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How PR Sold the War in the Persian Gulf

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"If I wanted to lie, or if we wanted to lie, if we wanted to exaggerate, I wouldn't use my daughter to do so. I could easily buy other people to do it." --Saud Nasir al-Sabah, Kuwait's Ambassador to the United States and Canada

The Mother of All Clients

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops led by dictator Saddam Hussein invaded the oil-producing nation of Kuwait. Like Noriega in Panama, Hussein had been a US ally for nearly a decade. From 1980 to 1988, he had killed about 150,000 Iranians, in addition to at least 13,000 of his own citizens. Despite complaints from international human rights group, however, the Reagan and Bush administrations had treated Hussein as a valuable ally in the US confrontation with Iran. As late as July 25 - a week before the invasion of Kuwait - US Ambassador April Glaspie commiserated with Hussein over a "cheap and unjust" profile by ABC's Diane Sawyer, and wished for an "appearance in the media, even for five minutes," by Hussein that "would help explain Iraq to the American people."⁶⁹ [2]

Glaspie's ill-chosen comments may have helped convince the dictator that Washington would look the other way if he "annexed" a neighboring kingdom. The invasion of Kuwait, however, crossed a line that the Bush Administration could not tolerate. This time Hussein's crime was far more serious than simply gassing to death another brood of Kurdish refugees. This time, *oil* was at stake.

Viewed in strictly moral terms, Kuwait hardly looked like the sort of country that deserved defending, even from a monster like Hussein. The tiny but super-rich state had been an independent nation for just a quarter century when in 1986 the ruling al-Sabah family tightened its dictatorial grip over the "black gold" fiefdom by disbanding the token National Assembly and firmly establishing all power in the be-jeweled hands of the ruling Emir. Then, as now, Kuwait's ruling oligarchy brutally suppressed the country's small democracy movement, intimidated and censored journalists, and hired desperate foreigners to supply most of the nation's physical labor under conditions of indentured servitude and near-slavery. The wealthy young men of Kuwait's ruling class were known as spoiled party boys in university cities and national capitals from Cairo to Washington.⁷⁰ [3]

Unlike Grenada and Panama, Iraq had a substantial army that could not be subdued in a mere weekend of fighting. Unlike the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Hussein was too far away from US soil, too rich with oil money, and too experienced in ruling through propaganda

and terror to be dislodged through the psychological-warfare techniques of low-intensity conflict. Waging a war to push Iraq's invading army from Kuwait would cost billions of dollars and require an unprecedented, massive US military mobilization. The American public was notoriously reluctant to send its young into foreign battles on behalf of any cause. Selling war in the Middle East to the American people would not be easy. Bush would need to convince Americans that former ally Saddam Hussein now embodied evil, and that the oil fiefdom of Kuwait was a struggling young democracy. How could the Bush Administration build US support for "liberating" a country so fundamentally opposed to democratic values? How could the war appear noble and necessary rather than a crass grab to save cheap oil?

"If and when a shooting war starts, reporters will begin to wonder why American soldiers are dying for oil-rich sheiks," warned Hal Steward, a retired army PR official. "The US military had better get cracking to come up with a public relations plan that will supply the answers the public can accept."⁷¹ [4]

Steward needn't have worried. A PR plan was already in place, paid for almost entirely by the "oil-rich sheiks" themselves.

Packaging the Emir

US Congressman Jimmy Hayes of Louisiana - a conservative Democrat who supported the Gulf War - later estimated that the government of Kuwait funded as many as 20 PR, law and lobby firms in its campaign to mobilize US opinion and force against Hussein.⁷² [5] Participating firms included the Rendon Group, which received a retainer of \$100,000 per month for media work, and Neill & Co., which received \$50,000 per month for lobbying Congress. Sam Zakhem, a former US ambassador to the oil-rich gulf state of Bahrain, funneled \$7.7 million in advertising and lobbying dollars through two front groups, the "Coalition for Americans at Risk" and the "Freedom Task Force." The Coalition, which began in the 1980s as a front for the contras in Nicaragua, prepared and placed TV and newspaper ads, and kept a stable of fifty speakers available for pro-war rallies and publicity events.⁷³ [6]

