



# **SPINtelligence trick you into**

## **PART 3 – The Subversion of Intelligence**

**Professor Ian Wing**

# – how governments believing them

**T**he dangerous combination of spin doctoring with intelligence is a serious challenge to public confidence in democratic governments. Intelligence is a powerful tool, and

the misuse of intelligence by governments is a disturbing trend. The aggressive tactics of 'spin doctors', and their willingness to mislead the general public with intelligence, have helped to reduce our confidence in government statements. This process has also promoted incompetent foreign policies.

The first article in this four-part series described what happened in the late 1990s when spin doctors learned how to misuse intelligence to win public support for government policies, and how spin brought Governments to rely on unsubstantiated intelligence as a method of maintaining public support, citing the case 'SPINtelligence' made for the invasion of Iraq.

The second article in this series described the twenty secrets of successful spin doctoring, including: monitoring the media, agenda setting, rapid rebuttal, selectively presenting facts, smear tactics, distractions, non-denial denial, phrasing

that assumes unproven truths, euphemisms, doublespeak, and weasel words.

This article will reveal ten more of the devious secrets of spin doctors and how they have misused the field of intelligence.

Spin doctoring has its origins in the field of public relations and corporate marketing. It consists of the aggressive selling of ideas to maximize the positive aspects of an issue. Ever since the first public mention of spin, in a New York Times article in October 1984, its use has been separated from standard marketing styles by its willingness to disregard honesty and ethics. During the late 1990s, intelligence was incorporated into spin. This added to both the capabilities and techniques of spin doctoring.

The first article of this series stated that intelligence officers do not make good spin doctors. This is because they are too honest in their use of information. The intelligence profession relies on established intelligence doctrine – the collection of intelligence from many sources; its analysis and transformation into intelligence; and its dissemination to the people who need to know. But this does not

mean that intelligence officers are not highly skilled in the arts of deception and trickery, particularly during the information collection phase. Intelligence agents are required to manipulate the actions of their targets using money, power, sex and fear. Spin doctors have learned many lessons from the deceptive elements of intelligence doctrine.

Spin doctoring in the political arena uses several techniques derived directly from intelligence doctrine. Here are some of the most important:

**Centralized Control** – In order to ensure that all politicians stay ‘on message’ and that the general public is ‘kept in the dark’, spin doctors apply rigid centralized control and strict discipline on all involved in spin operations. This includes politicians who are strongly warned to follow party guidance on what to say and not say. That guidance is developed by the spin doctors and then approved at the highest levels of political party leadership.

**Secrecy and Security** – Intelligence requires very high levels of secrecy and security to protect its sources and products. Any breach of security may jeopardize an important intelligence operation or capability. Likewise, spin requires a high level of security to prevent its target audience – the general public – from learning about its operations and capabilities.

**Cost-Benefit Analysis** – The use of spin by governments involves potentially high political benefits and, simultaneously, some potentially damaging political risks. For this reason, all

spin operations are subjected to a cost-benefit analysis prior to commencement. The benefit being sought is usually the management of public perception, which is balanced against the risk of exposure. If the risks are deemed too high, the operation does not proceed. The main risks are compromise of the secret operation, or the development of public cynicism which may prove counter-productive. Intelligence officers also balance the risk of compromise against potential information that may be gained. If an intelligence operation goes wrong the painful after-effects are known as ‘blow back’. Spin doctors use the same term for the after-effects of failed spin operations.

**Plausible Deniability** – Intelligence operations may involve illegal acts known as ‘black ops’ which range in seriousness from the theft of documents to blackmail and violence, through to assassination (‘wet work’). Governments must avoid the risk of being blamed for their own sensitive intelligence operations and so use plausible deniability to provide separation. When intelligence operations are launched, all operatives are briefed on the arrangements that will apply if they are caught. These arrangements will usually require the operatives to ‘take the fall’, in the hope that they will subsequently be exchanged for another agent or receive an early release from prison. Politicians are usually too clever to become closely associated with sensitive spin operations. If the operation is compromised it runs the risk of leaving a trail back to its sponsors. To counteract this



risk, the trail is muddled to remove any clearly identifiable linkages. If things go wrong, the government can make the plausible claim that it had ‘no direct involvement’. For this reason, spin doctors are highly-skilled in developing ‘cover stories’ for their operations.

**Cut-Outs** – One of the best techniques used in plausible deniability is the use of cut-outs. A cut-out involves a third person who provides a communication link between two others but guarantees that they never meet. Cut-outs are a good way of insulating an intelligence officer from his agents. They can ensure that, if the agents are placed under surveillance or caught, there is no direct link back to the agent handler. These arrangements are particularly important to successful black ops. Spin doctors use the same technique to insulate politicians from spin operations. In some cases the relevant politician will agree not to be briefed on important spin

  
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operations and to leave them to their advisers. If the operation is subsequently exposed, the politician can still 'truthfully' report to parliament that he knew nothing about it. This cynical approach to the meaning of truth is common to both the dark worlds of intelligence and spin.

