

Note: This paper is an expanded version (about 50% longer) of the article of the same title published in *Public Relations Review* 35:2 (June 2009) 159-61. Therefore, this paper would be considered the same work as the article, with all copyright protections of the article applicable to this version as well.

Flicks of Government Flacks: The Sequel

(Longer Online Version)

by

Mordecai Lee

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

(Copyright © 2008 Elsevier Inc.)

Abstract

This inquiry supplements the list of cinematic depictions of the government public relations professional which was published in *PRR* in 2001. Some additions were from movies that were released after 2001 or not available at the time, others from films that were not identified in the first effort. By publishing this addendum, a more comprehensive list becomes available to future researchers by combining the movies identified in 2001 with this additional listing.

1. Introduction

In 2001, this author reviewed the film image of government public relations officers (Lee, 2001). This research note is an addendum to the set of 20 movies identified in that article. This short

communication is intended to serve as an archive and groundwork for future research and analysis about the film image of public information professionals working for government managers.

Since the 2001 article, additional possible movies were identified partly by feedback from public sources such as the readers of the original article and partly from subsequently published literature (Wielde and Schultz, 2007; Tilson, 2003). Also, after 2001, the screenplay of the 1962 version of *The Manchurian Candidate* was published, making the released version of the film available for accurate quotation (Axelrod, 2002). Finally, since 2001, online search capabilities have greatly increased. For example, the website tcm.com added to its movie listings the synopsis of each film as prepared by the American Film Institute (AFI). This permitted a deeper and more nuanced search of a digital database than had been available for the 2001 report. As a result, several pre-2001 movies that were missed in the 2001 survey were subsequently identified.

This review adds a set of seven films to the 2001 list of 20 movies that depicted government PR professionals. The criteria used here are the same as the 2001 survey. So, first, it excludes public relations experts who work in the private or nonprofit sectors. Therefore, for example, the Manhattan show business publicist in *Phone Booth* (released in 2002, played by Colin Farrell) would be beyond the scope of the project. So, too, would be the two partners in the PR agency The Zipkin Group in *A Mighty Wind* (2003). However, that movie contains dialogue that, while satirical, presents such a cutting depiction of the image of public relations in American popular culture that it warrants being reproduced here:

Wally Fenton (played by Larry Smith): We are very excited to be involved with this project. Frankly, it's gonna be something of a challenge for me because personally, anyway, I'm not a fan of folk music.

Amber Cole (played by Jennifer Coolidge): Me too!

Fenton: I couldn't care less about it. But that really doesn't matter in the business of public relations – which is what we care about, which is what we do. It doesn't matter what we think. It matters what you think. And it matters what we can make you think. Am I right? What we can sell to you. And a product you'll love to buy, by the way. That's the way we look at this particular concert.

Cole: And if we can't do that, we fake it.

Fenton: Well, that's also part of public relations. We're professionals here, you see. We get ideas that help sell.

Second, this effort to update the 2001 inquiry also excludes PR professionals who work for elected officials (such as the White House Press Secretary or a US Senator) or for candidates running for office. So, for example, the TV series *West Wing* would be excluded. However, a major development since 2001 has been the wide availability on DVD or Blu-ray of the entire run of the series. This, therefore, now provides a good opportunity for other researchers to analyze the depiction of the public relations professionals in *West Wing*.

Third, the scope is limited to professional public information officers (sometimes called PIOs or PAOs), not to lay civil servants who happen to do something that could be defined as public

relations. So, for example, *Saving Private Ryan* (released in 1998) would not qualify, even though the hero (an Army Ranger officer [played by Tom Hanks]) describes a new assignment to his sergeant as “a public relations mission” (Rodat, 1997; Collins, 1998, 100). The character was not a public relations specialist, which is the theme of this inquiry.

Finally, one film was excluded because it could not be obtained for screening. The Hong Kong-produced movie, *The Sunshine Cops [Yang guang jing cha]* (released in 1999) most certainly relates to police public relations. But, from the film’s synopsis that is available, it is unclear if any professional public relations officers of the police department are in the film.

The listing below of additional movies depicting public sector PR professionals is in chronological order of the year of the movie’s release and the information provided is structured similarly to the 2001 list.

2. More Government Flack Flicks

2.1 The Manchurian Candidate (released in 1962). Directed by John Frankenheimer. Written by George Axelrod (2002). From the novel by Richard Condon (2004 [1959]). Major Bennett Marco played by Frank Sinatra. Genre: thriller. Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: An officer in Army Intelligence based in Washington, DC, Major Marco has been facing psychiatric problems. Therefore, an Army doctor recommends to Marco’s superior that he needs “less sensitive duties. I think a few months detached service to, uh, well, perhaps the public relations corps should put the major in the pink”

(Axelrod, 2002, 21). But, it turns out that public relations was not an easier profession than military intelligence. In his new assignment, he moderates a press conference by the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon. A demagogic Senator (a la Joseph McCarthy) disrupts the press conference with wild accusations and the Secretary defends the service vehemently. Marco intervenes:

(Marco quietly covers the microphones with his hands.)