Hill & Knowlton, then the world's largest PR firm, served as mastermind for the Kuwaiti campaign. Its activities alone would have constituted the largest foreign-funded campaign ever aimed at manipulating American public opinion. By law, the Foreign Agents Registration Act should have exposed this propaganda campaign to the American people, but the Justice Department chose not to enforce it. Nine days after Saddam's army marched into Kuwait, the Emir's government agreed to fund a contract under which Hill & Knowlton would represent "Citizens for a Free Kuwait," a classic PR front group designed to hide the real role of the Kuwaiti government and its collusion with the Bush administration. Over the next six months, the Kuwaiti government channeled \$11.9 million dollars to Citizens for a Free Kuwait, whose only other funding totalled \$17,861 from 78 individuals. Virtually all of CFK's budget - \$10.8 million - went to Hill & Knowlton in the form of fees.⁷⁴ [7]

The man running Hill & Knowlton's Washington office was Craig Fuller, one of Bush's closest friends and inside political advisors. The news media never bothered to examine Fuller's role until after the war had ended, but if America's editors had read the PR trade press, they might have noticed this announcement, published in *O'Dwyer's PR Services* before the fighting began: "Craig L. Fuller, chief of staff to Bush when he was vice-president, has been on the Kuwaiti account at Hill & Knowlton since the first day. He and [Bob] Dilenschneider at one point made a trip to Saudi Arabia, observing the production of some 20 videotapes, among other chores. The Wirthlin Group, research arm of H&K, was the pollster for the Reagan Administration. . . . Wirthlin has reported receiving \$1.1 million in fees for research assignments for the Kuwaitis. Robert K. Gray, Chairman of H&K/USA based in Washington, DC had leading roles in both Reagan campaigns. He has been involved in foreign nation accounts for many years. . . . Lauri J. Fitz-Pegado, account supervisor on the Kuwait account, is a former Foreign Service Officer at the US Information Agency who joined Gray when he set up his firm in 1982."75 [8]

In addition to Republican notables like Gray and Fuller, Hill & Knowlton maintained a well-connected stable of in-house Democrats who helped develop the bipartisan support needed to support the war. Lauri Fitz-Pegado, who headed the Kuwait campaign, had previously worked with super-lobbyist Ron Brown representing Haiti's Duvalier dictatorship. Hill & Knowlton senior vice-president Thomas Ross had been Pentagon spokesman during the Carter Administration. To manage the news media, H&K relied on vice-chairman Frank Mankiewicz, whose background included service as press secretary and advisor to Robert F. Kennedy and George McGovern, followed by a stint as president of National Public Radio. Under his direction, Hill & Knowlton arranged hundreds of meetings, briefings, calls and mailings directed toward the editors of daily newspapers and other media outlets.

Jack O'Dwyer had reported on the PR business for more than twenty years, but he was awed by the rapid and expansive work of H&K on behalf of Citizens for a Free Kuwait: "Hill & Knowlton . . . has assumed a role in world affairs unprecedented for a PR firm. H&K has employed a stunning variety of opinion-forming devices and techniques to help keep US opinion on the side of the Kuwaitis. . . . The techniques range from full-scale press conferences showing torture and other abuses by the Iraqis to the distribution of tens of thousands of 'Free Kuwait' T-shirts and bumper stickers at college campuses across the US."76 [9]

Documents filed with the US Department of Justice showed that 119 H&K executives in 12 offices across the US were overseeing the Kuwait account. "The firm's activities, as listed in its report to the Justice Department, included arranging media interviews for visiting Kuwaitis, setting up observances such as National Free Kuwait Day, National Prayer Day (for Kuwait), and National Student Information Day, organizing public rallies, releasing hostage letters to the media, distributing news releases and information kits, contacting politicians at all levels, and producing a nightly radio show in Arabic from Saudi Arabia," wrote Arthur Rowse in the *Progressive* after the war. Citizens for a Free Kuwait also capitalized on the publication of a quickie 154-page book about Iraqi atrocities titled *The Rape of Kuwait*, copies of which were stuffed into media kits and

then featured on TV talk shows and the *Wall Street Journal*. The Kuwaiti embassy also bought 200,000 copies of the book for distribution to American troops.⁷⁷ [10]

Hill & Knowlton produced dozens of video news releases at a cost of well over half a million dollars, but it was money well spent, resulting in tens of millions of dollars worth of "free" air time. The VNRs were shown by eager TV news directors around the world who rarely (if ever) identified Kuwait's PR firm as the source of the footage and stories. TV stations and networks simply fed the carefully-crafted propaganda to unwitting viewers, who assumed they were watching "real" journalism. After the war Arthur Rowse asked Hill & Knowlton to show him some of the VNRs, but the PR company refused. Obviously the phony TV news reports had served their purpose, and it would do H&K no good to help a reporter reveal the extent of the deception. In *Unreliable Sources*, authors Martin Lee and Norman Solomon noted that "when a research team from the communications department of the University of Massachusetts surveyed public opinion and correlated it with knowledge of basic facts about US policy in the region, they drew some sobering conclusions: The more television people watched, the fewer facts they knew; and the less people knew in terms of basic facts, the more likely they were to back the Bush administration."⁷⁸ [11]