Intelligence also offers a range of new techniques enabling spin doctors to deceive the general public:

**Appealing to False Authority** – This method allows politicians to claim that they are relying on information gained from senior professionals independent of the political process. But very few people are completely independent of all politics, and all government employees are potentially susceptible to political pressure. Such pressure is difficult to identify. Politicians and their spin doctors rarely ask intelligence agencies for a completely independent report on an issue. Instead, they typically ask for 'talking points to support their case'. Only a very foolish career officer would dare to provide intelligence supporting the other side of the case. The politician can however claim the intelligence represents the best estimate from an independent intelligence source. This is spin at its best. And even if the intelligence does not quite suit the political need, he can carefully select the bits that do and provide only those to the public. The fact is that intelligence is usually very 'nuanced' – meaning that it contains qualified statements relating to 'possibilities' and 'probabilities', rarely statements of certainty. Spin doctors however are skilled in removing any qualification from intelligence reports. Thus, a report that reads: 'it is possible that Iraq still possesses residual obsolete stocks of WMD' can be edited by spin doctors to read: 'Iraq possesses WMD'.

**Dodgy Dossier** – The development of the British dossier on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction and its public release during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq is now referred to as the 'dodgy dossier' incident. The dossier purported to be an intelligence assessment, but was really a spin operation intended to win public support for the war against Saddam Hussein's regime. The evidence presented in the dossier was either made up or grossly exaggerated, but it worked. The same effect was intended from Colin Powell's inaccurate presentation on Iraqi WMD to the United Nations. Both were successful spin operations, but both are now suffering serious blow back. Exaggeration is a key part of successful spin. Politicians often exaggerate the views of their opponents in order to develop a so-called 'straw man'. The straw man can then be attacked as if it represents the real views of the opponent.

**Front Groups** – The use of front groups is an established part of international intelligence espionage and subversion. So-called intelligence 'false flag op' are carefully created by foreign intelligence operatives with the appearance of being local and spontaneous. Front groups combine the techniques of plausible deniability and cut-outs to a sophisticated level. Some spin doctors operate 'independent' organizations to promote their causes. The linkages between the government and these groups may be informal and based simply on common agendas, or they may include secret formal agreements including hidden funding. For this reason, the linkages between groups are often difficult to identify, but may be inferred from unusual associations. There are countless examples of these 'strange bedfellows'. Front groups made up of doctors who provide reports casting doubt on the dangers of smoking are a clear example. Scientific groups that dispute claims about global warming, or promote the merits of clean nuclear energy, all use spin to promote their points of view.

**Pseudo-Events** – A major exercise of front groups is to stage events deliberately planned to gain maximum publicity for the cause. A front group can stage a pseudo-event on a given subject and then invite politicians to attend. Orchestrated media conferences and photo-opportunities are then used to maximize the effect of the event. The politician can benefit from the spin generated by the event and yet maintain plausible deniability about his involvement.

**Astro-Turfing** – During a complex intelligence operation, operatives may need to generate trouble while still keeping their hands clean. The work of 'agent provocateurs' is to stir up events such as riots, perhaps to destabilize a foreign government. Spin doctors have learned and are now skilled in this technique. When Kuwait was liberated from Iraqi control by Coalition forces in 1991 the US Troops were greeted by crowds of Kuwaiti locals waving US flags. This expression of Kuwaiti goodwill provided ideal footage for television news around the world. This was spin. The famous US spin doctor John Rendon is quoted in *How to Sell a War*, revealing that the flags were passed out by secretive US 'psychological warfare' officers moments before the troops arrived. Another example occurred in 2003 when Saddam Hussein's statue was apparently pulled down by jubilant Iraqis in Baghdad. The cameras deliberately did not show the US Army engineers operating the heavy machinery. The term 'astro-turfing' came from spin doctors' creation of fake crowds at sporting arenas during political rallies. Astro-turfing is now a breach of the US public relations code of ethics – but this code does not apply to spin doctors!

The subversion of intelligence into spin has serious implications. The general public should now maintain a healthy scepticism about all so-called intelligence provided to them by the government. Spin doctors have learned a great deal from the dark world of intelligence but they are unconstrained by the ethics of the intelligence profession. They are free to do 'whatever it takes' to sell their message. ■

Associate Professor Ian Wing has worked as a professional intelligence officer for over 20 years and he served for seven years as the President of the Australian Institute of Professional Intelligence Officers (AIPIO). While serving with the ADF, he was decorated for extremely meritorious service in combat in Iraq. He now teaches intelligence and security at Charles Sturt University.

The final article in this series will cover the dark secrets of spin and the damage that is caused by SPINtelligence.

