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## **“The Hour Strikes for Public Relations”**

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*Chairman*  
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To be invited to give the Foundation Lecture is a rare honor. I accepted with deep appreciation, and also in the thought that perhaps I might be able to repay a portion of the great debt I owe to our calling.

This Foundation exists to develop to the fullest the capabilities of public relations men and women and to broaden their influence. I'm sure you share my gratitude to those who through the years have done so much in this endeavor.

The Foundation Lectures not only have been rewarding, but they explain why so many different yet valuable things can be said about public relations.

What do you say when you are asked, “What is public relations?” That has been happening, over and over again, for decades.

A world-famous economist went back to his alma mater for his 25<sup>th</sup> reunion. A member of the faculty surprised him by asking him if he would like to see his old economics professor.

“Is he still here?” he asked.

“Yes, he is, and in the same office.”

So the economist climbed the stairs and was warmly welcomed by his mentor. The latter asked him, “Would you like to see the examination I am giving?”

He nodded, and after looking it over, said, “I can't believe it! This is the same examination I took 25 years ago. You can't be asking the same questions every year, can you?”

“Oh, yes,” the professor replied. “We keep changing the answers.”

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This has been going on where we are concerned, too, and we are only now beginning to realize it.

It must be true that a number of important decision makers, urgently seeking answers, became dissatisfied with the ones they were getting from their public relations people. Other answers were more to their liking. So other counsels prevailed.

The evidence is in the growing number of shifts in department labels, of new men and women with different fields of expertise being put in charge of new strategies and tactics. This realignment takes over what used to be clearly labeled in the public relations function.

You hear the comment: “The times are passing public relations by.”

There must be some reasons for this development and I’ll mention several that I discern.

The first is the feeling on the part of some of these decision makers that they would like to keep the bad-mouthing of public relations itself from being attached to what they feel they must do. When their well-intentioned effort is dismissed as just a “public relations ploy,” or when they are accused of “PR-ing it,” you can understand their irritation.

I have never dwelled on the slurs nor the band-aids suggested to deal with them. But if leaders can use virtually the same successful strategies and tactics that we do, and by labeling them “communications” or “public affairs” avoid the slurs, should we blame them?

The second reason for this trend is to minimize the effect of the criticism that public relations is primarily trying to “manage the news” -- a distinctly unpopular activity which breeds hostility.

Public relations people are directly involved in news making and news reporting. Of necessity, they have this preoccupation that lawyers and financial people do not have. There is no point in our downgrading the importance of what we do, but this allegation of “news management” does hurt.

The press is enjoying a very heady sense of mission. More and more the media are performing a role of importance in our political system. The press, it is argued, makes politicians accountable. In this undertaking it does not welcome interference.

A third reason why others are moving onto our turf is that our value is being challenged on the grounds that we are theoretical and unrealistic. In times past when things were more tranquil, those who employed us listened to our analyzing and our exhorting and felt rewarded.

But with the pressures bearing down on them now, they want action. Even more, they want performance by people who have had down-to-earth experience in problem-solving; who are trained in the time-tested disciplines of the law, accounting, science and engineering. To some, these alternatives, under stress, offer more assurance than does the earlier mainstay -- public relations.

The fourth, and the most compelling reason for this turning-away, I suspect, is the money factor.

As more and more aroused leaders dedicate their time and their energies to solving public problems, they have to finance their newly-organized undertakings. They run into a special problem, for earmarking some of the expenditures for "public relations" has become sharply controversial. In my judgment, these costs are necessary and "antiseptic" by any reasonable standard, but bans against deducting them as business expenses are already on the books, and more may be expected.

All of these considerations -- and some others that are probably operating -- have brought on what can be viewed as "the flight from public relations."

Does this mean that the Cinderella hour is striking for public relations?

Are the enchantments that once seemed so bright and the exhilaration of shaping events that seemed to be our destiny, ebbing away?

I don't think so.

The hour is striking *for* us. It rings to wake us up; to see clearly what is going on; to grasp the importance of *this fact*; the march of events has created an unprecedented need for precisely the special talents and skills that public relations people provide.

My one purpose here today is to encourage you to believe in this interpretation.

