

Goebbels and today's mass mind control: Part One

How PR opinion-shapers turn the people against their own interests

By Carla Binion

April 23, 2001—Today's right-wing public relations spin has much in common with the propaganda methods of Hitler's PR man, Joseph Goebbels.

Goebbels admired Edward Bernays, a self-proclaimed founder of the public relations industry. Bernays, a Vienna-born nephew of Sigmund Freud, opened a New York office in 1919. According to John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, (*"Toxic Sludge is Good for You,"* Common Courage Press, 1995) Bernays "pioneered the PR industry's use of psychology and other social sciences to design its public persuasion campaigns."

Bernays wrote in *"Propaganda,"* (New York: 1928, pp. 47–48) "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it." Bernays referred to this scientific opinion-control as the "engineering of consent."

In his autobiography, Bernays discusses a dinner at his home in 1933 where, "Karl von Weigand, foreign correspondent of the Hearst newspapers, an old hand at interpreting Europe and just returned from Germany, was telling us about Goebbels and his propaganda plans to consolidate Nazi power. Goebbels had shown Weigand his propaganda library, the best Weigand had ever seen. Goebbels, said Weigand, was using my book 'Crystallizing Public Opinion' as a basis for his destructive campaign against the Jews of Germany. This shocked me. . . . Obviously the attack on the Jews of Germany was no emotional outburst of the Nazis, but a deliberate, planned campaign."

Today, corporations spend millions on public relations campaigns to "crystallize public opinion," often in an effort to convince the public that harmful things are actually good for us. Sometimes the companies start by bending the minds of our elected representatives.

This is the first part of a series. In part one, we'll focus on the ways in which corporations and their public relations mind-shapers worked to destroy the Clinton health care plan. Today forty-four million Americans, about one in five people, have no health coverage, and many people cannot afford needed pharmaceutical drugs. Most Americans probably wonder why, despite repeatedly broken campaign promises, Congress never does anything to improve the health care system.

As far back as November 8, 1999, a Newsweek article reported that half or more of eligible heart attack patients are at greater risk because they can't get needed beta blockers. The article stated that two-thirds of people surveyed say they are worried that health care is no longer affordable. Conditions haven't improved since then.

In 1993, the Clinton administration tried to do something about the high price of prescription drugs, hinting at possible government-imposed price controls. The pharmaceutical industry then turned to the Beckel Cowan PR firm to oppose the administration's designs on lowering the cost of prescription drugs—although, of course, the Clinton plan would have benefited the public.

Stauber and Rampton write that Beckel Cowan “created an astroturf [or, fake grassroots] organization called ‘Rx Partners’ and began deploying state and local organizers to, in the words of a company brochure, ‘generate and secure high-quality personal letters from influential constituents to 35 targeted members of Congress.’”

At the same time, Beckel Cowan managed a mail and phone campaign “which produced personal letters, telegrams and patch-through calls to the targeted members’ local and Washington, DC, offices.” The PR firm built a network of supporters in 35 congressional districts and states.

Pharmaceutical companies weren't the only corporations to oppose an improved health care system. The insurance industry went to work to fight against the Clinton health care plan, recruiting PR-man Robert Hoopes. According to Stauber and Rampton, the 300,000 member Independent Insurance Agents of America (IIAA) hired Hoopes as their “grassroots coordinator/political education specialist.”

Campaign & Elections magazine reported the IIAA activated “nearly 140,000 insurance agents during the health care debate, becoming what Hoopes describes as a new breed of Washington lobbyists,” wrote Stauber and Rampton. Hoopes said the lobbyists “have behind them an army of independent insurance agents from each state, and members of Congress understand what a lobbyist can do with the touch of a button to mobilize those people for or against them.”

In Campaign & Elections magazine (“Killing Health Care Reform,” October/November 1994) Thomas Scarlett writes of the insurance companies PR moves, “Through a combination of skillfully targeted media and grassroots lobbying, these groups were able to change more minds than the president could, despite the White House ‘bully pulpit.’ . . . Never before have private interests spent so much money so publicly to defeat an initiative launched by a president.”

