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“Public Relations and Society”

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I am truly grateful to the Foundation trustees for the honor accorded me in asking me to give this annual Foundation lecture. I am keenly aware of the obligation implied in this invitation. As a scholar and a teacher, I am cognizant of the substantial contributions made to our knowledge and insights into public relations by past lectures. I have made good use of these lectures in my and teaching and in my writing. They represent an important contribution to our literature. This is, of course, but one of the many contributions your Foundation has made to the advancement of public relations.

I join a roster of distinguished speakers who have given us much from this podium. I can only hope that I, too, may make some small contribution to the advancement of this essential and challenging vocation by illuminating our heritage to demonstrate public relations' far-reaching impact on the society it serves. Or fails to serve.

In doing this, I am picking up a theme that can be found in the early lectures, that of public relations' role in history. But I am taking a somewhat different tack by using history past and history present to remind you that your work often lasts long after the heat of the battle has been lifted. I will sketch with a few fragments from a very large mosaic of past and present the impact that your work has on your fellow man. In doing this, I seek to remind you that you have a responsibility to your sponsoring society as well as to your sponsor.

This theme is to be found in the first lecture, given by Historian Frank E. Vandiver on our nation's Civil War, “the first public war.” In stating that “it is not surprising...that the Civil War became largely a war of opinion, a truly public war,” Vandiver outlined one historic example of what, then called propaganda, but today is called public relations, played in our nation's history.

The second of these lectures was given by the late Allan Nevins, one-time journalist who became one of the nation's eminent historians. In his “The Constitution Makers and the Public,” Nevins assessed the public relations campaign led by Alexander Hamilton that won ratification of the Constitution under which we live today. Nevins praised Hamilton as “a born public relations man” and concurred in the judgment that “the authors of *The Federalist* did the best job of public relations in the nation's history.” Surely in terms of the long reach of constitutional government,

no public relations campaign has had greater significance for our society—or for the world for that matter.

It may be difficult for this generation to envision, but persuading a people who had just successfully revolted against strong, tyrannical government to accept a strong central government over a weaker Confederation of States was no simple task. It was, in fact, an uphill fight because in the estimate of Historian Frederick Turner Main: “The Anti-federalists had a small majority—perhaps 52 percent.” The Federalist victory was a triumph of an organized, smartly generalized minority over an uncoordinated, somewhat disorganized majority. More than that, it was a victory for a strong, flexible Constitutional government that has given us nearly two centuries of freedom, security and a productive capitalistic society.

Thus, the skilled use of public relations tactics and communications by Hamilton, Jay and Madison, has had a profound effect on our nation—and on our world. Further, the genius of these Founding Fathers in adding the Bill of Rights insured us a forum for free, robust and competitive speech, which made not only possible, but made imperative the practice of public relations. In our some 200 years as a nation, the advocates and strategists of communications have done more than win or lose public relations campaigns. They have profoundly affected the course of our history and the nature of our society. Practitioners seldom think of themselves in this significant role or ponder that their works may live on long after them.

It is these profound and lasting influences that practitioners have had and do have on our society that I wish to recount. The work of the some 80,000 practitioners in our society is largely hidden from public view save for an occasional scandal or an exposé. For the most part, practitioners operate in shadows off-stage in their efforts to move and manipulate public opinion. Because of their wide and often lasting influence, the work and ethics of these men and women ought to be subjected to more public and scholarly scrutiny than they get.

Practitioners themselves, fully intent on winning the battle of the moment—be it passage or defeat of a Panama Canal Treaty, passage or defeat of gun control legislation, or election of a presidential or gubernatorial candidate—seldom look beyond the immediate campaign for a cause or client to assess their impact on society. Thus, I thought it might be illuminating to set forth some of these examples of public relations and politics, public relations philanthropy and public relations and the media, will both inspire you as to the importance of your work and to cause you to rethink your responsibilities as shapers of tomorrow.

Public Relations and Politics

The artillery and stratagems of public relations have been most frequently wheeled on line to win political battles. Politics is the struggle for power and public relations provides an array of weapons commonly used in these struggles. Employment of these tools and tactics to shape the course and impact of government is older than the national government itself. Today, given the power and wide reach of government rules and riches, the struggle is fought with greater numbers, greater sums and greater sophistication than ever before.