What is it based on?

Let's start with what has precipitated a new dimension for our specialty.

Public relations came into existence to help those -- not very many -- who were in dire need of it, for uncomfortable personal reasons. I urge you to read again two of the earlier Foundation Lectures: "Public Relations and the Progressive Surge: 1899-1917" by Dr. Eric F. Goldman, and "After the Fall - Opportunity: 1918-1945" by Dr. Joe B. Frantz (*Public Relations Review*, Vol. IV, No. 3, Fall 1978).

You will not find them bookish or dull. They deal with the times and the people as befits them -- with color, hisses and cheers. But this is deceptive, for these eminent historians are seriously explaining how public relations came into being.

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The reason was that evils and excesses charged to greedy and arrogant groups cried out for correction. It has seemed to me that it is just as important in this analysis to note that all the rest of the people, by comparison, were viewed as innocent victims. They didn't cause problems.

I am under no illusion that private parties no longer flout the law and pollute the mainstreams -- real or figurative.

But what is new and calls for a strategy in tune with the times is that there is tremendous difference in who is responsible for the evils and excesses that need correction now. It is not simply the guilty few, nor those who merely are dishonest, despite all the publicity about their misdeeds.

All of us are at fault. We, collectively, are the cause of inflation, unemployment, discrimination, immorality, crime -- and other threats to our well-being. We are indeed getting the government we deserve.

To their great credit, more and more leaders -- in business and other pursuits, both public and private -- are vigorously trying to solve these vastly complicated problems.

What is called "issue management" is being widely urged as the preferred course of action. It has the virtue of being an organized, methodical attack on specific targets.

However, I share the apprehension already voiced by some observers, that the label "issue management" sets up visions of manipulations, of perhaps a renewal of employer campaigns like the "American Plan" crusade of the early '20s, which certainly was successful, but publicly denounced as anti-labor. Backlash from such past mobilizations of business strength did, in fact, nourish the fledging public relations business.

But if the older approach is used again, a series of triumphs accomplished by one-on-one persuasion of politicians and their aides -- almost out of sight of the voters- - will bring on an even bigger backlash.

The losers will not let us forget that the laws and regulations that have been changed by intensive lobbying went on the books with solid voter support, and, in their view, cannot be rescinded without road public concurrence.

This danger can be avoided, and I hope it will.

Laws and regulations can be rewritten or annulled to avoid breakdowns and chaos if the need to do it, and the reasons for doing it, are explained in acceptable terms to the people -- all of them.

It's the hard way.

It takes public relations: many people, lots of travel, and mastery of the facts and reasoning that makes common sense to common people. Above all, the endeavor must rest on the principle that each of the solutions sought is, in fact, and can be demonstrated to be, in the best interests of the majority of the voters.

Lobbyists are necessary in our system to keep the right of petition alive and to help in the textual phase of correcting and writing legislation.

Others are needed, too, for other specialized tasks -- lawyers, engineers, accountants and the executives that keep all the gears meshed.

All of us will have to restrain our impulse to go for the "quick fix." It's easy to believe that things can't wait! It's easy to believe that politics is only for winners and losers. The typical "doer" is not comfortable working at the slow process of bringing about sound judgment through understanding.

So the torch will be tossed to us. And that will be the beginning of a new life of usefulness.

We will be striving to bring about a major change in people's ideas of what they really want -- based on what they really need. As times goes on, I believe it will be easier and easier for us to succeed. That's because the voters are finding out that the old ways of getting more of the pie for themselves are causing them more harm than good.

We will have to attack the roots of the growths that are smothering enterprise, investment and our standard of living. To do this we will have to understand how the goals we are committed to reach are related to great social movements. That sort of insight, I'm sorry to say, we have been leaving to the deep thinkers.

To illustrate what we are getting into, let me cite three groundswells that may determine the outcome. They have been most thoughtfully examined.

