
Philippines (1941 – 1945)²⁹
Disinformation Failure

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Disinformation in the ether does not work. When China and Russia spread obvious and clumsy disinformation on social media, those messages themselves often have little-to-no effect. People, even addicted scrollers, do not suddenly believe what they are reading and viewing when it does not already resonate with them.³⁰ Or, when it does not already cause outrage. When it feels like they are trying to be manipulated directly by foreign powers.

Instead, disinformation tactics—as part of an orchestrated propaganda campaign that is but one materialization of an influence strategy—affect audiences when they already play into the foundational narratives of the intended audience.³¹ When they amplify existing voices through existing trusted actors. To further mobilize. To further radicalize. To reinforce existing beliefs and trends.

Disinformation that fails to target the subconscious of a subject (or ‘collective subconscious’ of a community) will be dead on arrival.³² Meaningless noise. Forgettable. Sometimes laughable.

It is helpful to study the most extreme disinformation campaigns to investigate the limitations of disinformation when disinformation is direct, obvious, and without an attempt to tap into the subconscious of the audience.

One case study I have worked on with my students and audiences over the past quarter century is Japanese propaganda in the Philippines. From the initial bombing (just after Pearl Harbor on 8 December 1941) to the Japanese government’s order to surrender. This included some of the bloodiest battles in human history to include—as just a small sample—the anti-Japanese-occupier guerrillas and their subversive warfare from MacArthur’s departure (March 1942, followed by the Bataan Death March in April 1942) to MacArthur’s return (October 1944), Battle of Leyte Gulf (the largest naval battle in history), Battle of Leyte, Battle of Luzon, Battle of Manila (amongst the bloodiest urban battles in human history, especially when one counts that massacres of civilians and other crimes against humanity).

Japanese occupiers attempted to control, absolutely, the information environment.

Japanese commanders stomped out or took over every means of mass media. They effectively monopolized the information environment of the once-U.S.-territory of the Philippines.

The Japanese occupation of the Philippines during the Second World War was as close to an overwhelmingly strong (foreign) government controlling the entire information environment as any time in history.

Japanese propaganda was 24/7/365—constant radio, daily papers, weekly films, pamphlets, and more.

They spent what would be in today’s dollars millions a month to pump out disinformation about Japanese intentions and actions—selling themselves as liberators standing should-to-shoulder with Filipinos instead of occupiers.

The problem with Japan’s influence strategy? The daily messages were developed in mainland Japan or Japanese headquarters officers in the Philippines. And ran on the misassumption that quantity of lies told with flair could influence audiences. There was no attempt to tap into the subconscious of the Philippine public. Japanese

propagandists failed to target the foundational narratives, sacred values, cognitive constructs, imagined communities, world views, unconscious biases, and psychological orders that are tattooed on their audience. That determine or influence most beliefs, decision, and behavior.

It was blind propaganda. And it failed despite the Japanese occupiers exerting complete control over many population centers of the Philippines.

And they were fighting 'ghost influence' of the resistance. There were no open attempts at wide counter-narratives by Philippine and U.S. resistance.

There were no overt attempts to correct constant oversaturation of Japanese disinformation and misinformation over their occupation, crimes against humanity, war crimes, brutal totalitarian military rule, racism, or goals.

Any counter-narratives—until the U.S. Army returned—were conducted mostly by deeds (propaganda by action) by guerrillas, subversives, saboteurs, spies, and passive resistance. While word of resistance was spread by word of mouth and tiny handheld tokens, this was conducted in whispers lest Japanese military catch wind and stomp out.

Monopolizing the Information Environment

Japanese means of controlling the information environment included the following, for example:³³

- Air raids first targeted anti-Japanese news services—radio towers and stations, newspaper offices and printing presses. Japanese pilots prioritized communications means first and foremost.
- Shut down formal news outlets not supportive of Japanese.
- Banned all non-Japanese-owned antennas.
- Banned foreign radio broadcasts.
- Banned news in English.
- Confiscated radios or altered to only access pro-Japanese propaganda.
- Registered typewriters and sample pages.

