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“Public Relations: Trustee of the Possibility of a Free Society”

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Perhaps inevitably, in these waning months of the second century of the American experiment, any person chosen to present the Foundation Lecture would be drawn to reflect upon the values of the American Revolution; to consider their condition now; and to seek some meaning and significance to the role and practice of public relations. In any event, I am so drawn.

On the eve of their Bicentennial, Americans are discontent. Many are despairing. They sense the weight of great problems they feel they can't do much about. Yet they do not quite trust anyone who can. The notion that there is something inherently rotten about the American system clings to substantial numbers. Some believe, as they witness the rate of transfer of power from the people to their government, that 1984 is an optimistic timetable.

Many don't know what they think. Nathan Glazer says people have lost self-confidence in their ability to tell "right" from "wrong." They see so much legitimacy given by others to behavior and attitudes foreign to their own innermost values that they are fearful in public of doing more than express tolerance for everything they disagree with.

Yet old speechwriters these days had best be cautious about the symbols they invoke to establish common ground; perhaps only apple pie is safe.

The public mood is certainly far harder to read than when I accepted my first public relations assignment more than 30 years ago. Back then you almost knew in your bones the goals and shared values of the publics who created the environment in which you worked. Only the details of opinions on particular questions needed more than seat-of-the-pants research.

Now, one has to be conscious of a disintegration of consensus that complicates the task of every institution seeking to maintain public support.

It confronts the elected representatives of the people with divergent and too-often strident signals as they seek to respond to the public will. And because they are trying harder to listen, conscious of the low esteem in which their calling is now held, the outcome is often immobility, or at the

opposite extreme, the showmanship of bold but precipitant action.

But politicians are not alone. The leaders of American institutions of all kinds -- business, education, labor, the press, even charitable foundations -- are wondering what happened to their authority and their credibility. They, too, are trying harder to listen, often enough with similar result.

The radical dissenters have not stepped in to fill the leadership void as confidence in the various institutions of the Establishment fell. It is the view of the adversary culture that its role is to dispose; dealing with the problems is the job of others.

Thus things seem out of control, neither channeled by common consent nor quite entrusted to the expert organizations of society. A certain sense of heedlessness heightens the discontent. Americans are not so sure the future will be better for themselves, or for their children. And that's a change.

The state of the economy, after more than two golden decades, does not, of course, help. Not that the great American cookie jar had never emptied rapidly before. The difference is that this time it wasn't supposed to. The secret of managing the economy had been learned, it was said, and all those instruments and systems had been built into the governmental structure that would insure us against wide economic swings. That the machinery did not work as well as advertised is unsettling enough to the theorists: To a public riding high on a revolution of rising expectations it looks like another dirty deal.

Daniel Bell casts substantial light on why this should be so when he points out that the expectations had turned hedonistic, concerned with consumption and pleasure, while the revolution itself became transformed. He now names it the revolution of rising *entitlements* -- a demand not for equal opportunity, but for an equal outcome. It portends, he says, the emergence of a new kind of political economy. Obviously so, since it is through the political process rather than the discipline of the market that the demands are expected to be met.

From freedom of the people to pursue life, liberty and happiness under a limited government to which they consent, we have come to a point of critical demand overload upon government. Not just for consumption and pleasure, but for regulation in my interest and control on the other fellow who is in my way. We Americans have trod a curious path; curious, certainly, given the philosophy and conceptions of the Founding Fathers.

Some believed it was an inevitable path. Thomas Macaulay, British author and member of the House of Lords, was among them. He wrote to a fellow author in Baltimore in 1857 to express the view that the American Constitution was "all sail and no anchor." He forecast a day when hordes of people, voting for immediate gratifications and possessing the power to get what they thought they wanted, would bring down the government -- and threaten civilization to boot. Interestingly enough, the British form of government, which Lord Macaulay strongly favored, proved itself

unable to resist the pressures exerted by discontented majorities. This led to enveloping restraints on the capacity and initiative of the private sector as government control and regulation expanded.

There is a searing poignancy about such a scenario for the United States. For here, the whole idea was to launch the nation on what Max Ways has called "a proposition that dispersed power into millions of hands." Whoever wrote the headline on his *Fortune* article captured the consequence of that dispersal of power in a way that I cannot improve. The consequence, said the headline, was to release "a torrent of individual energies."

