8

Unseen Engineers: Biography of an Idea

By the early 1920s, the pragmatic lessons of the war, coupled with the prevailing wisdom of social psychology, had moved a growing sector of the American intelligentsia to two conclusions. First was the belief that a modern, large-scale society, such as the United States, required the services of a corps of experts, people who specialized in the analysis and management of public opinion. Second was the conviction that these "unseen engineers"—as Harold Lasswell called them—were dealing with a fundamentally illogical public and therefore must learn to identify and master those techniques of communication that would have the most compelling effect on public attitudes and thinking.

Nowhere did these concerns merge more eloquently than in the thinking of two men whom we have already encountered. One was Walter Lippmann who was, by the 1920s, America's most esteemed theorist and advocate of public-opinion management. The other was Edward L. Bernays, a former theatrical press agent and evangelist for the Committee on Public Information (CPI), who—from the twenties onward—built upon many of Lippmann's insights and applied them in general practice. Together, the impact of these men on the shape of twentieth-century American society would be colossal.

Though only in his early thirties, Lippmann had been influencing American social and political thought for more than a decade. Over those years he had gravitated from an earlier commitment to the ideal of popular sovereignty toward a more cynical and utilitarian outlook,

one that historian Robert B. Westbrook characterized as "democratic realism."

"The democratic realists of the twenties," Westbrook wrote, "focused their criticism of democracy on two of its essential beliefs:

> the belief in the capacity of all men for rational political action and the belief in the practicality and desirability of maximizing the participation of all citizens in public life. Finding ordinary men and women irrational and participatory democracy impossible and unwise under modern conditions, they argued that it was best to strictly limit government by the people and to redefine democracy as, by and large, government for the people by enlightened and responsible elites.[1]

At the heart of this perspective was the problem of how to mediate between the democratic aspirations of *ordinary men and women* and the conviction that elites must be able to govern without the impediment of an active or participatory public. For Lippmann, the ability to "manufacture consent," to employ techniques that could assemble mass support behind executive action, was the key to solving this modern puzzle.[2] In two important books—the widely hailed *Public Opinion,* published in 1922, and a lesser-known book, *The Phantom Public,* which appeared five years later—Lippmann laid out his ideas on how this formidable objective might be accomplished.

Lippmann's analysis rested on a set of assumptions regarding the ways he thought ordinary people experienced the world. Though he accepted the existence of an objective reality and believed that scientific intelligence was, through careful study, capable of comprehending it, Lippmann argued that the average person was incapable of seeing that world clearly, much less understanding it. Recalling Plato's well-known parable of the cave, Lippmann maintained that it was humanity's fate to engage with the world not in immediate proximity to its events, but primarily through "pictures in our heads."

The gulf between perception and reality, Lippmann believed, was an ancient one, yet it had widened significantly with the rise of "The Great Society": a modern world in which geographic distance; the complexities of social, political, and economic life; and the hypnotic pull of the mass

Walter Lippmann
NIKOLAS MURAY

media spawned conditions in which the authority of such "pictures" was becoming more and more prevalent.[3] In this increasingly cosmopolitan society, he maintained, new technologies and new networks for disseminating words, sounds, and images had irrevocably transformed the wellsprings of common knowledge. As the world grew larger and more complex, people's ability to make sense of their universe was becoming less and less grounded in the terrain of immediate experience. Against the tangible immediacy of people's lives, he recounted, worldviews were being educated by words and pictures carried from afar. Formulating a quintessentially twentieth-century vocabulary, Lippmann argued that mass-mediated words and pictures commingled in people's minds, constituting a credible—though often fallacious—"pseudo-environment," a virtual reality informing ordinary thought and behavior.[4] In the process, an increasingly precarious architecture of truth was taking hold.

For Lippmann, the propensity to live according to "the medium of fictions" was fortified from two directions. First—inspired by the political insights of his mentor, Graham Wallas, and underscored by Freud's analysis of the unconscious—Lippmann asserted that innate human psychology was little inclined toward logic. "We do not know for certain how to act according to the dictates of reason," he wrote. "The number of human problems on which reason is prepared to dictate is small."[5] Public opinion, therefore, was an essentially "irrational force."[6]

Second—reflecting an amalgam of Pavlovian psychology and anthropological thinking—Lippmann believed that "man's reflexes are . . . conditioned."[7] People's ways of seeing and experiencing their world were nothing more than an extension of their cultural milieu, of a commonly held way of seeing and experiencing reality—common fictions or, as Lippmann put it, "the habits of our eyes."

Not only events that occur beyond the physical orbit of people's lives, but even immediate experiences were invariably filtered through a set of previously existing cultural outlooks and expectations. These habitual ways of seeing, he continued, were organized around a battery of "stereotypes," mutually shared mental templates that—in advance—gave shape and meaning to the experiences that people had and the ways that they visualized them.

In contrast to conscientious scientific analysis—which strives to sustain an objective relationship with the subject matter being studied—run-of-the-mill patterns of thought were, to Lippmann, trapped within self-fulfilling systems of categorization. For most people, then, objective understanding was unattainable.

> For the most part we do not first see, and then define. We define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.[8]

He elaborated on this process further:

> We imagine most things before we experience them. And these preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. . . . They are aroused by small signs. . . . Aroused, they flood fresh vision with older images and project into the world what has been resurrected in memory.[9]

Lippmann asserted that this was the way that cultures invariably operate. "[H]ighly charged with the feelings that are attached to them," a given culture's repertoire of stereotypes is the glue that

binds people to one another within a group, providing them with the underpinnings of their "universe," establishing the invisible "fortress" by which they maintain their "tradition(s)."[10]

Lippmann's discourse on the foundations of human knowledge led him in two directions at once. First, consistent with his democratic realism, it buttressed his repudiation of the "original dogma of democracy," an Enlightenment ideal that assumed people's ability to comprehend rationally and act on their world. If people cannot accurately know their world, he inquired, how can they be expected to act wisely on it?[11]

Second, Lippmann's stark contrast between customary thinking and scientific analysis suggested that while an average person was beguiled by a "medium of fictions," a scientifically trained "social analyst" was in a position to identify and manipulate the ways these fictions would operate. If patterns of perception can be unearthed, if scientists can uncover the "habits" of people's eyes, they may also learn to engineer "pseudo-environments" that could persuade people to see their "larger political environment . . . more successfully."[12] As Ronald Steele, Lippmann's biographer, explained, Lippmann's epistemology "showed why reason alone could not explain human behavior," yet "at the same time suggested how emotions could be channeled by reason."[13] "Though it is itself an irrational force," Lippmann explained, dredging up Gustave Le Bon's vision of the dreaded crowd, "the power of public opinion might be placed at the disposal of those who stood for workable law as against brute assertion."[14]

This capacity to harness public opinion demanded a working knowledge of the modern social and psychological sciences to monitor and chart the unconscious forces at work behind the facade of public opinion. "The new psychology . . . the study of dreams, fantasy and rationalization," he indicated, "has thrown light on how the pseudo-environment is put together." The would-be director of public opinion must also be conversant with customary patterns of influence, the psychodynamics of leadership within the population he wishes to influence, and the ways that leaders have historically been able to sow ideas in other people's minds.[15]

With this model of cognitive engineering in mind, Lippmann's most practical contribution to public relations thinking was his sys-

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Figure 1: Matthew Brady portrait of candidate Lincoln.

Figure 1: Engraving based on Brady portrait.

