

# 1

## Introduction

What do these four events have in common?

- General Motors spied on Ralph Nader in 1965.
- Los Angeles police beat motorist Rodney King in 1991.
- Indonesian troops shot and killed protesters in Dili, East Timor in 1991.
- U.S. military forces invaded Iraq in 2003.

First, each event involved an injustice, at least in the eyes of quite a few observers.

- For General Motors, a giant corporation, to spy on and seek to discredit Nader seemed a devious and dishonorable response to what Nader had done, namely writing the book *Unsafe at Any Speed* that alerted the public to shortcomings in auto safety.
- For four Los Angeles police — with many more present at the scene — to strike Rodney King dozens of times, while he was apparently lying on the ground posing no threat, seemed to many to be a clear case of abuse.
- For Indonesian troops to shoot peaceful protesters appeared to most observers to be an obvious atrocity.
- For the world's leading military power to launch an unprovoked attack on another state — one already weakened by a decade of international sanctions — seemed to many people to be unfair. It was also said to be a violation of international law.

Another feature of these four events is that they received extensive publicity. Unlike some earlier cases, lots of people became aware of these instances.

- Corporations frequently take reprisals against critics, especially their own employees, without much publicity. In contrast, General Motors' investigation into Nader was exposed and led to widespread media coverage.
- Los Angeles police previously had beaten lots of other people, but few of these cases received much attention. King's beating was different: it was captured on videotape by observer George Holliday and broadcast on television nationally and internationally.
- Although Indonesian troops occupying East Timor had committed many massacres in the 15 years before 1991, they received limited attention due to censorship. The Dili massacre, unlike earlier killings, was witnessed by western journalists and recorded in photos and video, and later broadcast internationally.
- Some earlier U.S. invasions, such as in Panama, Grenada, and Haiti, were initiated quickly and completed before protest could build momentum. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, in contrast, was publicly planned months in advance and subject to sustained public debate.

Finally, each of the four events backfired against those held responsible.

- General Motors' secret investigation of Nader, once exposed, turned public opinion against auto manufacturers and dramatically raised Nader's profile, giving him the clout to instigate more effective challenges to the companies.
- The beating of Rodney King led to highly adverse publicity for the four police officers involved in the beating and for the Los

Angeles police force generally. The four officers were taken to court and two of them sent to prison.

- The Dili massacre, rather than discouraging opposition to Indonesian rule over East Timor, instead triggered a massive expansion in international support for East Timor's independence.
- The U.S.-led attack on Iraq reduced the standing of the U.S. government, as measured in public opinion polls, throughout most of the world. Furthermore, rather than reducing terrorist threats to U.S. citizens, it may have increased the risk.

In short, these four events are examples of a phenomenon that can be called backfire: an action that recoils against its originators. In a backfire, the outcome is not just worse than anticipated — it is negative, namely worse than having done nothing.

All sorts of things can backfire, especially when someone takes on those with more power. Children who steal from their parents might be chastised, denied privileges, or worse. An employee who openly insults the boss could be punished by being denied a promotion, being transferred, or even fired. A murderer who is caught is likely to end up in prison. Because openly challenging those with more power is so predictably counterproductive, most people avoid it most of the time. Breaking the rules is risky if you get caught.

But there's an exception: if you're powerful, often you *can* get away with it. Abusive bosses insult employees without much comeback. Powerful corporations threaten legal action against small businesses, most of which acquiesce. Repressive regimes commit human rights abuses against opponents; often few people know about this and even fewer try to oppose it. Those with power can make the rules but then enforce them only against others.

The four cases of backfire — against General Motors, the Los Angeles police, the Indonesian military, and the U.S. government — are unusual, because the backfires were against those with more power attacking those

with less power. In each case, two factors — a perception of injustice and awareness of the events by significant audiences — were crucial in making the action counterproductive. This is the particular type of backfire I examine in this book.

Backfire can refer to an outcome or a process. A backfire, as an outcome, occurs when an action is counterproductive for the perpetrator. Backfire, as a process, is the struggle over the meaning and consequences of an action. My main attention is on backfire as a process, in other words on the dynamics of backfire.

