Backfires: White, Black and Grey

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Abstract:
Sometimes the use of force can backfire on perpetrators, generating increased support for the opponent. Perpetrators may try to turn this process against their targets, by attributing their actions to the targets, as in black operations, or by using an ambiguous event as a pretext for action. These techniques can be understood as different uses of backfire dynamics, by analogy to white, black and grey propaganda. Various examples are used to illustrate this framework.

Keywords : Backfire, Outrage, Covert Operations, Psychological Operations

Background

Superior force often wins the day, but not always. Sometimes the exercise of force backfires: it is counterproductive for the perpetrator, generating increased support for the target. Consider the torture and humiliation perpetrated against Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. When in 2004 photographs about the torture were released through the media, there was a massive public reaction against the US government, with polls in Arab countries showing reduced support for the US presence in Iraq (Hirsh, 2004) and polls in the US showing reduced support for the war (Ritter, 2004).

For this sort of backfire to occur, two fundamentals are required (Martin, 2007). First, the actions in question must be perceived as unjust, excessive or a violation of some social norm. Torture obviously meets this requirement. Second, information about the actions must be communicated to receptive audiences. The digital photographs from Abu Ghraib fulfilled this requirement.

When one or both of these requirements are not present, perpetrators have little to fear. Sometimes damaging acts are not perceived as all that bad. When, in the late 1960s and 1970s, prisoners of the British in Northern Ireland were restrained, hooded and forced to listen to white noise, most people did not think of this as torture, because the usual concept of torture was beatings, electrical shock, mutilation and the like. However, when scientists documented the effects of the new treatment regime and gave it the label 'sensory deprivation,' more people came to recognise it as a form of torture (Ackroyd *et al.*, 1977).

The second requirement, communication to receptive audiences, is often not met. Torture is usually carried out in secret precisely because of the potential for public outrage. The vividness of messages is also important. Prisoners in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay received similar treatment to those at Abu Ghraib (Harbury, 2005; McCoy, 2006), but the level of public anger was far less, because there were no revealing photographs: photographs of mock executions in Afghanistan were destroyed 'because they would enrage the public' (Neumeister, 2005). Written reports of treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib in late 2003, for example from the International Committee of the Red Cross, received little media attention (Rajiva, 2005); it was the photographs that made the issue high profile.

The potential for backfire is often present but only occasionally realised. For example, police frequently use excessive force against suspects, but usually this is covered up and does not cross the media threshold for newsworthiness (Lawrence, 2000). However, on 3 March 1991, when Los Angeles police beat Rodney King in the course of arresting him, the events were recorded on videotape by observer George Holliday. When the videotape was broadcast on television, it caused disgust and outrage among many viewers and backfired dramatically against the police (Martin, 2005).

When protesters come under attack, backfires are more likely when the protesters are more peaceful and committed to nonviolence (Sharp, 1973: 657-703). This may seem counter-intuitive because activists often assume that being more militant or violent is more effective. However, to trigger public outrage, it is vital that observers perceive a qualitative difference between the actions by the two sides. If violence is used against peaceful protesters, this is widely seen as improper. If the protesters are being violent themselves - perhaps just by breaking a few windows, throwing bottles, striking police or even just pushing against them - then violence used against them does not seem so outrageous, even when the police violence is far more severe.

Gandhi was the pioneer of the technique of making an opponent's attacks recoil against them. He repeatedly counselled his followers to be resolutely nonviolent even in the face of grievous attacks. Although Gandhi's rationale was that violence was morally wrong, his methods were pragmatic (Sharp, 1979). During the 1930 salt march, a challenge to the British salt monopoly, colonial officials in India pondered whether to arrest Gandhi, realising that to do so would most likely inflame Indian opposition to British rule (Dalton, 1993). Later, Indian protesters approached salt works at Dharasana, meekly submitting to brutal beatings by police. When news stories of the confrontation, written by journalist Webb Miller, were circulated worldwide, the reaction against the British was enormous. By maintaining nonviolent discipline, Gandhi and his supporters maximised the political impact of attacks on them (Weber, 1997).

A comparison case is Kenya, also ruled by the British. In the 1950s, British rule was challenged by the Mau Mau rebellion which, unlike the Indian resistance, included significant violence. The British set up numerous concentration camps and used tortures against rebels, as well as executions and killings, with little negative publicity (Anderson, 2005; Edgerton, 1989; Elkins, 2005). Because the Mau Mau themselves used similar violence, the grievous British state violence received little attention.

