

The False Dilemma that Took a Country to a False War

We now know that the Iraq War of 2003 was a false war. The central justification was that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and had aided al-Qaeda. But no weapons of mass destruction were ever found. Saddam had never aided al-Qaeda.

This article will not address *why* George W. Bush wanted to go to war. Rather it will focus on *how* the Bush administration tricked its citizens into supporting whatever the administration said about the need to go to war. It did it the same way countless manipulative leaders have done before: with a false dilemma so well packaged it was irresistible.

Vladimir Lenin consolidated power with a false dilemma when he implored all Russians to side with the Communists:

“Each man must choose between joining our side or the other side.” It worked. Benito Mussolini declared over and over in speeches across Italy that *“You’re either with us or against us.”* Once again, it worked. Thus, it should come as no surprise that George W. Bush’s speechwriters gave him that identical line to use again and again, beginning on November 6, 2001, five days after the 911 attack, when Bush announced that **[Intermediate Conclusion] “You are either with us or you are against us in the fight against terror.”**

[Rule] The false dilemma fallacy works by forcing people to choose from a limited set of options, usually two, when in fact more options exist. At first glance, *“You’re either with us or against us”* appears to be true. **[Fact] People can support a position,** or **[Fact] they can not support a position.** What else is there? It’s like a yes or no question. You can only say yes or no. No other answer makes sense.

But we live in a world of rich and varied colors, not a simplistic world of black and white. More choices exist than *“You’re either with us or against us.”* **[Fact] You can also be undecided, neutral, or a little for and against a position.** That’s what makes it a false dilemma.

Sadly, that’s not how the American public saw it in the years after the 911 terrorist attack. Just as it had for Lenin and Mussolini, Bush’s pounding of the people with *“You’re either with us or against us”* had the intended effect. It shut down deliberation by making neutrality or dissent look dangerous. Phillip Knightley, writing ten years after 911 in the book *Journalism After September 11*, stated that:

“In the United States, after the realization that thousands had died in the surprise attack, it would have been prudent to steady the nerves of the nation, to try to comprehend what had occurred, and to map out the way forward.

This article represents a new form of journalism. It illustrates how Structured Argument Analysis can be used to uncover the argument used to arrive at a claim, and how an article can describe that structure in an interesting, educational manner. The underlined sentences become nodes in the argument map. This article is designed to be used in the Kickstarter video.

But [instead] President Bush announced ‘*If you are not with us, you are with the terrorists,*’ thus shutting down debate and causing the American media to fall obediently into line. ... Any dissent or disagreement was seen as a lack of patriotism or worse. Anyone who questioned government policy risked being called a traitor.”

Note what happened here. Once the “*with us or against us*” false conclusion was widely accepted, it was used to justify a further false conclusion: **[Claim] Anyone who disagreed with the United States government was a traitor.**

This was shockingly easy to do. Once a lie is accepted as the truth, you can build a Castle of Sand on the lie and it will look as solid as a Castle of Stone. That’s what Bush did. It’s a fact that **[Fact] saying we should not follow a certain policy when our leaders think we should is disagreement.** If the *false* dilemma of “*You’re either with us or against us*” is seen as a *true* dilemma, where there really are only two choices, then the **[Rule] Either/Or rule** leads to a further conclusion: **[Intermediate Conclusion] Disagreement with US policy shows you are not with us. Therefore, you are aiding the enemy.**

At this point the Bush administration had planted the belief that disagreement means you are aiding the enemy. There was only one more step to set the trap and complete their argument.

[Fact] A traitor is defined as someone who knowingly aids the enemy of a country. In logical terms, if someone aids the enemy, then they are a traitor. Using this definition and the above conclusion that disagreement means you are aiding the enemy, **[Rule] the If P then Q rule applies.** If someone aids the enemy, they are a traitor. Disagreement with war policy aids the enemy. Therefore, anyone who disagrees is a traitor.

It worked. The United States, supported by other nations who were duped as well, launched a false war that ultimately killed an estimated 150,000 to 460,000 people and caused the later rise of ISIS, which led to additional war.

But would it have worked if the American public had seen “*You’re either with us or against us*” as a false dilemma from the start? How could that have been done?

By raising political truth literacy. I’d like to think that if articles like this one had been appearing regularly by the time 9/11 happened, the response would have been totally different. When Bush first sprung his false dilemma on the American public, enough citizens and members of the press would have said “*No. That’s a false dilemma. You can’t fool me. I can also be undecided, neutral, or a little for and against what you want to do. Therefore, this country does not need to rush to war. We need to slow down, evaluate the evidence, and act accordingly. Anything less is not responsible democracy. It is fascism, communism, totalitarianism, or whatever else you want to call it. It is NOT democracy.*”

We will never know if that would have made the difference. But we do know that not everyone was fooled. In metro Atlanta, a city of 400,000 at the time, about 200 people marched in Piedmont Park in March of 2003 against the war. I and my wife were among them. We were not fooled.

But where were the others?

They were scared into the sleep of silent submission, drugged by the power of the false dilemma that took a country to a false war.