Today it is difficult to imagine a successful political candidate whose face is not known to the public-at-large. This has not always been true. The visual packaging of politicians only dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when photography began to allow physical appearances to circulate as never before. The first presidential candidate to benefit from this development was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's election prospects were enhanced by an 1860 campaign photo portrait of him, made by the prominent New York studio photographer Matthew Brady. [See Figure 1]

In life Lincoln is said to have been a homely looking man, with a protruding adam's apple and a deeply furrowed face. In present-day parlance, he was not photogenic. Given this liability, Brady used photographic license to transform Lincoln into a more physically attractive candidate.

Photographic historian Susan Kismaric describes the process: "In preparing his subject for the 'shoot,' Brady modified Lincoln's gangling appearnace by pulling up the candidate's collar to make his neck look shorter; he also retouched the photograph to remove the harsh lines in Lincoln's face."*

Thus embellished, Lincoln's face was ready for public dissemination. The portrait "was reproduced as a line engraving in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* [See Figure 2] and *Harper's Weekly*....It was also used on campaign posters and buttons...." Lincoln, according to Kismeric, credited Brady's portrait—in large part—for his election to the presidency.

* Susan Kismeric, *American Politicians: Photographs from 1845 to 1993* (New York, 1994), pp. 14-15.

ARCHIE BISHOP

tematic approach to how media might be understood and exploited. It was not enough, for example, to see the press as the shaper of public opinion. Modern leadership required specialists who would formulate how the press itself would cover a given issue. "[P]ublic opinions must be organized *for the press* if they are to be sound, not *by the press* as is the case today." Political science was, for Lippmann, the science that would frame public opinions for the press.[16] Its primary aim would be perception management.

Developing ideas that would become twentieth-century public relations catechism, Lippmann cautioned that to govern the way that the press will cover an event, access to that event must be consciously restricted. "A group of men who can prevent independent access to the event" are in a position to "arrange news of it to suit their purposes." He continued:

> Without some form of censorship, propaganda in the strict sense of the word is impossible. In order to conduct a propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks is wise or desirable.[17]

Central to Lippmann's vision of successful propaganda were his insights regarding the unparalleled powers of persuasion being uncovered by modern technologies of mass communication, particularly the cinema. Social psychologists, from Le Bon onward, had repeatedly declared the power of symbols to galvanize the crowd mind, but such pronouncements rarely moved beyond a cryptic, somewhat cabalistic, plane of analysis. Lippmann was among the first to take such metaphysical assertions and ground them in a practical analysis of the modern media system. He delineated the specific ways that images and narrative conventions worked on an audience and how they might be used.

Key to his exegesis was the belief that "pictures," "visualization" generally, provided the most effective passageways into inner life. "Pictures," he postulated, "have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory."[18]

Modern life, Lippmann was convinced, had spawned technical conditions that allowed this capacity to be exploited as never before. If previous modes of mass communication—the printed word in particular—required an educated process of decoding to be understood, new media had made the process of interpretation "effortless." With cinema, a way of seeing reached an audience predigested. Mesmerizing likenesses of reality itself, movies provided a powerful model that could instruct the propagandist on how he might efficaciously construct "pseudo-environments."

> In the whole experience of the race there has been no aid to visualization comparable to the cinema. . . .
>
> Photographs have a kind of authority over the imagination to-day, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable. Any description in words, or even any inert picture, requires an effort of memory before a picture exists in the mind. But on the screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting, and then imagining, has been accomplished for you. Without more trouble than is needed to stay awake the result which your imagination is always aiming at is reeled off on the screen. The shadowy idea becomes vivid.[19]

For Lippmann, however, the ability to enlist the public eye was not simply a result of new visual technologies. Strategies of mass impression were also being revealed by the ways that these new technologies were being used. A still youthful film industry was in the midst of developing narrative formulas—approaches to storytelling—that presented the propagandist with powerful inklings of how the emotions of the public might be effectively rallied. Inspired by the example of Hollywood, Lippmann began to envision game plans for persuasion that, though novel within his world, are today standard practices.

"In order not to sit inertly in the presence of the picture," Lippmann noted, "the audience must be exercised by the image." (This conclusion mirrored Freud's theory of "object cathexis," the process by which a person's innermost desires or ideals are projected onto an external object or another human being.) Hollywood, Lippmann observed, routinely achieved this state of being by providing visual "handles for identification," signals by which an audience might immediately and unconsciously learn "who the hero is," and so on.

Applying psychoanalytic insights to the task of propaganda, Lippmann emphasized the importance of *identification* in the psychic life of an audience as a device for capturing an audience's affections.

> In order . . . that the distant situation shall not be a gray flicker on the edge of attention, it should be capable of translation into pictures in which the opportunity for identification is recognizable. Unless that happens it will interest only a few for a little while. It will belong to the sights seen but not felt, to the sensations that beat on our sense organs, and are not acknowledged. *We have to take sides. We have to be able to take sides. In the recesses of our being we must step out of the audience on to the stage, and wrestle as the hero for the victory of good over evil. We must breathe into the allegory the breath of life.*[20]

Simply put, the distance between an audience's unconscious desires and the drama they are watching must be strategically dissolved. "The formula works," Lippmann explained, "when the public fiction enmeshes itself with a private urgency."

To promulgate such opportunities for identification, Lippmann instructed, propagandists must also learn from popular tastes in movies. Projected pseudo-environments must successfully negotiate between the public's *fantasy life* and their sense of *what is possible.* "Our popular taste," he calculated, "is to have the drama originate in a setting realistic enough to make identification plausible and to have it terminate in a setting romantic enough to be desirable, but not so romantic as to be inconceivable."[21]

Raised in a world that looked toward fact-based journalism as the most efficient lubricant of persuasion, Lippmann turned toward Hollywood, America's "dream factory," for inspiration. Never before had an American thinker articulated in such detail the ways that images could be used to sway public consciousness. Appeals to reason were not merely being discarded as futile, they were being consciously undermined to serve the interests of power. It is here, at the turning point where Lippmann unqualifiedly abandoned the idea of meaningful public dialogue, that the dark side of his ruminations on the power of the image was most dramatically revealed.

Throughout the pages of *Public Opinion,* Lippmann had asserted that human beings were, for the most part, inherently incapable of responding rationally to their world. Yet as he analyzed and hashed over the ways that images might be employed as tools of leadership,

another aspect of Lippmann's thinking rose to the surface. For Lippmann, it was not so much people's incapacity to deliberate on issues rationally that was the problem; it was that the time necessary to pursue rational deliberations would only interfere with the smooth exercise of executive power. For Lippmann, the appeal of symbols was that they provided a device for short-circuiting the inconvenience posed by critical reason and public discussion.