Today, too often, the public good appears to be lost or ill-served in the spirited clashes of special interest groups, armed with their practitioners and their large PR budgets. Who can assess the continuing damage being done to by our society by the successful efforts of the National Rifle Association to block gun control legislation desired by the great majority of citizens? Who among you looks to the greater good of society that is meant to transcend what Meg Greenfield calls "the atomized world of a thousand me-first particular groupings." The bottom line is that the political and government practitioner today has an influential role in our public affairs decision-making.

Political public relations dates back to the nation's pre-Revolution years when a small band of resourceful and determined men fed the fires of revolt. Practices originated by Sam Adams and his band are in use today, albeit in a more precise and professional manner of execution and utilizing more powerful channels of communication. For example: The simplistic slogan, the staged event, the use of symbols, and the importance of getting your interpretation of events to public first.

Pioneer public relations practitioners played a key role in the birth political party system and the spirited Presidential campaign in the Jacksonian era of the Nineteenth Century. Today's political practitioners, in government and out, are playing an even more significant role in our political decisions now that the political party is in disarray and plays a diminished role in politics and government.

The first clear beginnings of our present-day party system, the Presidential campaign, and the White House Press Secretary's function came in the Jackson Administration and in the work of Amos Kendall and Francis Blair. This was the period in which the common man won the ballot and started the free public school. The literate public was greatly enlarged and its political interests stimulated by a burgeoning party press as a new generation came to power. As literacy spread, as more people got to vote, and as the number of newspapers grew, so did the people's political power; consequently it became ever more necessary to campaign for their votes. We have seen this same thing happen in our time as our black citizens finally won their too-long delayed right to participate in the political process.

The 1828 Presidential campaign which carried Jackson to the White House climaxed a spirited if shallow campaign, one that focused more on personality than issues. That focus has continued from that day to this. Many forces were at work that would make the contest lively and bitter. The contest stimulated the formation of parties in virtually all the states, constructing what historians call "the nation's second political party system." This was a significant development, and a necessary one. For all their wisdom, the framers of the Constitution had not foreseen the need for a party system required to make our government of separate powers work.

We are slowly coming to appreciate this essential party role as we see our political parties once again disintegrating as they did in the Era of Good Feeling. The party serves as a brokering force among the competing special one-issue interests and as the cement which binds a government together. The waning influence of the political party is having a paralyzing effect on our national government; and a questionable effect on the candidates whom we elect, candidates often elected for their charisma on TV, not for their character competence. In all this public relations has had

and has a powerful role. Perhaps a too powerful role. None the less, the dominance of political public relations is inescapable in today's media world.

We constantly need to remind ourselves that the basis of power in a democracy is persuasion. In his study of Presidential leadership, Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. concluded that the President's "link with the public is his key relationship." He wrote: "The leverage the President has acquired in the law making process has been indirect, based on the use of the arts of persuasion, and ultimately grounded in the popular support he can claim or mobilize." This Jimmy Carter knows all too well.

Beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, who sensed the power of the burgeoning media and the nation's first nationwide wire service, strong American presidents have utilized the expertise of public relations to exploit the news media to mobilize public support for their policies, and to cripple their enemies.

From Theodore Roosevelt to Richard Nixon, the coupling of public relations with expanding media power profoundly altered the nature of our Constitutional government, changing it from the government of checks-and-balances as designed by the Founding Fathers to a Presidential Government. The corruption and abuses of this greatly magnified power by Nixon and his crooked cronies brought a turn-about that has greatly weakened the Presidency in its relationship to the Congress. This reversal in the flow of power began with Ford and has continued with Carter. As we view the inability of Congress to function effectively and the savagery of the media, we may wonder if the pendulum has not swung too far in the other direction.

The early years of the Twentieth Century in the United States were laden with significant changes, breath-taking in their swiftness, far-reaching impact. The expansion of the news media enlarging the public forum and the concomitant emergence of public relations were the catalysts for many of these changes. Theodore Roosevelt's succession to the Presidency in 1901 marked "not only a change of Presidents, but the beginning of a new epoch." His coming to power signaled the end of *laissez faire* government and the beginning of Big Government that today excessively regulates and dominates our lives.

