

## Persuasion – Part II

By Brigitte Battat

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*“Ignorance silences knowledge.”*

Thomas Sowell

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### **Persuasion or Propaganda?**

The focus of this writeup is on the meaning of persuasion. Nevertheless, since I live in a globalized world in which freedom of expression is often misunderstood (in other words, the persuader often abuses the freedom of the individuals he or she is trying to influence), I decided to address first the concept of persuasion vis-a-vis propaganda.

Propaganda techniques appeal usually to one’s emotions rather than to common sense or logic and use a gamut of approaches attempting to convince one how to think, feel, or act; this may include various forms of *deception and even threats*. Depending on the country of residence, Propaganda may be tinged with threats. In essence, the propagandist does not want the listener or reader to think critically about the message.

Various sites provide the following synonyms for the word Propaganda: disinformation, hype, indoctrination, publicity, advertising, agitprop, announcement, brainwashing.

The three classical forms of Persuasion are Ethos, Pathos, and Logos. In essence, the power of persuasion uses the emotions of the speaker or writer, targets the emotions of the audience, and attempts to reason with the listeners by using logical thinking. In the twenty-first century, however, various individuals or groups claiming to use persuasive techniques in the name of freedom cross the line into the purview of propaganda, which does not appeal to the critical thinking of the targeted audience.

Case Study – The Making of the Atomic Bomb by Richard Rhodes

*“Stupid people can create problems, but it often takes brilliant people to create a real catastrophe.”*

Thomas Sowell

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I deliberated at length how I should address the topic of persuasion in a manner that would describe with accuracy the meaning of the word. As I researched case studies related to the topic, I became skeptical of their validity. S. I. Hayakawa had written *Choose the Right Word: A Modern Guide to Synonyms and Related Words* in the year 1968, at a time when children learned to read from books,

had little interaction with the television screen, and social media and cellphones were not yet incorporated in our lives. Choosing the right word and expressing oneself with accuracy were still part of the basic school requirement. I am not certain that today's ethos, pathos, and logos are interpreted in the manner intended by Hayakawa. Twenty-first century persuasion often crosses the line into the purview of propaganda, a concept which does not apply logical reasoning when used by advertisers or politicians.

I decided to solve this problem by providing a concrete example of Persuasion. Specifically, I opted to analyze *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* by Richard Rhodes, a book based on facts extracted from the original documents generated by the scientists, politicians, and the military men involved in the production of the bomb and its eventual use. I believe that in his almost a thousand pages, Richard Rhodes provided extensive information with the view to equip the reader with the necessary information to comprehend the consequences of using the atomic bomb. In my opinion, the writer used Pathos and Logos with great skill.

I consider this book as a unique case in its ability to persuade. *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* contains a detailed description of the science behind the creation of the weapon, the people who contributed to its development, the Los Alamos construction, the numerous military and political debates related to the deployment of the bomb, the process of releasing the bomb from the *Enola Gay* (a Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber), and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tragedies. Every detail comes from original documents generated before, during, and after the use of the bomb; hundreds of write-ups provided by the surviving victims of this calamity are also included. A few examples are included below with the view to emphasize the intensity of this story.

In his discussion with a fellow scientist at Los Alamos, Enrico Fermi makes the following case against using the atomic bomb:

*“First of all let me say that I have no hope of clearing my conscience. The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls...*

*But I am not really convinced of your objections. I do not feel that there is any chance to outlaw any one weapon. If we have a slim chance of survival, it lies in the possibility to get rid of wars. The more decisive the weapon is the more surely it will be used in any real conflicts and no agreements will help.*

*Our only hope is in getting the facts of our results before the people. This might help to convince everybody that the next war would be fatal. For this purpose, actual combat – use might even be the best thing.”*

After the Hiroshima and Nagasaki horrors, Churchill made the following comment in his book on the history of the Second World War:

*“To avert a vast, indefinite butchery, to bring the war to an end, to give peace to the world, to lay healing hands upon its tortured peoples by a manifestation of overwhelming power at the cost of a few explosions, seemed, after all our toils and perils, a miracle of deliverance.”*

One may not agree with the two comments above. Nevertheless, the author offers original quotations expressed by various personalities of that period, proffering the reader the option to decide whether the use of the bomb was an immoral act. The persuasion in these situations uses Ethos, Pathos, and Logos as a function of the individual expressing his emotions. The book contains hundreds of pages of the original descriptions provided by the Hiroshima victims who survived the event. The examples below are but two out of hundreds of accounts by the Hiroshima victims. One such case is that of a husband helping his wife flee the city, who describes a scene witnessed during their escape:

*“While taking my severely wounded wife out to the river bank, by the side of the hill of Nakahiro-machi, I was horrified, indeed, at the sight of a stark-naked man standing in the rain with his eyeball in his palm. He looked to be in great pain but there was nothing that I could do for him.”*

The radiation resulting from the Little Boy explosion brought further suffering:

*“Following the pika, we thought that by giving treatment to those who were burned or injured, recovery would follow, but now it was obvious that this was not true. People who appeared to be recovering developed other symptoms that caused them to die. So many patients died without our understanding the cause of death that we were all in despair...”*

Richard Rhodes did not express personal opinions on the topic of the atomic bomb. Rather, he used information generated by individuals directly involved in the making of this weapon, enabling the reader to decide how he or she feels about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki calamities.

## **Conclusion**

The question remains as to the ability of the individual to successfully use persuasion at a time when Homo sapiens universally hide behind screens of various sizes and have become estranged from their fellow men and women. Or rather, why are humans so eager to adopt gadgets and forget about their fellow creatures, for even in a globally digital age, the need for physical contact distinguishes us from other animals.

Furthermore, as wars take place in certain regions of the planet or have the potential to explode on a global scale, the power of persuasion may be of vital importance in preventing tragedies.

I would like to conclude by describing the essence of the apocalyptic 1957 novel *On the Beach* by the British writer Nevil Shute. The book illustrates in detail the effects of the nuclear fallout during an imaginary World War III. Its consequence is the gradual death of the world population. Although a fantasy, this novel possesses the power of persuasion by triggering in the reader's mind the desire to oppose future wars, and object to the development of weapons of mass destruction.

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