To Lippmann, symbols were powerful instruments for forging mental agreement among people who—if engaged in critical dialogue—would probably disagree. "When political parties or newspapers declare for Americanism, Progressivism, Law and Order, Justice, Humanity," he explained, they expect to merge "conflicting factions which would surely divide if, instead of these symbols, they were invited to discuss a specific program."[22]

Five years later, in *The Phantom Public,* Lippmann added that serious public discussion of issues would only yield a "vague and confusing medley," a discord that would make executive decision making difficult. "[A]ction cannot be taken until these opinions have been factored down, canalized, compressed and made uniform."[23]

No technique was more effective for unifying public thinking and derailing independent thought, Lippmann argued, than the informed employment of symbols as instruments of persuasion. The symbol, he wrote, is "like a strategic railroad center where many roads converge regardless of their ultimate origin or their ultimate destination." Because of this, "when a coalition around the symbol has been

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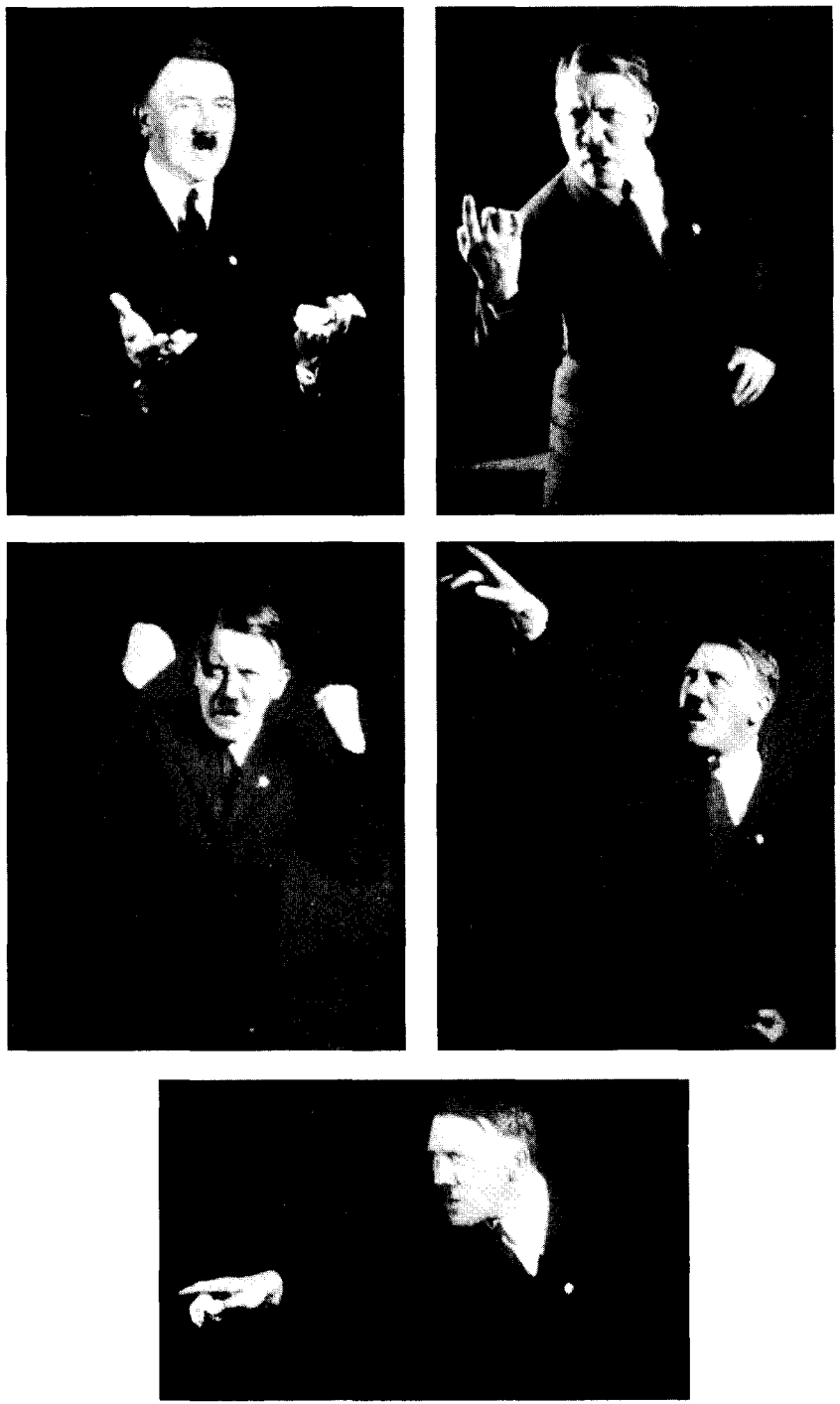
By the 1920s, a growing number of politicians and political strategists were embracing the idea that calculatingly constructed images could be used as tools for galvanizing popular passions.

A telling example if this assumption occurred in 1927, when a soon-to-be-famous politician visited a photographer's studio to have a series of portraits made. This was not a conventional sitting, however. These photos were taken as the politician stood boldly before the camera, rehearsing grandly dramatic gestures as he lip-synched to a recording of one of his own speeches. Later, he would study the pictures with great care, seeking to perfect the visual impact of his oratorical presence.

To see the results of this extraordinary photo session, turn to the next page.

ARCHIE BISHOP



effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures under consideration.

In its adamant argument that human beings are essentially irrational, social psychology had provided Lippmann—and many others—with a handy rationale for a small, intellectual elite to rule over society. Yet a close reading of Lippmann's argument suggests that he was concerned less with the irrational core of human behavior than he was with the problem of making rule by elites, *in a democratic age,* less difficult.

Educated by the lessons of the image culture taking shape around him, Lippmann saw the strategic employment of media images as the secret to modern power, the means by which leaders and special interests might cloak themselves in the "fiction" that they stand as delegates of the common good. The most compelling attribute of symbols, he asserted, was the capacity to magnify emotion while undermining critical thought, to emphasize sensations while subverting ideas. "In the symbol," he rhapsodized, *"emotion is discharged at a common target and the idiosyncrasy of real ideas is blotted out."*[24]

This general understanding infused Lippmann's formula for leadership:

> The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery . . . but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of *symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.* Because feelings are much less specific than ideas, and yet more poignant, the leader is able to make a homogeneous will out of a heterogeneous mass of desires. The process, therefore, by which general opinions are brought to cooperation consists of *an intensification of feeling and a degradation of significance.* Before a mass of general opinions can eventuate in executive

(OPPOSITE) A 1927 series of studio portraits taken by Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer. Later published in *Hitler: Eine Biografie in 134 Bildern* (Berlin, Verlag Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1931). PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAY R. COWDERY

> action, the choice is narrowed down to a few alternatives. The victorious alternative is executed not by a mass but by individuals in control of its energy.[25]

The conscious maneuvering of symbols, in short, was the mediation between popular aspirations and the exigencies of elite power that he and a generation of democratic realists had been looking for.

> He who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy. . . . A leader or an interest that can make itself master of current symbols is the master of the current situation.[26]

Intrinsic to this outlook was Lippmann's firm belief that most people are inescapably oblivious to their world and cannot not "be expected to deal" intelligently "with the merits of a controversy." The most one can hope for is that the public can be guided to respond to "easily recognizable" symbols "which they can follow." The immediate task of leadership, he judged, is to uncover and project those signs that can most efficiently guide the public mind.

> The signs must be of such a character that they can be recognized without any substantial insight into the substance of a problem. . . . They must be signs which will tell the members of a public where they can best align themselves so as to promote the solution. In short, they must be guides to reasonable action for the use of uninformed people.[27]

From the vantage point of the 1990s, one cannot avoid being struck by Lippmann's clairvoyance; the extent to which his analysis of symbols—how they may be employed to sway the public—sounds uncomfortably familiar. The use of media images to stir emotions and circumvent thought is, today, a near universal feature of public discourse. During the twenties, however, these ideas were less prophetic than prescriptive; they provided a powerful way of seeing that many—particularly the growing battery of people involved in publicity work and opinion management—were looking for and prepared to embrace.