Teddy Roosevelt sensed the power inherent in the presidency and the necessity to mobilize public opinion in order to use it. He saw the White House as a "bully pulpit" and so used it. He created press offices in the White House, met regularly with reporters, developed the "leak," the "media event" and discovered "Monday." TR was the first to use the presidential junket to generate public support for his programs. He initiated the White House Governor's Conference in 1906 and with it made "conservation" a household word.

Observers wrote that Roosevelt ruled the country from the front pages. Veteran Washington newsman David Barry observed that "Roosevelt knew the value and potent influence of a news paragraph written as he wanted it written and disseminated through the proper influential channels." A *Harper's Weekly* article was titled "Theodore Roosevelt: Press Agent." Roosevelt's well-publicized antitrust suits turned the tide against the growing concentration of corporate power, at least temporarily. His conservation policies, effectively promoted by Gifford

Pinchot in the government's first large scale publicity program, saved many of the nation's resources from gross exploitation, then the order of the day.

Who can calculate the lasting impact of Roosevelt's exploitation of the press as a new and powerful tool of presidential leadership?

His public relations-minded successors—Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, greatly increased the power of the Presidency and to the same degree, diminished the power of the Congress by using TR's techniques.

Or who can calculate the terrible cost of Woodrow Wilson's failure to win Senate ratification of the League of Nations Treaty in 1919? Is it not significant that this was the only political battle Wilson fought without a public relations counselor at his side? During his successful governorship of New Jersey and through his first term as President, Wilson was guided by Joe Tumulty in the ways of dealing with public opinion, a force Wilson recognized but never really understood. When Tumulty fell from favor because he counseled Wilson against marrying so soon after the death of the first Mrs. Wilson, Wilson turned to George Creel, who guided him in his wartime Presidency. Creel's influence, in turn, was destroyed by the Congress in Wilson's second term. Thus, when Wilson undertook his League of Nations fight, he had no trusted practitioner at his side. Who knows, had Wilson won his struggle with the Henry Cabot Lodges of that day, we might not have had Hitler and World War II. A big "if" in history!

Or who can calculate the influential role Louis McHenry Howe played in our history by his ceaseless and consummate use of public relations to bring Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Presidency? In a recently published book, "FDR and the Press," an Australian historian documents "Franklin Roosevelt's superb insight into publicity techniques, his 'news sense,' his ability to time releases so that they achieved maximum impact, and his rare talent for dramatizing his actions," but totally neglects Howe who taught FDR all these things, and more. From the time he went to work for then State Senator Roosevelt in 1912 until his death in 1936, Louis Howe was at FDR's side, guiding him, saying no to him. It is significant that FDR never made a serious political blunder as long as Howe was his adviser.

Take just one example of Howe's superb skills. One reason for FDR's political success was the fact that the people never really sensed what a helpless cripple he was. In FDR's darkest hour on Campobello Island, Louis Howe did not give up his goal of making FDR president. He was determined that the press would never know how badly crippled FDR was. When the stricken man was to be removed from the island to return to New York City for treatment, "Louis arranged to have his friend carried secretly to the train. While the crowd gathered at another dock, carefully misled by a Howe-inspired rumor, Roosevelt made the painful transfer on his stretcher from boat to jolting baggage cart, then through a window of his private car ... When reporters finally caught up with him they had to interview him from trackside and "saw only a smiling, jaunty FDR giving an impression of gay self-assurance."

Twentieth Century presidents, utilizing the expertise of public relations and the ever mounting power of the news media, effectively changed the nature of our government and expanded its role in our lives.

The scope and size of government public relations is writ large in the fact that public-affairs and information efforts of the Federal bureaucracy cost at least 2.5 billion dollars annually and hidden costs undoubtedly send the total higher.

Consequently, by 1973 there was wide debate and concern in the United States about the "crisis of the Constitution." This debate faded with the fall of Nixon's corrupt administration. This impact of the growth of public relations on our government has been too little noted.