Rulers and other perpetrators of violence are often aware, consciously or intuitively, of the paradox that repression can be counterproductive when resisters refuse to use violence. It is actually quite advantageous to rulers when violence is used against them. In the first Palestinian *intifada*, beginning in 1987, Israeli violence against unarmed protesters looked very bad to world audiences. The *intifada* generated far more support for the Palestinian cause than previous terrorist actions by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. However, the *intifada* did not follow Gandhi's call to restrain from violence altogether. Hence, when Palestinian youths threw pebbles at Israeli soldiers, it offered some justification for Israeli counter-violence, which was far more lethal (Dajani, 1994; Rigby, 1991).

For those in the Israeli government who wanted to pursue a repressive policy against the Palestinians, the nonviolence of the *intifada* was a great threat, especially because it unified the Palestinian population across class and gender lines. Hence, Israeli leaders did little to

encourage Palestinian commitment to nonviolence; instead, their methods of humiliating the Palestinian people almost seemed designed to provoke violence, which would in turn justify Israeli repression. The Israeli government deported leading Palestinian nonviolence advocate Mubarak Awad.

To summarise the argument so far: superior force is usually successful, but sometimes it can backfire on the perpetrator, generating increased support for the opponent. Two fundamental conditions for backfire are a perception of injustice and communication to receptive audiences. *Blowback*, which refers to covert operations that rebound against the government or agency sponsoring them, is a type of backfire (Johnson, 2004; Simpson, 1988).

When it is quite clear who the attacker and the target are, it is useful to use the expression *white backfire*, in analogy with white propaganda, as discussed below. In white backfire, the perpetrator may try to hide the attack or deny responsibility, but does not say the attack was actually carried out by someone else.

Backfires can be powerful tools for justice. In 1991, Indonesian troops opened fire on a crowd of East Timorese during a funeral procession in Dili. Unlike previous massacres, which were largely hidden from the rest of the world, this one was witnessed by western journalists and captured on videotape by filmmaker Max Stahl. When information about the massacre reached audiences internationally, it caused outrage and led to a huge rise in support for East Timor's independence. The Indonesian attack, intended to intimidate and discourage the movement for East Timor's independence, instead had the contrary effect of giving it an enormous boost (Martin, 2007). This was a classic white backfire.

Two other types of backfire are now introduced: black and grey, by analogy to types of propaganda.

Propaganda and Backfire

It is standard to distinguish between three types of propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell (2006: 16-26):

- White propaganda, which is overt, where sponsorship is acknowledged directly and which is considered to be truthful.

- Black propaganda, which refers to untruthful activities, where the origin of the activities is falsified or the activities are covert.

- Grey propaganda, situated between white and black propaganda, where there is no clear indication of origin or the origin is attributed to an ally, and where the truth of the information is uncertain.

When backfire is a possibility, it is actually better for perpetrators if their opponents use violence - or are *perceived* to. The key role of perception in backfire leads to the possibility of doing things that are readily misperceived, thereby causing backfire against someone or something else. Hence, by rough analogy to types of propaganda, three types of backfire are proposed here.
- *White backfire,* in which perpetrators take action that can potentially backfire on them, without attempting to attribute it to anyone else (though the perpetrator may attempt to hide the attack or deny responsibility). Examples include Abu Ghraib, the beating of

Rodney King, the beating of protesters during the 1930 salt march campaign in India, and the 1991 Dili massacre (Martin, 2007).

- *Black backfire*, in which a perpetrator takes an action designed to generate outrage against the target, by making the target appear to be the perpetrator of an attack. Examples include agent provocateurs, black radio stations (Soley and Nichols, 1987), and the US Phoenix Program during the Vietnam war (Valentine, 1990).

- *Grey backfire*, in which an incident of unrelated or uncertain origin is treated as an attack by the target, which backfires against the target. The uncertainty surrounding the incident may be genuine or manufactured. Examples include the 1933 Reichstag fire (Tobias, 1964) and the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident (Moïse, 1996).

Black Backfire

In late August 1939, as Hitler was poised to invade Poland, he deployed a plan to hoodwink the world. A select group of German soldiers, who were able to speak Polish, were dressed in Polish uniforms and executed an attack on a German radio station. The aim was to convince the German people and other governments that Polish troops had attacked Germany, thereby giving a pretext for the German offensive. In other words, the idea was to give the appearance of a Polish attack that would be seen as unfair and backfire against the Polish government (Burleigh, 2000: 407-408; Evans, 2005: 699-700).