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One of these people was Bernays. By 1922, Bernays's outlook—like Lippmann's—had already been stamped by the presumptions of social psychology. Early encounters with the writings of Gabriel Tarde, Gustave Le Bon, Graham Wallas, and Wilfred Trotter had deeply affected his worldview. Also, as Freud's double nephew, psychoanalytic thinking had come to him with his mother's milk.

When he read *Public Opinion,* Bernays was impressed by the scope of Lippmann's hypotheses—the suggestive connections between social psychology, the modern media system, and the ability to achieve the "manufacture of consent"—yet he found Lippmann's work too academic.

> Lippmann treated public opinion on a purely theoretical basis. He never got down to matters of changing it. He talked of it as if he were a sociologist discussing a social caste system . . . abstractly. And I was surprised. Here he was, a working newspaper man. [28]

This frustration with Lippmann was rooted in Bernays's pragmatic background, first as a journalist, then as a press agent. Upon graduating from Cornell in 1913 at the age of twenty-two, Bernays embarked on a brief career as a journalist, editing two medical magazines: the *Medical Review of Reviews* and the *Dietetic and Hygienic Gazette.* Even then, his uncanny aptitude for "press agentry" was evident.

An early look at this flair for unseen engineering can be found in the work Bernays did—while still editing medical magazines—to foster the success of a controversial play entitled *Damaged Goods.* Written by the French playwright Eugene Brieux, the drama presented the tale of a syphilitic young man who, against the advice of his physician, marries and subsequently sires a syphilitic child. Beyond its melodramatic content, the play is a brief on behalf of public health education, taking aim at Victorian customs that kept subject matter such as syphilis strictly under wraps.

The play first caught Bernays's attention when, as editor of the *Medical Review of Reviews,* he published an article by a doctor com-

mending *Damaged Goods* as a welcome antidote for the conspiracy of silence that enveloped the issue of syphilis. A few months later, when Bernays learned that the play was about to be produced in New York City, his knack for publicity kicked into gear.

Writing to Richard Bennett, the play's producer, Bernays offered the backing of his journal. "The editors of the *Medical Review of Reviews,*" he wrote, "support your praiseworthy intention to fight sex-pruriency in the United States by producing Brieux's play. . . . You can count on our help," he added. Bennett and the twenty-two-year-old Bernays soon met to discuss the play and to determine how Bernays might assist with its production.

> Bennett leaned forward and said, "I have been interested in *Damaged Goods* for several years. A play so frank, so sincere can accomplish enormous good. . . . Sex diseases should no longer be concealed. I hope to interest legislators in the seriousness of the social disease the play discusses and force them to pass reform laws."
>
> "Yes, yes of course," I murmured, enthralled.

Despite their shared enthusiasm for the play, formidable roadblocks stood in the way of its production. The prevailing moral climate in New York was hardly conducive to the open exploration of such an explicit topic. Anthony Comstock, who headed the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, had already "closed other shows he thought too daring." The Police Department and the mayor's office had supported these closings.[29]

As Bernays encountered these difficulties, he underwent a fruitful transformation from green medical editor to innovative publicist. While most publicists of the day understood their job as merely handing press releases to reporters or staging ritualized press conferences, Bernays's instinct was to operate more clandestinely, behind the scenes, invisibly staging events or "circumstances" that the press would—out of habit—consider newsworthy.

From his anonymous perch as "editor" of the *Medical Review of Reviews,* Bernays announced the establishment of a new organization, a disinterested third party that he named the *Medical Review of Reviews's* Sociological Fund Committee. Its professed objective was to

advance public instruction about venereal diseases. References to *Damaged Goods* were nowhere to be found.

Bernays then proceeded to ask people from among New York's upper crust to lend their support to the educational campaign by joining the committee and making donations. "I was careful to invite men and women whose good faith was beyond question and would be responsive to our cause," Bernays later explained. He recruited individuals—both liberal and conservative—whose names carried implicit authority. "Dr. Simon Flexner of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research . . . Rev. John Haynes Holmes of New York's Unitarian church . . . John D. Rockefeller, Jr. . . . Mrs. Rose Paster Stokes, a social worker . . . Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt . . ." and others.

Not coincidentally, the inaugural project of the Sociological Fund Committee was to back the production of *Damaged Goods.* Bernays figured that the committee's endorsement would serve two purposes simultaneously. First, it would erect an impervious fortress against the assaults of Comstock or other guardians of public morality. Second, in light of its carriage-trade membership, it would spawn a network of well-heeled individuals, interested in bracketing themselves among New York's high society and, therefore, willing to support *Damaged Goods* in the name of a "worthy cause."

Bernays's plan worked like a charm. Instead of negative publicity, the play received enthusiastic coverage in the press. In testimonials, Rockefeller heralded the play as "breaking down the harmful reserve which stands in the way of popular enlightenment," while Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies Home Journal,* proclaimed the production "a very hopeful and significant event." A special performance for President Woodrow Wilson and other political dignitaries in Washington generated national press for the play. Road companies soon toured; a film was made.[30]

During a period when *Damaged Goods* might easily have suffered the wrath of the morals squad, the blessing of an official-sounding front group and a furtive if conscious mobilization of private networks of influence transformed the play into a virtuous tool of "enlightenment." Working clandestinely, exploiting the prestige of individuals whose ability to lead the opinions of others was already well established, Bernays displayed an uncommon genius for social

engineering that would define his career and would sharpen the focus of public relations thinking.

By way of the *Damaged Goods* episode, Bernays tumbled upon his true aptitude. Abandoning journalism, he became a full-time publicist. Functioning initially as a theatrical press agent, Bernays enjoyed a good deal of early success, representing the interests of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe, Nijinsky, Enrico Caruso, and other major attractions of the day.

During the war years, Bernays joined the army of publicists rallied under the banner of the CPI and concentrated on propaganda efforts aimed at Latin American business interests. Within this vast campaign of "psychological warfare," as he described it, Bernays—

A 1917 photograph of Edward L. Bernays *(extreme right)* during his career as a theatrical press agent. Here he is supervising the arrival of one of his most illustrious early clients, Enrico Caruso (emerging from automobile). Later that year, Bernays would take a position with the CPI, a pivotal step in his metamorphosis into Edward L. Bernays, counsel on public relations. COURTESY SPECTOR & ASSOCIATES, INC.

like others of his generation—began to develop an expanded sense of publicity and its practical uses.[31]

Bernays now envisaged public relations as a potent social instrument that, in the hands of disciplined specialists, might be employed for significant purposes. The "astounding success of propaganda during the war opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind."[32] Publicity, he was persuaded, could be used to "organize chaos," to bring order out of confusion and social disarray.[33]

From the early twenties onward, Bernays's vision of himself and of his mission began to assume an air of historical consequence. Standing at a "divide between what I had done—my press agentry, publicity, publicity direction—and what I now attempted to do," he discarded the bespattered term *press agent* and substituted for it a more exalted title. Applying a bit of press agentry to his own vocation, he would henceforth refer to himself as "counsel on public relations." Eliciting a deliberate association with the legal profession, which advised clients on how to maneuver their ways through the complexities of law, Bernays described a counsel on public relations as one who would prescribe for a client the most effective ways to navigate an increasingly complicated, often hostile, social environment.[34] "I just took it [the term *counsel*] from law. And instead of saying 'Counsel on Legal Relations,' I said 'Counsel on Public Relations.'" At the heart of this newfound "profession" stood Bernays's belief that it was essential for public relations to be conversant with and make use of the modern social and psychological sciences in their work.

