

SF Examiner
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Keeping 'em honest

Some of the stuff coming out in the Washington scandals has, I confess, special interest to the ink trade. It has to do with all the heavy-handed ways the politicians and their public relations men try to use the media for sheer propaganda.

"Have your letter-writing organization in Ohio flood the papers with letters as follows . . ." "Send 100 telegrams to . . ."

It is a curious fact that what has the Nixon administration up to here in trouble, as much as anything else, is the blind faith it obviously has had in the uses of public relations and opinion engineering. What the Nixies have proved for all time is that PR without political savvy simply doesn't work.

Early in the breaking scandals I happened to talk with a political friend in Los Angeles about it. He was disgusted not so much at the scandals as at the way Nixon had organized his administration.

"It had to happen," he said. "These people around Nixon never came up through the chairs. They don't know a damn thing about politics. All they know is advertising and public relations."

I guess the idea in a PR-oriented power structure is that if you create an imposing facade, you can do whatever you want behind that false front — and get away with it.

One small aspect of this — those letters to the editor — tends to fascinate me more than it should, I guess. Nobody in this business has ever viewed the letters columns as being anything other than a flawed mirror of public opinion indeed. But a lot of us have come to view with a growing sense of irritation the notion of the political PR men that calculated use of these columns is a normal part of campaigning.

On the parish level, here, it is at first amusing, then annoying, to note the name appended to a glowing hymn of praise to Mayor Joseph L. Alioto, and then see the

same name appearing regularly on the list of paid Alioto campaign workers. Passing this stuff off as genuine public opinion is insulting. It also tends to degrade what ought to be a useful public forum.

Up there in the higher reaches, where the Nixies dash about trying to glue Humpty Dumpty together again, the process varies only in its volume. "Flood the papers with . . ." "Send 100 telegrams to . . ."

Even more interesting in the Washington testimony is the grander use of access to ink: The inspired syndicated column, and the inspired (and possibly subsidized) hard cover book. "Suggest so-and-so and thus-and-thus, and leak it to Whoozis . . ." "We could use a book right now, perhaps So-and-so would be okay, or perhaps . . ."

Our government lately has been taking an enormous interest in whether Wonder Bread really causes children who eat it to grow faster than unfortunate moppets who eat competing brands. Truth in advertising has become something not merely to advocate but to enforce wherever possible.

Bureaucrats take out after questionable ad claims with something of the fervor with which Cotton Mather pursued heresy. Advertise wrinkle-free prunes and the test lab starts counting wrinkles. Even Guinness, the noble stout, was not permitted to tell us that "Guinness Is Good For You." Guinness hadn't PROVED it.

I don't suppose any bureau will ever be set up to police the hairline accuracy of political claims, or to screen letters-to-editors for fraud content, and to tell the truth I am just as glad there won't be such an agency.

I'll be content if editors continue to do the job of keeping the politicians and their PR men reasonably honest, and I'll be perhaps a shade more content if current scandals infuse them more with the spirit of Cotton Mather in all this, and a little less with the tolerance of Little Mary Sunshine.