Al Sommers, the Conference Board's chief economist, has been pondering what he calls "a collision of ethics and economics." He maintains that "Democracy is egalitarian, seeking a more equal distribution of income. Capitalism is organized on dominance and leadership and depends on unequal distribution for saving, investment, and growth. The two are by now very uncomfortable bedfellows." He goes on to examine this troublesome matter in a way that I find extraordinarily illuminating. If defining the problem gets us halfway to solving it, this is helpful, though the dilemma is one we will be up against more and more. It lurks behind the issues of inflation, equitable taxations, discrimination and constitutional rights.

Jerome Wiesner, president of MIT, and many others, see great dangers in the drive for a risk-free society, another area where we need guidance. Passions run high on this issue, but that's all the more need to uncover the sensible courses to pursue and to obtain

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support for them from a majority of the public. Failing this, we may meet with catastrophe.

And third among these complications is the thrust of the almost religious dedication to freedom of information, tied into the absolute priority of the individual vis-à-vis society. These goals consume the interest of many able, sincere and persuasive people who often are not flexible in their demands.

I have read in draft from a remarkable study on the history of the crusade to establish absolute freedom of information -- world-wide -- and to assert the individual as the dominant focus of all policy. One of your illustrious Foundation Lecturers, Tim Traverse-Healy of England, commissioned John A.R. Lee to devote his great talents to this task, and its significance cannot be ignored. We will be hearing much more on this, too, and our thoughts cannot be vague if we are to be helpful.

If you haven't seen it, I recommend Jeffrey M. Berry's useful book, "Lobbying for the People" (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977). It tells us more than we probably want to know about what is going on in the daily activities of 83 public interest organizations that qualify under his definition. They are not impressed by complexity, nor baffled by it. Their tactics can teach us resourcefulness. Most important is their fixation on a common goal: obtaining the intervention of government. In their view, nothing else will make certain that a perceived ill or an injustice will be cured.

We are indeed at a great crossroads in human affairs with mighty forces pulling us this way and that. Yet we cannot let complexity and interventionism destroy a marvelously functioning economic and political system.

I wish I possessed the wisdom and eloquence of John Gardner, who has demonstrated both so often. In his most recent speech, he simply and powerfully establishes the ground on which most of our controversies can be settled. He relies on our pluralism, our liberty and our regard for the individual and adds as essential ingredients, citizen morale and motivation.

Forcing our hands in all of this is what I believe to be the most stunning piece of research that has come to my attention this year. In the summer issue of *The Public Interest* is an essay titled, "Why Government Grows (and Grows) in a Democracy" by Allan H. Meltzer and Scott F. Richard. It is, I will admit, heavy going, but, in significance, a blockbuster.

No longer can we believe the controversial wisdom that government has grown in response to the New Deal and the Fair Deal, to unionism and to campaigns for public assistance -- and that all of this is recent and subject to review, and, perhaps, reversal.

Meltzer and Richard prove the contrary. They have researched the figures on taxes as a percentage of Gross National Product and on government employment as a percentage of

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the working force. They show that federal taxes have been increasing at a steady rate at least since 1792, doubling every 13 years, and since 1821, the numbers of people on the federal payroll have been growing at a similar measured rate.

They also tell us why. As we have long known, giving the voter what we want has always been the way to get elected, and if that means bigger government, so be it.

But those are not the facts that disturb me most.

Their study says that by the year 2000, which is only as far ahead of us as 1956 is behind us, the federal government will take about 45 percent of GNP in taxes and will employ about 25 percent of the labor force.

The trend-line says that in another 100 years, which is not too far away, the government will take all of our GNP in taxes, and with 50 percent of the labor force in its bureaucracy, everyone, in effect, will “work” for the government. This is mind-boggling.

Yet what reason can we have for expecting a major break in a two-century-long trend?

So the future is truly much more threatening than most of us think it is. The specter of a disappearing private sector looms. It’s irrational. We cannot imagine a United States of America with no private enterprises that create wealth. Who would pay the tax bills? But this line of inquiry, so far, has been conspicuous by its absence.

Some years ago I began worrying about this gap. I embarked on a project which is now approaching the final proposal stage. It grew out of the deep impression made on me by Robert and Helen Lynd’s landmark book, “Middletown” (New York: Harper Brace and Co., 1929). As you will remember, it was the result of a six-month, on-the-scene, in depth, sociological study of what actually went on in a city of 30-odd thousand men and women in the Midwest. For the first time, facts replaced suppositions and generalities.

