

The Politics of

"There's a sucker born every minute."

— P.T. Barnum

19th century "press agent"

"Any paperhanger or car salesman can call himself a public relations practitioner, just as Nixon's henchmen did — and we all know what happened to them."

— Edward Bernays

founder of modern P.R.

Just before his 94th birthday in 1985, Edward Bernays — adviser to at least four American presidents and countless captains of industry and widely credited as a founder of modern-day American P.R. — expounded in an interview about the vagaries of a profession he sought, with limited success, to hold to a higher ethical standard. He didn't use the word, but he deplored the ascension of the practitioners of "spin" — he called it "press agency" — to push products, ideas and politicians.

"It's like a drug company taking over a medical school," he said.

Some contemporary press agents might well compare their trade to that of drug salesmen, and most admit that — despite Bernays' high-minded efforts to make P.R. a "real" profession, with clear academic and ethical standards — the field is clearly becoming more prone to manipulation, less a function of simply getting the information to the public in a clear and perhaps nicely packaged way.

And nowhere is that manipulation more controversial than when it is practiced under the aegis of the state.

In California, government-funded P.R. is practiced by a variety of generally well-paid staff — many in civil service positions and many others in the sometimes murky, politically charged arena of state employees in positions "exempt" from civil service. They are called press secretaries and public information officers (the latter is the official civil service title), communications directors, "special assistants" and heads of offices with intriguing, but not particularly descriptive, titles such as "Public Awareness" and "External Affairs."

"My sense is that the PIO jobs have been increasingly politicized," says longtime Associated Press political writer John Howard, echoing the views of other journalists who cover the state Capitol. "The highest-level P.R. people are hired totally through the governor's office. I can't

Government P.R.