Throughout the campaign, the Wirthlin Group conducted daily opinion polls to help Hill & Knowlton take the emotional pulse of key constituencies so it could identify the themes and slogans that would be most effective in promoting support for US military action. After the war ended, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation produced an Emmy award-winning TV documentary on the PR campaign titled "To Sell a War." The show featured an interview with Wirthlin executive Dee Alsop in which Alsop bragged of his work and demonstrated how audience surveys were even used to physically adapt the clothing and hairstyle of the Kuwait ambassador so he would seem more likeable to TV audiences. Wirthlin's job, Alsop explained, was "to identify the messages that really resonate emotionally with the American people." The theme that struck the deepest emotional chord, they discovered, was "the fact that Saddam Hussein was a madman who had committed atrocities even against his own people, and had tremendous power to do further damage, and he needed to be stopped."⁷⁹ [12]

Suffer the Little Children

Every big media event needs what journalists and flacks alike refer to as "the hook." An ideal hook becomes the central element of a story that makes it newsworthy, evokes a strong emotional response, and sticks in the memory. In the case of the Gulf War, the "hook" was invented by Hill & Knowlton. In style, substance and mode of delivery, it bore an uncanny resemblance to England's World War I hearings that accused German soldiers of killing babies.

On October 10, 1990, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus held a hearing on Capitol Hill which provided the first opportunity for formal presentations of Iraqi human rights violations. Outwardly, the hearing resembled an official congressional proceeding, but appearances were deceiving. In reality, the Human Rights Caucus, chaired by California

Democrat Tom Lantos and Illinois Republican John Porter, was simply an association of politicians. Lantos and Porter were also co-chairs of the Congressional Human Rights Foundation, a legally separate entity that occupied free office space valued at \$3,000 a year in Hill & Knowlton's Washington, DC office. Notwithstanding its congressional trappings, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus served as another Hill & Knowlton front group, which - like all front groups - used a noble-sounding name to disguise its true purpose.⁸⁰ [13]

Only a few astute observers noticed the hypocrisy in Hill & Knowlton's use of the term "human rights." One of those observers was John MacArthur, author of *The Second Front*, which remains the best book written about the manipulation of the news media during the Gulf War. In the fall of 1990, MacArthur reported, Hill & Knowlton's Washington switchboard was simultaneously fielding calls for the Human Rights Foundation and for "government representatives of Indonesia, another H&K client. Like H&K client Turkey, Indonesia is a practitioner of naked aggression, having seized . . . the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975. Since the annexation of East Timor, the Indonesian government has killed, by conservative estimate, about 100,000 inhabitants of the region."⁸¹ [14]

MacArthur also noticed another telling detail about the October 1990 hearings: "The Human Rights Caucus is not a committee of congress, and therefore it is unencumbered by the legal accouterments that would make a witness hesitate before he or she lied. . . . Lying under oath in front of a congressional committee is a crime; lying from under the cover of anonymity to a caucus is merely public relations."⁸² [15]

In fact, the most emotionally moving testimony on October 10 came from a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl, known only by her first name of Nayirah. According to the Caucus, Nayirah's full name was being kept confidential to prevent Iraqi reprisals against her family in occupied Kuwait. Sobbing, she described what she had seen with her own eyes in a hospital in Kuwait City. Her written testimony was passed out in a media kit prepared by Citizens for a Free Kuwait. "I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital," Nayirah said. "While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns, and go into the room where . . . babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the babies on the cold floor to die."⁸³ [16]

Three months passed between Nayirah's testimony and the start of the war. During those months, the story of babies torn from their incubators was repeated over and over again. President Bush told the story. It was recited as fact in Congressional testimony, on TV and radio talk shows, and at the UN Security Council. "Of all the accusations made against the dictator," MacArthur observed, "none had more impact on American public opinion than the one about Iraqi soldiers removing 312 babies from their incubators and leaving them to die on the cold hospital floors of Kuwait City."⁸⁴ [17]

