

[Oromaner on Cortada and Aspray, 'Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America'](#)

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James W. Cortada, William Aspray. *Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019. Illustrations. vii +

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Reviewed by Mark Oromaner (Independent Scholar) **Published on** Jhistory (May, 2020)
Commissioned by Robert A. Rabe

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Asked to provide a one-line summary of *Fake News Nation: The Long History of Lies and Misinterpretations in America*, I would paraphrase the black power leader H. Rap Brown and state that the theme of the book is that fake news, lies, misinterpretations, and conspiracy theories are as American as apple pie. Fortunately, I was asked to provide a review of this far-ranging book. It is far ranging in the sense that the eight case studies examined range from the US presidential election of 1828 to current debates about climate change. However, the failure to include any of the numerous potential cases focusing on racial conflict is a glaring omission. Each of the cases is filled with quotes, citations, and supportive examples. At times, though, there are too many quotes and supportive examples. However, the educated nonprofessional will find the case studies informative in terms of selected events in American history. The more scholarly reader interested in the historical role of fake news will find a useful bibliographic essay. James W. Cortada is a senior research fellow at the Charles Babbage Institute at the University of Minnesota and William Aspray is a professor of information science at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The two authors “have each been studying the role of information and its technologies as historians for four decades” (p. vi).

Four of the eight cases they include in their study focus on US presidents. Two of these are concerned with elections (1828 and 1960), and two are concerned with assassinations (Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy). The “raucous” 1828 election campaign between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams demonstrates that many of the uses of misinformation and other misleading communications “evident today were already in evidence two centuries ago” (p. 10). The environment and details of the 1960 election between Kennedy and Richard Nixon (for example, the television debates and Kennedy’s Catholicism) are likely to be better known to readers than are those of the 1828 election. The assassination of presidents Lincoln (1865) and Kennedy (1963) provide fruitful grounds for rumors supporting ongoing conspiracy theories, “even in the face of incontrovertible facts that do not support them” (p. 53). The Confederacy plays a role in many theories about Lincoln’s assassination, and rumors spread that involved Vice President Andrew Johnson, cabinet members, and a group including John Wilkes Booth. The Soviet Union, Cuba, the mafia, Cuban Americans, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) played central roles in the Kennedy case. Even after the Warren Commission Report and the subsequent US House Select Committee on Assassinations report, “conspiracy theories about this assassination continue to bloom”

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(p. 80). However, these reports were flawed and, along with documents that were labeled “classified,” provided food for conspiracy theories.

The remaining case in which a president (Theodore Roosevelt) plays a significant part involves information and misinformation surrounding US involvement in Cuba and the short-lived Spanish-American War (1898). Throughout much of the nineteenth century, American newspapers took sides concerning revolts by Cubans against Spanish rule. The majority of these accounts were anti-Spain and emphasized Spain’s cruelty; the use of concentration camps; the treatment of arrested American citizens; and, finally in 1898, the blowing up of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor, although evidence suggested that the cause of the explosion was probably coal dust located near the boiler. As a result of misinformation in the press, “the public in the United States soon came to the belief that the ship had been blown up on purpose”—thus, the slogan “Remember the Maine” (p. 104). Roosevelt’s exploits during the war and the subsequent mythology about him were reflected in the media in language that “strayed from the truth to an extent not witnessed again during the twentieth century” (p. 110).

In contrast to the twenty-eight pages devoted to the Spanish-American War, a mere four pages are devoted to the role of information and misinformation during the period from World War I to the current wars in the Middle East. The government did not want a repeat of the out-of-control information environment of the Spanish-American War. During the war, American leaders learned the importance of misinformation at home and abroad. These lessons had their impact during all subsequent wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Think in particular about the campaign of misinformation building up to the American invasion of Iraq. In summary, information had been weaponized.

Cortada and Aspray use the term “business” to encompass all for-profit enterprises and trace the use of misinformation back to the patent medicine business in New England during the 1600s. With the growth of public relations and advertising, the so-called medical cure and other businesses grew in size so that at present we have Big Pharma and what has been referred to as the Medical-Industrial Complex. Over the years, businesses, laws, professional associations, and government regulatory and oversight agencies evolved to try to prevent false claims related to drugs and medicine. Today, the federal government, lobbyists, and large financial, political, and social resources are reversing the attempts to at least monitor the information and disinformation provided by Big Pharma. At bottom this balancing act is a reflection of political power, with the president and a Republican Congress on the side of deregulation.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of large-scale industries in the US. For Cortada and Aspray these are clusters of companies that have come to dominate sections of the economy. To survive and prosper, industries used new forms of information gathering, manipulation, shaping, and dissemination. For their analysis, the authors focus on the tobacco industry and demonstrate how it used misinformation, lies, lobbyists, researchers, and lawyers, among other resources, “to stave off regulation of cigarette smoking” (p. 13). For the first time an entire industry came together “to embrace a line of thinking and a set of facts that were known to its members to be false or at least misleading” (p. 160). This became the model used to challenge climate change, health-care insurance, gun control, gay marriage, and other issues. In light of the fact that smoking declined from a peak in 1964 and that by 2010 it “was down to levels not seen since

the early 1930s” (p. 168), I found it somewhat ironic that the model of casting doubt on science and smearing the reputations of critics has been adopted by so many groups and politicians.

The final case, the ongoing climate change/global warming debate demonstrates how multiple industries collaborated, conspired, and disseminated deceptive messages about human impact on the environment. The petroleum industry and its allies primarily initiated this program. Although we do not know the outcome of this challenge to the scientific findings, Cortada and Aspray correctly describe the current situation: “today the United States is the only government in the world that does not support global-wide initiatives to control carbon dioxide emissions, which scientists long ago determined to be the primary cause of global warming” (p. 13). There is little, if any, chance that we will see a proclamation from the current administration and the Republican Congress about carbon emissions analogous to the US surgeon general’s 1964 report warning about the hazards of cigarette smoking. The power of the president, the Republican Party, conservative think tanks, conservative media, and the petroleum industry (the Global Climate Coalition) is a formidable force in the information war over science. For example, according to Cortada and Aspray, “one common finding [of the public’s views on climate warming] is that scientists had less influence on the public than did political and fuel industry advocates” (p. 188).

Fake News Nation is a timely work that provides the general reader with an understanding of how lies and misinformation have played a crucial role in a number of important events in American history. Readers will gain insight into the social construction of information, the historical existence of the “dark side” of information (for example, lies, rumors, misinformation), and the particulars of a number of crucial events in American history. However, I doubt that historians of American society or of the role of information will gain much from it.

Although their work is of a historical nature, Cortada and Aspray do make some comments about the future of the information wars. From now on, beginning with children, they argue, individuals must be taught critical thinking skills to distinguish among sources of information and taught digital literacy skills. However, they fail to explore how the education system will implement programs to make progress toward the achievement of these goals.

Any discussion of the information wars must say something about the role of the internet and social media. Although much work is to be done, “the evidence suggests that the story that played out in the traditional media of newspapers and television is being repeated on the Internet” (p. 210). Finally, the ability to discriminate between fake and accurate information may be an “inherent cognitive behavior that makes people tend to believe that which is already familiar to them, [therefore] it is readily possible for both true and false information to be widely spread and believed” (p. 18). The information wars in the US may have a long future.

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