By Sigrid Bathen

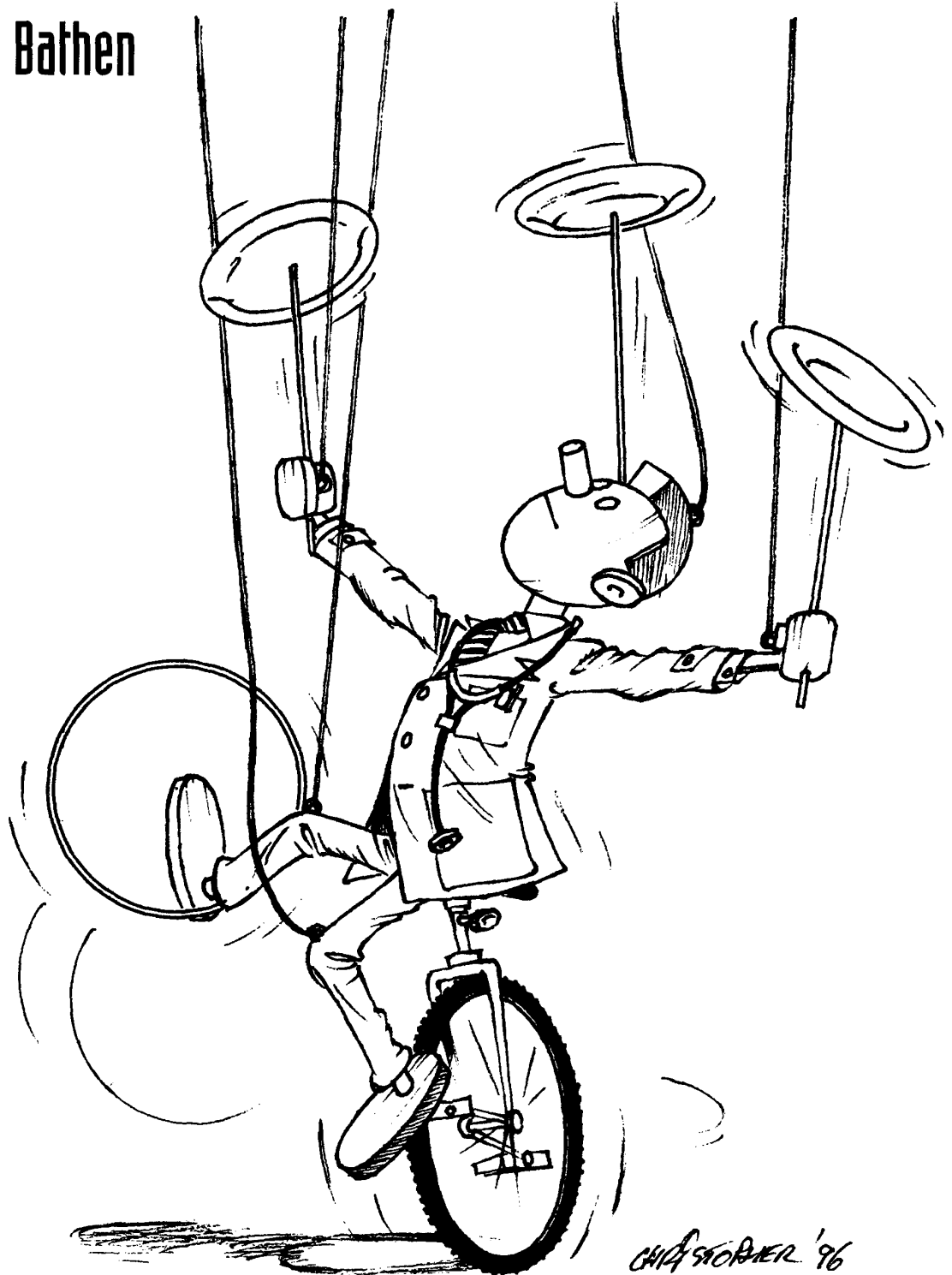


Illustration by Christopher

remember a time when it was so centralized."

Reporters say the generally miserable media image of Governor Pete Wilson is in large measure the result of partisan politics and manipulative press policies which, particularly in recent years, permeate state agencies — whose directors, after all, are appointed by the governor. "Reporters look for a basic benchmark of accuracy from professional press people," says Howard, "and now they have to wade through the spin. Sometimes you can trust the spin doctor — and a few of them I do. . . But if I had to choose between PIOs who had taken an exam, or deal only with political appointees, I'll take the PIOs."

Many present and former PIOs, most of them former reporters and editors, agree. "It's become very political," says one retired PIO who asked not to be named. "The problem is, and it's endemic, that the governor appoints people

to be chief of information who don't know about it. They're young. They're arrogant. And they'll say their mother knows the governor..." "Another retired PIO said the Wilson administration increasingly in recent years would approach agency heads about "photo ops for the governor... You would kind of be expected during the next week to find an occasion or an event that the governor could get some publicity from. I was never real enamoured of that process. It was political bullshit."

Vince Vandre, a former reporter and editor who was a senior state information officer for nearly 30 years, says flatly: "I wouldn't survive 10 minutes in that arena today. The information officers were originally there to help the public understand what was going on. Now it's just to exalt some political figure at state expense."

Other PIOs find that assessment unduly harsh. "Most of the PIOs are hard-

working — gathering facts, answering questions," said one longtime PIO. "Most of us are simply trying to get the information out." In high-profile state agencies, the volume of media calls can be staggering. Kati Corsaut, an information officer with the state Department of Corrections said her department's communications office responds "on average" to some 2,000 press calls per month, on subjects ranging from inmate riots to the square footage of a prison cell.

According to the state Personnel Board, there are currently only 75 official civil-service information officers (PIOs) throughout the state, a precipitous drop from 1992, when there were 128 — the result, in large measure, of legislation which nearly succeeded in abolishing the class and prompted many state agencies to reclassify their PIOs to other civil-service jobs with more generic titles. Chris Weinstein, president of the State Information Officers Coun-

Phil Guthrie — An appreciation ... without spin

When Ray Procnier became director of the state Department of Corrections in 1967, he told Phil Guthrie, the agency's information officer, that he didn't have to write any more press releases — an edict in state government some might regard as tantamount to closing the doors. What in the world would there be to do?

"No more goddamned press releases," ordered the legendary state prison director, a blunt, up-from-the-ranks former prison guard with a sometimes indelicate command of language, often described as "tough-talking" by reporters unable to quote him directly in their family newspapers. "Just answer their (*expletive deleted*) questions."