Political publicity is one of the oldest phases of public relations, but it never had the scope, shape and reach that it has today in the era of "The New Politics." Stanley Kelley, Jr., a political scientist, observing the watershed nature of the 1952 campaign, was one of the first to sense the beginning of the end of the influence of political boss and the rise of the public relations practitioner to power. Noting that the public dialogue begins with the political campaign, Kelly observed: "The public relations man is occupied with directing the course of public discussion as it relates to the selection of government officials and the settlement of controversial issues of public policy."

The role of public relations in political campaigns and in government—the two are inextricably related—is expanding. A winning campaign publicist, say a Jody Powell, or campaign strategist, say a Gerald Rafshoon, move into office and there become quite influential on the course of government. This growing dominance of the public relations specialist in our political affair has come under increased criticism. A political scientist, Leon Epstein, has observed: "Much of the criticism of the new techniques is centered about the enterprise of public relations as such. The idea of selling candidates like soap is offensive to all those who believe in the capacity of voters to absorb information and make reasoned decisions."

Who among us can calculate the impact of the emergence of the public relations campaign specialist as a dominant figure in our public affairs? Certainly we can agree with Stanley Kelley that "the activities of the public relations man have become a significant influence in the processes crucial to democratic government."

Political scientists have found that the American Party system has undergone a marked erosion of its legitimacy among members of the mass public in the past 10 to 15 years. One political scientist, Jack Dennis, asserts "the generally low institutional status of the parties is not simply a function of the Watergate Crisis. Decline of public esteem for the parties' has been a longer-term phenomenon." This party decline can be seen in voter loss of identification with either major party, with the decline in party workers and contributions, and with decline in voting. I concur with Jack Dennis that "parties are clearly and sharply on the wane as an important feature of American politics." As the party has waned, the political public relations specialist has waxed.

Public relations practice in the political arena has left some ugly legacies to our society. For example, the bitter legacy of hatred that too often erupts from the sewers of the Ku Klux Klan. In

early 1920, the revived Ku Klux Klan, born originally in the bitterness and devastation of Reconstruction, was a rather weak regional fraternal organization under the guidance of founder-Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons. When the Klan began to stagnate and lose money, Simmons resorted to hiring public relations assistance from Edward Young Clarke and the Southern Publicity Association of Atlanta. Within a year and a half, the Klan blossomed from a membership of 4,000 to a national strength of more than 100,000 members.

E. Y. Clarke and his partner, Elizabeth Tyler, were seasoned promoters who had been successful in war-time fundraising in the South. In their campaign for the Ku Klux Klan, Clarke and his associates employed many acceptable tools and tactics of contemporary public relations. At times, however, they also resorted to unethical practices—exaggeration, cover-ups, frame-ups, character assassination and blackmail. Granted the Southern Publicity Association operated in an era in which the function and ethics of public relations had not been clearly defined. This does not excuse the skilled selling of racial and religious hatred to make a buck, nor dilute its damage to our social fabric.

We in the South were sickeningly reminded of this bitter residue of the successful Clarke-Tyler campaign only a week ago when 14 KKK hoodlums murdered five anti-Klan protesters in North Carolina.

In the 1950s when the function and its ethics had been more clearly defined, public relations practitioners lent themselves to the character assassination we came to know as McCarthyism. Typical of this kind of political practice was the disgraceful campaign waged against Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland by Jon M. Jonkel, then a Chicago practitioner. For \$1,250 a month, Jonkel, exploiting the Communist Witch Hunt climate generated by McCarthy, poisoned our political climate for many years to come. Another bitter legacy of public relations practice.

Public Relations and Philanthropy

In 1960 at the invitation of Historian Merle Curti and with the support of the Ford Foundation, I undertook a study of the history of fundraising in the United States and its impact on our society. Here, too, the practice has had a profound and lasting influence on the nation's philanthropy and on those institutions supported by public giving. This constructive result of the development of public relations gets scant notice from scholars of the beneficiaries of philanthropy. Public relations' contribution is told in my "Fund Raising in the United States." The welding of public relations, organizational and fundraising skills has profoundly changed our nation's philanthropy from one of the very few rich giving "charity" to the very poor to a people's philanthropy. Last year, the American people responding to promotion and peer pressure gave nearly \$40 billion dollars to churches, colleges, hospitals, causes and some 500,000 volunteer agencies. Nearly FORTY BILLION DOLLARS.

