

# Madison Avenue



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## Brouhaha over POWs

A brouhaha has broken out over a series of new public-service ads prepared by the Advertising Council, the advertiser-agency-media-supported organization that has turned out such non-controversial campaigns in the past as Smokey the Bear and Love Your Neighbor. The furor has developed over television and print advertisements introduced by the council calling for humanitarian treatment of American prisoners of war in Vietnam and for neutral inspection of North Vietnamese POW camps. For while nobody is opposed to better treatment of the prisoners—any more than they are opposed to such other council projects as fighting pollution, preventing crime, and keeping America beautiful—a group of POW families, aided by some advertising people in New York, has criticized this focus and created its own campaign urging the immediate end of the war and release of the men.

Thus with a counter-campaign to the official Ad Council drive under way—marking the first time in at least two decades that such a situation has arisen—television stations and networks and newspapers and magazines have been thrown right into the middle of the fray. And with the electronic media particularly sensitive to, and gun-shy of, the equal time problem, there seems to be little doubt that either group's ads are being regarded these days as routine filler for unsold time and space.

"The prisoner-of-war question is complicated, but the human side isn't," says Alfred J. Seaman, president of SSC&B, Inc., the volunteer agency for the Ad Council campaign. "The civilized world can agree that POWs should be treated humanely and neutral observers be let in—that's the essence of our whole work. Hanoi becomes responsive to American public opinion when it becomes clear-cut."

"We don't want these prisons inspected; we want them empty," counters Frederic Papert, chairman of PKL Companies, and the adman spearheading the counter-campaign. "Given the non-partisan nature of Ad Council causes and the movements within the advertising agency business to get out of Vietnam, it seems that this particular assignment is all wrong."

The contretemps erupted last May when the twenty-nine-year-old council, currently conducting twenty-five major national public-interest programs, announced "an all-media public service advertising campaign to focus attention" on the more than 1,600 American servicemen who are prisoners and missing in action in Southeast Asia. There was confusion right from the start as to the names of the sponsors who requested the council to take on this campaign about the plight of the captured men, with such fairly well-known outfits as the White House, the American Red Cross, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State mentioned in various quarters as being among the backers of the idea.

The client in this case, however, is now generally believed to be the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. The league, which says it has a membership of 3,000 relatives, has long been in favor of such an advertising campaign and is firmly backing the Ad Council's proposals because, in the words of Mrs. Joan Vinson, former national coordinator, "the prisoner issue is not a political issue, it's a human issue. We only want to know who they are, where they are, and how they are."

After the council's position concerning the prisoner ads became public, a splinter association called POW/MIA Families for Immediate Release contacted a few New York agency executives for assistance. This loosely knit group, which claims to have the support of some 350 relatives, wanted to get its point of view about troop withdrawal across to the public and came to Madison Avenue for professional guidance.

"We feel that the 'Write Hanoi' campaigns are no longer effective—it's time for something else now," says Sheila Cronin, a national coordinator of the immediate-release activities. "Our ads are directed at emptying the camps, while their ads are aimed at maintaining them," adds Valerie Kushner, another member of the group.

Through the voluntary efforts of Mr. Papert and other agency and service company officials, ads were created in which Miss Cronin, Mrs. Kushner, and the parents of another captive in North Vietnam talked directly about their

loved ones and asked viewers and readers to write Washington requesting fast action to end the war. These one-minute televised messages and one-page print ads were shown initially in New York in August.

When they saw what the Families for Immediate Release were doing, the National League and the Ad Council counter-counter-attacked. First the league wrote a letter to its members (which, incidentally, erroneously asserted that all council campaigns require White House endorsement) noting, "We are very surprised and shocked that anyone could disagree with these ads."

Then SSC&B showed storyboards and sample ads for its campaign—also making use of the case history approach—to the council's board of directors and received the unanimous approval of the approximately 50 per cent who attended the September meeting. Finally it sent a tape recording outlining its approach to the advertising, although the ads themselves weren't included, to the league's annual meeting in Washington.

With both groups having taken off the gloves, the battle escalated. Families for Immediate Release sent letters to 700 television stations (publications and radio stations received similar communications) demanding equal time if the council's spots were used, with a return post card enclosed for the managers to state their intentions. Citing the equal-opportunities provisions of Section 315 of the Communications Act and implying that the Federal Communications Commission's fairness doctrine for contrary viewpoints would be breached by giving free time to only one side's announcements, the group threatened legal action against stations refusing to give equal time.

On the other hand, the Ad Council asked for a declaratory ruling from the FCC that its spots were non-political, in order to assure hesitant station managers that they would not be under fire from the government for going along with the campaign. It also sent scripts and storyboards of its sample spots around for clearance by the three TV networks—where the response thus far has not been overwhelming.

At this point, the puzzle as to who, if anyone, will get the estimated \$25-million worth of media support for their prisoner campaign is still up in the air. Just like so many other facets of the Vietnam War, the advertising dichotomy on this highly important, emotionally charged matter has resulted in more questions than answers and has given Americans still further food for thought.

—LEONARD SLOANF.