

Seeing through national security spin

Governments put out a lot of false and misleading information about national security, and you hear about it through the media. Here's how to avoid being taken in.



Threat promotion

When there are threats to health and life, people look to the government for protection, so governments like to raise the alarm about enemies. Be sceptical. Claims about threats may be exaggerated or not warranted at all.

The enemies can be external, like the danger of invasion from China, or even just the danger of Chinese investment. Or the enemies can be internal: spies, infiltrators, terrorists, criminals or asylum seekers.

Secrecy

Governments keep a lot of things secret, especially about what they say is national security. This includes information about corruption, bad decision-making and unnecessary expenditure. The Australian government is so allergic to openness that it passed laws making whistleblowing and journalism about national security matters a criminal offence. Therefore, assume you're not hearing the full story.

On the other hand, when governments and commentators raise the alarm about alleged threats, they sometimes reveal secrets but are never penalised for this.



DOUBLE STANDARDS

One of the most revealing clues to spin is double standards. Actions by some groups (“them”) are condemned but similar actions by other groups (“us” or allies) are ignored or lauded. To get a handle on one-sided claims and self-interested thinking, see if you can notice examples of double standards in government actions or rhetoric.

- Nuclear weapons. Why is there such an alarm about Iraq, Iran and North Korea getting nuclear weapons but no such alarm about governments with hundreds or thousands of them? Think United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, India, Pakistan, Israel.



When was the last time you heard about the need to invade one of these countries because of their nuclear weapons? When was the last time you heard the alarm being raised about nuclear weapons being held by “our side”?

- Military bases. Why is there an alarm about a Chinese military base when the US has military bases in over 100 countries?
- Spies. In the news, you might hear about the danger from foreign spies. However, there is hardly ever any mention of “our” spies. “They” are devious and dangerous. “We” are assumed to be pure.
- Surveillance. Some foreign government is monitoring our communications, maybe to obtain military secrets or steal trade information. Terrible! There’s never any mention of “our” government monitoring communications in other countries.¹

¹ Australian spies bugged government offices in East Timor in 2004 during negotiations over oil and gas reserves in the sea between Australia and East Timor. This would never have been known except for one of the Australians doing the bugging revealing what had happened. He was later prosecuted for exposing this crime by the Australian government.



- Human rights. Politicians get very excited about human rights violations in other countries, usually only the countries designated as enemies, but not about human rights violations elsewhere or at home. The treatment of women in Afghanistan by the Taliban was a big issue, but not in Saudi Arabia (which wasn't invaded).

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Governments are the drivers of national-security spin. The media are helpers by their very nature, even when journalists and editors do everything possible to be balanced.

- According to the “news values” that determine what is newsworthy, government figures are more likely to be quoted than citizen campaigners.
- Another news value is conflict: it gets more coverage than everyday activities. At protests, a tiny bit of violence gets more attention than thousands of peaceful protesters.
- Television news gives priority to visuals. Things that can't easily be filmed, like surveillance and climate change, receive less attention.
- Some conflicts receive lots of attention, like Israel-Palestine. Others, where many more people are killed, are ignored.²

² Virgil Hawkins, *Stealth Conflicts: How the World's Worst Violence Is Ignored* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

DEALING WITH SPIN

Can you see through national-security spin? The short answer: no. It's almost impossible to know what's really going on. But you can protect yourself.

1. Be sceptical of government pronouncements and media stories relating to national security.



2. Seek other sources of information, including those said to be the enemy. Look for omitted perspectives. Talk with first-hand observers.
3. Look for double standards.
4. Look for the role of vested interests and conflicts of interest.
5. Be aware of the focusing illusion: giving attention to something makes it seem more important.

**“Nothing in life is as important as you think
it is when you're thinking about it”**

- Daniel Kahneman

Case study: the invasion of Iraq, 2003

US President George W Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other senior figures claimed or hinted that Saddam Hussein was obtaining or already had nuclear weapons and that he was implicated with al Qaeda in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The *New York Times* published supportive stories. These claims were used to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. No evidence appeared to support the claims.

1. Be sceptical of national-security claims. ✓
2. Seek other sources: whistleblowers and critics questioned the claims. ✓
3. Double standards? The US and UK have numerous nuclear weapons. Iraq was not a threat to either one. ✓
4. Vested interests? The military-industrial complex. ✓
5. Focusing illusion. The attention on Iraqi nuclear weapons made them seem more important than anything else going on in the world. ✓



Info sheet #5 Resistance Resources

<https://bit.ly/3ouoYtw>

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Comments are welcome to improve and update this info sheet.

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