At the Human Rights Caucus, however, Hill & Knowlton and Congressman Lantos had failed to reveal that Nayirah was a member of the Kuwaiti Royal Family. Her father, in fact, was Saud Nasir al-Sabah, Kuwait's Ambassador to the US, who sat listening in the

hearing room during her testimony. The Caucus also failed to reveal that H&K vice-president Lauri Fitz-Pegado had coached Nayirah in what even the Kuwaitis' own investigators later confirmed was false testimony. If Nayirah's outrageous lie had been exposed at the time it was told, it might have at least caused some in Congress and the news media to soberly reevaluate the extent to which they were being skillfully manipulated to support military action. Public opinion was deeply divided on Bush's Gulf policy. As late as December 1990, a *New York Times/CBS News* poll indicated that 48 percent of the American people wanted Bush to wait before taking any action if Iraq failed to withdraw from Kuwait by Bush's January 15 deadline.⁸⁵ [18] On January 12, the US Senate voted by a narrow, five-vote margin to support the Bush administration in a declaration of war. Given the narrowness of the vote, the babies-thrown-from-incubators story may have turned the tide in Bush's favor.

Following the war, human rights investigators attempted to confirm Nayirah's story and could find no witnesses or other evidence to support it. Amnesty International, which had fallen for the story, was forced to issue an embarrassing retraction. Nayirah herself was unavailable for comment. "This is the first allegation I've had that she was the ambassador's daughter," said Human Rights Caucus co-chair John Porter. "Yes, I think people . . . were entitled to know the source of her testimony." When journalists for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation asked Nasir al-Sabah for permission to question Nayirah about her story, the ambassador angrily refused.⁸⁶ [19]

Front-line Flacks

The military build-up in the Persian Gulf began by flying and shipping hundreds of thousands of US troops, armaments and supplies to staging areas in Saudi Arabia, yet another nation with no tolerance for a free press, democratic rights and most western customs. In a secret strategy memo, the Pentagon outlined a tightly-woven plan to constrain and control journalists. A massive babysitting operation would ensure that no truly independent or uncensored reporting reached back to the US public. "News media representatives will be escorted at all times," the memo stated. "Repeat, at all times."⁸⁷ [20]

Deputy Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Pete Williams served as the Pentagon's top flack for the Gulf War. Using the perennial PR strategy of "good cop/bad cop," the government of Saudi Arabia played the "heavy," denying visas and access to the US press, while Williams, the reporters' friend, appeared to intercede repeatedly on their behalf. This strategy kept news organizations competing with each other for favors from Williams, and kept them from questioning the fundamental fact that journalistic independence was impossible under military escort and censorship.

The overwhelming technological superiority of US forces won a decisive victory in the brief and brutal war known as Desert Storm. Afterwards, some in the media quietly admitted that they'd been manipulated to produce sanitized coverage which almost entirely ignored the war's human cost - today estimated at over 100,000 civilian deaths. The American public's single most lasting memory of the war will probably be the

ridiculously successful video stunts supplied by the Pentagon showing robot "smart bombs" striking only their intended military targets, without much "collateral" (civilian) damage.

"Although influential media such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* kept promoting the illusion of the 'clean war,' a different picture began to emerge after the US stopped carpet-bombing Iraq," note Lee and Solomon. "The pattern underscored what Napoleon meant when he said that it wasn't necessary to completely suppress the news; it was sufficient to delay the news until it no longer mattered."88 [21]

Notes

1. John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*, (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press, 1992).
2. Ibid.
3. Hal D. Steward, "A Public Relations Plan for the US Military in the Middle East," *Public Relations Quarterly*, Winter 1990-91, p. 10.
4. "H&K leads PR charge in behalf of Kuwaiti cause," *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Jan. 1991, p.8.
5. "Citizens for Free Kuwait Files with FARA After a Nine-month Lag," *O'Dwyer's FARA Report*, Vol. 1, No. 9, Oct. 1991, p. 2. See also Arthur E. Rowse, "Flacking for the Emir," *The Progressive*, May, 1991, p. 22.
6. *O'Dwyer's FARA Report*, Vol. 1, No. 9, Oct. 1991, pp. 2.
7. *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Jan. 1991, pp. 8, 10.
8. Ibid., p. 1.
9. Rowse, pp. 21-22.
10. Martin A. Lee & Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1991), p. xvii.
11. Transcript, "To Sell A War", pp. 3-4.
12. MacArthur, p. 60.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p.58.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 54.
17. New York Times/CBS News poll, as reported in *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report*, Jan. 1991, p. 10.
18. "To Sell A War," pp. 4-5.
19. MacArthur, p. 7.
20. Lee & Solomon, p. xix.