

Government by public relations from Caesar to Bush by Michael Carmichael

March 26, 2006

Reflecting on the relationship between public relations and the media, let us be clear about their missions in our 21 st century society. The role of the media is to inform the public.

In a free and open society -which we purport to be building in Europe and throughout the Western world - the press and media should be informing the public so they can make informed decisions about their democratic institutions which underpin our culture of freedom and liberty.

Ostensibly, the mission of public relations is to shape and inform the press and media - so they can fulfill their mission of informing the public. However, we may be working with a false premise. We may not have a free and open society. Our society may be dominated by totalitarian institutions that are so subtle that the majority of the population may never be aware of their virtual slavery.

For example, 21 st century government is less concerned about manufacturing what should be its primary product: justice - and more concerned about deploying and sustaining its own power - and preserving the power of those individuals it serves - the plutocratic elite who own our society - a very narrow sliver of the population.

Against this stark backdrop, I would like to point out that our society is undergoing a robust infusion of political realignment. The planetary population is activated like never before in world history. The public demand for a more direct role in the application of power is clear. The anti-globalisation movement, the environmental movement, the pro-democracy movement, the peace movement, the protest movement - call it what you will - is sweeping across our tiny planet. People are demanding change. They are demanding direct access to the levers of power. For the moment, instead of projecting our impressions of where this planetary movement is going, I would like to examine some of the more obvious origins of political change and the engagement of public relations and the media in the psychological processes driving the politics of power.

To begin, let us turn to the final days of the Roman Republic and the assassination of Gaius Julius Caesar.

My selection of the assassination of Caesar is totally arbitrary. We could launch this historical examination at many other earlier or later points of activation:

- The origin of the alphabet;
- The rise of civilisation;
- The rise and fall of Pharaoh Akenaten;
- The crises engulfing King Ahab;
- The conquest of the Assyrian and Persian Empires;
- The rise of Alexander the Great or

- The trial of Socrates.

The assassination of Caesar provides us with a relatively well-documented historical record and - using it as a lens to examine the impact of political messaging on the public and the ensuing reverberations on power - we can discern a valuable series of lessons in the politics of the classical world.

We shall need only to examine the roles of two of the principal actors: Marcus Antonius and Marcus Tullius Cicero.

Cicero was the elder and more respected statesman. He had wielded power in the Roman Republic through his aristocratic privileges as well as by his rhetorical and oratorical prowess. Dignified and elegant in his personal character, Cicero is the ultimate model for eloquent and proper Latin prose. An unsurpassable debater, Cicero reigned supreme in the pseudo-democratic oligarchy that was the Roman Republic.

Under Caesar, Marcus Antonius rose to the rank of Master of Horses - making him Caesar's senior deputy. Basically, Anthony was in charge of the security services. Known to be somewhat coarse, crude, boisterous and decadent, Anthony had a long-standing grudge with Cicero. Anthony's step-father had been condemned to death by Cicero for his role in the Catiline conspiracy that sought to undermine the aristocracy of Rome by granting universal debt relief. In his youth, Anthony had studied eloquence and rhetoric in Athens, and he was regarded an accomplished Asiatic orator.

After years of conquest, Caesar amassed unprecedented levels of personal power in the Roman Republic. Named Pater Patriae - Father of his nation - and then, Dictator Perpetuus - Dictator for Life - the Senate felt their grasp on power slipping away. Amidst an atmosphere redolent of deification, conspiracies began to emerge around the rise of Caesar to a dangerous proximity to divinity. Motivated by what they said were desires to protect the Republic, the conspirators sought to destroy Caesar's threat of imposing rule via theocratic autocracy - a direct threat to the temporal power of the Senate and what would have been a fatal blow to the oligarchical and Republican traditions of Rome.

In 44 BC - on the Ides of March, led by Cassius and Brutus, the faction of conspirators carried out their plot and brutally assassinated Caesar in the Senate. After plunging at least twenty-three daggers into Caesar's body, they immediately stated their benign intention to prevent his ascendance and the destruction of the Republic.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Anthony and Cicero kept a low profile. Cicero soon left Rome, and - fearing for his own life - Anthony donned the disguise of a servant. However, word soon reached him that the conspirators had no desire to assassinate anybody else. That evening

Anthony entertained Cassius with a dinner party at his house.

