganda is commonly used to unite a community and boost morale during a crisis. Harold Lasswell, an American political scientist, defines propaganda as a tactic that changes “the popular perception of the situation without altering its material conditions” [1]. This definition underscores propaganda’s ability to shape public opinion without addressing underlying realities. Maria Lucia Rusu, a Ph.D. holder in Military Sciences, and Romana Herman, a member of the Land Forces Academy in Romania, claim that “Propaganda should not be perceived as a subversive or negative act, [since] it has a political and revolutionary character as a form of mass influence of public opinion” (119). Through public opinion on a large scale, propaganda can unify people against a common enemy, which is essential to mobilizing a nation during wartime. Furthermore, propaganda can serve as a form of motivation to the public during a time of crisis. Lynnette Finch, a historian and senior lecturer at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia, emphasizes the effectiveness of propaganda in history, claiming that it “has been one of the crucial tools of warfare and has been enlisted to manipulate the ideas, attitudes and conclusions, and tolerance levels of civilians and soldiers” [1]. She highlights its effectiveness during World War II, arguing that winning the minds of civilians is a crucial aspect of winning or losing a war. Through propaganda, leaders can simultaneously demoralize the enemy and boost their citizens’ morale. Leaders who use propaganda can effectively rally more support effectively allowing for a stronger and more unified response to a crisis.

While propaganda may be a necessary or effective leadership tactic during war, it can also promote hate speech and spread misinformation. When considering the powerful influence of propaganda, one striking example is that of Nazi propaganda during World War II. Jeffrey Herf, an American His-

torian of modern Germany, elaborates on this stating than “Nazi ideology, policy, and propaganda which had served to enhance Hitler’s power quite well up to 1941 . . . contribut[ed] to the regime’s loss of touch with reality” [2]. He posits that this propaganda bolstered Hitler’s manipulation of the general German public causing the blatantly malevolent death of millions of Jewish people. In fact, when discussing the events of the war, Albert Speer, Nazi Minister of Armaments, stated that “through technical devices like the radio and loud-speaker, eighty million people were deprived of independent thought” [1]. Nazi propaganda played a critical role in consolidating power, allowing the regime to wage war across Europe and execute the Holocaust, one of history’s deadliest genocides. While propaganda may remain a viable solution for many leaders, it can also erode trust in government. H. C. Peterson, an American government official, summed up the American public consensus on World War I propaganda: It was “responsible for the temper and irrationality of the peace treaty and the vindictiveness of the post-war years” [3]. disillusionment persisted beyond World War I, leading to increased suspicion during subsequent conflicts, including World War II. When reflecting on the propaganda campaigns post-war, Americans were “puzzled, uneasy, or vexed at the unknown cunning which seems to have duped and degraded them” [1]. Douglas Walton, an author, and research fellow at the Centre for Research in Reasoning, Argumentation, and Rhetoric, corroborates this, stating that “strong negative connotations attached to the word ‘propaganda’ imply that such discourse is both unethical and illogical. The ethical aspect implies intentional deception and manipulation of a mass audience” (384). Other forms of propaganda for the sake of manipulation include social media, however, due to the argument focusing on World War II, manipulation through social media was not considered, and in turn there was no elaboration on confirmation bias or groupthink.

### **Propaganda as a Means to Expedite Action**

Propaganda is an efficient tactic for expediting solutions and mitigating mass panic during a time of conflict. Rose McDermott, an American political scientist, asserts that manipulating emotions such as fear and anxiety increases the power of what a leader is saying, thereby prompting an effective response while “help[ing] overcome internal divisions and promot[ing] cooperation within a community.” Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) is one example of a leader who took advantage of this and utilized propaganda

to help influence public opinion and morale during World War II. By doing so, FDR united the United States citizens against a common enemy, boosting morale, and facilitated the efficient execution of military actions, ultimately contributing to success during the war. McDermott also contends that “leaders can employ mechanisms of strategic manipulation of emotion and social identity to help achieve effective collective action.” She claims that focusing on emotions like fear and anxiety taps into people’s inherent survival instincts, resulting in a stronger, more unified response during a crisis. Julian Erhardt, a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern, reinforces this point, stating that in addition to a unified response, “fear decreases people’s confidence in their own preferences and choices and makes trust in external factors such as the government more likely.” In times of crisis, a leader’s appeal to his audience’s fear allows for greater trust of the government, therefore allowing for better mitigation of a crisis. Using the US as an example, Samantha D. Cart, a graduate student at West Virginia University, corroborates this claiming “how the president chooses to articulate on an occurrence . . . play[s] a huge role in how United States citizens respond to crises” [4]. She analyzes the example of Franklin Delano Roosevelt noting that his use of manipulative propaganda fostered a stronger, more unified response from the public while increasing trust in proposed solutions. It is, however, important to consider that the varying demographics of an audience may influence the overall impact and potency of propaganda.