The word “boomerang” can be used as an alternative to “backfire.” A related concept is “blowback,” a term used to describe unforeseen adverse consequences of government policies, especially covert operations. Backfire is a more general concept: it applies to many areas outside the government level and deals with tactics as well as outcomes. (See chapter 13 for more on blowback.)

To refer to the emotional response to attacks, injustice, or norm violations, I mostly use the term “outrage,” in the sense of fierce anger or indignation. I use “outrage” as a surrogate for a wide array of emotional responses captured by terms such as anger, shock, indignation, revulsion, disgust, antagonism, and concern. The basic idea is that a person is upset by something and feels action should be taken about it. If this sort of emotional response is expressed, verbally and through actions, by sufficient numbers of people, it can lead to backfire as an outcome.

### **Inhibiting Outrage**

Backfires against powerful attackers are unusual, so it's worth asking, what do attackers do that prevents or inhibits backfire? There are five important methods for inhibiting the outrage that can lead to backfire.

- 1 Cover-up: information about the event is prevented from reaching receptive audiences.

- 2 Devaluation of the target: the moral worth of an individual or group suffering injustice is reduced.
- 3 Reinterpretation: the event or situation is claimed not to be what it seems.
- 4 Official channels: the issue is dealt with through formal procedures — such as courts or inquiries — or pronouncements by authorities or experts, giving an appearance of providing justice.
- 5 Intimidation and bribery: those who might act on the basis of outrage are subjected to threats or attacks, or offered incentives not to act.

The five methods of inhibiting outrage are most vividly revealed through examples, as we will see in chapters 2 to 12. But it is possible to make some preliminary observations.

*Cover-up* is an obvious tactic for perpetrators to avoid being blamed. The first instinct of most criminals is to not leave any incriminating evidence and then get away and not be caught. The Nazis carried out their exterminations in secret. Today, torture is carried out in dozens of countries, but not a single government admits it. There are many techniques for cover-up, including operating in secrecy, hiding evidence, destroying evidence, censorship, using proxies (such as hired killers), and refusing to collect evidence. Cover-up is a way to prevent communication to receptive audiences, one of the two essential conditions for backfire.

*Devaluation* lowers people's opinion about an individual or group, with the result that attacking that individual or group may not seem so bad — indeed, it might seem to be a good thing. Devaluation has a long history. All sorts of groups have been and are devalued, including women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, the poor, the homeless, and criminals. Occasionally, such as during revolutions, aristocrats or the wealthy may be denigrated and attacked. In wartime, enemies are devalued.

*Reinterpretation* is a staple of unjust attack. Some of the facts may be accepted, but said to mean something entirely different, or the facts

may be denied. A perpetrator can deny an act occurred, deny knowledge of the act, deny the action meant what others think it does, and deny any intention to cause the act. Authorities may start by denying that anyone was killed at a protest. When the evidence becomes overwhelming, they may accept that someone died but deny having known anything about it. Or they may agree that protesters died, but say it was the protesters' fault and that police were protecting themselves and were following proper procedures. Finally, the authorities may deny any official intention to attack protesters, blaming a few rogue officers for abuses.

The types and styles of reinterpretation are legion. With the expansion of public relations and spin-doctoring, reinterpretation has been turned into a routine and yet sophisticated art. By the same token, audiences have become increasingly skilled in seeing through self-interested justifications.

*Official channels* give the appearance of justice and thus are a potent method of inhibiting outrage. If an action is endorsed by a scientific authority, an expert panel, a court, or a commission of inquiry, then many people will think all is well. Yet, contrary to appearances, official channels often give a spurious legitimacy to injustice: experts might be influenced by their employer or source of grants; courts might look only at legal technicalities, not moral justice; watchdog agencies might be given insufficient resources; commissions might be set up with restricted terms of reference and hand-picked staff to give the answer desired by the government.