In practice, few outside Germany believed the Poles had attacked, but the basic idea is still relevant: attacks sometimes can backfire against the perpetrator, when the two requirements are satisfied (this is white backfire), but sometimes they can backfire against the victim. We call this a black backfire.

Consider the *agent provocateur* who is employed by a government to weaken its challengers (Marx, 1974). The agent provocateur (AP) joins a challenger group, pretending to be sympathetic, and subtly or blatantly encourages the group to use violence or other extreme methods, which then serve to justify the government in taking repressive action against the group. Sometimes the AP directly initiates the violence; in other instances, the AP encourages violence by others. In either case, the AP aims to reduce the advantage that challengers have when they are perceived as behaving appropriately, and reduce the outrage that can occur when governments launch attacks on the challengers. The very idea of the AP is thus built on the concept of backfire, but in this case the provocation - executed or stimulated by a government agent - backfires not on the government but on its opponents. It is thus a black backfire. An example is the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's destabilisation of social movement organisations in the 1960s and 1970s by using APs (Church Committee, 1976; Karman, 1974).

By its nature, black backfire can be difficult to document. When a black operation is carried out successfully, observers believe what the operator intends, namely a false understanding of who is to blame. Only in a few cases is sufficient documentation available. The Central Intelligence agency (CIA) planned an operation, called Northwoods, in which it would create terrorist attacks that would appear to be the work of Castro's Cuban regime, thus causing a black backfire on Castro. The operation was never carried out, but documents later revealed the plan (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1962).

The Phoenix Program: Attempted Black Backfire

The Phoenix Program was carried out by the US forces in Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 (Committee on Foreign Relations, 1970; Committee on Government Operations, 1971; Valentine, 1990). It was organised, funded and supervised by the CIA, and targeted what the US military called the 'VC infrastructure' - VC standing for Viet Cong - a misleading term for the Vietnamese civilian supporters of the opposition forces. These supporters were 'neutralized' by means of kidnapping, interrogation, torture, jailing and assassination.

Commonly, activities carried out as part of the Phoenix Program were attributed to the enemy. This was standard practice in what the military called black operations or black propaganda. US-sponsored squads, dressed in the style of the enemy, went into the villages and took away targeted individuals. These people were killed and left on paths and roads close to the villages with signs attached to the bodies attributing the deaths to the Viet Cong. It is officially estimated that 20,000 to 40,000 were killed in this program.

The role of the CIA, the number killed, and the methods of operation were all covered up. The Phoenix Program activities were officially explained as being part of a nation-building exercise within the wider Pacification Program and civilian targets were claimed to be military. Congressional inquiries were denied access to information about the program (Valentine, 1990: 376-377).

However the local Vietnamese villagers' knowledge of their own countryside and of any movements in the area was enough to uncover the US falsification. This served to further antagonise the villagers against the US and US-sponsored forces, having the reverse effect to that intended by American planners. It was an attempt at black backfire, but the attempt failed.

Grey Backfire

In between white and black backfire is a category of backfire in which the cause of outrage is uncertain but is successfully attributed to a target. On 27 February 1933, the German parliament building, the Reichstag, was seriously burnt in an arson attack. The Nazi government blamed communists and used the attack as a justification for suspending civil liberties and banning the German Communist Party. In an election shortly afterwards, the Nazis increased their percentage of the vote. The attack certainly backfired against the Nazis' opponents.

Who was to blame? Consider three possibilities:

1. The attack was carried out by anti-Nazis as a planned assault on the Nazis. This would be a white backfire.

2. The attack was actually planned and covertly carried out by the Nazis, but blamed on the communists, in order to justify government repression - as claimed by communists and many other anti-Nazis at the time (World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism, 1933). This would be a black backfire.

3. The attack was carried out by someone whose connection to the Nazis or their opponents was unknown or uncertain. The Nazis opportunistically blamed communists, so it backfired against opponents of the Nazis. We call this a grey backfire.

Who really caused the Reichstag fire? This has been debated for decades (Tobias, 1964). The very existence of significant uncertainty puts the backfire into the grey category. Grey backfires involve ambiguity, either genuine or created. Note that the analogy between grey backfire and grey propaganda is less exact than for the white and black forms.

The Tonkin Gulf Incident: A Grey Backfire

On 4 August 1964, in what became known as the Tonkin Gulf incident (Moïse, 1996), it was reported that two US Navy destroyers, the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy,* on a routine patrol in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of Vietnam, had been fired upon by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. President Lyndon Johnson used this alleged attack to convince Congress to pass the Tonkin Gulf resolution three days later, giving a mandate for escalation of the war. In retaliation for the attack, Johnson ordered air strikes on North Vietnam.