It was a dangerous step, something akin to inviting everybody to help themselves at a party in Fort Knox. Except that the power was dispersed within the bounds of a system founded upon belief in a Creator, observance of the principle of constitutionalism and the rule of law, encouragement of a free press and the nonpolitical governance of the market. And it wasn't all as easy as picking up gold bricks. So there were forces that restrained those energies and guided them as they thrust not only the economy but the social order of the United States forward to become the envy and the inspiration of the world.

I mentioned the title I had chosen for this lecture to a friend who, I thought, reacted strangely. "You are implying a conclusion," he said. In our brief conversation, he reflected his doubt that a free society is anything less than a certainty for the American people. I wish I were so sure.

What we have been witnessing recently are two strangely contradictory and disturbing developments: rising mistrust of government by the people, and growth in the scope and power of government. Simultaneously. And in a nation where the people are thought to be in charge. Everyone has theories about what has gone wrong. Depending on the company one is keeping, it is the failure of the church or of education; the greed of the businessman; the crookedness of the politician; the decay of our ideals; our loss of trust in one another, for whatever reason; a "pinko" Supreme Court; cynicism that keeps voters away from the polls; the alliance of the media with the adversary culture and the concentration of television in particular on the self-pity of every group asserting a grievance -- except in the case of the grievances of Establishment institutions; the infection of ideologies from strange cultures, notably reflected in the notion that someone owes us a living.

Irving Kristol has identified something else. He calls attention to the large numbers of professionals in the public and quasi-public sectors who have a vested interest in enlarging the redistribution of income, not from rich to poor within the private sector especially, but redistribution from the private sector to the public sector. These modern liberals, he says, "talk about equality, but the substance is about power." Because the movement of the money sustains them. And as politics supersedes economics, their highly educated talents enable them to bring disproportionate influence to bear to ensure results more meritorious in their eyes than if left to the common people exercising their right of decision in the vulgarly democratic marketplace.

"Social planners often appear to be less concerned in making the poor better off than in making

society conform more closely to their own ideas of social morality." So says the British sociologist Barbara Shenfield. She should know something about that.

It is beyond my ability to judge which, if any, or whether all of the ascribed causes may be responsible, but a fundamental change is evident. It has affected all institutions. Daniel Yankelovich says that on the surface we appear to have the old-style mixed economy, but the fact is that the mix is different now. That different mix, he says, threatens to unhinge the balance of public and private interests "and to undermine both."

With the new mix, American business finds more of its really critical decisions being made in legislative halls and regulatory hearing rooms than in any period aside from all-out war. Regulation by government is pervasive and growing. And the struggle of the corporations to deal with their problem of capital formation -- to name just one problem -- will be unlikely to contribute to the goal of the Federal Full Employment Act, to plentiful supplies in the marketplace, to social amity or to a badly needed, workable business-government relationship.

"Capitalism is in crisis," says Alan Greenspan, known as a conservative. Well, maybe no one should weep over that. Isn't capitalism something kind of bad, anyway? But next comes Otto Eckstein, known as a liberal, and he's saying he fears that pressures on the capitalist system will "hasten the day when the individual foundation of our society is gone." That is a horse of a different color.

"Capitalism." "Conservative." "Liberal." How our words have a way of getting their meaning twisted up! Peter Drucker says he dislikes hearing businessmen deplore the trend toward "socialism" because if "socialism" still means ownership of the means of production by the workers, than the United States is the most "socialist" nation in the world.

He points out that pension funds alone, ignoring direct ownership and all other forms of indirect ownership, account for about 30 percent of the assets of American industry, and the percentage is growing. Ownership of the securities of corporations is not the whole story, however. To get the true picture of "capitalism" in the United States, you would have to look at the millions of proprietorships and partnerships fully owned by the individuals and families who are also the employees. Or is that "socialism"?

To be pure about it, equating businessman and "capitalist" is a contradiction unless he's a businessman who doesn't receive a salary, in which case he shouldn't be known as a businessman. Either I scarcely know a handful of "capitalists" or I know a whale of a lot of them.

Dr. Eckstein's worry about the individual foundation of society as government moves in on business is quite understandable. We are all overwhelmingly involved in the system. The interrelationship of our personal liberties and our interdependence as a people are too intimate to imagine that when the bell tolls the loss of any freedom, it tolls only for someone else.

