

Brainwashed and Pro-War

by Bill Herbst

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This week's post is a two-fer: Two commentaries for the price of none. Both are short and, like most of my commentaries, are perspectives from the fringes of the bell-curve, far from the center of collective American belief. But then, that's where I live. Sure, my life hangs out with the majority in many ways: I wear shirts with button collars, I eat food produced by industrial agriculture, and I suffer from many ailments common to old people. In a thousand ways, I'm average. But my weekly commentaries tend to offer points of view that are not embraced by a majority of Americans. These two are no different.

#1: Brainwashed

Brainwashing — the substitution of fantasy for reality promoted by culture — uses marketing and propaganda techniques that are aimed at the limbic brain, where our emotions and beliefs reside. What we want and don't want, like and don't like, are the primary areas in our brains (and our psyches) of vulnerability to manipulation. The neocortex is not the target, since the rational mind is merely the servant of feelings and beliefs. Our intellect dutifully and happily works hard to come up with rationalizations, justifications, and whatever cherry-picked evidence of apparent facts (or "alternative" facts) are required to make a good or winning argument that supports our emotional leanings.

Damn near everyone in America is brainwashed (including me). In my opinion, this is not a conspiracy foisted on us by a cabal of devious elites or secret provocateurs. Such manipulators exist, but they don't possess anything near the power required to achieve the level of brainwashing that has overtaken us. No, the toxic kool-aid that we drink daily is not created in corporate boardrooms, deep-state office buildings, or secret conferences, although activities in those locations undoubtedly contribute to the propagation of narratives, plans, and policies that I would oppose.

For example, consider the recently-revealed agreement among officials in the Trump administration to implement the policy of family separation as deliberate cruelty intended to deter immigration by discouraging asylum-seekers. Stuff like that goes on every day and is completely routine in societies throughout civilization. It does not, however, constitute the kind of grand conspiracy theory so popular among disaffected Americans.

No, in my view brainwashing is a more general condition that arises out of the collective consciousness of human beings. We might call it the Dark Side or the Shadow, but it's not "organized," because it doesn't need to be. Instead, it occurs in a million different ways, each created by small and disconnected groups of people pursuing obvious but often circumspect self-interest. The overall result may appear to be diabolical in its seeming coherence and cleverness, but it's not. Devious, yes, but typically less than fiendish. Instead, it's ubiquitous, oceanic, and mostly unconscious, achieving invisibility by hiding in plain sight, much like the water around the fish. We all swim in this sea of manipulation.

These days, the effects of brainwashing include dividing us into extremely polarized armies of belief. That's not new, of course. Crude dualities have always been the case to one degree or another within humanity. Us-versus-Them is a binary baseline, a kind of lowest-common-denominator current that aggregates us into various opposing camps. The old political labels "Left" and "Right" are inadequate terms to define the polarization that covers so many different parts of our experience, but any of the usual simplistic headings — black/white, rich/poor, coastal/heartland, urban/rural — leaves out more than it includes.

Our current dilemma in the war between the brainwashed factions centers around the presidential election. Both camps believed and fully expected that their guy would be victorious. Trump people (i.e., Republicans) were certain that he would win in a walk, while Democrats (who may or may not have been "Biden people" but were certainly anti-Trump) were equally convinced of a blue wave landslide. Both sides were wrong, but that reality hasn't sunk in yet. Deep brainwashing is remarkably resistant to change from outside.

We are fractured into a thousand shards of opinion and belief. Elements of truth still abound, but they float like flotsam in a sea of falsehoods. Each of us may be resistant to being brainwashed in certain ways, but that often makes us more vulnerable to brainwashing from other directions.

I don't have a solution for this and can't offer any profound insights. I don't know what to do about it. It's just what I see in me and around me.

#2: America Loves War

These are tough days to be against war. The Orwellian Pro-War double-speak machine is in full swing: up is down, right is left, lies are truth.

Our lame-duck President has ordered that the remaining 13,000 American troops leave Afghanistan and come home. This has provoked a torrent of outrage from many directions: the mainstream media (including CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and even FOX News), the Pentagon, and all the various supporters of the military-industrial complex. No surprise there. Trump Derangement Syndrome is alive and well, but so is the fact that America is a violently-deranged empire that loves war.

Promoting war in the name of peace — specifically war in other countries — is a longstanding American tradition. We've been doing that for more than a century. Peace for whom? Well, for us, sort of. How that works is a bit tricky, though. It's not peace for the people who live in countries we invade and keep troops in *forever*. In too many of these countries, especially those whose populations are people of color — black, brown, yellow, swarthy, anything but white — our troops are not "peace-keepers," as we are so often told. They are fighters, killing people and being killed (although the numbers of people they kill in these countries is always far larger than the number of our soldiers killed).

But Bill, don't we have to use our military to protect American security? Isn't that obvious to everyone? No, it's not. It's an argument, not a fact. The Pro-War narrative uses many such arguments, all based on appeals to our needs and desires. Central among them are appeals to fear and money.

On the one hand, it's about Us-versus-Them — our fear of The Other. If we believe that "they" will harm us, then killing them before they can makes sense to a lot of people. I don't share that belief, but I've studied history sufficiently to recognize and accept its power. Yes, there are bad actors in the world, and protecting ourselves from them is entirely reasonable. But does protecting ourselves mean creating and stockpiling enough doomsday weaponry to wipe humanity off the face of the earth ten times over? I cringe every time I think back to George W. Bush's statement in the wake of 9-11 that "*They hate us for our freedoms.*" No, they don't. They hate us because we mess with them.

On the other hand, endless war is about profits for the defense industry, that many-headed hydra underpinning so much of our economy and wealth-creation. Keeping troops stationed around the world isn't cheap, but it is Big Business for American corporations. Few Americans are even aware of the black-ops CIA coup that overthrew a democratic government in Iran in 1953. We wanted Iranian oil on the cheap, so we reinstated the Shah. The eventual result of that was the Islamic revolt of the late 1970s. Hell, it's no wonder Iran doesn't trust America. We want all the money.

I'm not implying that security and safety are meaningless or unimportant. No, they're high on the list of human drives — always have been and probably always will be. I'd just like to move them down a couple notches in our hierarchy of needs.

As I've written often, I'm all in for ending war and bringing the troops home. Too many of the arguments for how to do that are actually Pro-War propaganda masquerading as Pro-peace. I won't engage in any of those debates.

Just stop. Stop the killing. Stop the madness.