Communities across our nation and Canada are winding up the annual United Way drive to raise money for the community's volunteer social and welfare services. These campaigns follow a pattern, with remarkably little variation save for new communication channels, that were established in Washington, D.C. in 1905. The builders of the model of today's fund drive were two YMCA officials, Charles Sumner Ward and Lyman Pierce.

The campaign plan was put together to top off a campaign for \$300,000 to build a new Y in the nation's capital. Ward joined Pierce, the Washington Y secretary, for the final 27-day campaign to raise \$80,000 and put the drive over the top. Their first move was to hire a publicity person, a fundraising first. As Ward explained later: "The job of these publicity men was to make sure that the newspapers were supplied with the day to day material necessary to keep a campaign on the front page. Headlines, front-page editorials and cartoons arouse the city's team spirit."

Ward and Pierce also used paid advertising for the first time, persuading merchants that providing supporting ads was "good public relations." Thus, they also helped start public relations advertising. These innovative fund raisers were quick to exploit the dramatic advantages of the time limit set for the campaign. Pressure on the campaign workers to complete their subscriptions by the deadline date was dramatized by the "campaign clock," a standard device of today's campaign.

Today the raising of \$80,000 doesn't seem like much punkins. In the context of the early 1900s when philanthropy was a matter of the rich giving to the poor in the name of "charity," it was a major breakthrough. A big sum! In 1978 some 2,200 United Way organizations in the nation raised \$1.3 billion dollars to support some 36,000 programs and agencies involved in meeting human needs. We can tote up the amount of money raised and the number of agencies supported but there is no way to calculate the impact these publicly supported agencies and institutions have had on our society. A constructive influence brought by the welding of skillful promotion and organized solicitation by Ward and Pierce and their successors—who have built in new techniques and new channels of communication over the years.

In citing the development of the United Way campaign as one of public relations' legacies, I would be remiss not to state that there are thoughtful persons with serious doubts about United Way's methods. For example, Carl Bakal, in his new book, "Charity U.S.A.," describes United Way as "charity's most sacred cow," one that "is giving sour milk." More than one suit has been brought recently against United Way for its effort "to monopolize collection of charitable donations through paycheck deductions."

The role public relations men and women have played in America's philanthropy is even more sharply sketched in the story of the American Cancer Society—a clear-cut example of public relations making the vital difference. In 1913 more than 75,000 persons were dying in the United States from cancer. A few doctors and laymen decided something had to be done. Out of a meeting at the Harvard Club in New York City May 22, 1913, came the American Society for the Control of Cancer to "disseminate knowledge concerning the symptoms, treatment, and prevention of cancer... and to compile statistics thereto." For three decades this Society remained puny. Two years after its founding this group had 394 members and a budget of less than \$7,000! Thus began today's fund-raising giant among the health organizations—but one that accomplished little in its first three decades.

Mary Lasker, utilizing public relations, effected the change from pigmy to giant. Moved by the death of her longtime cook due to cancer Mary Lasker, talented and energetic person that she is, went to the American Cancer Society to find out what was being done to fight cancer. Precious

little, she found. This smart, spunky woman who knew and used the skills of public relations moved in and took charge. She utilized the talent of her husband's advertising agency and hired the pro, John Price Jones, to conduct the annual fund drive in 1943—in the midst of World War II—and these combined efforts raised \$345,000—a big sum by previous standards but a small sum indeed alongside the \$126 million dollars the ACS raised in last year's public relations-promoted fund drives and memorials.

But public relations as utilized in the fight against cancer does far more than raise funds for research. It disseminates knowledge. The Cancer Society's earlier lack of resources and skill in carrying out the educational function is shown in the stark fact that though Dr. George N. Papanicolaou's vaginal smear technique of detecting cancer in its early stages was discovered in 1926, it did not get widespread acceptance until "sold" to the women of the nation by a revitalized public relations program dating from the mid-1940s. Who can calculate the lives and homes saved by this public relations campaign? Or lost by its earlier lack? Such contributions are seldom mentioned by our critics.