To my friend who doubts that anything less than a free society lies ahead for the American people: I must say your optimism is delightful, but it will take more than optimism to have a fair shot at such a future. It will take, first of all, a conscious dedication to the goal of a free society on the part of all the institutions we think of today as the Establishment. And it will take guts.

Before offering such thoughts as I have concerning the implications to public relations specifically, I owe it to myself to disabuse you of the notion that old Weston is issuing a call for a return to McKinley. I'm sure none of you thinks I'm saying, "On to Flower Power!" It is neither that I have in mind when I use the term, free society.

What I am talking about is simply the ability of the American people to retain control over their government.

There are dangers of two kinds. One is the massive inertial force, either at rest or in motion, of an organization -- if government can be called an organization -- that may be beyond management now, yet still growing. A staff of some 17,000 people serves the members of Congress, as one case in point. That staff is likely to increase by 10 percent this year. The citizen who feels he has registered his views directly into the pearly ear of his very own congressman would more often than not be chagrined to learn just how many layers of the staff his carefully worded letter actually penetrated. The staff is a screen for those who seek appointments, and a filter through which the member receives most of his information. It is in the nature of things that the staff's first concern is the member's privilege, prerogative and longevity.

Government has a tendency also to feed upon its own power, to grow inexorably, and to seek new frontiers and things to do. If there were time, we might consider some detail about the independent agencies and departments. But it is a truism that controls breed controls, and there is such a thing in nature and in human affairs as a point of no return. Far too infrequently do regulators put their own brakes on, as one FTC Commissioner did in a recent advertising case. "Surely," he wrote, "we can find more important work for our legal staff than litigating the questions of whether somebody's underarm deodorant is 'dry' in the 'non-liquid' sense or in the 'non-oily' sense."

The second danger is agitation by the people themselves for government intervention. Efforts by private sector institutions to obtain privileges or a sheltered position represent one kind of agitation. Today's generation of business managers, fuming under a tangle of government regulations, have an earlier generation of business managers to thank for having led the hat-in-hand parade to Washington. When government becomes the provider of good, surely the day arrives when it becomes the provider of bad as well.

Another form of agitation for government intervention arises out of the dissatisfactions of people in their relationships with private sector institutions and their sense of frustration in seeking redress of felt wrongs. Activists demanding that government "do something" may meet with success on occasion purely out of their acquired skills in commanding media attention embarrassing to the

public figure who is made to appear callous by his inactivity. But the activists are most successful when they articulate legitimate grievances.

Public relations people are in the middle of all these processes that expand government and shrink private initiative. I am not saying they are responsible for the fact that the processes occur; simply that they are, first of all, positioned at the intersections and, secondly, they are individuals who carry responsibilities that influence the outcome. They serve government, education, organized labor, business, foundations, voluntary organizations, charities, at least some of the media and probably other categories I've missed.

These are all Establishment institutions, and all are creatures of a free society. Their legitimacy rests on their creation, growth and continuance over time by and through the support of citizens who were quite properly exercising their personal liberties to serve their interests and desires. Whether those interests and desires took the form of advancing some selfless human or social purpose, or whether they were, grounded on hope of reward for rendering a service or providing a product, all are legitimate -- and it takes more than the claims of critics to de-legitimize them.

Lately, however, American institutions have displayed a tendency to run for cover when their legitimacy is attacked. Customarily, they let their fellow institutions struggle unassisted. Worse yet, they too often call down a pox on one another, sometimes to defend their own flanks, and sometimes to gain an advantage. It is a practice that undermines public confidence in first one part, then another, of the system that nurtures them all. If they don't understand what they are doing, it's time they did.

The first need of every such institution is the nerve to assert its legitimacy and to be prepared to do so in a way that accurately but unmistakably relates its purposes to human aspirations and social goals. Who in the institution, if not its public relations people, is better able to understand the dynamics of its sociopolitical environment? Who can better identify the commonalities of the interests of its constituencies and the larger community with its own? Who can express its purposes more effectively? Who, in other words, is in a better position to exert some leadership?

A certain internal educational effort is an essential part of providing such leadership. The process includes, of course, developing the institution's understanding of its own environment. But most importantly it also includes raising this question: What are we here for? Business management tends to answer without hesitation: To make a profit. One must inquire, then: Shall we ask for public support on grounds that we want to make a profit?