And he did. For more than two decades, under five directors, Guthrie, who died last Sept. 16 at age 67 after a long, tortuous battle with cancer, talked to reporters, got them the information they needed — or told them why he couldn't. His office was spare, often untidy, with an old manual typewriter in one corner.

Procnier, now retired and living in Grass Valley, remembers their first meeting. "We had an agreement — I wanted him to tell the truth regardless of what it was. He was in on every meeting, so I didn't have to interpret anything. He travelled with me. We didn't have anything to hide." They became close friends, weathering death threats and bomb threats, '70s prison unrest and frequent controversy.

Although he had about him an aura of sometimes harried disorganization, Guthrie was one of the most focused, disci-



plined bureaucrats I have ever known, and, especially important to reporters, his information was reliable and accurate. In the "de-institutionalization" era of the 1970s, when the numbers were as important, in a somewhat different way, as they are today, he kept a hand-written chart of the number of inmates in each prison on the wall by his phone, regularly updating it so he would be able to answer reporters' questions about rapidly changing inmate populations. He was unflinchingly good-humored, frequently — and sometimes inadvertently — hilarious, in a business that would drive a lot of people up, or at least against, the wall. In one of many Guthrie fables, and this one is true, he once set his wastebasket afire with a cigarette, then got his foot caught and his pants leg lit when he tried to stomp it out, finally dousing the flames with a carafe of cold coffee — all the while talking calmly, not missing a

cil, says the organization currently has about 80 members, and SIOC estimates the number of PIOs statewide at about 100. Since so many were reclassified in recent years, getting an exact number is difficult. The statewide exam for PIOs — which differs from previous exams in that it apparently will not require either a writing sample or an oral interview during the statewide screening process — was recently offered for the first time in at least seven years. Department heads and PIOs currently in state service, whose advancement was limited by the lack of an exam, are relieved the exam was finally offered. But others express concern that the timing and methodology of the exam give too much control to department heads appointed by the governor and may be a legal method of easing existing political appointees into civil service jobs before the end of the Wilson administration in 1998 — an allegation sharply denied by

representatives of the governor.

The number of state employees performing media-related work in exempt, appointive positions and so-called Career Executive Appointments or CEAs — which, unlike the exempts, are drawn from state employees and must pass through certain civil service hoops, often oral interviews — is much more difficult to pinpoint than the PIOs. As of November 26, 1996, the personnel board listed 1351 exempts throughout the state. These do not include legislative jobs and are generally high-level positions appointed by constitutional officers and agency heads without regard to civil service requirements — a fact which many critics say is increasingly common, the result of partisan political influences and a worrisome erosion of the reasonably objective civil service standards. Many exempts and CEAs are in media positions, but because their titles vary, they're often hard to identify — as are their

salaries, which are generally higher than the PIOs, who start at \$2853 per month (for assistant information officers) and rise to \$4994 for the top PIO-II classification and \$6109 for the very rare PIO-III.

Whatever their official title, political ties or civil service status, state flacks perform essentially the same tasks: they issue press releases and answer media questions about the significant and the mundane, organize press conferences, write and edit speeches and op-ed articles for their bosses' bylines, handle a plethora of newsletters, reports, brochures, public service announcements and other tools of the trade. Historically, they are trained journalists, although that requirement, which many say is fundamental to the job, is sometimes eschewed as merely one of many "media skills" required for entree to this elite and powerful government fraternity. Although "public information" is at the core of their duties, political considerations have

beat — as a colleague looked on, aghast.

He always returned phone calls and he knew the department he represented inside out. He knew which guy to talk to about interpreting the sometimes bewildering numbers, how to reach the warden during a prison riot, who to talk to about getting an interview with an inmate on Death Row.

