



Eugene Secunda, Terence P. Moran. *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror.* Westport: Praeger, 2007. 231 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-99523-2.



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War: Just Another Marketing Challenge?

Eugene Secunda and Terence P. Moran take on an ambitious task in *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror* and largely fall short. Although their use of Aristotle's rhetoric and American marketing categories are intriguing as organizing principles, they ultimately frustrate more than illuminate. Inadequate historical contextualization and background, and sloppy editing further mar the book.

Secunda and Moran both teach at New York University. Secunda co-authored *Shifting Time and Space: A History of Videotape* (1991) with Eugene Marlow and worked in corporate communications in Eastern and Central Europe in the 1990s. Moran is the director of the Media Ecology Faculty in the Steinhardt School of Education and has previously written on language and persuasion.

Selling War sets out to be a synthesis that systematically demonstrates how the American government has sold war to its people for the past 110 years. In part, the intent is to warn American citizens to be aware of these techniques. Although the scale, scope and circumstances of these wars varied widely, Secunda and Moran look for

common structures. They find them in rhetoric and marketing, because, they state, that selling war is "not very different from selling any other product, idea, or cause" (p. 2). The best sales pitches, they argue, combine Aristotle's classical rhetorical formula—ethos (the good character of the speaker), logos (logical appeal), pathos (emotional appeal)—with modern marketing. These marketing tools would include media usage, flexible monitoring, and proper understanding of the "marketing environment," i.e. the "time, place, people, events, and circumstances within which the persuasion is attempted" (p. 7). Successful war selling rests on understanding American's mythical self-image. Americans see themselves as peaceful, but willing to embrace a decisive fight of good against evil when roused. "In short, Americans will always buy a war if it is marketed properly" (p. 3).

The emphasis on Aristotle and marketing is an interesting idea, but the authors frequently use it too broadly—governments have ethos by being popularly elected (p. 23). Or they use it anachronistically—as when they note that in 1898 President William McKinley's administration paid little attention to "Media Analysis, Planning,

and Placement' ” (p. 17).

The authors, however, are unclear on whether a war can be marketed, at least initially, without lies. They emphasize at the beginning that presidents from McKinley to George W. Bush “perpetuated a tradition of deceit or misleading dialogues with the American public whenever they sought to involve the nation in an armed conflict” (p. 1). But, then they state that the government must respect the intelligence of the public and explain its cause truthfully and logically to successfully sell a war (p. 9).

Secunda and Moran correctly note that selling war is an ongoing process, but they should have addressed in greater depth other key elements in Americans’ acceptance of war—length, cost and aims. It can be easy to use deceit or a weak case to successfully sell a short war with few American casualties against a weak enemy. Change any of those elements and the job gets harder. There is also a big difference between selling a total war, such as World War II, an open-ended limited war such as Vietnam, or a tightly defined, limited war, such as the Gulf War. As counter-insurgency expert David Kilcullen pointed out in an interview with George Packer in 2006, in reference to war fighting: “America is very, very good at big, short conventional wars? It’s not very good at small, long wars? But it’s even worse at big long wars? And that’s what we’ve got.”[1]

Although the authors are writing with one eye on the Bush administration’s post-9/11 strategies, they start the book in 1898 with the Spanish-American War and proceed chronologically through World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War.

The authors clearly acknowledge that in 1898 President William McKinley did not even try to sell the war with Spain. Instead, newspaper publishers and other public figures took the lead in pushing war to the public; McKinley followed. “In 1898 it was the people, stirred to fury by the popular press that sold the war to a reluctant American government. It was the beginning of an American tradition—the tail wagging the dog” (p. 15). Although this undercuts the overall argument of their book, the authors try to downplay this contradiction by portraying McKinley as simply unprepared to sell the people a product they already wanted to buy (p. 11).

America’s domestic propaganda efforts in World War I began after the April 1917 declaration of war and formation of George Creel’s Committee on Public Informa-

tion. President Woodrow Wilson successfully sold the war to the American public, they concluded, but he violated the “iron law of successful marketing” by promising what he could not deliver—world peace (p. 46). In their account of World War I, the authors stumble by ignoring the significant public dissatisfaction with the war, vigilante violence, and the draconian repression of the Espionage and Sedition acts. Instead, they wrote: “From the American declaration of war on April 6, 1917, to the armistice on November 11, 1918, Americans overwhelmingly supported involvement in this European War” (p. 45).