The following day, Anthony presided over the Senate. He endorsed a general amnesty for the conspirators. Cassius and Brutus would become provincial governors, and it was agreed that Caesar's laws would stand. Now in control of the political dynamics of the critical situation, Anthony went to Caesar's house where he confiscated all of the quite considerable cash amounting to a huge sum.

Crucially, he also took possession of Caesar's archive which included plans, notes and many documents that would now give Anthony complete control over the powerful political legacy of Caesar.

On either the 17th or 18th of March, Anthony delivered the funeral oration over the dead body of Caesar. But it was not a typical solemn and dirgelike affair. Anthony transformed the Roman funeral elevating it to the level of political psychodrama par excellence.

While he never delivered the fine speech crafted for him by Shakespeare - in fact, no copy of his funeral oration exists - from historical accounts we do know a great deal about Anthony's powerful and moving performance.

Arrayed in the Forum of Rome, Caesar's body was surrounded by armed guards and a groaning throng of plebians. With his stage intricately set, Anthony rose to the occasion.

Beginning modestly, Anthony proposed to read out the honours that had been heaped upon Caesar. Moving through a concatenation of honorifics, Anthony's voice grew in volume, and he adopted theatrical effects - at times inflecting his voice with passion and gesturing dramatically toward the dead body lying on the bier before the crowd.

Reeling nimbly from pathos to pity, Anthony constructed a vision of Caesar as the sacrosanct and beatific father of his country. At one point, the Senate reacted to Anthony's remarks with groans of protest, but he swiftly defused the situation - stating that the best course of action had been taken. Then, he grimly predicted the danger of a return to civil war and the probable mass-extinction of the leading families of Rome.

Now bending over the body of Caesar, Anthony did something extraordinary. He chanted praises in a rhapsody of military conquests to Caesar as a heavenly divinity - then he launched into a recitation of Caesar's military campaigns and the new lands, peoples and wealth he had brought to Rome.

Now in an inspired state of rhapsodic frenzy worthy of the hip-hop rap artist, Eminem, Anthony rocked and rapped his way from grief and bereavement to heavy sobbing. Swiftly regaining his composure, Anthony then vowed to give up his life for Caesar's. With an astonishing gesture, Anthony swiftly stripped the clothes from Caesar's corpse and placed them on a pole which he waved in front of the audience who were thunderstruck at the sight of the obvious brutality portrayed by the ripped and shredded, blood-drenched toga.

At that moment, the people joined Anthony's lamentation. Dirges were sung, and the mood of Rome changed from remorse to revenge. Then with perfect timing, a wax effigy of Caesar's body was presented for the audience to see. The effigy was rotated by a clever mechanical device to display the twenty-three horrific stab wounds. With the atrocity now fully revealed, the dam burst. The mob built a funeral pyre, and they ignited torches from Caesar's flames. The mob fanned out across Rome to set fire to the houses of the conspirators and the Senate.

Having fanned the throng into a frenzy of vengeance, Anthony was now ensconced on Caesar's crest of power. Turning to the only potential rival to his power, the Senate, Anthony designed a plan to bring its most powerful politician to heel. Calling for a session of the Senate in the summer, Anthony was enflamed when Cicero failed to take the bait and attend the opening session. For his absence, Anthony harangued Cicero.

On the second day of the Senate, Anthony, himself, was absent, and Cicero timed his entrance to perfection. Sensing that the moment was right to check Anthony's surge of political power, Cicero delivered the first of what would eventually become a series of 14 speeches known today as the Phillipic that led to the rise of a powerful opposition force that would bring the downfall of Anthony.