Japan's Blind Disinformation

Japan's influence strategy included propaganda to 'win the hearts and minds' of Filipinos. Promised platitudes include the following, for example:³⁴

- "New Philippines for and by Filipinos."
- Liberation from U.S. occupation.
- "Asia by Asians."

- “Co-prosperity Sphere in the Greater East Asia.”
- Shared racial brotherhood against European occupiers.³⁵

Platforms included posters and flyers, newspapers, continuous radio, film, and literature.

Japan's Actions Failed to Jibe with Japanese Propaganda

The Japanese propaganda machine failed to heed even their own strategy literature on influence that underlines words can never substitute for deeds. Words without deeds—especially words that are contradicted by deeds and fail to take into account the audience's experiences and world views—are blank rounds. As Angelo Codevilla and Paul Seabury, in their 2006 *War: Ends and Means*, underline, "...psychological operations' is often misunderstood as the preposterous proposition that words can substitute for deeds..."

Japanese actions contradicting their messaging included the following:³⁶

- Death camps for transgressors.
- Sudden lack of freedom of ideas and speech.
- Every Filipino had to bow before any and every Japanese soldier. This humiliation is remembered and even felt today in almost any village or city block.
 - An illustration. If a former beloved schoolteacher and great-grandmother was out for a Sunday morning stroll with family in tow—dedicated, even in her retirement, to tutor and help underserved youngsters learn to read, to give to her community and church daily, and to provide love and wisdom to her extended family. And she came upon a 17-year-old Japanese private. She would have to bow down fast enough, low enough, and long enough to that private's liking. Otherwise this private, with noncommissioned officers looking and egging on, would beat this elderly woman with a stick—sometimes to death, right in front of her family and community. This was an everyday scene in Manilla.
- Military control of most governance.
- Puppet government did not represent most Filipinos and Filipinas.
- Thousands of Filipinas were torn from families and forced into slavery to serve Japanese soldiers and sailors.

Historian James Scott summarizes Japanese brutality with the following:

- *The Japanese had descended upon the Philippines, armed only with empty promises of Asian prosperity while looting the nation's warehouses, stores, and crops.*³⁷
- *In [Manilla], men, women, and children starved to death each day by the hundreds. Others turned to thievery, prostitution, and even grave robbing to survive. Manila had devolved into a humanitarian catastrophe...*³⁸

- *...Japanese occupation...ruined the economy, triggered widespread starvation, and shredded the social fabric...*³⁹

Propaganda Falls on Deaf Ears

There is no evidence that the Japan's propaganda influenced any Filipino citizen. Those that recall it wrote about films being met with unusual silence and lack of applause. It was said, "The Propaganda Bureau may be working hard but they are just wasting a lot of film."⁴⁰ Even as Philippine artists appreciated the quality propaganda performances, they noted that no one applauded in any cinema or arthous or any performance by Japanese occupiers.⁴¹

Furthermore, the false words combined with Japan's brutality and humiliation of Filipinos appeared to sharpen hatred for Japan. The chasm between promises and experience outraged Filipinos. Lies and obvious attempts at manipulation made Japan's cruelty sting even more.

This was noted by Japanese top military officials that opined that they felt completely alone and isolated from the Philippine population. Those that commanded Japanese sailors and soldiers felt they could not trust any citizen—even supposed collaborators.

Japanese top brass were so worried about citizen resentment, they predicted an uprising from most civilians—of any age, sex, background—once MacArthur neared Manilla. Not only could no Filipino be trusted to sit the fight out. But also it was assumed citizens would unleash their wrath on uniformed Japanese: "...the population's hostility toward the Japanese meant that many civilians would likely turn on his troops when MacArthur's forces arrived."⁴²

As Pacita Pestaño- Jacinto wrote in his diary of the Japanese occupation:

- *I think every Japanese soldier feels it, the hatred seething underneath our surrender.*⁴³
- *It is a hatred that he must match with the might, arrogance and cruelty of a conqueror.*⁴⁴

Japanese officers were so terrified of civilians that they attempted to round up all hunting and defensive weapons; kitchen knives and sharp cutlery; guard dogs; and any medical-center or household substances that could be used to make poisons or explosives.⁴⁵

Anti-Japanese (non-Maoist) Guerrillas Influence Campaign⁴⁶

U.S. and Filipino guerrillas conducted almost no propaganda except by deed—no major counter-narrative offensive. Instead, they treated population respectfully and defended innocents when possible.

