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Review: *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* by Susan A. Brewer

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Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2009. Pp. X, 342. Cloth \$ 29.95.

Susan Brewer has written a vitally important book for our times. Starting with the Spanish-American War of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and ending her survey with America's first war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she covers America's propaganda campaigns in the most significant conflicts spanning this time period. Her overall finding is not all that surprising, but important and worth repeating: in each conflict, Americans were misled and misinformed, sometimes even lied to in an outright manner. The meta-narrative of 20<sup>th</sup> century US war propaganda, "civilization against barbarism" (277), was compelling and has lost little of its powerful attraction. It was also flexible enough to adjust with slight variation to each specific war scenario: liberty versus autocracy during World War I, democracy versus dictatorship in World War II and freedom versus tyranny during the Cold War conflicts. The wars changed, but the narrative has remained remarkably consistent, conveniently side-stepping issues of geopolitical control, economic motivations and search for empire.

The discussion of the US propaganda campaigns during the Spanish-American War will probably be the least familiar to most readers, mainly because it is frequently overlooked in surveys which start with World War I. As Brewer highlights, President McKinley was a rather media-savvy president who courted the representatives of the wire services and had one of his secretaries meet daily with reporters for "a kind of family talk" (15). Yellow journalism fanned the flames of war in Cuba, but the war in the Philippines, against the Filipino independence movement no less, turned out to be a more difficult sell. Tight censorship, which included the review of all press reports sent from Manila by the US army, as well as short film clips highlighting American bravery and victories overshadowed the fact that American troops were suppressing freedom for the Filipino people and instead helped to establish a significant beachhead for the expansion of America's economic presence in Asia. Neither American anti-imperialists nor the hundreds of thousands Filipino casualties, as Brewer emphasizes, received any significant media coverage.

Like many other industrialized countries, the United States vastly expanded its use of media propaganda in the two world wars with the rise of films, radio and modern advertising. In both conflicts, American administrations initially embarked on "a strategy of truth" in order to explain and justify the war to its people. Respected journalists like George Creel who led the Committee on Public Information (CPI) during World I and Elmer Davis who oversaw the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II spearheaded these efforts. In neither case did the strategy of truth survive to the end of the war. In addition to reverting to atrocity propaganda during World War I or sugar-coating the war casualties in World War II, American propagandists developed a unique blend of entertainment, advertising and propaganda to stoke the patriotic fervor and simultaneously showcase the superiority of free enterprise and democracy. Yet Americans were willing to forgive especially the FDR administration for its misleading propaganda because the contrast between Axis and Allied powers was so stark and the choice so obvious. The "good war" has rightly become the quintessential fight for freedom, the iconic representation of America as liberator and will never lose its luster.

The Cold War conflicts, as Brewer highlights, were much more difficult to explain to the American people. While the theme of freedom versus tyranny dominated the propaganda campaigns in both wars and while the Cold War rhetoric captivated mainstream political thinking, Americans remained lukewarm about either of the two wars. Both Truman and Johnson enjoyed strong public support as well as the whole-hearted collaboration of the media at the outset of the conflicts. But neither Johnson nor Truman was able to see the war through to a satisfying and conclusive end, and the increasing public dissatisfaction ultimately took a heavy toll on their presidencies.

Brewer makes clear that nothing was really all that novel during the Operation Iraqi Freedom. In fact, it fits almost predictably into the long history of America's wartime propaganda campaigns. The familiar rhetoric of Americans as liberators, the close cooperation between the media and government, the restrictive news management, the marginalization of critics and war opponents as well as the little attention paid to economic motivations all followed familiar patterns. Even the embedding of news reporters was not truly new (252).

The power of Brewer's book is that she makes these propaganda patterns evident and apparent, and that she does so in a concise and insightful manner. She has done a superb job of combining her own primary research with surveys of the secondary literature and arrives at judicious, thoughtful and engagingly written chapters on each of the wars. Brewer's study is ideally suited for educated lay readers and university courses, and it deserves a very large audience.

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