Here is an example of the attack Cicero launched at Anthony: Cicero addressing the Senate and the city of Rome:

I will act, therefore, as commanders do when their army is ready for battle, who, although they see their soldiers ready to engage, still address an exhortation to them. Thus, I will exhort you who are already eager and burning to recover your liberty. You have not--you have not, indeed, O Romans to war against an enemy with whom it is possible to make peace on any terms whatever. For he does not now desire your slavery, as he did before, but he is angry now and thirsts for your blood. No sport appears more delightful to him than bloodshed and slaughter and the massacre of citizens before his eyes. You have not, O Romans, to deal with a wicked and profligate man, but with an unnatural and savage beast. And, since he has fallen into a pit, let him be buried in it. For if he escapes out of it, there will be no form of torture which it will be possible to avoid. But he is at present boxed in, pressurised and besieged by those troops which we already have and will soon be accompanied by many more . . . Focus your energies on this urgent cause - just as you are now rallying to protect yourselves and your rights. Never have you been more focused . . . never have you been so harmoniously united with the senate. And no wonder. For the question now is not in what condition we are to live, but whether we are to live at all, or to perish by torture and ignominy.

Needless to say, Anthony took umbrage, and Cicero could not escape. He fell under the blows of Anthony's assassins while attempting to flee south of Rome. Anthony ordered the head and hand of Cicero to be severed and placed above the podium of the Senate as a grotesque warning to his political enemies. With this gesture, Anthony's credibility took a decisive plunge. Now dead, Cicero had launched a political resistance movement to Anthony's rule that would eventually engulf and overwhelm him and transform Rome. Cicero's beloved Roman Republic was gone forever. History had turned a page, and a new era had dawned.

Now let us turn more than a millenium of the pages of history to examine a revolution in political messaging that took place at the twilight of the Mediaeval era - the life and work of Dante Aligheri.

Known for his masterpiece, *Divina Commedia*, we sometimes forget that Dante was deeply involved in the professional politics of Florence. A member of the Apothecaries guild, Dante was appointed judge, then elevated to the position of supervisor of roads, travel and transportation. When the political schism within his party, the Guelfs deepened, he sided with the White Guelfs who were opposed by the Black Guelfs. At that time, it became apparent that Pope Boniface VIII was in an advanced stage of plotting the military occupation of Florence by foreign forces. A diplomatic mission was swiftly dispatched to Rome, and Dante was the leader of the delegation.

While there, Pope Boniface VIII sent away all of the other members of the White Guelf delegation, but he invited Dante to remain in Rome. In the next six days, the Black Guelfs seized power in Florence. In the aftermath, Dante was demonised for his absence and condemned to exile. After a few futile attempts to restore power to the White Guelfs, Dante turned to poetry. It is important to note that Dante would write his masterpiece in Italian, the vernacular, rather than Latin. In addition to the starkly political themes that are abundantly manifest in *Divina Commedia*, Dante wrote a treatise on temporal power, *De Monarchia*. Due to his direct experience of papal treachery, it is not surprising that one constant theme in Dante's writing is the danger of papal influence in politics. He repeatedly condemns popes for their involvement in political intrigue. In his *Monarchia*, Dante urges the supremacy of one ruler, an Emperor, not a Pope. There is little mystery why the pope condemned Dante's book to be burned in Rome.

In spite of his prolific political writing, Dante's most influential work for our consideration is his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* - *The Eloquence of the Vernacular*. In this essay on the power of language, Dante says that writers should use the language of the common people. He proposes that the courtly Italian should be elevated, enhanced and developed into a serious literary language to rival and hopefully displace Latin. In this treatise, Dante launched the quest for the perfect language for communicating the highest levels of understanding to the broadest number of people. Dante argued that the development of a common language could lead to the unification of Italy. He went further. He proposed the establishment of a world government that would be predicated on smooth, fluent and deeply integrated communications through a more perfect language. These were remarkable ideas in the 14th century. Dante Aligheri was more than a

visionary, he was a poetic and political prophet of world government. In many respects, he was more modern than we are today.

Now, we must fast forward another three centuries to the time of Niccolo Machiavelli. It was the Renaissance, and Machiavelli had risen to power as a diplomat in the Florentine Republic. Upon the rise of Lorenzo de Medici and their return to Florentine power, Machiavelli would - like Dante before him - be exiled from his beloved Florence. Actually, Machiavelli was arrested, tortured and incarcerated prior to his exile. Pope Leo X personally ordered the release and exile of Machiavelli. As is well known, Machiavelli produced a large corpus of major works during his exile.

Machiavelli wrote a treatise on the governance of republics, his Discourses, and another on the governance of principalities, The Prince.