The little guerrilla propaganda that was done was largely by word of mouth throughout all islands and Manilla—quietly, rarely openly, never widely—of their work to liberate the Philippines from Japanese rule.

For communications between guerrillas and the U.S. Army, messengers clandestinely traveled from Australia (where MacArthur had fled) to communicate with some guerrilla leaders. And these subversive leaders employed allied indigenous runners to deliver memorized messages between resistance networks

The underlying theme of the opposition to Japanese occupation was self-determination. Not the false self-determination that Japan was offering. But self-determination from all outside rule to include the U.S. government after the war.

On the minds of Filipino guerrillas and spies and civilians included a vision for future autonomy and liberation:

- Filipinos fought against the Spanish (with U.S. as allies) for independence and self-determination before the turn of the twentieth century.
- Some Filipinos that had fought with the United States against the Spanish then turned on the U.S. occupiers for independence and self-determination (running up to 1902).
 - Children and grandchildren of those that fought against U.S. governance of the Philippines, even as they may have resented U.S. control, were suddenly allies of the United States in their quest for self-determination against the Japanese—followed then by autonomy from the U.S. government.
 - The U.S. government went from federal authority over the Philippines to agents of liberation from all outside rule (to include from the U.S. government itself). The United States was no longer the occupier. Instead, U.S. Soldiers became a vehicle for self-determination.
- Before World War II, the U.S. government promised independence in 1946. This seemed to be a collective aspiration even for those citizens that had appreciated U.S. governance up to that point.
- U.S. guerrilla leaders fighting alongside Filipinos against the Japanese promised a liberated and independent Philippines as a mutual goal. The promise of 1946 liberation was felt at every level.
- Although recapture of the Philippines did not offer strategic advantage to U.S. forces (U.S. military could reach the Japanese mainland without control of the Philippines), MacArthur (viewed as a ‘villain’, hero, or savior in different circles of the Philippine resistance) still returned as he promised. This was not lost on Philippine citizens: that the U.S. government prioritized liberation of the Philippines over strategic advantage in the Pacific theater writ large. The real reason for the timing may have been liberating U.S. prisoners of war—forgotten for too long. But MacArthur’s return was also seen as a sacrifice to liberate the entire Philippines from Japanese rule.
- The Philippines was indeed given independence in 1946. A sovereign state. No longer a U.S. territory. Although this was after WWII, the promise of self-determination was indeed delivered. It materialized pre-WWII promises.

Japan’s propaganda focus on liberation from U.S. ‘overlords’ was, on the other hand, misplaced—did not jibe with the type of self-determination citizens sought and did not jibe with Japan’s actions.

Lessons Learned

For many important matters people do not like to be lied to. Especially bold-faced lies that fly in the face of reality.

No amount of beautiful propaganda affects people’s behavior unless narratives target and find traction with the subconscious of the audience.

Influence must be conducted with an understanding the audience subconscious. And then it must leverage existing narratives and trusted native networks indirectly and insensibly—lest audiences feel manipulated against their best interests by obvious and clumsy non-native propaganda.

Blind disinformation does not work.

This article is a reflection on my educational [podcast](#), 2017 [primer](#) on narrative warfare education (that informed a chapter in Dr. Ajit Maan's [Dangerous Narratives: Warfare, Strategy, Statecraft](#) as well as the short educational primer [Influence Warfare Volume I: A Blueprint](#).