My project calls for funding the field work of a team competent to elicit all the facts about the income and outgo of the real people in a real community. This time the entire emphasis will be on money: what is private sector money, what public sector money is, how it organizes, how it flows and how it irrevocably gets scrambles in the “mixed economy.”

The specialists with whom I have been working now say they have devised methods to get these results with useful accuracy, and I am encourage to believe that I can obtain the funding needed.

Supported by this study and others that I hope will follow, we can warn of the onrushing future in convincing detail. This information simply does not exist today.

I believe, further, that this Foundation can usefully turn its attention to another gap: uncovering more of the facts about proven public relations methods that are equal to the great task that I hope has emerged in the outline from my talk.

Adding to what we know, we will have to make more breakthroughs in contacting the masses of people.

Also, looking ahead, we must continue to learn how to participate in the primary opinion-forming process that belongs to the free press. In doing this, we will recognize, I earnestly hope, how futile it is to expect that even a vastly greater and quicker press has the obligation to transmit all, or even a good part, of the information that voters need to form wise judgments. That is our job, and because we are experienced in performing it, I see us working in a salutary relationship.

The scale on which we work in public relations must and will expand too.

At Byoir, we have had opportunities to accomplish goals that called for large-scale programs. In one case, within the last year, our staff members personally visited every sizable community in the ten most populous states, to discuss with the community groups and the local press the implications for them of a controversial subject that was of concern to one of our clients. Not surprising to us, we found that most of them had never heard of it. But when we went back again, a few weeks later, we found that there had been a lot of enlightenment generated.

Nine years have passed since the Children's Television Workshop was born. Its example is instructive.

Joan Ganz Cooney did not launch her idea for a television program for preschool youngsters until she had the guarantee of \$7 million in underwriting. Her budget for something that didn't yet exist included an ice-breaking program that we carried out, costing a quarter of a million dollars the first year.

The media helped, but in disadvantaged communities, they are not the factors they are elsewhere. So we had to innovate. We were interested in people who did not even own television sets; and yet we wanted them to find some way to tune in on stations they had never heard of.

We remembered old ways and invented new ones to communicate and to persuade. It took personal calls, handbills, sound trucks and the enlisted support of the members of hundreds of community organizations all over the country.

No one thinks it's news now, that, nine years later, nine million viewers regularly see "Sesame Street," and according to Nielsen, four out of five U.S. households with a child under 6 years of age, living in areas where it is broadcast, tune in.



If I have transgressed in citing this case, it's because I feel so strongly that the greatest weakness in public relations is not that we over promise, but that we underestimate. We either do not know what it takes to alter the beliefs and prejudices and habits of large numbers of people, or we are too easily persuaded that we can't get clients and principals to act on our recommendations. No self-respecting business organization would misjudge as badly as we do in the resources needed to get through to the millions of men and women it must reach.

I hope the Foundation will, with our help, increase its endeavors to document the capability of public relations and what is required to profit from its employment.

Do you understand now why I believe that the hour is striking *for* public relations? It summons us to the greater task, which I repeat once more, urgently needs the unique capabilities that you and I will make available.

We can spearhead a movement to get away from the tendency to always look for an antidote -- something used to prevent the bad effects of something else. The current "age of the antidote" must give way to a sensible large-scale endeavor to help the public judge wisely. That is what we need most. Soaring public expenditures, programs out of control and the prevailing mood of exasperation are the results of countless "quick fixes" that at the time seemed so logical, so beneficial.

The way out of our difficulties is to focus on the underlying principles that will support a free, democratic and yet vastly complicated society. This is a large order, but I believe that it can be filled.

The function of public relations, as I see it, is to uncover the facts about the interrelationships of people in today's world, and to make these facts so well understood that sensible people will make sensible judgments.

Judgment, finally, is all we have to work with. There are no facts about the future, and as one wise old client told me years ago, "Judgment is what you use when you don't have the facts."

I will leave you with this that I borrowed.

Wisdom is knowing what to do.  
Knowledge is knowing how to do it, and  
Success is doing it.

Is it really more easily said than done?