The Coalition for Health Insurance Choices (CHIC), an insurance company front group, led the attacks on health care reform. According to Consumer Reports, “The HIAA [Health Insurance Association of America] doesn't just support the coalition; it created it from scratch.” Stauber and Rampton write that PR-man Blair G. Childs masterminded the Coalition.

Describing the fight against health care reform, Childs said in 1993, “The insurance industry was real nervous. Everybody was talking about health care reform . . . We felt like we were looking down the barrel of a gun.” He added, “We needed cover because we were going to be painted as

the bad guy. You get strength in numbers . . . Start with the natural, strongest allies, sit around a table and build up to give your coalition a positive image.”

To battle health care reform, Childs said the coalition brought in “everyone from the homeless Vietnam veterans . . . to some very conservative groups. It was an amazing array, and they were all doing something.” (Blair Childs speaking at “Shaping Public Opinion: If You Don’t Do It Somebody Else Will,” in Chicago, Dec. 9, 1994.)

Childs advised industry health reform opponents on selecting names for their fake grassroots coalitions. He said they should use focus groups and surveys to find “words that resonate very positively.” (Examples included the words “fairness, balance, choice, coalition and alliance.”) His own coalition sponsored the famous “Harry and Louise” television spots. Those ads used strategic words to convince the public that Clinton’s health care plan was overly complex—a “billion dollar bureaucracy.”

Propagandist Rush Limbaugh also fueled the anti-health care debate on his radio show with frequent “calculated rants” aimed at his dittohead audience. PR-man Blair Childs said his coalition ran paid ads on Limbaugh’s show to encourage Rush’s listeners to call members of Congress and urge them to kill health care reform.

Stauber and Rampton say that congressional staffers often didn’t know the callers were “primed, loaded, aimed and fired at them by radio ads on the Limbaugh show, paid by the insurance industry, with the goal of orchestrating the appearance of overwhelming grassroots opposition to health reform.”

During 1992 and much of 1993, before the propaganda blitz, both Democrats and Republicans were leaning toward a health reform bill according to James Fallows (The Atlantic, January 1995.) Fallows writes, “Bob Dole said he was eager to work with the administration and appeared at events side by side with Hillary Clinton to endorse universal coverage. Twenty-three Republicans said that universal coverage was a given in a new bill.”

By 1994, the insurance corporations’ PR attacks had changed the political environment. Stauber and Rampton write that “Republicans who previously had signed on to various components of the Clinton plan backed away.” Even Democratic Party Senate majority leader George Mitchell “announced a scaled-back plan that was almost pure symbolism . . . Republicans dismissed it with fierce scorn.”

Although Hitler’s propagandist used mass mind control for more sinister goals, today’s corporate propagandists have the following in common with Goebbels: They use the same opinion-shaping techniques he did, and they use them for the purpose of turning the people against their own interests. When large numbers of American citizens suffer or die because they can’t get needed medicine or surgery as a result of corporate propaganda, it becomes obvious that Goebbels and today’s industry PR spin doctors have produced fruit that is similar in kind, though different in degree.

The public benefits from understanding corporate PR and its character and intentions. Hitler said, “Only one thing could have broken our movement: if the adversary had understood its principle and from the first day had smashed with extreme brutality the nucleus of our new movement.” (Speech to Nuremberg Congress, 9/3/33.)

Corporate America’s movement to undermine affordable prescription drugs, universal health care and other public health and safety interests has to be understood before it can be fought. Stauber and Rampton say the PR industry resembles the title character in the old Claude Rains movie, “The Invisible Man.” Rains’ character uses his invisibility to get away with robbery, murder and other crimes. The film was made using special-effects techniques such as hidden wires to make ashtrays, guns and other objects appear to float in mid-air, as if they were being moved by the invisible man.

“Instead of ashtrays and guns,” write Stauber and Rampton, “The PR industry seeks to manipulate public opinion and government policy. But it can only manipulate while it remains invisible.”

In part two, we’ll look at specific techniques today’s public relations ploys have in common with Goebbels’ methods, and we’ll examine the corporations’ and think-tanks’ Goebbels-like attacks on environmental protection.

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