American isolationism in the 1920s and 1930s is characterized as buyer’s remorse after World War I, confronting President Franklin Roosevelt with a “marketing dilemma” in 1940 after World War II began (p. 47). Japan eased his dilemma by attacking Pearl Harbor, giving the U.S. both a cause and a slogan—“Remember Pearl Harbor.” The total war effort that followed brought in all elements of American media and society. “In war, as in marketing, a product that performs the advertised promise satisfied the customers and keeps them buying. Like Coca Cola, World War II was sold like any other product; it satisfied customers and sold itself” (p. 74).

By the late 1940s, the U.S. was in a Cold War with the Soviet Union and was selling the American people on anti-communism and anti-Soviet alliances. The Berlin blockade, the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons and the Communist takeover of China in 1949 led to calls to escalate America’s position in the Cold War. The U.S. government was preparing for many things, including propaganda, but it was just not prepared to sell the American people on a war in Korea a few months later. Secunda and Moran downplay the vital Cold War context and instead focus on Truman’s “very big mistake in branding” by calling the war a “police action” (p. 82). That terminology, and Truman’s failure to sell the public his limited war strategy, made it impossible to fully rouse American support for the war, they argue.

In the mid-1960s the American government again tried to make a case for another limited land war against Communist expansion in Asia, this time in Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson won election in 1964 on a peace platform, used deception to get congressional approval for an expanded war (the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution), then escalated the war after the election. The growing erosion in government credibility, capped by the 1968 Tet Offensive, undermined public support for the war. Johnson declined to run for re-election, Nixon became

president and the war went on for another five years. Overall, Vietnam demonstrated how not to sell a war. “In short, don’t sell Americans a war they do not understand, do not need, and do not want” (p. 118).

Many in the U.S. government believed that bad communication and the news media had undermined support for the war in Vietnam. After a few practice runs in places like Grenada and Panama, the U.S. was ready to sell a bigger war again—this time in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. government lined up allies, limited media access to the battlefield, appealed to basic American myths and fought a technologically sophisticated, quick, decisive and low (American) casualty war requiring no sacrifice at all from the American public. The key factor in this success was its speed and, for Americans, its bloodlessness. The details of the current war in Iraq, and how it was sold, are well-known to most readers, and Secunda and Moran describe them all—from the original claims of Iraqi development of Weapons of Mass Destruction and an Iraqi/Al-Qaeda connection through the 2007 “surge” of U.S. troops. The authors argue that the initial deceptions, the rising casualties and the seemingly endless war all soured Americans on the Iraq War.

Secunda and Moran’s historical account presents a number of problems for historians. The authors rely on a combination of published secondary works, and a large number of newspaper and magazine articles, especially for the more recent events. Their historical foundation, however, is narrow and sometimes shaky. Although they give an account of media developments, they give insufficient attention to much of the political and diplomatic context, including the growth of presidential power and the national security apparatus since the 1940s; social science research into persuasion since the 1930s, and the

larger Cold War context (domestic and diplomatic) of both Korean and Vietnam war decision-making.

They also do not take note of important historical scholarship dealing with war, propaganda and perception that has come out in the past decades, and frequently cite only a small scattering of relevant works per chapter. On just World War II, for example, there’s no mention of John Dower’s *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986) or Allan Winkler’s *Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (1978).

Finally, the text is marred by misspellings of common proper names—Emilio Arguinaldo instead of Emilio Aguinaldo (p. 22), Guantanomo for Guantanamo (p. 23), Jack Valente instead of Jack Valenti (p. 35), Elba River instead of Elbe River (p. 69), and Columbia for the nation of Colombia (p. 125). There are other annoying factual errors scattered throughout the text—the 1919 -1933 German republic never moved its capital to Weimar (p. 42); the Japanese were expanding in Manchuria, not Mongolia in the 1930s; and General Douglas MacArthur had his famous Wake Island meeting with President Harry Truman Oct. 14, 1950 not “mid-October, 1951.” (p. 81).

While *Selling War* has some insights and interesting organizing concepts, and could be useful for informing citizens of some basic techniques, it does not succeed as a history of “selling war” to America during the past 110 years.

Note

[1]. George Packer, “Knowing the Enemy,” *New Yorker* 18 December 2006. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact2

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