(quietly) “Mr. Secretary, I’m kinda new at this job but I don’t think it’s good public relations to talk that way to a United States Senator, even if he is an idiot” (Axelrod, 2002, 22).

As a result of this kind of incident, his commanding in Intelligence tells him, “Public Relations has bounced you back to me” (Axelrod, 2002, 37).

Marco’s temporary duty to public affairs appeared in the 1962 screenplay, but was not in the original 1959 novel. The screenplay of the 2004 remake (Pyne and Georganis, 2003) included Marco’s temporary assignment in public affairs, but the final cut of the movie, as released, eliminated all those references.

2.2 Countdown (released in 1968). Directed by Robert Altman. Written by Loring Mandel.

Novel by Hank Searls (1964). NASA spokesperson at Mission Control Walter Larson played by Ted Knight (who later played the pompous TV news anchor on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*).

Genre: sci-fi and thriller. Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: In the race to be first on the moon, Larson is the main media liaison person. He briefs the press about upcoming missions and oversees the care of feeding of the press corps when it travels between Houston and the Kennedy Space Center. Higher echelon officials trust him and take him into their confidences. They also get public relations advice from him.

During the mission to the moon, Larson stays in the press room and gives continuous and accurate updates to the media because he is plugged into the voice contact between the astronaut and Houston (and they aren't). However, at one point he lies to the press, describing a lack of radio contact as "planned for this stage of the mission" when it wasn't and there were great worries about the safety of the astronaut.

(In the original novel, the PAO played a much smaller role. His title was Astronaut Public Relations Officer and was not involved in other aspects of media and public relations. In the novel his name was Joe Garcia, a former Marine aviator who shifted to public relations later in his career. The author described him as "more a poet than a military public-information man" [Searls, 1964, 39-43, 137-38].)

2.3 MacArthur (aka MacArthur, the Rebel General) (released in 1977). Directed by Joseph Sargent. Written by Hal Barwood and Matthew Robbins. US Army Public Relations Officer (PRO) Colonel Legrande A. Diller played by Allan Miller. Genre: biopic. Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: The top public relations staffer to General Douglas MacArthur, Colonel Diller's job is to promote the public profile of his commander. After the fall of Bataan, MacArthur regroups from a new HQ in Australia. A newly appointed staff officer, just arrived from Washington, DC meets with Diller:

Colonel Courtney Whitney: You've done an absolutely top-notch job with the general's press. He's America's hero, you know, and no small amount of credit belongs to you.

Diller: Well, we don't want the home folks to forget about us out here.

Whitney: I don't think you realize the dimension of the excitement. (Hands him fan mail.)

By the end of the war, MacArthur has promoted Diller to a one-star general. After the Japanese surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay, Diller is talking to another MacArthur aide:

Diller: Sid, You know, I got the surrender signing on the cover of almost every major magazine in the world and I'm still gonna give you this advice...

Major Sidney Huff (staff aide to MacArthur): (laughs)

Diller: ...in the next war, if anybody (emphasis in delivery) tries to get you into public relations, don't (emphasis) do it.

Huff: Yeah, I'll remember that.

Diller: Especially not for the general. Every foreign correspondent in the world (emphasis) is here now. It's like chow line outside my office. I've got to accredit

them. I've got to find 'em all places to bunk. I have to spend an hour with every correspondent.

Huff: What are you trying to tell me, that you're actually earning that star of yours?

Diller: You better believe it.

2.4 Capricorn One (released in 1978). Written and directed by Peter Hyams (1976). Novelization by Ron Goulart (1978). NASA Mission Control spokesman Paul Cunningham played by Paul Haney and another NASA PR staffer Mark Hughes played by Todd Hoffman. Genre: sci-fi and thriller. Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: Paul Cunningham is the voice of Mission Control providing live updates to the media from his seat within the control room. He is heard in the movie, but never seen, emphasizing that he is, literally, the voice of NASA, but otherwise an invisible presence.

A lower level PR staffer is shown escorting VIPs to the launch and catering to their whims, such as a request by an important Congressman for two commemorative binoculars to keep, one for him and one for his wife. The PR man initially resists, but eventually grants the Congressman his wish. In response, the legislator says to him, "You learn pretty quick [sic]. You'll do all right" (Hyams, 1976, 12). This vignette depicts public relations as little more than a gopher, doing just about anything to keep a stakeholder happy, no matter how unreasonable the request is.