In the Discourses, Machiavelli focused on a problem for all governments in which the people have any influence. In a chapter titled, "The People Many times desire their ruin, deceived by a false (conception) of good," Machiavelli laments the weakness of the public to discern the foolishness of their rulers. The examples he cites point out the public gullibility - well established in the days of Rome as well as mediaeval Florence and easily discernable in George Bush's America of today - the people will always be enthusiastic when their leaders promise to involve them in military conquests.

Citing case after case from Rome to the Florence of his own time, Machiavelli points to examples of foolish military adventures that led to ruin. Florence's ruinous seige of Pisa was a reflection of Varro and Penula in their futile attempts to rout Hannibal when he invaded Italy. Machiavelli explained the public's perpetual thirst for war:

There is no easier way to ruin a Republic where the People have authority, than to involve them in a brave enterprise: because where the People are of any importance, they will always accept them.

This point of Machiavelli's is - without any question - a principal plank in the political strategy of Karl Rove and his clients, George Bush and Dick Cheney.

In his more well known work, The Prince, Machiavelli gives us some deep insight into his grasp of the language of power. In his chapter, "Concerning the Way Princes should keep faith," Machiavelli states:

Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word.

Machiavelli had no word for, "spin," but that is clearly what he had in mind. Today, when a politician fails to deliver on his promises, we are subjected to endless prevarication, obfuscation and disingenuous pleadings to the contrary that we call, "spin."

Citing a contemporary example, Machiavelli wrote:

One recent example I cannot pass over in silence. Pope Alexander VI did nothing else but deceive men, nor ever thought of doing otherwise, and he always found victims; for there never was a man who had greater power in asserting, or who with greater oaths would affirm a thing, yet would observe it less; nevertheless his deceits always succeeded according to his wishes, because he well understood this side of humanity.

Machiavelli's counsel to his political clients was clear, calm, cold and calculating:

For this reason a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with . . . five qualities, that he may appear to him who sees and hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality - religion - for men judge more by the eye than by the (mind), because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come (in direct contact) with you.

Here, once again, we find in Machiavelli a primary principle underpinning the political strategy of Karl Rove as practiced by his clients: George Bush and Dick Cheney. In recent weeks, Tony Blair, has also made strikingly religious statements about his decision to wage war on Iraq.

Now we are going to fast forward four centuries, to the time of the revolution in mass communications that began in the 19 th century and has expanded into the 20 th and 21 st centuries.

During this period, America became the incubation chamber for public relations. During WWI, the US government established the Creel Commission to develop propaganda. In little more than six months time, the Creel Commission had transformed America from an isolationist nation of pacifists into a bellicose and belligerent nation driven by jingoism.

Edward Bernays is the leading American theorist of public relations. Bernays was the nephew of Sigmund Freud, and he consciously sought to apply his uncle's theories of the subconscious processes of psychology to the field of public relations.

Telecommunications and radio made deep impacts on public opinion. A new type of political communicator emerged. Mussolini was a journalist. Hitler was a political communicator with an intense and highly sophisticated interest in the psychological processes engaged by propaganda.

However, it was Hitler's master of propaganda that operated on his behalf. Josef Goebbels realised the potential of mass communications to organise and foment political power. Goebbels wrote:

How fortunate for governments that the people they administer do not think. . . . If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it people will eventually come to believe it. . . . The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and or military consequences of the lie. It thus becomes vitally important for the State to use all of its powers to repress dissent, for the truth is the mortal enemy of the lie, and thus by extension the truth is the greatest enemy of the state.

Across the Atlantic, FDR realised the importance of mass communications. He adopted the fireside chat - a weekly radio programme, and he used radio and the newsreel to create public support for his sweeping social reforms in America. Churchill - a classical, in fact, a Ciceronian orator straight out of the Senate of Rome - adapted well to the new technologies. His messages were clear, sibilant and politically scintillating.

With the emergence of television, media experts realised the opportunity to mold and shape public opinion like never before in human history. But, a few visionaries saw the potential for abuse of the new media.

George Orwell wrote his dystopian vision, Nineteen Eighty-Four, featuring the life and work of a low-level bureaucrat in the Ministry of Truth. Geared to the doctrine that, "Ignorance is bliss," Winston Smith was constantly engaged in modifying the historical record to bring it into conformity with the ideal prescribed by his prophetic totalitarian state, Oceania.