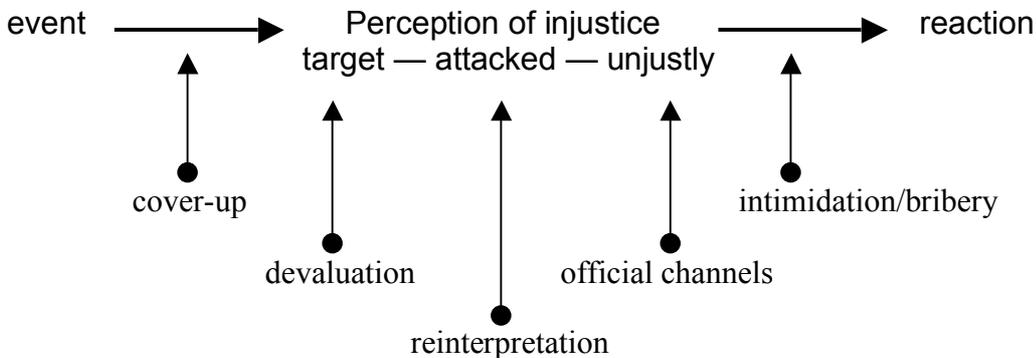
Some official channels are extremely slow. Cases can take months or years to get through the courts. By the time there is a court verdict or a report from a commission, agitation about the original injustice often has died down. Sometimes reports are released at times when they are least likely to be noticed. Finally, in many cases governments simply ignore recommendations from official inquiries.

*Intimidation and bribery* constitute the fifth method of inhibition: people may know exactly what has occurred and think it is unfair, but be unwilling to do anything about it due to the consequences, either negative or

positive. Intimidation can be used against targets, against witnesses, against campaigners, and against wavering members of the attacker group. Intimidation is often linked to cover-up, as when observers are too frightened to reveal what they saw. Bribery has a similar range of application. Often it is difficult to obtain evidence about intimidation and even more so about bribery, because these processes are frequently hidden and sometimes subtle.

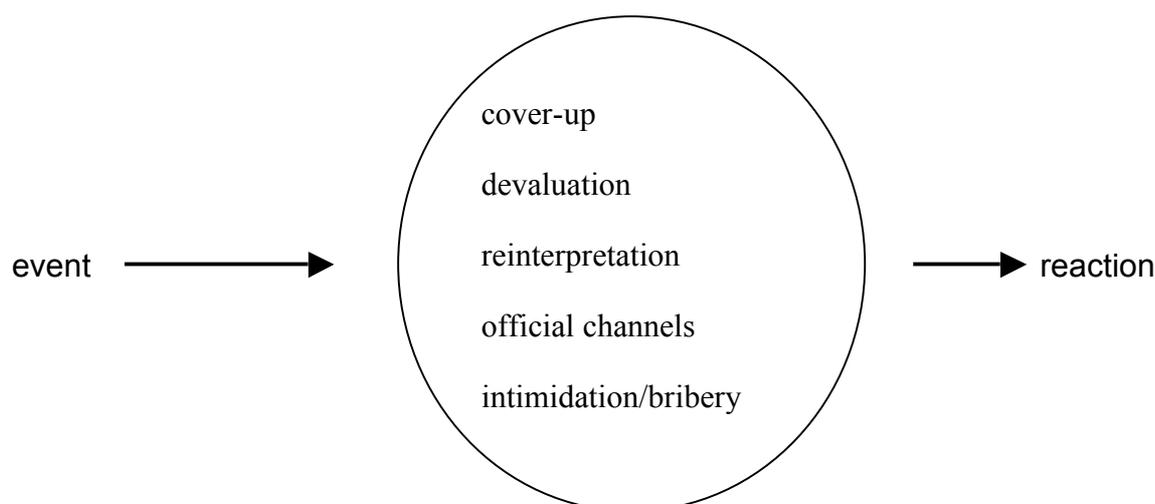
To say there are five main methods of inhibiting outrage over injustice is a matter of

convenience. Depending on the case, it might make sense to list several types of reinterpretation, to combine intimidation and cover-up, to omit official channels, to separate intimidation and bribery, and so forth. There is no right or wrong way to classify these methods. I have settled on five methods because they seem to capture much of what goes on in a wide range of cases, and because they are at a convenient level of generality. Figure 1.1 illustrates how the five methods fit into a pattern.