This conviction was only fed by Lippmann's widely read conjectures on public opinion and by the dialogue in influential circles that they provoked. Bernays decided to enter the fray. More than simply a public relations practitioner, he would soon situate himself as the most important theorist of American public relations. In contrast to Lippmann, however, Bernays believed that his firsthand experience in the field of publicity would facilitate the development of a more practical approach to mobilizing public opinion.

In 1923, just a year after Lippmann published his tome, *Public Opinion*, Bernays answered with his own book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. Five years later—again just a year after Lippmann's *The*

Phantom Public appeared—Bernays published a second book on public relations, *Propaganda.*

If Lippmann's prose was intended to sway the thinking of socially cognizant leaders and intellectuals, Bernays's writing style was meant for practitioners in the trenches; his primary interest was to frame the job of public relations counsel in ways that would allow practitioners to take advantage of the insights of modern social and psychological thought. Lippmann's books were filled with intricate ruminations on the processes of human epistemology and theoretical speculations on how these processes might pertain to the project of molding public opinion. Bernays's books were punctuated throughout by vivid narratives—stories of Bernays's earliest campaigns, other public relations feats, and commonplace sales situations—each presented to demonstrate how social psychology, and the social scientific approach more generally, might be employed in the everyday work of a publicist.

In *Crystallizing Public Opinion,* for example, Bernays recalled the work he had done for *Damaged Goods* to demonstrate the usefulness of Trotter's discussion of the herd instinct: the ineluctable pull exercised by groups and their leaders on the unconscious lives of individuals. The herd instinct, Bernays explained, provided a back door through which the play was sold to the public.

> "Damaged Goods," before its presentation to America in 1913, was analyzed by the public relations counsel, who helped to produce the play. He recognized that unless that part of the public sentiment which believed in education and truth could be lifted from that part of public opinion which condemned the mentioning of sex matters, "Damaged Goods" would fail. The producers, therefore, did not try to educate the public by presenting this play as such, but allowed group leaders and groups interested in education to come to the support of Brieux's drama and, in a sense, to sponsor the production.[35]

"Trotter and Le Bon," Bernays instructed readers of his 1928 book, *Propaganda,* "concluded that the group mind does not think in the strict sense of the word. In place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions. In making up its mind," he continued, "its first impulse is usually to follow the example of a trusted leader. This is one of the most firmly established principles of mass psychology."

For the public relations counsel, Bernays advised, the tacit authority of existing groups or of trusted group leaders could be applied to a wide diversity of situations. "It operates in establishing the rising or diminishing prestige of a summer resort, in causing a run on a bank, or a panic on the stock exchange, in creating a best seller, or a box-office success."

To illustrate this wide applicability, Bernays cited publicity work done for a meat packer, to enhance the sale of bacon. Old-style publicity, he explained, would have relied on "full-page advertisements" encouraging consumers to "eat more bacon." "Eat bacon because it is cheap, because it is good, because it gives you reserve energy." The consequence of such a campaign, rooted in the product's own attributes, would, according to Bernays, be minimal. A more successful approach, he recommended, would be to appeal to the attributes of available consumers, to root the campaign in an analysis of "the group structure of society and the principles of mass psychology."

The publicist would ask himself, *"Who is it that influences the eating habits of the public?* The answer, obviously, is: *'The physicians.'"* The modern publicist, then, must attempt to persuade "physicians to say publicly that it is wholesome to eat bacon." The publicist, he explained, "knows as a mathematical certainty, that large numbers of persons will follow the advice of their doctors, because he understands the psychological relation of dependence of men upon their physicians."[36] The ability to employ the credibility of trusted authorities was the key to getting people to eat more bacon.

To Bernays, recent scientific ideas concerning the mental processes of individuals and groups provided the public relations specialist with powerful expedients for both apprehending and influencing the public mind. Offering the prosaic case of a man on the verge of purchasing an automobile as an example, Bernays explained to readers that the car's mechanical properties had little to do with his decision.

> Men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their action. A man may believe that he buys a motor car because,

> after careful study of the technical features of all the makes on the market, he has concluded that this is the best. He is almost certainly fooling himself. He bought it, perhaps, because a friend whose financial acumen he respects bought one last week; or because his neighbors believed he was not able to afford a car of that class; or because its colors are those of his college fraternity. . . .
>
> [M]any of man's thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which he has been obliged to suppress. A thing may be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see in it a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself. . . . A man buying a car may think he wants it for purposes of locomotion. . . . He may really want it because it is a symbol of social position, as evidence of his success in business, or a means of pleasing his wife.[37]

While Bernays believed that the social sciences presented individual practitioners with an indispensable assortment of techniques for mounting effective publicity efforts, he also possessed a more ambitious social vision, one that apprehended the unfolding role of public relations within the modern architecture of power. "In our present social organization approval of the public is essential to any large undertaking," he observed. For Bernays, the growth of public relations was a necessary response to this pesky historical condition.[38] It is in this dimension of his thinking that Bernays joined the tradition of social thought that had been initiated by Tarde and Le Bon. In this aspect of his work, Bernays and Lippmann were nearly indistinguishable.

Subscribing to Lippmann's vision of modern society and its conditions, Bernays saw the public relations counsel not simply as a person who applied modern scientific know-how to his work, but also as one of the "intelligent few" who must, within democratic society, "continuously and systematically" perform the task of "regimenting the public mind." These "invisible wire pullers," as Bernays tagged public relations experts, would provide the skills necessary to bring about a successful negotiation between the chaos of popular aspirations and exigencies of elite power.[39]

Broaching a theme that he would repeat—to the embarrassment of many in the public relations profession—for decades to come, Bernays announced that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" had become an indispensable feature of "democratic society."[40] With the masses pounding at the doors of "the higher strata of society," he noted, ruling elites were turning to propaganda as the scientifically informed tool through which public submission might be achieved.

> The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been possible so to mold the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.[41]

Beyond serving the narrow requirements of individual clients, public relations experts were those who specialized in pulling "the wires which control the public mind" and creating that propaganda.[42] Reaching beyond the modest pretensions that had surrounded the work of traditional press agents, Bernays described the public relations counsel as one who was a master at creating pseudo-environments—"creating pictures in the minds of millions" by staging seemingly spontaneous events—that would quietly induce the public to comprehend the world in a desired way.[43] In describing this idea, Bernays's rhetoric was, as was his habit, monumental:

> When Napoleon said, "Circumstance? I make circumstance," he expressed very nearly the spirit of the public relations counsel's work.[44]

Within this grandiosity, however, Bernays was beginning to delineate a pragmatic outline for how a public relations specialist might be trained to "become the creator of circumstance." First, the public relations specialist must be a careful student of the media and of the organized networks of communication through which the majority of people gain their "picture" of the world-at-large: "advertising, motion pictures, circular letters, booklets, handbills, speeches, meetings, parades, news articles, magazine articles and whatever other

mediums there are through which public attention is reached and influenced."[45] Most people, he added "accept the facts which come to them through existing channels. They like to hear new things in accustomed ways."[46]

Despite the public's reliance on familiar sources of information, however, the PR expert's study of communication must—at the same time—be timely and dynamic, continually in touch with "the relative value of the various instruments" and the changes that affect the masses' responsiveness to particular media forms. "If he [the PR counsel] is to get full reach for his message he must take advantage of these shifts of value the instant they occur."[47] In this proposal, Bernays prophesied the development of the entire field of media consultancy, certainly an outstanding feature of present-day society.