He told prison staff throughout the state that, no matter what time or where he was, he was to be immediately informed of reporters' inquiries. As cynicism and spin threaten to eclipse the free flow of information in government, and certainly in politics, he was a breed apart — a true believer, in the best sense, in the constitutional guarantee of a free press and the sanctity of the public's right to know what its government is doing. As a legal affairs writer for the *Sacramento Bee*, I covered the state prisons during the tumultuous 1970s. It was a time of unprecedented violence and rebellion within the prisons, and prisoners were staging protests and filing lawsuits. Some of the protests and lawsuits detailed egregious physical and racist conditions, and I am reminded of that time as I read about the problems the Department of Corrections is having today at its embattled institution in Corcoran, and wondering how Phil would handle reporters' questions. "He'd tell them the truth," says Proconier.

The only flack ever to receive the Society of Professional Journalists Freedom of Information award, from the Central Valley chapter, Phil was a favorite with reporters, though sometimes we gave him hell, trying to get him to give us confidential information (he refused, universally), or an exclusive on a big story (no way).

It was a difficult time to be the spokesman for the state prisons — if there ever is an easier time — and Guthrie handled it with professionalism, sensitivity, humor and flair. After a brief stint with Proconier when the latter was imported to run the troubled Texas state prisons, he retired 10 years ago to his house in Bodega Bay, which he used to loan to friends free of charge. Before he became ill, he had a good, long decade with his wife Mary, whom he met at a University of the Pacific

reunion. They remodeled their ramshackle beach house, with its stunning view of the bay, and he even stopped smoking several years before his death.

Cancer of the esophagus is a nasty way to go. He survived a horrendous operation then baffled all the doctors by living nearly two years after that. Around the time of his last Christmas, he sent me a long, beautifully written, alternately sad and funny letter, an article really, in which he told how pleased he was to hear from the many reporters and editors — the names were a veritable Who's Who of California journalism, old friends all — who had called, written or visited. Given his condition, it was amazing he could write at all, much less be funny as hell. He said he wrote because it "gives me something to do besides dose myself with shark cartilage — a form of voodoo medicine we cancer patients go to when all else seems ineffective." And he said the "nice part" about this "otherwise crummy experience" was "the way so many of the people one knows, from numerous differing lifetime phases, get in touch. . . On the whole, it reaffirms my belief that people are basically pretty nice."

Having lost a good chunk of his esophagus, he had a hard time eating. With amazing fortitude, love and equanimity, Mary kept him going. I talked to him on the phone a few weeks before his death, and he was the same Phil — weaker, softer of voice, but still funny, still sharp, interested in life. In a vintage piece of Guthrie humor, a veteran flack to the end, he even wrote his own obituary — professional, straightforward, written in the third person — and addressed the envelopes for Mary to mail upon his death.

He didn't want a funeral, so his family and friends held a private memorial in the Bodega Bay Grange Hall near his house a few weeks after he died. A retired prison administrator played a mournful "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes, a jazz combo played (Guthrie was a serious jazz fan), and, as one old friend put it, "Everybody told Phil Guthrie stories — some of which are printable in a family newspaper." 🏠

—Sigrid Bathen

always been part of the package.

"My experience as a reporter going back to the late 1970s is that PIOs clearly had the political interests of their employer in mind," says Sandy Harrison, a longtime Capitol reporter who for nearly two years has been press secretary — a political appointment exempt from civil service — to Senate President pro Tempore Bill Lockyer (D-Hayward). "I don't think that has changed. That's not to say that every PIO I ever dealt with was a partisan hack. They were helpful and nonpartisan. But their primary role was to [serve] their boss — if not the department head, then the agency secretary or ultimately the governor."

Many PIOs bristle at the suggestion that their job is simply to make their bosses look good. "I'm not going to say there is not a political element," says former Sacramento television newsman Tip Kindel, who for eight years has been the chief information officer/communications director for the state Corrections Department, a job which puts him daily in the eye of an increasingly thorny, highly controversial and media-intensive arena. "But we try as much as possible to stay

out of [the politics]. Those issues are best addressed by the governor's office. We're really here to tell people what the department is doing, and to respond to media inquiries."

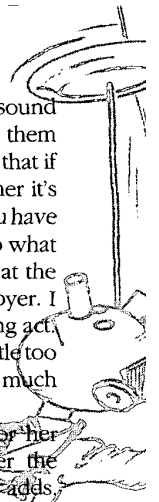
Kindel, who started in state service as a PIO and now holds a CEA appointment in corrections, distinguishes between the political and the partisan. "Take the issue of prison overcrowding," he says. "You know you're going to run out of beds, that something has to be done ... The policy makers have two choices: They can either send fewer people to prison, or build more places to put them. Otherwise, the courts will come in and there will be wholesale releases. It's politics, but we don't take a position."

