

All great leaders have been spinners—public opinion manipulators—to some extent. Was there ever any greater spin than that of the ancient divine right of kings? The Vikings called a frozen island in the North Atlantic “Greenland” and their foothold in what is now eastern Canada “Vineland.” While there was not much green and fewer vines, some settlers were initially encouraged by the sharply spun names.

Mailed fist ■

A tightened hand in chain mail armor, a traditional symbol of military might and oppression.

Leak ■

The deliberate disclosure of confidential or classified information by someone in government who wants to advance the public interest, embarrass a bureaucratic rival, or help a reporter disclose incompetence or skulduggery to the public. As *New York Times* reporter James Reston (1909–1995) often said: “The government is the only known vessel that leaks from the top.”

Trial balloon ■

A deliberate leak of a potential policy to see what public response will be. The term comes from the meteorological practice of sending up a balloon to test weather conditions. If public response is hostile, the new policy proposal can be quietly dropped (or deflated).

Propaganda is spin in action. At its core is the manipulation of people’s beliefs, values, and behavior by using symbols (such as flags, music, or oration) and other psychological tools. In effect, it is the management of public opinion. Propaganda is the older term for what we now call public relations, a government’s mass dissemination of true information about its policies and the policies of its adversaries—or alternatively, similar dissemination that is untruthful (sometimes called black propaganda). The term itself stems from the Congregation of Propaganda set up by the Roman Catholic Church in 1622 to propagate its views and to refute the views of Protestants and those considered heretics.

The growth of democracy and mass political awareness presented new possibilities for propaganda. So too has the development of the mass media, which all governments use to influence their publics. The concept was introduced into American political science after World War I when British news reports of German atrocities (both real and imagined) were indicted as having influenced American attitudes toward entry into the war. This fostered Harold D. Lasswell’s landmark analysis *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1927). Ever since World War II, when the German Ministry of Propaganda under Joseph Goebbels broadcast one lie after another, the term has taken on a sinister connotation. Goebbels musically advised to: “Think of the press as a great keyboard on which the government can play” (*Time* March 27, 1933). While Goebbels has been dead since 1945, his example still inspires modern governments—especially those of corrupt dictators. But even democratic governments use the “great keyboard” as Goebbels so helpfully suggested.

Propaganda today is no longer presented with the heavy hand of the **mailed fist**. It is subtle, delicate, almost subliminal. Modern propaganda is offered to a TV-addicted public as a media event, an activity undertaken as a means of generating publicity from the news media. The defining criterion for a media event is that it would not be done if cameras and reporters were not present. Examples include an orchestrated news **leak**, the releasing of **trial balloons**, protest demonstrations scheduled for the convenience of the early evening television news programs, or a walk through a poor or ethnic neighborhood by a candidate for public office to demonstrate meaningful (meaning photogenic) concern. These pseudo-events, historian Daniel J. Boorstin’s term for nonspontaneous, planted, or manufactured “news,” are designed to gain publicity for the person or cause which arranged the “event.”

Cunning politicians throughout the ages have instinctively practiced effective public relations. Some techniques are timeless. When William Shakespeare's Richard III wanted to enhance his seeming worthiness to be king among the masses, he conspicuously went about carrying a Bible. President Bill Clinton did the same when the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke in 1998. The following Sunday he went hand in hand with his wife to church while conspicuously carrying his Bible. The Bible, in addition to its other uses, is a time-honored public relations prop.

But it was only in the twentieth century that public relations advanced beyond politics to become a self-conscious management art, even a profession. Edward L. Bernays (1891–1995) is generally considered to be its founding practitioner. He was the first to make big money selling his ideas on how to influence public opinion on products as well as politicians. He took his skills as an experienced New York theatrical press agent and his understanding of psychology from being **Sigmund Freud**'s nephew (his mother was Freud's sister) and sought to mold public attitudes. For example, in the 1930s Procter & Gamble wanted to sell more Ivory soap. But children didn't like soap. So Bernays came up with the National Soap Sculpture Contest, an annual event whereby a million children got their hands dirty carving Ivory soap.

The American Tobacco Company, makers of Lucky Strike cigarettes, wanted to sell more cigarettes to women. But respectable women didn't smoke and certainly not in public. How to encourage them? In answer to Uncle Sigi's (as he called Freud) famous question, "What does a woman want?" Bernays decided that a woman wants to be thin. So he came up with an advertising campaign that featured slender women smoking as the ad copy read: "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet." He then associated smoking with women's rights by having fashionable ladies puffing away on their "torches of freedom," as he called their cigarettes, during the 1929 Easter Parade in New York City. Finally he arranged for experts such as doctors to endorse the benefits of smoking. Women eventually achieved equality with men in smoking—and in lung cancer. Meanwhile, Uncle Sigi, a famous cigar smoker, was gradually dying of throat cancer. All the while Bernays knew enough about the dangers of smoking that he did not smoke himself (he lived to the age of 103) and insisted that his wife and children not smoke as well.