Second, those interested in fashioning public opinion must be sociologically and anthropologically informed; they must be meticulous students of the social structure and of the cultural routines through which opinions take hold on an interpersonal level. They must consider the imprint of sex, race, economics, and geography on public attitudes.[48] It was also important to understand existing networks of influence—family, community, education, and religion—for example, as well as the undeclared patterns of leadership that operate within each of them. "If you can influence the leaders," Bernays instructed, "you automatically influence the group which they sway."[49] Such knowledge was not only serviceable for approaching people in groups, but also functioned when addressing individuals. "[E]ven when he is alone," Bernays intoned, a person's mind "retains the patterns which have been stamped on it by the group influences."[50]

Just as the public is used to receiving information through accustomed channels, Bernays added, a social group's outlook is bounded by certain accepted "structures . . . prejudices . . . and whims." These, too, must be factored into the calculations of the publicist. "The public has its own standards and demands and habits," he explained. "You may modify them, but you dare not run counter to them." An organization that would use modern propaganda techniques "must explain itself, its aims, its objectives, to the public in terms which the public can understand and is willing to accept."[51] Therefore, an ongoing "scientific" study of the public, a "survey of public desires

and demands," is an essential device for a public relations strategist.[52] Though social surveys, focus groups, and related forms of instrumental demographics are unexceptional today, Bernays's suggestion that molders of opinion must be ongoing monitors of social attitudes was, during the 1920s, innovative; Bernays saw the unfolding apparatus of mass impression with an oracular gaze.

Third—confirming the adage that an acorn never falls too far from the tree—Bernays contended that, above all, the public relations counsel must be a watchful student of the public psyche. "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind," he asked rhetorically, "is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?" "The recent practice of propaganda," he answered, "has proved that it is possible . . . within certain limits."[53]

Those limits, as Bernays understood them, were bounded only by a propagandist's ability to understand the mechanisms of individual and mass psychology. "Mass psychology is as yet far from being an exact science," he allowed, "and the mysteries of human motivation are by no means all revealed." Nevertheless, he believed,

> theory and practice have combined with sufficient success to permit us to know that in certain cases we can effect some change in public opinion with a fair degree of accuracy by operating a certain mechanism, just as the motorist can regulate the speed of his car by manipulating the flow of gasoline.[54]

The implications of this statement were, for Bernays, obvious. Just as an advertising man must comprehend the product-buying habits of prospective consumers, the public relations counsel must be conversant with the ingrained "thought-buying habits" through which public opinion operates.[55] Simply put, a publicist must comprehend "the mental processes" of the public and "adjust" his propaganda "to the mentality of the masses."[56]

In describing this "mentality," Bernays assembled a hodgepodge built from various modern psychological theories. Reprising the now familiar motif of public irrationality, Bernays argued that people hold on to their ideas within "what one psychologist [referring to Trotter]

has called 'logic-proof compartment[s] of dogmatic adherence.'" For the publicist to pursue his trade effectively, it was necessary for him to understand these perceptual cubbyholes, these proclivities toward "*a priori* judgement" and create circumstances deliberately planned to engage with these peculiar "psychological habits."[57]

Amplifying this point, Bernays borrowed heavily from Lippmann. Lifting language directly from *Public Opinion* and then adding his own practical spin, Bernays explained that the "stereotype" provided the public relations specialist with a particularly useful tool.

> The public relations counsel sometimes uses the current stereotypes, sometimes combats them and sometimes creates new ones. In using them he very often brings to the public . . . a stereotype they already know, to which he adds new ideas, thus he fortifies his own and gives a greater carrying power.[58]

Elsewhere, Bernays's approach to the public mind blended Freudianism with Trotter's instinct theory. "[T]he individual and the group are swayed by only a very small number of fundamental desires and emotions and instincts," he declared. "Sex, gregariousness, the desire to lead, the maternal and paternal instincts, are all dominating desires of the group." These desires, he offered, are "sound mechanisms" upon which a public relations expert "can base his 'selling arguments.'"[59] "The public relations counsel," he wrote in another context, "can try to bring about . . . identification by utilizing the appeals to desires and instincts."

At still other times, Bernays's psychological thinking was simplistically Pavlovian. When "millions are exposed to the same stimuli," he informed readers of *Propaganda,* "all receive identical imprints."

Regardless of its sources and its customary bombast, however, Bernays's geography of the public mind was focused on one objective: the systematic forging of public opinion. To execute this task, he advised, the propagandist must abandon all attempts at reasoning with the public. In order for it to respond appropriately, Bernays maintained, the public must have reality predigested for it.

> Abstract discussions and heavy facts . . . cannot be given to the public until they are simplified and dramatized. The refinements of reason and shading of emotion cannot reach a considerable public.[60]

Bernays designated this streamlined version of reality "news." When reality is distilled down to its most "simplified and dramatized" form and is able to make an "appeal to the instincts" of the public mind, he explained, "it can aptly be termed news." The creation of "news," then, was for Bernays the essential job of the public relations counsel.

> In order to appeal to the instincts and fundamental emotions of the public . . . the public relations counsel must create news around his ideas. . . . He must isolate ideas and develop them into events so that they can be more readily understood and so they may claim attention as news.[61]

Within this elitist strategy—which embellished on Lippmann's notion that it was imperative for leaders to anticipate and forestall the public's "critical scrutiny" of issues—a profound metamorphosis in the way that society defined *information* was being normalized. If, at the turn of the century, "news" had been understood as a faithful extension of an *objective* world, Bernays approached "news" as an essentially *subjective* category, something that took place—and could be generated—in the pliant minds of the audience at whom a parcel of information was being directed. If news had once been understood as something out there, waiting to be covered, now it was seen as product to be manufactured, something designed and transmitted to bring about a visceral public response.

Bernays's conception of what constituted "news" was, at the same time, intimately tied to a transformed rhetoric of persuasion. Like others who had journeyed along the pathways of social psychology, Bernays saw *the symbol* as the most powerful psychological megaphone for reaching and persuading the public.[62] Ultimately, then, the public relations counsel must be an expert in the meaning and serviceability of symbols, of those "reflex images" that will provide him with mesmerizing "short-cuts" for realizing an acceptable public reaction.[63] "[T]he public as a group does not see in shaded hues," he explained.

> The very need of reaching large numbers of people at one time and in the shortest possible time tends toward the utilizations of symbols which stand in the minds of the public for the abstract idea the technician wishes to convey. . . . Such a use of appeals must, it goes without saying, be studied by the expert.[64]

A PR specialist's capacity to mobilize the public's instincts, he explained with equanimity, rests on his "ability to create those symbols to which the public is ready to respond; his ability to know and to analyze those reactions which the public is ready to give; his ability to find those stereotypes, individual and community, which will bring favorable responses; his ability to speak in the language of his audience and to receive from it a favorable reception are his contributions. The appeal to the instincts and the universal desires is the basic method through which he produces his results."[65]

Foreshadowing an escalating population of "compliance professionals" who would follow in his footsteps, Bernays's intellectual aptitude was focused, almost exclusively, on maneuvering symbols to effect a desired, often unconscious, social response. In the wake of this development, the tide and texture of American public life would never be the same.

For Bernays, an increased reliance on the eloquence of symbols and the idea of a public driven primarily by instinct went hand-in-hand. This perspective would fire his career from the 1920s onward.