Thoughtful discussion of purpose within the leadership is required if any ensuing expression is to be more than "a public relations" -- pardon the term -- statement. Absent that serious and purposeful discussion, what is said and what is real will likely be dissimilar. The ability of the members of the institution to communicate on its behalf will probably be diminished -- rather than strengthened -- for the problem of credibility will be intensified. And policy and performance will be unaffected.

I am distressed on occasion to hear public relations people describe the public relations function solely in terms of communication, even to the point of suggesting that some new name indicative of the emphasis on communication be adopted as a substitute. Those who pioneered the field correctly understood that when institutions encounter hostile attitudes or find support melting away, it is not necessarily because their constituents and others don't understand what they are hearing. It is also possible that they don't like what they are experiencing.

The way people experience an institution has its origins in the institution's policies, which are in turn grounded in purpose. When public relations people opt out of involvement with policy, they limit their usefulness, and especially so now. For it seems evident that regaining credibility and confidence for American institutions will require more than talk.

If the public relations man or woman initiates an exploration of purpose as a starting point to influence policy and performance, numerous roadblocks will be encountered. The leaders of most institutions are true believers, confident of the rightness of what they do and the way they do it. If there is a problem, it's just what other people don't understand.

Some courage is required to assert that this is not necessarily the case. Even to question may raise doubts about one's loyalty.

But how well the public relations practitioner succeeds in retaining some distance and objectivity, resisting the almost irresistible pull toward total absorption into the view of the world held by the leadership of his institution, will critically affect his ability to be truly useful. Maintaining that distance is a cause of constant tension. It conceivably is a major reason for the frequent exclusion from the inner circle of those practitioners who succeed too well!

Well, no one I know ever said public relations is easy. The practitioner can't whip out a lab report that proves it's malignant and referring to Blackstone is someone else's bag. The practitioner may have absorbed an enormous amount of information, and may have a unique skill in analyzing what he or she sees based on training, experience, judgment and instinct. But it comes down to the practitioner and The Chief, or perhaps a council of chiefs and the outcome will depend upon the practitioner's interpersonal skills and track record. Admittedly, it is tempting to cop out... Yes, Sir! It's just a little lack of understanding. We'll communicate, communicate, communicate!

The implications of trusteeship for a free society call for a cop-in. First of all, to grasp the nettle in a dedicated effort to make sure that the institutions we serve are not a source of the public discontents that culminate in agitation for a new law or another or more powerful government agency. That is basic, and I do not mean to minimize its importance in the least when I say that trusteeship for a free society demands even more. It demands that we:

1. Resolve that we have personal responsibilities for freedom. Few are more strategically positioned to affect the pivotal attitudes -- we just haven't given it priority;

2. Use all the powers of persuasion and influence we possess to stand against actions by our own institutions that encourage the assumption of greater authority by government;
3. Discharge our responsibilities in ways that avoid disparaging and inflaming public attitudes against other American institutions;
4. Shun the easy adjustment of capitulation as a way of smoothing relationships when values worth fighting for are at stake, or when understanding may be gained with more patience and effort;
5. Give our personal time to the development of collaborative, mutually supportive efforts embracing institutions in all categories who share the recognition that we are in the boat together, and it's leaking badly.

There *are* some lighted candles on the shore, and here and there a spark. Increasing numbers of thoughtful people are speaking out and writing on the urgency of maintaining a healthy private sector. Recognition is dawning in surprising places that there *are* some things government can't do well, or at all. It is evident, too, that Americans by the millions are beginning to respond to the idea of a Bicentennial celebration and I sense in their attraction to historical displays and pageantry an eagerness to review first principles. Certainly there is a longing for things to believe in, for values to be shared.

The trusteeship I am urging is, nevertheless, no easy responsibility. It requires a patriotic sense of mission in all that we do. I dislike being as dramatic as to refer to an earlier commitment expressed in the solemn words "lives, fortunes and sacred honor." But that sets the tone.

In "Fiddler on the Roof," Tevye called out to the Lord to say it's nice to be the chosen people, but do we have to be chosen every time?

We should be grateful, it seems to me, to be at the intersections of the social, political, economic and technological forces shaping the American destiny, to have the natural interests and abilities to be involved in affecting the course of events, and to be chosen at a time when, well, there is a possibility we might just pull it off.