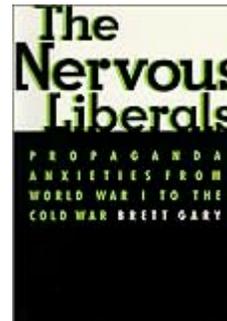




**Brett Gary.** *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xii + 323 pp.p. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11365-6.



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## Liberals at War

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Liberals do not care for propaganda. By definition, propaganda is not simply that which is propagated, but rather false or misleading statements propagated to some political purpose. In the liberal view, politics ought to be based upon truths that any rational person could recognize. Propaganda violates this rule. But distaste aside, should liberals worry about propaganda? Ought they to be concerned that lies will, so to speak, distort prices in the marketplace of ideas? If so, then when propaganda enters the marketplace – say, from an illiberal foreign government – should they call upon the liberal state to intervene? Or ought they to trust people to know lies when they see them and, maintaining the traditional liberal suspicion of state power, employ a laissez-faire strategy toward propaganda?

This question will always be with us, but at certain times it is especially acute. The great transnational ideological struggles of the twentieth century constituted such a time. Between the First World War and the middle of the Cold War fascist and communist propaganda emanated from various European and American sources.

Particularly during the depressed 1930s, the anti-liberal, anti-democratic propaganda seemed to have a plausibility about it even in the land of Jefferson and Lincoln. Brett Gary's book tells the story of how American liberal intellectuals responded. Some persevered in the doctrine of Jefferson, Mill, and others that at the end of the day truth will win as long as the state keeps out of the market. Others, Gary's "nervous liberals," were those who believed that the state had to protect the American people from fascist and communist propaganda. The phrase "nervous liberals" is from Archibald MacLeish, the poet and Librarian of Congress who eventually developed a case of the nerves himself. Each group of liberals, the nervous or "national-security" group and the "free-speech" group, worried that the strategy of the other would cause the American regime to go the way of the Weimar Republic.

The ground for nervous liberalism had been cleared by the Great War, when free-speech liberalism had taken it on the chin. Frightened of national disunity, the federal government violated civil liberties as never before, and with the acquiescence of the bench. Most intellectuals

later disowned these violations (and the war in general), but the efficacy of propaganda in that war left many, including the influential Walter Lippmann, convinced that in an age of mass communication the *demos* could not distinguish truth from lies. The majority of liberals disagreed, siding with John Dewey's arguments that education, always liberalism's universal solvent, could combat propaganda. But Lippmann's doubts lingered, rattling the nerves of the intellectuals.

Among the edgiest was the political scientist Harold Lasswell. A pioneer of political psychology and the use of content analysis, Lasswell did not divide political communication into propaganda and truth: all was propaganda, whether liberal or not. In a time of irrational politics, the task for the state was to prevent violence by propagating liberal ideas. Lasswell worked with a team of scholars funded by the Rockefeller Foundation to study the techniques and effects of propaganda. Committee members disagreed as to whether Dewey or Lippmann was right about democracy, but all agreed that fascist propaganda presented the nation with a new danger. (The Rockefeller committee, under the direction of the medievalist John Marshall, played a crucial part in the foundation of the modern discipline of communications). As Gary writes, these scholars and the Foundation aided the state in its war on anti-liberal ideas.

As the 1930s became the 1940s and German power grew, more and more liberals lost their nerve. MacLeish exemplifies the move. At first sharply critical of his fellow intellectuals who distrusted the judgment of the "masses," and determined not to engage in social engineering, MacLeish ended up as "architect of the emerging national security state" (p. 131). As director of the U.S. Office of Facts and Figures, MacLeish both prevented foreign propaganda from reaching the public and propagated on behalf of America and the allied cause. The Library of Congress, which he also directed, acted as an intelligence conduit; the nation's vast network of libraries was part of the arsenal of democracy.