But if Bernays was the most systematic proponent of public relations, he was also a man of his times. In the mid-1930s, reflecting on a world in which public relations and related propagandistic activities had become omnipresent, Lasswell portrayed the intellectual classes as made up of those people "who live by manipulating contentious symbols."[66] Granting this definition, Bernays—dexterous "imagineer" of the public mind—had, by the mid-1920s, come to the fore as an archetypal twentieth-century American intellectual.[67]

Into the early years of the twentieth century, as long as American society continued to uphold the principle of reason, the printed word had, with few exceptions, been the favored instrument in the tool kit of publicists. Now, in a world conceived as being ruled by unconscious

and irrational forces, publicists in general were turning away from *the word* and, more and more, looking toward *the image* as their preferred tool of public address.

Around the turn of the century, the anxious reveries of men like Gustave Le Bon, Edward A. Ross, and Wilfred Trotter had inspired dreams of a new intellectual aristocracy, people who—through the conscientious application of social scientific methods—would be able to bring order to a dangerously chaotic world. In the years following the end of the First World War, Lippmann and Bernays—exemplifying an emerging class of propaganda specialists—had taken these skittish fantasies and transformed them into a widely accepted strategy of social engineering. A world in which public relations experts, advertising strategists, image managers, and architects of calculated spectacles would increasingly manufacture the terms of public discourse was in the process of taking root.

16
Engineering Consensus

FOR THE FIELD OF public relations, like the society around it, the decade following the end of the Second World War was a period of blinding contradictions. On the one hand, "welfare capitalist" PR agendas—underscoring democratic ideals and building on the notion of inherent social and economic rights—announced that the voice of the people had been heard. Corporate America, so went the narrative, was respectfully and deferentially beckoning to its call. According to this majestic promise, the ancient utopian longing for universal well-being was—at last—in the process of being satisfied.

At the same time, however, the crusade against Godless Communism—and the demonization of all but a "private enterprise" point of view—was petitioning people's darkest fears, molding their anxieties into a bleak environment of political silence. Paralleling a determined attempt to respond to the demands of an active public, a reborn Le Bonianism was also emerging, one that sought—once again—to transform the democratic public into a silent and manageable entity.

Nowhere was this curious juxtaposition of democratic ideals and ardent mass manipulation more eloquently found than in Edward L. Bernays's 1947 essay, "The Engineering of Consent."[1] Just as James Madison's Federalist Paper No. 10 provides an incisive glimpse into the thinking that propelled the Founding Fathers to draft a new Constitution for the United States in 1789, Bernays's "Engineering of Consent" offers a revealing look at the ideas that have come to inform the exercise of political and economic power in our own time. The essay remains one of the clearest statements of the assumptions and

WATCH OUT, INDUSTRY: HUMAN PROBLEMS AHEAD

How PUBLIC RELATIONS *can help solve them*

STRIKES are only a visible part of today's pattern of maladjustments—and a small part, like the tops of icebergs that show above water. Strikes are dramatic. They dominate any discussion of industry's human relationships, because the United States lost 120,000,000 man-days of production in the first year after V-J Day. Industry necessarily has many other difficulties in human relationships; with workers, stockholders, retailers, distributors, government and consumers. It must maintain good will for its reputation and products with all its publics.

Industry could run much more smoothly if it used the powerful tools of the science of human relations to minimize friction and improve its group relationships.

Industry has brilliantly applied the physical sciences in solving its technical problems. The social sciences can serve industry's human relationships in the same way that physical sciences serve industry's technological progress.

How can industry harness this knowledge? By using the objective, independent judgment of the modern technician in social sciences, the public relations counsel, who is qualified by education, professional training and experience to apply science to practical problems. He analyzes his client and the publics on which his client is dependent. He uncovers causes of maladjustments and misunderstandings and advises courses of action to improve the entire relationship of his client with the public.

He is often asked to meet specific problems or crisis situations. More often he is retained on a continuing basis to help guide the public relations policies and practices of the business.

Faced with today's incredibly complex public relationships, the executive needs professional advice in this field just as he needs a lawyer or engineer.

How can the executive decide which public relations organization or man is best qualified for his needs? It is difficult for him as a layman to differentiate among the publicity man, the press agent and the counsel on public relations. It is difficult to evaluate the soundness or unsoundness of the public relations counsel's methods, or to judge the effectiveness of his operations, since professional standards are not set by the state, as in other professions.

Here is a guide for organizations interested in engaging public relations counsel:

- To make sure of integrity and probity, ask for and evaluate personal references.
- To determine financial and credit standing, ask for bank references and consult Dun and Bradstreet, Inc. or another responsible credit organization.
- To judge performance, consult officials of major communications media—newspaper and magazine publishers and editors and radio executives; and present and former clients.
- To insure that you get seasoned judgment and wisdom, ask for and study the biographies of the principals. For the knowledge to perform the intricate work demanded requires high educational background and continuity in the profession. No one, no matter how brilliant he may be, can start at the top of any profession. Years of apprenticeship and experience are needed to provide sound public relations advice.

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strategies that have guided public relations practices in the United States since the war's end.

Preempting the ambience of incorruptibility that surrounds the Constitution, Bernays opened his essay invoking the Bill of Rights. In his reading of these basic constitutional protections, however, he made one curious addition. Conveniently evading the issue of *who controls* or *who has access to* the modern instruments of communication, Bernays declared that "Freedom of speech and its democratic corollary, a free press, have tacitly expanded our Bill of Rights to include the right of persuasion."

Given recent history, the embrace of the Bill of Rights was indispensable. Throughout the Second World War, tales of Nazi propaganda and thought control had given systematized techniques of persuasion an unsavory reputation, one that persisted in the popular culture of the postwar period. It was critical, therefore, for Bernays to couch his argument in terms that were compatible with liberal democratic ideals.

Bernays did not define this expansion of the Bill of Rights as an augmentation of public dialogue, however. Rather, he stated that it was a prerogative permitting those who understood—and had access to—the cognitive highways of the modern media system to guide the views of the population at large. Attempting to dispose of any questions that his interpretation of democracy might provoke, Bernays declared that the breadth and pervasiveness of the mass media in the United States had, by the late forties, made this right of persuasion "inevitable."

> All these media provide open doors to the public mind. Any one of us through these media may influence the attitudes and actions of our fellow citizens.

Bernays then proceeded to outline the implications of this *inevitability* for the public relations specialist.

> The tremendous expansion of communications in the United States has given this Nation the world's most penetrating and effective apparatus for the transmission of ideas. Every resident is constantly exposed to the impact of our vast net-

> work of communications which reach every corner of the country, no matter how remote or isolated. Words hammer continually at the eyes and ears of America. The United States has become a small room in which a single whisper is magnified thousands of times.

Given its connectedness to every arena of human interaction—formal and informal, organizational or merely conversational—the contemporary media structure provided publicists with a distribution system that corresponded to social life itself. It had become the surging heart of a modern circulatory system of thought; it pumped blood through the "crisscrossing" vessels and capillaries of human perception; it was the fountainhead from which the most distant extremities might be fed.[2]

Once impenetrably provincial, American society had, in Bernays's view, evolved into a modern highway system. An educated driver, equipped with the proper road maps, he maintained, could reliably transport psychological commerce anywhere that he wished.