While cropping and erasing facts from official state documents, Smith constantly practiced the new mental disciplines that formed the basis for Oceania - Doublethink and Newspeak. Here is Orwell's definition of Doublethink:

..... the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. ... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.

Newspeak was the official language of Oceania. It was closely aligned with Doublethink. The purpose of Newspeak was to eliminate the possibility of thoughtcrime - subversion or sedition - by eliminating the vocabulary of conflict with the state. Through a radical rationalisation and reduction of the vocabulary, the potential for subversive thoughts would become unthinkable and therefore impossible.

In the America of George Bush, Dick Cheney and Karl Rove, the Patriot Act removes major constitutional rights and guarantees. The No Child Left Behind Act - ostensibly designed to elevate the level of education for school children - remains unfunded after four years. The Help America Vote Act has enshrined voter suppression, gerrymandering and installed untrustworthy electronic voting technology at the heart of American democracy. Doublethink and Newspeak are the order of the day - not only in Bush's America, but throughout the world.

In the 1950s, media gurus from Marshall McLuhan to Vance Packard pointed out that the medium was the message and that America was a nation of sheep - easily led by the new psychological forces unleashed through a modern communications strategy.

Journalists are their own harshest critiques. John Swinton, an American journalist wrote:

There is no such thing, at this date of the world's history, in America, as an independent press. You know it and I know it. There is not one of you who dares to write your honest opinions, and if you did, you know beforehand that it would never appear in print. I am paid weekly for keeping my honest opinion out of the paper I am connected with. Others of you are paid similar salaries for similar things, and any of you who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the streets looking for another job. If I allowed my honest opinions to appear in one issue of my paper, before twenty-four hours my occupation would be gone. The business of the journalists is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of Mammon, and to sell his country and his race for his daily bread. You know it and I know it, and what folly is this toasting an independent press? We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks, they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.

Today, America's dean of the Washington press corps is Helen Thomas. She laments the emergence of what she calls, "the lap dogs" of the media. Thomas says:

Of all the unhappy trends I have witnessed - conservative swings on television networks, dwindling newspaper circulation, the jailing of reporters and "spin" - nothing is more troubling to me than the obsequious press during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. They lapped up everything the Pentagon and White House could dish out - no questions asked. Reporters and editors like to think of themselves as watchdogs for the public good. But in recent years both individual reporters and their ever-growing corporate ownership have defaulted on that role. Ted Stannard, an academic and former UPI correspondent, put it this way: "When watchdogs, bird dogs, and bull dogs morph into lap dogs, lazy dogs, or yellow dogs, the nation is in trouble."

While Thomas is adamant over the disintegration of the professional media and the rise of the Orwellian juggernaut of the Bush presidency, hope may be on the horizon.

The internet has created a global network where people are now capable of sharing their thoughts. When one person publishes a blog that they are disenchanted with official policy, they will find an audience of like-minded people who will re-enforce their opposition.

A ranking blogger, Arianna Huffington says that today, "The little guy is the true pit bull of journalism. The blogosphere's ability to include the whole planet in an immediate dialogue makes it (America's) most vital news source."

In the latest surveys, we find that more people are now consulting the internet for news than the mainstream media. The internet is a powerful new tool for the communications industry - and the people who seek a broader and deeper role in the democratic process of government - weak and lethargic as they undoubtedly are, even today when their rights are being challenged.

In the era dominated by Berlusconi and Murdoch, we are faced with an ethical dilemma. As members of the professional media elite, we have to make a decision. Are we going to serve the state, the corporations, the plutocracies that would impose a status quo ante upon the nations of sheep engrossed in doublethink and babbling Newspeak for a mere pittance - the price of slavery? In the modern economy, we are isolated from the immensity of wealth that is now in control of our planet.

Worse. Public relations and the media are intimately engaged in the manufacture of power for the owners of our ownership civilisation.

You have the power to decide between perpetuating the powerful or empowering the people. That is the choice facing every intellectual, every public relations professional, every journalist and every academician in the twentieth first century.

The future is in the hands of ordinary people - just like us.