

Public duped to support war

by Jennifer Johnston

North Americans were manipulated into believing the Gulf War was a necessary action, said Dr. Douglas Kellner, noted academic, author, and critical theorist from the University of Texas at Austin.

In a speech delivered at Ambassador Auditorium last Thursday, Kellner explained how the Bush administration, the media, and a public relations firm contributed to the perceived reality surrounding the war.

Providing many examples to back his assertions, Kellner built his argument on four basic points.

His first revolved around the manner in which North American mass media mobilized support for the war.

As an example, Kellner pointed to a *Washington Post* story carried as a leak from the Bush administration in order to prime the public. The leak, which bordered on "yellow journalism," Kellner said, introduced the concept of Saddam Hussein as the "Beast of Baghdad."

Formerly, Saddam Hussein had been considered a pragmatic leader by the Bush and Reagan administrations, Kellner said. That changed when he served their propaganda needs better as a "beast."

"In dramatic events like a war, propaganda works," Kellner said. "This was an incredibly elaborate

campaign that was using all sorts of cultural forms ... They really had this orchestrated."

Kellner's second point revolved around how the mass media constructed the text of the war. He said the media, particularly television, were complicit in their coverage by failing to question the administration's performance.

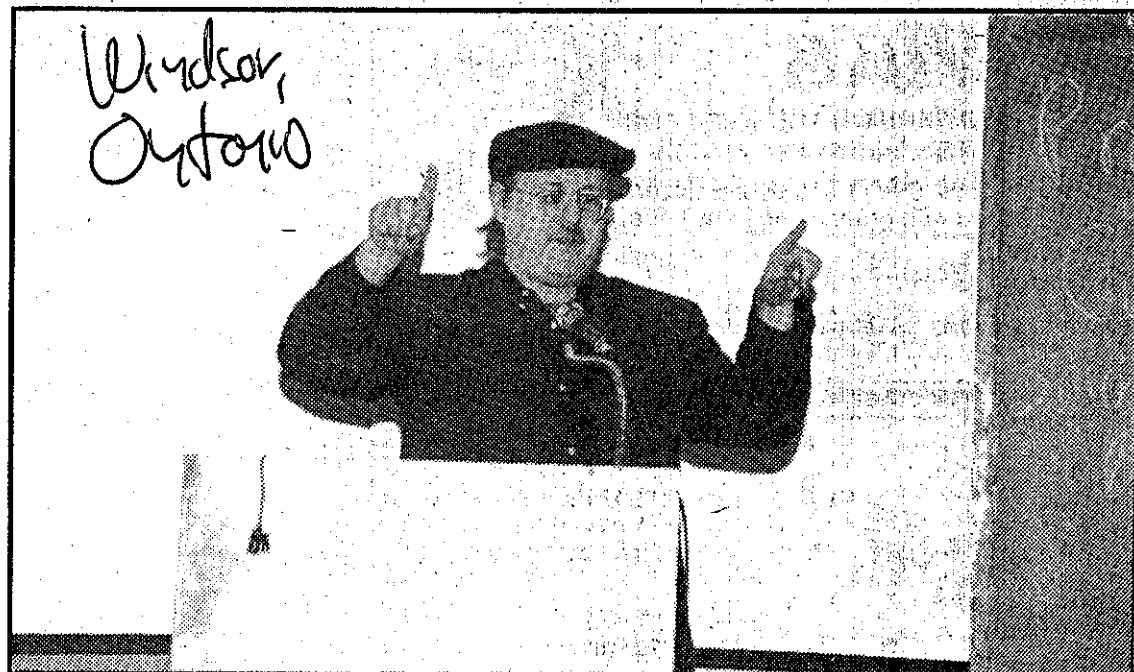
"They became the transmission valve for propaganda," Kellner said.

He pointed to the media's coverage of comments made by President Bush and General Norman Schwarzkopf.

In order to build support for the war, the two regularly used terms and incidents they knew would rally public opinion favourably toward the war effort. The allegation that invading Iraqi soldiers pulled newborn Kuwaiti babies out of incubators was cited.

It was later reported that Hill and Knowlton (a public relations firm hired by the Citizens for a Free Kuwait to promote anti-Iraq sentiments) orchestrated the bogus public relations campaign about the "atrocities."

The public was further manipulated by the actual words, dominant images, and codes which appeared during the war. Kellner said the militarization of language was employed to sanitize the public's perception of the war.



Lance photo by Suzanne Ngul

Douglas Kellner explains how propaganda shaped public perceptions of the Gulf War.

Kellner listed a number of terms which were altered to lessen their impact. For example, body bags were referred to as human remains pouches, targets were called assets, bombs became ordinances, and bombs which missed their targets were called incontinent ordinances. In essence, an incontinent ordinance could bypass its intended asset, thereby filling many human remains pouches. This was a nice way of saying the army screwed up and killed innocent people when they sent their bombs to the wrong targets.

Kellner also explained the audience's reaction to the text of the war. This point he divided into two sections. The first revolved around North Americans bonding with the troops (a phenomenon not seen during the Viet Nam war).

Kellner said the popular yellow ribbon and pen pal campaigns, and the way in which people rooted for the war like a football game, were evidence of public support. Further, the bad ratings which accompanied anti-war news coverage proved the public was well manipulated into supporting this highly questionable action.

As a second point, Kellner explored the war psychosis which gripped many North Americans. Business and pleasure travel both decreased dramatically. In particular, people stayed away from air travel in record numbers. As well, stores reported selling out of gas masks.

Kellner said these reactions came in response to the public's fear of terrorist acts.

In a post-war analysis, Kellner said the perception that the United

States won the war has decreased somewhat because Saddam Hussein continues to rule. Matters have been made worse for the Bush administration, as they lost control of public discourse and the images presented after the war, he said.

Kellner termed this backlash as the "revenge of the real," as the public is horrified by television images of environmental disasters, such as the burning oil fields, and the countless dead beside the "highways of death."

He said these allow the public to see the real impact of war, not the manipulated image presented by the government.

While the media, the Bush administration, and Hill and Knowlton presented the Gulf War as a good vs. evil, sanitized war movie, the public is beginning to realize it was far from it.