Bob Forsyth, a former *Sacramento Bee* Capitol reporter and metro editor who was press secretary to then-Senate President pro Tempore David Roberti (D-Los Angeles) and now handles media for two statewide lawyers' groups, says the partisan aspects of government P.R. are becoming more intense — and reporters are as much to blame as the politicians they cover. "Many journalists want a 'spin' directed their way," says Forsyth. "I'm kind of taken aback by

journalists who seek a spin, or a sound bite to dress up their story or give them a snappy lead. I cling to the belief that if you're on the state payroll, whether it's an elected official or an agency, you have a responsibility to the public to do what you can to get the truth out, and at the same time be loyal to your employer. I know that is sometimes a balancing act. I just have a feeling that there is a little too much slickness today, a little too much obfuscation."

"Every politician worth his or her salt wants as much control over the information as possible," Forsyth adds. "So all of them have been chipping away at the information officer class. The credibility of the information officer or flack is on the line. Credibility is the only stock in trade for the information officer, and it's a damn foolish administration — politician or not — who screws around with that."

Unlike other critics, who sometimes blame Governor Wilson's handlers for his generally negative media image, Forsyth says the governor has created his own image. "Wilson is his own worst enemy in terms of the media, as Reagan was his best friend," says Forsyth. "People don't ascend to those offices without



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being savvy with the media, and they can screw that up all by themselves. Basically, Wilson has the image of a mean-spirited s.o.b. And he has created that image on his own without anybody's help.

Sean Walsh, Wilson's press secretary for the past three years, worked for six years in the Bush presidency, and comes principally from a political rather than a journalistic background. He took a brief leave to be Wilson's campaign press secretary during the governor's ill-fated run for president, and in recent years has been the governor's spokesman during a time of intense controversy over several hot-button political issues, including affirmative action, immigration and welfare. Sharp-tongued and intensely partisan, Walsh makes it clear that he speaks for the governor, and his style can come across as pugnacious and harsh. He is generally sanguine about the vitriol directed at his boss — though he admits he is sometimes stunned by the intensity of it. "They don't call us flacks for nothing," he says, insisting that the governor is only doing his job as chief executive.

"There is this huge bureaucracy which, fair or unfair, the governor is responsible for managing," says Walsh. "Pete Wilson is a very hands-on manager of policies. Do I like every policy? Am I paid to argue Sean Walsh's views and issues? No. The same goes for public information officers at agencies and departments."

Walsh flatly denies that the governor's office intrudes on the day-to-day, information handling of state departments. "I honestly don't like to meddle in the PIOs' business. But I do want to know about things before they happen." He says the line between public information and executive policy is sometimes a thin one. And he likens the governor's media image to the popularity — or unpopularity — of the policy decision of the moment. "Are you familiar with *Star Trek*?" he asks. "Where they beam up Kirk, and it's the good Kirk or the bad Kirk?"

Walsh insists Wilson "recognizes the importance of having an informed media and professionals who have the ability to put that message out," but he sees nothing wrong with the governor offering to publicize department activities. "The chief executive's time is very limited, and he can highlight policy issues to the benefit of a department or agency. . . Government may move like a

thousand-jointed centipede, but state government follows the head — that's where the money is, where the core social issues are argued or discussed."

Although Walsh denies it, some journalists who have been around the Wilson administration for many years, say the governor doesn't much like reporters — and that dislike translates into excessive micro-management of the information coming out of his administration. "It is a much more politicized climate than it was under the previous

governor (Republican George Deukmejian)," says one former reporter, now a media liaison for a prominent politician, who asked not to be named. "I've never liked the way they've run their press shop. Deukmejian was far more accessible, and getting information out of his administration was far easier. I am hearing constantly from reporters that phone calls are not returned, not referred out in a timely manner.

"Frankly, I think the governor has a strong dislike for the media." 🏠

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