

## Political Manipulation Through Implicit Premises

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There is an old joke that starts by asking you, "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" Whether you answer yes or no it sounds like you are admitting to being a wife beater. It's a practical joke based on the use of an implicit premise - that you beat your wife. The technique is used for more than a laugh though. It's also a favorite of politicians, who use it to manipulate public opinion.

You see, political manipulation is accomplished by controlling the framework in which others can argue and ultimately even think about things. To get your viewpoint accepted without openly arguing it, for example, you introduce it as an implicit premise of the debate. This helps you win the public over to your view in a more subtle way than open discussion. It can also exclude the likelihood of any serious opposing viewpoint.

Let's look at an example taken from current times (this was originally written in 2008). The U.S. government has been holding people in prisons for years without charges or access to attorneys, even while admitting that most of them have committed no crime. This is said to be okay because these prisoners are not U.S. citizens, and might be terrorists (some of them certainly are). Why does a supposedly liberty-loving public accept this violation of people's rights? Because the premise has been firmly established in their minds that "rights" are granted to citizens by governments and therefore don't apply to non-citizens.

Now, the founders of this country explicitly stated that rights are inherent in all humans, and fought against the idea that they are mere "privileges" bestowed by governments or other authorities. But the implicit premise of these issues has become the idea that rights are for "members only." Even the opposition is unable to make effective arguments against these current violations of human rights, which is clear when they say that these detentions are wrong because they "il eventually lead to violations of citizen's rights - as though that is the only real crime.

Implicit premises are a powerful method of control. We should get in the habit of recognizing the premises hidden in political debate. Then we can at least honestly look at whether we agree with them or not. Here a couple more to consider.

**Drug Laws** - The implicit premise is that we need to stop people from using certain plants and substances. Thus the debate skips over whether we should have anything to do with what people put in their bodies and becomes one about what kind of laws forced treatment is best. Question whether there should be government involvement in this area and you're on the fringe. You're not allowed in the "serious" debates, because you don't share this now "obvious" premise.

**War on Terror** - Terror is not a nation or people, and so cannot be fought in a "war." Terrorism is a tactic, the specific acts are crimes, and the criminals should be captured and prosecuted. But the metaphorical use of the term "war on terror" has introduced the premise that this is a war, which allows governments unprecedented powers forever. Why forever? Because these crimes and tactics will always exist. A "war on robbery" or a "war on murder," could justify endless power and suspension of rights as well (and here again the word "suspension" reveals the premise that rights are bestowed by governments and so can be taken away by them). We might make sarcastic jokes if there was a "war on stealing," but a "war on terror" is no less silly.

**Social Security** - Watch the debate and it becomes apparent that the implicit premise that the system must be saved is almost without opposition. Of course it never was a "retirement fund" since no money was actually invested, and we could simply provide the necessary welfare for any retirees who cannot provide for themselves. The additional premise that it is a retirement fund hides the fact that today's poor workers must labor to provide monthly checks to rich retirees.

The use of an implicit premise is one of the many powerful ways to manipulate public opinion. Notice how any argument that proceeds from it limits debate and further strengthens the basic premise, which is then almost never challenged. Argue about HOW to stop drugs and you strengthen the idea that they MUST be stopped. Argue about HOW to fight a war and you get everyone agreeing that it IS a war. Argue about HOW to provide the social security checks retirees are OWED, and you argue FOR the idea that promises of past governments are obligations of current workers. This is political manipulation.

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