Bernays always sought quite consciously to associate what he was selling with powerful symbols. Smoking was liberating for women. When President Calvin Coolidge, a politician who had an image as a sourpuss, needed help getting elected president in 1924, Bernays very publicly associated him with cheerful smiling people from the New York Broadway theaters. When in the early 1950s a client, the United Fruit Company, was having its banana plantations expropriated by the new leftist government in Guatemala, he made the issue a part of the Cold War by announcing that this **banana republic** had become a bastion of Soviet influence. This encouraged the CIA in 1954 to

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**Sigmund Freud
(1856–1939) ■**

The Austrian medical doctor who became the founder of psychoanalysis.

Banana republic ■

A frivolous unstable republic; one that changes its laws, leaders, and constitutions too casually. The phrase is a pejorative way of referring to Latin American countries because of the historically unstable nature of their regimes.

sponsor a coup that brought in a government that was friendly to the United Fruit Company. Bernays's tactics earned him the title "father of spin."

If Bernays is the "father of spin," then all current practitioners are his disciples—whether they have ever heard of him or not. They all seek for their candidate or incumbent a defining moment that will symbolically etch their man (or woman) into the minds of the public. Sometimes it occurs in a speech, as when President Franklin D. Roosevelt during his 1933 inaugural address at the height of the **Great Depression** told the nation: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Or when President John F. Kennedy told a joint session of Congress on May 25, 1961: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth." This the United States achieved in 1969.

Perhaps the best-known defining moment in recent history occurred on September 11, 2001. As the fires were still burning in the rubble of the World Trade Center, New York City's mayor, Rudy Giuliani, stood before the world's news cameras and announced in a commanding yet compassionate voice that the "number of casualties will be more than any of us can bear." For his actions on that day, when he truly had to run for his life to escape falling debris, he became "America's mayor" and, eventually, a viable presidential candidate. Yet, if you look closely at his management efforts before and after that day you may find more public relations than substance. Yes, crime went down in New York City; but it also went down in almost every other major American city as well. Fiscally, his city was in great shape; but this was mainly the result of the economic boom of the 1990s. Tellingly, many of his city's firefighters do not feel he was such a great manager. In July of 2007, the International Association of Firefighters released a video denouncing "America's mayor" as an "urban legend." One reason: because so many more firefighters than police officers died on September 11. Why? Because most of the police, who had radios that worked, were told to exit the Twin Towers in time to reach safety. The firefighters, who were carrying obsolete and/or defective radios, didn't get the word in time. Budget priorities are ultimately the responsibility of the mayor, and they often turn out to be matters of life or death.

Probably the leader who has been most defined by a historical moment than any other in recent memory is President George W. Bush. In 2003 he told his nation that he was using his authority as commander in chief of the armed forces of the United States to invade Iraq to forestall its use of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). When it turned out that no such weapons were to be found, he was branded a liar by his critics. It didn't matter whether he believed that WMDs were there or not. The fact that they could not be found defined him as a liar. There seemed no way—despite his best efforts—that he could spin himself out of the contention that he took his country to war under false premises.

Great Depression ■

The period between the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, and World War II, when the United States and the rest of the Western world experienced the most severe economic decline in the twentieth century. The main focus of the New Deal was to lessen privations caused by the Depression and to create regulatory structures and economic policies that would modify the severity of the normal business cycle. It would cause President Franklin D. Roosevelt to say in his second inaugural address, January 20, 1937, that: "I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." Because the Great Depression started during the Republican Hoover administration, the Democrats have ever since blamed Republicans in general for it.

The ultimate lesson here is that major management decisions must always be made with an eye to public relations—with an eye to how the public will perceive your efforts. This is cynically illustrated by the organization that decides to spend a million dollars on pollution control and 10 million to advertise it. Obviously, the public relations benefits available are perceived to be far greater than the actual pollution controlled. Thus many of the most visible “management” initiatives of governments and corporations must be scrutinized carefully enough to ascertain if they are for real or really just public relations.

Public relations is a tool with no inherent values. It is used by despicable tyrants to hide their villainy, by incompetent managers to cover up their ineptitude, and by honest administrators to inform the public about how that public's business is being run. Thus it becomes the obligation of astute citizens to learn to see behind the public relations veil to determine if they are being tyrannized, mismanaged, or properly served by their public servants. The propaganda of the modern age spews forth from the benign face of a press secretary whose job may be as much to obscure as to reveal the truth. But you, dear reader, have no more important job than to ascertain the facts of the situation so that you may function better as an administrator and as a citizen.

For Discussion: *Is public relations as practiced by government leaders a new management skill or just one that is newly analyzed? Can you offer recent examples of “defining moments” by public officials or candidates for public office?* ▲