An even more spectacular and successful health and public relations story is found in the eradication of the crippler polio. Discovery of the Salk vaccine was financed by the dollars raised through the genius of Carl Byoir, Gerry Swinehart, Dorothy Ducas and other public relations pioneers and their exploitation of Franklin Roosevelt's illness. The proliferating national campaigns to raise money to fight nearly every known disease had their origins more in the Roosevelt Birthday Balls and March of Dimes than in the older Christmas Seal sale which dates from 1907. The use of seals to raise money of course is also used in many health fund-raising efforts. Albeit an expensive one.

A rare combination of personalities and events converged at precisely the right moment to launch the successful crusade against crippling polio. But more than prevention of polio was found in the process. Successful nationwide fundraising patterns were developed that have been utilized by later practitioners and fund raisers. Carl Byoir and his associates wrote the platitudes while they were still fresh. High-pressure publicity and skilled organization methods today are used to get millions of volunteers to solicit gifts from as many as 90 million Americans in a single drive. The health drives are truly a people's philanthropy. Who among us can calculate the good that has flowed from these techniques, however costly and wasteful the methods may be at the time?

To balance the record, we must note that practitioners have served the many near fraudulent or dubious appeals which continue to blight public giving. For example, one of the convicted looters of The Sister Kenny Foundation in the 1940s was a Minneapolis practitioner.

Public Relations and the News Media

These lasting influences of public relations on society could only have been achieved by utilization of the widening power of the news media. Public relations practice was born with the emergence of a national news forum late in the last century and early in this one. Today the practitioner and journalist are locked together as essential elements in the nation's public information system. Both have the obligation to implement the guarantees of the First Amendment as well as to protect it from increasing assaults, I think it safe to generalize that the

journalist is far more sensitive to these obligations than is the practitioner. Yet our stake in a free forum is equal to that of journalists and citizens.

Improved techniques of printing, the increased literacy of a people achieving more education and aroused interest in public affairs combined both to reflect and stimulate the growth of the mass media. The mass circulation newspaper, made possible by the rotary press and the city, and the growing number of popularly priced magazines were coming to be important factors in accelerating these profound changes and in generating a militant public opinion. The modern AP, now the world's largest press association, dates from 1900 and the UPI from 1907. The advent of the national news wire brought a quickened exchange of news and opinion across the nation, facilitating the agitation for change abroad in the land. The popular magazine was mostly a Twentieth Century development. Before 1880 there were only a few magazines. By 1890 we had the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Munsey's* and *Cosmopolitan*—but no *Cosmo Gal!* It was in 1900, significantly, that the first magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, reached a million circulation. Other magazine giants soon followed. As did the silent motion picture and radio in the 1920s. Finally, TV in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Out of these developments came the organized practice of public relations—and the nation's public information system, of which it is an integral part.

Since its origins early in this century, the practitioner and the journalist have functioned in this system in a mutually-dependent relationship, sometimes as adversaries, sometimes as colleagues cooperating in mutual self-interest. The bedrock of this relationship is mutual advantage. Neither party can function without the other. Sociologist Herbert Gans in a new book worth your reading, "Deciding What's News," suggests that the relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance.

Sometimes the news media becomes the captives of the practitioner who often has not only superior manpower resources but also news control. John Chancellor, commenting on the President's use of the network anchormen to hype last July's energy address, said it was the problem of the dynamics of the White House versus the passivity of the press. Incidentally, Gans found that some 20 percent of national news flows from the White House. The artillery of the press is often muffled or diverted to decoy targets by skillful public relations.

In viewing the ease with which the media can be manipulated because of their lack of manpower, time, and news space, ponder this thought: Just as your institutions and government depend in the long run on public confidence for effectiveness if not survival, then so must practitioners depend on the credibility of the nation's public information system. If you debase the currency of confidence in our news media with your obfuscation and censorship, you do a disservice not only to your institution and to the consumers—you debase the coin of your own realm. You have an important stake in the credibility of the news media as a journalist or citizen.