Following the incident, US public opinion shifted dramatically in favour of President Johnson's handling of the Vietnam war and in support of increased military measures against North Vietnam (Moïse, 1996: 225-226). Thus, the incident can be said to have had negative consequences for the North Vietnamese.

This was not a white backfire. The North Vietnamese did not admit that an attack had taken place. Furthermore, it was unclear at the time whether any attack had been made. Radar sightings on board the two destroyers were interpreted as PT boats and led to firing against the presumed attackers, but there were no visual sightings of enemy vessels from the destroyers or from US aircraft, and afterwards US pilots could find no traces of debris (Moïse, 1996: 41). The radar images could have been due to the 'Tonkin Spook', in which natural phenomena produce anomalously well-defined traces; an inexperienced operator might not know how to distinguish them from actual vessels (Moïse, 1996: 107-108).

Uncertainty about what had happened was present from the beginning, but Johnson was keen to use the incident to obtain Congressional authorisation for the war. It is also possible that Johnson was not sufficiently alerted, by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, about emerging doubts about the incident. (Porter, 2005: 192-202). In any case, Congress was not informed about the uncertainties.

Many North Vietnamese officials believed the Tonkin Gulf incident had been purposely engineered by the US government to provide a false pretext for immediate retaliation and for escalation of the war (Moïse, 1996: xiv-xv). In other words, they believed it was a black operation leading to black backfire. Massive amounts of evidence, from US official sources, are now available about the incident (Moïse, 1996), none of it revealing any indication of a black operation. So the incident is best classified as a grey backfire: there was uncertainty at the time about what had actually happened, but US officials attributed it to the North Vietnamese and were able to generate considerable Congressional and public support for retaliation and escalation.

Countering Black and Grey Backfires

Perpetrators typically use five main methods to inhibit outrage and prevent backfires (Martin, 2007):

- covering up the event;

- devaluing the target;

- reinterpreting what happened;

- using official channels to give the appearance of justice; and

- intimidating and bribing people involved.

Black and grey operations, with the aim of creating public outrage against the target of the operation, can be analysed using the same framework. To be effective, a black operation uses deception to foster an interpretation that the victim was actually responsible. The (black) attack is not covered up - it has to be open in order to backfire - but responsibility for it is hidden.

To counter black and grey operations, it is valuable to:

- expose responsibility for the event;

- validate the target of the operation (the falsely alleged perpetrator);

- interpret the operation as unfair and underhanded;

- avoid or discredit official investigations, at least when they seem likely to dampen public outrage; and

- resist intimidation and bribery.

Conclusion
In a conflict between a powerful and a weak side - for example between a group of police and a single suspect, or between a government and a small group of opponents - the powerful side holds many advantages. If the weak side mounts an attack, this can provide the pretext for the powerful group to use its superior resources. The exception is when the powerful side is exposed in a gross abuse, for example when police seriously assault a suspect or troops gun down protesters and this abuse is exposed to a wide audience, leading to a change in public opinion. These are instances of backfire, such as the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police and the shooting of peaceful protesters in Dili, East Timor, by Indonesian troops, both in 1991. They are white backfires, because the perpetrators made no attempt to attribute their own actions to their opponents.

Given this dynamic, it is not surprising that powerful groups sometimes use black operations to give themselves the benefit of public outrage. They want their own actions to be seen as an outrage-generating attack by their opponents, as when police use agents provocateurs to encourage protesters to be violent. These sorts of black operations involve promoting actions that will backfire on their opponents, in what can be called black backfires.

Powerful groups may also interpret uncertain or irrelevant events as attacks to justify their own aggressive actions, as in the Tonkin Gulf incident. These are grey backfires.

Any sort of injustice has the potential to backfire, from censorship to torture. Perceptions are crucial: third parties must believe that an injustice is involved. Individuals differ over what

they perceive as unjust, and views can change over time, for example as human rights campaigners raise concerns about certain types of interrogation and incarceration. Thus, whether an action will backfire is highly contingent, depending on individual values, access to information and efforts by participants to shape viewpoints.

Black and grey operations can be understood as attempts to use prevailing views about what is fair by turning them against the opponent. As such, they are inherently risky: if they are exposed, they can instead backfire on the perpetrator.

This analysis highlights how attacks by a weak party against a stronger one are likely to be counterproductive. Therefore, when a weak party does appear to launch an attack, it is important to be especially wary of possible hidden agendas. This might be an attempt to promote black or grey backfire.

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