Unlike Gabriel Tarde's similar argument—made half a century before—Bernays's remarks were neither speculative nor academic. To Bernays's pragmatic way of thinking, the modern infrastructure of communication disclosed—in its labyrinthine details—the intermediaries through which power would be effectively exercised in contemporary society.

> Knowledge of how to use this enormous amplifying system becomes a matter of primary concern to those who are interested in socially constructive action. . . . [O]nly by mastering the techniques of communication can leadership be exercised fruitfully.

Assisted by experts "who have specialized in utilizing the channels of communication," Bernays wrote, leaders will be able—whenever expedient—to "accomplish purposefully and scientifically what we have termed 'the engineering of consent.'" It can be routinely applied "to the task of getting people to support ideas and programs."[3]

Bernays willingly conceded the "possible evil" inherent in the use of such techniques the ways they might be employed to serve "anti-

democratic purposes."[4] To Bernays, however, this caveat in no way invalidated the vital point of his argument. Given the scale of modern democratic society, he believed, the need to "engineer consent" had become a necessary precondition for the exercise of power.

Aware of the manipulative tone of his hypothesis, Bernays offered lip service to the idea of a democratic public as a body of informed citizens. Ideally, he proposed, the "engineering of consent" should be employed only with "the complete understanding of those whom it attempts to win over." "Under no circumstances," he cautioned, "should the engineering of consent supersede or displace the functions of the educational system, either formal or informal, in bringing about understanding by the people as a basis for action."

Venerable principles aside, however, Bernays moved swiftly to the kernel of his argument: the ongoing necessity—in an outwardly democratic society—to manufacture the imprimatur of "popular support" to validate the decision-making activities of elites.

> [The] engineering of consent will always be needed as an adjunct to, or a partner of, the educational process. . . . [I]t is sometimes impossible to reach joint decisions based on an understanding of facts by all the people. The average American adult has only six years of schooling behind him. With pressing crises and decisions to be faced, a leader frequently cannot wait for the people to arrive at even a general understanding.[5]

"Planning for mass persuasion," Bernays advised, "is governed by many factors that call upon all one's powers of training, experience, skill and judgement."[6] He then proceeded to specify the mechanisms through which the "engineering of consent" might be accomplished.

First, the public must be studied and analyzed as one considers the properties of any raw material prior to the manufacturing process.

> What are their present attitudes toward the situation with which the consent engineer is concerned? What ideas are the people ready to absorb? What are they ready to do, given an

> effective stimulant. . . . What group leaders or opinion molders effectively influence the thought process of what followers? What is the flow of ideas—from whom to whom? To what extent do authority, factual evidence, precision, reason, tradition, and emotion play a part in the acceptance of these ideas.[7]

To gain a useful profile of the public, Bernays insisted, "painstaking research" must be performed; public temperatures must repeatedly be taken. The mental predilections of the group you wish to influence must be also particularized, to know *how,* or *which,* tactics might be successfully employed. Though Bernays's conception of "research" was not yet conversant with sophisticated demographic survey methods, computerized data analysis, or the use of "focus groups," he reflected an abiding faith in technocratic leadership and in the utility of social science inquiry as essential instruments of modern rule.

As Bernays moved from the problem of research to the question of tactics, it became unmistakably clear that if *leaders* were cognizant individuals, masters of modern science, *the public at large* was intellectually comatose and could be led, for the most part, by calculated appeals to its emotions.

> From the survey of opinion will emerge the major themes of strategy. Those themes contain the ideas to be conveyed; they channel the lines of approach to the public; and they must be expressed through whatever media are used. The themes are ever present but intangible—comparable to what in fiction is called the "story line."
>
> To be successful, the themes must appeal to the motives of the public. Motives are the activation of both conscious and subconscious pressures created by the force of desires. Psychologists have isolated a number of compelling appeals, the validity of which has been repeatedly proved in practical application.

This was a significantly different public from the one reported on by Elmo Roper two years earlier. Despite its battered emotional state, Roper's public was defined by an insistent presence of mind. It knew that it wanted a guaranteed annual wage, and if private industry failed to bring that about, it would look to the government to do so. Roper's public exercised power; it was inextricably linked to the New Deal and to the mass mobilizations that had altered the political landscape during the thirties. It came to the table with a nonnegotiable set of stipulations: "[N]ever in the future shall property rights be placed above human rights. . . . [C]ontinued corporation dividends cannot be regarded as being as sacred as continued wages for labor."

In "The Engineering of Consent," this headstrong public was conspicuously absent. There was no bargaining table, there was no fractiousness; there were only "open doors to the pubic mind." Sticking to his guns and apparently unfazed by the turmoil of the Great Depression, Bernays painted a portrait of a governable public that was decidedly neo-Le Bonian in its outlook. His public was essentially visceral. It was not a subject, but an object, a thing that could be known and, once known, managed. The capacity to think was not a quality of those who were situated on the receiving end of Bernays's engineered public communications. Thought would only be a hindrance.

This understanding of leadership and of the public underscored the importance of stagecraft. The ability to generate easily digested mental environments would determine what passed for truth. If Jefferson had once maintained that the "diffusion of information" was essential to the livelihood of an informed democratic citizenry, Bernays's essay registered the moment in time when the "diffusion of information" would increasingly serve as a gambit for the manufacture of instrumental truths.

As Bernays explained it, "the engineer of consent *must create news.*" He must orchestrate public occurrences so they will be noticed and will harvest the acquiescence necessary to sustain a desired outcome.

> News is not an inanimate thing. It is the overt act that makes news, and news in turn shapes the attitudes and actions of people. A good criterion . . . is whether the event juts out of the pattern of routine. The developing of events and circumstances that are not routine is one of the basic functions of the engineer of consent. Events so planned can be projected

> over the communication systems to infinitely more people than those actually participating, and such events vividly dramatize ideas for those who do not witness the events.
>
> The imaginatively managed event can compete successfully with other events for attention. Newsworthy events, involving people, usually do not happen by accident. They are planned deliberately to accomplish a purpose, to influence our ideas and actions.[8]

Implicit within this argument was a modern rendition of William James's belief that "truth happens to an idea," a total blurring of all distinctions between social fact and theatrical fantasy. To be effective, information must be calculated to stir an audience, to provoke an enduring psychological bond between *the public* and *the corporate.*

At Standard Oil, Earl Newsom epitomized this train of thought. Describing the key factor in a "good public relations program" at the 1946 Public Relations Conference, Newsom cited the need to identify and exploit those symbols to which the public is predisposed to respond.

> [A]ll people share some important emotional attitudes . . . it is these very elements which people do have in common that can lead us to the touchstones for which we are looking.
>
> The clear, noteworthy image thrown upon the screen must be one of portraying our company as *wanting the things that people want.* There must be a merging of image and audience if people are to say "That is my kind of company—that is good—let us keep and preserve and extend that institution." The image cannot be one of human exploitation, of ruthlessness, of greed, of selfishness.
>
> The image must be a *human* image. For it must reveal a company as an organization of human beings. For, you see, we are asking people to "join our crowd"—they who want so much to join a crowd.[9]

Behind all this was a recommitment to an idea of a public driven by its emotions, essentially unconscious and incapable of critical

reason. It was also a repudiation of the principal of participatory democracy, which had—if for only a brief time—reinvigorated the American political climate during the 1930s. It looked ahead, once again, to a democracy that could be efficiently managed from above. Once condemned as wicked and uncontrollable, the "crowd mind" was now being conceived as a thing to be knowingly incited and instrumentally governed.

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