Yet, equally often, practitioners are frustrated in getting useful information to the public by the inadequacies and the frozen patterns of the media. Day to day the advantages and antagonisms in this relationship alternate from side to side, varying from situation to situation. Sociologist Gans, as the result of his study concluded: "Sources have somewhat more power in the relationship than reporters, since they can punish reporters by withholding information, thereby putting them at a disadvantage with peers from competing news media." At the least, reporters are drawn to a

symbiotic relationship of mutual obligations with their sources. The relationship runs the gamut from cozy to stormy; a relationship that sometimes serves the public interest, sometimes defeats the public interest. Scholars, newsmen and newswomen, practitioners and citizens alike have appeared to be unaware of the increasing role the public relations source has in making, shaping and managing the day's news—news that determines our public agenda and thus strongly influences our nation's decisions.

With these basics before us, let us assess the media's and public relations' role in reporting and interpreting the energy crisis through our public information system—history present:

The nuclear accident at the Three Mile Island plant outside Harrisburg laid bare the all too frequent failures of practitioners and of journalists with the result that the public was ill served with inaccurate and inadequate information. Both government and corporate practitioners contributed to the damage done the cause of nuclear energy at Three Mile Island—a fact which underscores the vital role the public relations man or woman performs in our news system.

Picture this scene: Shortly after 1 p.m. on March 28, the day the nation's most severe nuclear accident devastated the nuclear fuel inside Three Mile Island, No. 2, Jack Herbein, vice president of Metropolitan Edison, which operates the plant, waded resolutely into a mob of reporters.

The networks, the wire services, local television stations and most of the major newspapers in the East were in the crowd, jostling with each other, shouting simultaneous questions at Herbein.

We all know the importance of timing and context in our work. If there was one thing that primed the press for Three Mile Island, it was "The China Syndrome." The movie included a corporate PR who tried to minimize a serious nuclear accident. I have a hunch that if you saw the Fonda movie before March 28, you damned it as perpetuating an old and false PR stereotype.

Yet Herbein, once a middleweight boxer at the Naval Academy, was better than his movie counterpart, coolly bobbing and weaving through a spate of angry, skeptical questions.

Yes, he explained, there had been some "minor" damage to the plant's fuel. Herbein then gave the first public chronology of a strange series of events that began at 4 that morning. "This is not what I would call a serious accident," Herbein concluded.

Only last week a task force of the President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island reported both the utility and the government decided in the first days of the accident "that bad news was not something the public ought to hear." The critical report on the Commission Task Force on the Public's Right to Information further said that statements issued by Metropolitan Edison Co. and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission indicated "a conscious decision on their parts to impart only available evidence and to avoid discussing its implications."

Such public relations misfeasance lays bare the fact that public relations practitioners too often obfuscate critical issues when they ought to strive to clarify matters in public debate. Such malpractice has a damaging impact on our society. The public relations problem that Herbein walked into that fateful Wednesday afternoon lives on. How do public officials, utility

executives and practitioners plan for the risks of nuclear power and publicize them without creating the additional risk of causing a panic? The *Wall Street Journal* saw it as merely a question of "whether to hunker down, say little and hope the public memory is short, or to take the offensive and push the company's point of view." How naive in this case? Who can calculate the damage of that nuclear, management and public relations disaster on our future? A damage writ large in the fact that an angry, alarmed public opinion is not likely to permit a new nuclear energy plant for years to come. A public opinion that may even shut down the plants we have now near large cities. One of the public relations consultants involved called Three Mile Island "PR's Balaklava."

That today our citizens do not fully comprehend the nation's energy crisis and the facts that underlay this crisis is an indictment not only of the energy industry's leaders and their public relations machinery but of the news media as well. Here—as in the case of Three Mile Island or in the case of government, the news media do not have the experienced manpower to fully and accurately report our energy situation. Consequently, the citizen is denied information and interpretation that is due her or him.

To remedy this lack, practitioners must fulfill an important and responsible role. You know, I know that the media could not function effectively as they do in reporting such complex issues without public relations assistance. Let there be no argument on these points:

(1) The news value of the media unduly emphasizes conflict over concord, political personality over political issue, corporate wrongdoing over corporate accomplishment, and thus requires balancing for a constructive democratic dialogue.

(2) These news media do not have the reportorial and editorial man-power, either in terms of depth or in terms of specialized knowledge, to adequately and accurately report and interpret today's broadened, complex news spectrum. This is easily shown in the fact that some 40 percent of the content of media originates in public relations offices.