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- ² Natasha Bertrand and Oren Liebermann, "US fighter jet downs a drone belonging to NATO ally Turkey over Syria, officials say," *CNN* [5 October 2023]. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/05/politics/us-downs-turkey-drone-syria/index.html>.
- ³ The Associated Press, "Azerbaijan moves to reaffirm control of Nagorno-Karabakh as the Armenian exodus slows," *NPR* [2 October 2023]. <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/02/1203150145/azerbaijan-moves-to-reaffirm-control-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-the-armenian-exodus->
- ⁴ Gal Beckerman, "'The Middle East Region Is Quieter Today Than It Has Been in Two Decades'," *The Atlantic* [7 October 2023]. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/israel-war-middle-east-jake-sullivan/675580/>.
- ⁵ The list of twenty-five plus one is as follows: Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, Sykes-Picot Agreement, Balfour Declaration, Dissolution of the Caliphate, Increased Jewish Immigration, Establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Uprisings and the 1939 White Paper, The Final Solution, The State Solution, 1948 War and Al-Nakba, Twin Pillars Policy, 1967 War, 1973 War and the Camp David Accords, 1979 Iranian Revolution, Birth of Hezbollah, Globalized Jihad and the birth of al-Qaeda, Birth of Hamas, Intifadas, Operation Desert Storm, al-Qaeda's Declaration of War and GWOT, 2006 Lebanon War, Arab Spring, Mowing the Grass, The Abraham Accords, ISIS and the Islamic Revolution, and *The Management of Savagery*.
- ⁶ Henry McMahon and Hussein bin Ali, Cmd.5957; Correspondence between Sir Henry McMahon, G.C.M.G., His Majesty's High Commissioner at. Cairo and the Sherif Hussein of Mecca, July, 1915–March, 1916, published 1939 with map. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Correspondence_between_Sir_Henry_McMahon_and_the_Sherif_Hussein_of_Mecca_Cmd_5957.pdf
- ⁷ The agreement in the below reference is as part of correspondence between Sir Edward Grey, then serving as the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Paul Cambon, the French Ambassador to London.
Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, Sykes-Picot Agreement, 16 May 1916. https://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Sykes-Picot_Agreement
- ⁸ Arthur James Balfour, The Balfour Declaration [2 November 1917]. https://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Balfour_Declaration.
- ⁹ Secretary of State for the Colonies, Palestine: Statement of Policy, His Majesty's Stationary Office [May 1939]. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1939_White_Paper_cmd_6019.djvu or https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brwh1939.asp.
- ¹⁰ The Jewish Agency for Israel, "The White Paper of 1939" [7 August 2005]. <https://archive.jewishagency.org/ben-gurion/content/23436/>.
- ¹¹ Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 470-471.
George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, fourth edition, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, 582-583.
- ¹² Richard M. Nixon, "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen," *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara [25 July 1969]. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/informal-remarks-guam-with-newsmen>.
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- ¹³ George W. Gawrych, *The 1973 Arab-Israeli War: The Albatross of Decisive Victory*, Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute, 1996, 9 and 13.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, New York: Vintage Books, 2006, 58-59.
- ¹⁵ "Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine," translated by Muhammad Maqdsi, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Summer, 1993, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), 122-134. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538093>.
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- ¹⁸ Matt M. Matthews, *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008, 61.
- ¹⁹ Itai Brun, "'While You're Busy Making Other Plans' - The 'Other RMA'," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33: 4, 535-565 [20 August 2010]. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2010.489708>.
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- ²⁴ Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, 46.
- ²⁵ Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," *Brookings* [21 December 2011]. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

²⁶ This article was originally published in *Philosophical Practise*, a Journal of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association, vol. 8, number 2, July 2013.

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ii²⁷ For a fuller exploration of my response to what Strawson defines as "episodic" and "diachronic" being in time, see *Internarrative Identity*, 2nd edition, pp. 53-65.

²⁸ It should be noted that what has been translated to English as "narrative" from the *Rhetoric* is not the way we use "narrative" today. Aristotle meant something more like oratory. See *Rhetoric*, Book III, Chapter 16.

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