The business end of national-security liberalism was the Department of Justice. Pushed by a President (Roosevelt) who wanted a "Brown Scare" to rid him of his far-right critics, and anxious about native fascism and anti-Semitism, Justice investigated and prosecuted various editors, writers, speakers, and booksellers. When direct evidence of foreign sponsorship was unavailable, prosecutors would argue that it could be inferred via Lasswellian content analysis: if a home-grown fascist used ideas and phrases similar to those of Goebbels, he was

probably part of the international Nazi conspiracy. Justice also took to identifying seditious intent with statements opposing the anti-fascist war. At the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover exploited the anxiety to expand his infamous files.

Through a great deal of archival and institutional research Gary has uncovered a fascinating and important story about American liberalism in one of its times of greatest stress. He writes effectively and evokes the dilemmas facing intellectuals when Father Coughlin was on the radio and Hitler was having his way across the Atlantic. One of the most striking aspects of the story is how liberal intellectuals enlisted enthusiastically in the antifascist cause and thus helped preserve the American state. American academicians and journalists after Vietnam prefer to think of themselves as maintaining a critical distance from the state. Insofar as they propagate toleration, attempt to discredit those with whom they disagree by associating them with execrable sources, and employ other techniques of MacLeish et al., however, they may be fooling themselves. The liberal state is no more laissez-faire in the marketplace of ideas than in the marketplace of goods. It must propagate the principles of liberty and toleration upon which it rests, and undermine competing principles. And it finds in liberal intellectuals eager soldiers.

Given the alternatives, however, perhaps liberals should not be troubled that they serve the liberal state. And it is on the question of alternatives that Gary gets into trouble. More precisely, he gives too little attention to the other options facing the nervous liberals. He acknowledges that they were persons of good will in a time of crisis. He sympathizes with them as they confronted difficult choices. He does not accuse them of anything close to the tyrannies of fascism and communism. But time and again he ends up criticizing them for compromising their liberal principles, thus implying that they ought not to have done so. Upon what basis can he lodge such criticism? He is no moral deontologist: his primary complaint about "nervous liberalism" concerns its baleful consequences, in particular postwar McCarthyism. Thus he must argue a counterfactual, sc., that the consequences of a free-speech liberal strategy during the Second World War would have been preferable to those that actually occurred under national-security liberalism. This he never does.

So I shall offer a counterfactual. Had the U.S. government in the 1930s and 1940s let the marketplace of ideas function without its thumb on the scales – in par-

ticular, had it not engaged in pro-war propaganda – the probability of German and Japanese victory would have risen significantly. To undermine this contention Gary would have to answer the arguments of the nervous liberals themselves: Why should we believe that Americans were so much less vulnerable to propaganda than Europeans? Were Americans morally superior? more intelligent? Or was American culture more liberal? If that was the case, how did McCarthyism – the phenomenon that motivates this study – happen only a few years later? Gary calls McCarthyism “the political paranoia of the cold war garrison state” (p. 250). One need not go that far, or make the fashionable moral equation of McCarthyism with Stalinist tyranny, to acknowledge that it was a moment when Americans fell hard for some untruths. So Gary cannot have it both ways: if the nation – including many intellectuals – was susceptible to the propaganda of a Wisconsin senator, then Americans can indeed succumb to propaganda. And the liberal state did well during the Second World War to fix the marketplace of ideas.

Put in more familiar if more tedious terms, Gary – like all of us – has the luxury of calling nervous those very people who took action to ensure that we would have the right to engage in such criticism. The Second World War imposed great hardship on the American people. Boys were dying, families were disrupted, people worked harder and submitted to rationing, and the country’s physical security was truly in danger. Had the nation’s enemies appeared as reasonable as they portrayed themselves in propaganda, a separate peace would have become a seductive option for Americans. One is tempted to say that it is a good thing that Archibald MacLeish rather than his current critics was the wartime Librarian of Congress. But one suspects that, in MacLeish’s situation, those critics would have seen that in times of great peril a bit of nervousness simply is a sign that one sees one’s situation clearly.

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