Journalists are reluctant to admit their growing dependence on the public relations officer. Yet you and I know that if the positive news of business, government, cooperatives, universities or voluntary agencies is to be fully, constructively told, these agencies must provide their own reportorial manpower.

Today's news task has outrun the capacities of the media. On the other hand, there is a serious public question in whether the "handout reporting," increasingly characteristic of American Journalism meets the citizen's need for accurate, complete information.

Conclusion

These few fragments from the mosaic of public relations history past and present make plain that the practice has brought much good to society; and has done much harm. These illustrations reaffirm the pluses and minuses of public relations' impact on society I set forth years ago:

Pluses:

A. By providing channels of feedback from an organization's constituent publics to management, public relations has made many organizations more responsive to their publics. Providing channels of opinion feedback to institutions is a way of making our democracy function more effectively. By monitoring and interpreting public opinion, we make our clients and causes more sensitive to people's needs. This service is essential when many organizations, like dinosaurs, have outgrown their central nervous system.

B. Practitioners serve the public interest by providing an articulate, clear voice in the public forum for every point of view. It is the democratic right that every idea, individual or institution shall have a fair and full hearing in the public forum so that its merit is determined by its ability to gain acceptance. To understand public opinion and to obtain such a hearing, the individual, institution or idea requires the expertise of a practitioner. In giving voice to all points of view, practitioners serve society.

C. Practitioners increase the public's information by providing information through the media which the media's manpower and money resources cannot otherwise provide. The revitalized Cancer Society's campaign to acquaint women with the Pap Test is but one of countless examples. Our news media, to repeat, simply do not have the manpower, money, space and time to adequately report and interpret today's broadened and complex news spectrum. Practitioners are indeed an essential part of the nation's public information system. As they fulfill this role by using their talents of communication to replace discord with concord, they serve society.

Minuses:

A. Public relations too often has cluttered our already choked channels of communication with the debris of pseudo-events which do not serve the interest of either sponsor or a public, and with the distortions of half-truths and obfuscation. Too often we convey our client's interest with phony events which rob readers and views of more substantial information and with phony phrases that confuse rather than clarify.

B. An elaboration of the phony phrase is the effort to becloud, obfuscate or cover-up the true facts of a public issue. This is particularly true of many of the special interest and cause groups served by practitioners. An example is the Tobacco Institute's constant efforts to becloud the scientific evidence linking lung cancer and heart disease to smoking. Or its efforts to suppress a Roper study showing that the fears of non-smokers about inhaling cigarette smoke has risen sharply in recent years. A far more damaging example was the cover up at Three Mile Island. Such distortions and cover-ups not only damage the credibility of the sponsor but also

the news channels upon which all of us, both as practitioners and as citizens, must depend.

C. Not only has our practice corroded the news channels with credibility gaps, it has, at times, corroded our democratic processes with cynicism of a people more than twice fooled. The cynicism and distrust as reflected in the low credibility of the church, the college, the corporation, the Presidency, and the Congress, is eating at the vitals of a once healthy democracy in these United States. Any part the practitioner has played in all these needs to be illuminated and damned. This practice has been sanctioned in the highest office in our land—from the U-2 cover-up to the Bay of Pigs, to Santo Domingo to Vietnam to Watergate. Our nation has paid a terrible price for these public relations practices—and it is still paying.

To discuss the historic and current impact of the practice in our society is to underscore that public relations has to come occupy an influential and essential role in our society.

This is what I conceive to be the social justifications for the public relations function in a free society: to accurately monitor the needs and views of an organization's constituent publics so that the organization remains responsive to its sponsoring society, and to ethically, effectively plead the organization's cause in the forum of public debate. This is the essence of the democratic spirit and process—two way communication and mediation which leads to a compromise in the best interests of conflicting interests—and thus society.

I close with this thought raised for us many years ago by the late Earl Newsome: "I suggest that sober self-examination at this point requires that we come to an understanding of ourselves and what it is we really want to accomplish...Each of us lives but once, and each of us wants to spend his life constructively...I am certain as can be that if each one of us establishes the highest of standards for his own conduct, we shall eventually earn the status of profession." In so doing, you will also constructively be serving society.