The effectiveness of propaganda during a war, however, could be undermined if a leader misuses the power it grants, resulting in detrimental consequences. According to Robert Noggle, a professor of philosophy in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at the University of Central Michigan, “manipulation might lead to bad decisions, such as empowering tyrants or undertaking unwise wars” [5]. In addition, crises challenge norms and freedoms considered fundamental to the social or political order [6]. Considering leaders are held to elevated expectations and are under extreme scrutiny, using propaganda to influence mass opinion could lead to decreased trust and confidence in the government prompting an exacerbation of the crisis. Pierluigi Conzo, associate professor of economics at the Department of Economics & Statistics and Francesco Salustri, researcher, and economist, claim that during post-conflict eras, “[people] tend to have lower levels of trust in institutions and more pessimistic beliefs about politicians’ morality.” By resorting to deceit and manipulation, leaders risk erod-

ing the trust between themselves and their followers, ultimately creating inefficiencies in governance and decision-making. Ted Thomas, director of the Department of Command and Leadership in the U.S. Army Command and Ira Chaleff, president of Executive Coaching & Consulting Associates, asserts that “leaders who stress ends or results over means or methods will breed dishonesty and reap the results of a culture which says one thing and does another” [7]. While efficiency is necessary to alleviate a crisis, doing so at the expense of the political relationship between a leader and his followers, detrimental consequences result in long-term loss of credibility and accountability for a leader.

### **Unification through Propaganda**

Propaganda can have a unifying effect on a group of people during conflicts. Bruce J. Avolio, an expert in leadership studies and his team, assert that transformational leaders uplift morale and motivate their followers by transcending selfish tendencies and aligning with organizational values. According to Avolio, using transformational leadership, leaders “can shape how followers evaluate and respond to stressful demands and events in their operating context” [8]. An example of this form of leadership is Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s First Inaugural address. Franklin Delano Roosevelt states “we face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the dean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by young and old alike....” FDR appealed to his audience’s emotions, fostering a sense of unity that helped pave the way for success during World War II. Through his emphasis on frankness and candor, he established a strong sense of trust and connection with his audience. Rose McDermott reflects on politically manipulating emotions such as fear and outrage, “help [Ing] overcome internal divisions and promote cooperation within a community through the identification of a shared enemy who poses a threat, whether real or potential, to everyone.” However, propaganda can undermine the legal and ethical principles by which leaders vow to lead and may disproportionately harm certain communities. Thomas and Chaleff argue that “leaders set the standard in what they enforce, reward, punish, and how they act personally. Followers then reinforce the culture or develop a subculture counter to the espoused culture.” The way a leader treats a group of people will be reflected by his community; if

a leader holds discriminatory values, there will be a greater prevalence of discriminatory ideas. Propaganda has a strong unifying effect that can also have the consequence of manipulating a group of people into supporting an unethical form of action that can result in the harm and isolation of a group of people. “Politicians who incite hate speech against specific ethnic or religious groups in society make those groups’ members more allied with other members of their own group and less tolerant of individuals from rival factions” [9]. This can promote discriminatory ideas that divide a country and are detrimental to the society that is being discriminated against. Unification through propaganda also creates a scapegoat, which is often a vulnerable or minority group. Richard J. Evans, a British historian specializing in Germany, elaborates, stating that “Terror . . . was directed above all at small groups of social outcasts” [10]. This is evident during the Nazi regime, where propaganda exacerbated prejudices and contributed to the devastation of the Holocaust. The promotion of racist or xenophobic ideas through propaganda can have a profound influence on a community, resulting in the normalization of discriminatory attitudes and increased societal harm.

## Conclusion

While many argue that the use of propaganda is an effective tactic for dealing with a conflict, it also erodes trust and weakens the connection between leaders and their audience while undermining the ethical principles leaders pledge to uphold. The effectiveness of propaganda is not synonymous with its morality; it should not be employed by political leaders during times of conflict despite its short-term success, due to its damaging long-term consequences. This analysis didn’t note distinctions between forms of government that employ manipulation, nor did it address varying degrees or methods of manipulation. However, as Ted Thomas and Ira Chaleff assert, leaders who prioritize the ends over the means risk causing lasting harm. Manipulation through propaganda and rhetoric compromises free will and personal autonomy, leading to the eventual deterioration of trust in government institutions. By avoiding manipulation and prioritizing transparency, leaders can foster trust within their communities, avoid long-term instability, and create a united front while promoting equality and strengthening confidence in their leadership. As FDR proclaimed, “This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly.”

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