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The Selling of the Executive Branch— Public Information or Promotion?

The government's thousands of public affairs and information specialists not only inform the public but also promote the Administration's policy and programs.

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If they agree on little else, friends and critics share the view that Ronald Reagan is a "skilled communicator," probably the best to occupy the White House since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Indeed, Reagan's communications skills, a legacy of his movie and television background, have created an awareness within his Administration of the significance of the media in educating the electorate, gaining political support and mobilizing a national coalition.

"Reagan understands that better than any of us," said Frank Ursomarso, White House director of communications. "In that sense, we are all students of his at the game."

Presidential scholars recognize the role of the chief executive as communicator. In a Ford Foundation report on *Studying the Presidency*, Hugh Heclo of Harvard University wrote: "The major theme to be found in didactic literature on the presidency is that the President's power is that of persuasion rather than command."

In his starring role as Administration spokesman, lobbyist and drum beater, Reagan is supported, as the old movie ads proclaim, by "a cast of thousands."

Strategically placed throughout the federal bureaucracy is a massive, amorphous network of public affairs specialists responsible for dispensing information about government services and programs at one level and promoting them on another. The former is essentially an educational function, the latter is primarily political in nature. It is this dichotomy that has traditionally bred confusion and suspicion about federal public affairs operations.

At least part of the problem is that the line between the need to inform as a public service and the desire to gain

popular support for political objectives has never been satisfactorily delineated. There is not even a clear definition of what constitutes government public affairs. Moreover, it is not known how many federal employees are engaged in what is broadly construed as public relations—preferably referred to in the bureaucracy as public affairs or public information—or what the total costs are, mainly because of misleading job titles in numerous instances and budgets that camouflage the outlays.

This is no less accurate today than in 1979 when Sen. Abraham Ribicoff, D-Conn., then chairman of the Governmental Affairs Committee, stated in conjunction with a report released by the General Accounting Office (GAO) on federal public affairs activities: "So effective have government agencies been in cloaking their PR types in disguises that it is now literally impossible to keep track of them."

As defined by the GAO, public affairs is an "umbrella term" covering a wide range of informational activities, including "press releases, reports, news conferences, photographs, speeches, publications, exhibits, audio-visual materials, advertising and facilities for answering daily questions from journalists and taxpayers." The GAO, however, makes a distinction between those activities and public "campaigns" with political overtones.

An Internal Revenue Service brochure advising taxpayers on how to fill out their annual returns, for example, would be educational. But the 21-page "executive briefing book" called "President Reagan's Program for Economic Recovery," which is published by the White House and carries the presidential seal, is a device to win political support for the Administration's program.

One might go even further and note

that the White House office of public liaison, established by President Nixon, institutionalized by Presidents Ford and Carter and perpetuated by President Reagan, is a formalized mechanism to influence popular opinion by directly appealing to and dealing with organized interest groups—thus cutting out the press as an intermediary. That is public affairs "campaigning" on a grand scale, or as some academics have called it, "lobbying the lobbyists."

Using federal funds for lobbying purposes is against the law. But in a kind of masquerade, it is conveniently perceived in Washington as simply issue politics or, to be even more genteel, as a form of public education.

Be that as it may, the expenditure in money and manpower for government public affairs remains a mystery.

As of October 1979, the Office of Personnel Management listed only 2,956 information specialists. This, as government spokesmen readily concede, is an exceedingly deceptive figure. Said an official of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB): "It is an area not easily controlled, where personnel and budget figures are often hidden. Much of it is a definitional problem: people may have public affairs jobs but are called something else."

Unofficial estimates in 1977 placed the number of federal employees involved in some facet of public relations at more than 19,000 and the cost in excess of \$400 million, about half of it accounted for by the U.S. Information Agency (now the International Communication Agency), which provides information abroad. (See *NJ*, 7/23/77, p. 1140.)

That now seems on the conservative side. A study of current departmental public affairs operations shows a budget increase in almost every case, indicating that it could conceivably cost about a