**Figure 1.1. Five methods of inhibiting outrage and how they relate to an event, perceptions of it, and reactions to it**

This diagram may give the misleading impression that the methods of inhibition operate in a sequence, beginning with cover-up and concluding with intimidation. Actually, each of the methods can operate independently, or in tandem with others, in virtually any order. So perhaps a better picture is Figure 1.2.



**Figure 1.2. Five methods of inhibiting outrage and how they relate to an event, perceptions of it, and reactions to it**

## Promoting Outrage

A key value of looking at methods of inhibiting outrage over injustice is developing “counter-methods,” namely ways of promoting or amplifying outrage or, to put it another way, of allowing appropriate outrage to be expressed. If, in confronting injustice, you can expect to confront most or all of these five methods, then it makes sense to be prepared to counter them. There are many possible ways to counter each of the methods of inhibition. Some of the most obvious are:

- Exposing information about the injustice.
- Validating the targets.
- Interpreting the event or situation as unjust.
- Mobilizing public support and either avoiding or discrediting official channels.
- Refusing to be intimidated or bribed, and exposing intimidation and bribery.

If attackers had complete control, they might be able to inhibit adverse responses to injustice, but often there are participants or observers who act to encourage this response.

## Overview

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 describe three classic cases of backfire from violent assaults against peaceful protesters: the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa; the Dili massacre; and the 1930 salt march in India. Each case was a turning point in a long-running struggle against injustice.

But backfire processes occur much more widely than violent attacks on peaceful protesters. Chapter 5 deals with the King beating, a case that starkly reveals backfire dynamics even though Rodney King was not a protester and certainly not committed to nonviolence. Chapter 6 deals with whistleblowing, and thus moves right away from violent attacks as the source of perceived injustice. Reprisals against whistleblowers are seen as unfair and hence can backfire. The usual range of methods for inhibiting outrage can be seen.

Chapter 7 is about the dismissal of biologist Ted Steele from the University of Wollongong. I give a close look at the events. The new complexity shown by this case is multiple backfire processes: not only can an action by a university administration backfire, but so can actions by a dissident.

Chapter 8 deals with two environmental disasters, the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the Exxon Valdez oil spill. No one intended these accidents to occur, yet they had adverse consequences for the Soviet government and Exxon, respectively. So backfire can occur even when there is no intent on the part of those held responsible.

Chapter 9 analyzes the 2003 invasion of Iraq, showing backfire processes at work. In a conflict with violence on both sides, the capacity of a single action to generate outrage is reduced. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of efforts by the U.S. government to inhibit outrage. Chapter 10 examines torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This case shows how a local backfire can occur within a wider one, namely the invasion of Iraq. Chapter 11 is about torture technology, in particular electroshock weapons. It takes a step back from incidents of torture, such as at Abu Ghraib, to the struggle over the production and sale of the tools of torture.

Chapter 12 examines the peculiar case of terrorism, which seems designed to produce outrage and thus is nearly always counterproductive. Hence, there must be other explanations for much terrorism.

Chapters 2 through 12 deal with case studies using somewhat different styles. Chapters 2 to 4 tell stories of backfires, only commenting at the end on how tactics fit within the five methods of inhibiting outrage. Chapters 5, 8, 9, and 10 are organized around the five methods, telling stories within that framework. Chapter 7, on an academic dismissal, tells the story and then gives four backfire perspectives. Chapters 6, 11, and 12 use a variety of examples to illustrate a backfire perspective on a particular topic. I use these different approaches to provide different perspectives and insights.

In chapter 13, I examine theory associated with backfire, including political jiu-jitsu, injustice, social movements, social problems, and communication. Finally, chapter 14 gives a summary of the backfire model and sums up insights from the case studies.

The backfire model offers a way to better understand social dynamics, especially where

perceived injustice is involved. Just as important as understanding is practical action. Analyzing backfire dynamics offers insight — especially for the less powerful — for building better strategies against injustice. The most important test of the model is whether it can do this.