2.5 *Bob Roberts* (released in 1992). Written and directed by Tim Robbins (1991). New York Police Department spokesman Frank Ryan played by Larry John Myers. Genre: comedy.

Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: The title character is shot while campaigning for US Senate. At the hospital, the Police Department's spokesman heads a news conference to brief the press. He is flanked by law enforcement and hospital personnel. He briefs the reporters on the department's investigation, but withholds some details, saying "I cannot reveal that information at this time."

A day or two later, Ryan provides an update to the press corps camped at the hospital. First he introduces a doctor to give the latest information on the candidate's condition. Then, he opens it up for questions, all of which are directed at him. He is calm and not rattled by the badgering from the reporters. He's clearly familiar with the reporters, calling one by name. Again, Ryan withholds some information, saying "I have no answer for that particular question at this time." Eventually, he releases the name of the suspected shooter.

2.6 *Race to Space* (released in 2002). Directed by Sean McNamara. Written by Eric Gardner and Steven H. Wilson. NASA PR man Frank Barnett played by John O'Hurley (who later played the pompous J. Peterman on the TV series *Seinfeld*). Genre: Children. Country: US

Plot relating to government public relations staff: Fictionalization of NASA's preparations to send a chimpanzee into space on a suborbital flight before Alan Shepard became the first

American in space in a similar suborbital flight in 1961. Billy, the son of NASA's head German scientist, is hired to help work with the chimpanzees who respond well to him because he is their size, unlike the adults. The boy is an outcast at his school, partly because his father speaks with a heavy accent.

When NASA selects which chimpanzee will go on the flight, an adult introduces himself to the boy at work and says: "Billy, Frank Barnett, NASA PR Liaison. I'm the guy that's gonna make sure the whole world knows about your friend there. And I've got one corker of an idea as how we're gonna tell 'em." Barnett arranges for the chimpanzee to be introduced to the media at an assembly at the boy's school. The media event not only accomplishes its PR purposes, but also makes the boy popular at school.

The public relations man comes across not only as effective and shrewd professionally, but also kind and caring to a little boy for no reason other than being nice.

2.7 Edison Force (released in 2005). Written and directed by David J. Burke. Police Department Public Affairs staffer played by Klodyne Rodney. Genre: Crime. Country: US.

Plot relating to government public relations staff: A reporter is investigating a shooting, suspicious that a corrupt police officer, attached to the First Response Assault & Tactical (FRAT) unit, did it. He asks the officer some questions while the officer is leaving the courthouse after testifying at the trial of the person framed for the crime. The officer answers,

“Talk to Public Affairs.” When the reporter persists, the officer answers identically, but more vehemently, “TALK TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS.”

The reporter duly goes to the Department of Public Affairs of the police department. He stands at a service counter and a uniformed officer (an African-American woman) is seated a few feet away at her desk. He asks her a question. Remaining seated, she responds, “FRAT files aren’t public record.” He asks another question. She says, “We can’t speak for FRAT.” Well, who can? Her answer: “FRAT.”

If only by staying at her desk and not standing up to come closer to the service counter, the spokeswoman is indicating through her body language that she is not interested in trying to help him. The reporter is successfully stonewalled. The Department of Public Affairs is not assisting him, although that is one of its ostensible purposes.

3. Summary and conclusions

Are these seven additional flack flicks consistent with the findings of the 2001 report or demonstrate any different trends? Generally, they are consistent. As in the first set, most were white males, with only one African-American woman, and most worked for the federal government. About half worked for uniformed services (military, police), although the spokesperson was sometimes a civilian. In almost all cases the depiction was negative, with only one clearly and solely positive.

One characteristic that came through much more strongly in the second set of movies is how many are space and NASA related. It could be that the ‘voice of NASA’ role in the real space program during the 1960s left a significant impression on popular culture and authors. As with real life, the NASA public relations men were employees of the agencies, but understood the pressure from their clients (news media, citizenry) to be authoritative, credible and truthful. In these movies, they sometimes chose loyalty to the agency above truthfulness, a depiction that captures popular culture’s suspicion about the profession of public relations, whether the practitioners are in the public, business or nonprofit sectors.

It is hoped that this addendum of seven additional films depicting public relations in public administration will make available a more comprehensive catalog of such movies for subsequent research and analysis.

References

- Axelrod, George (2002). *The Manchurian Candidate* [screenplay of 1962 movie] (Eye, Suffolk, UK: ScreenPress Publishing).
- Collins, Max Allan (1998). *Saving Private Ryan* [novelization of original screenplay] (New York: Signet).
- Condon, Richard (2004 [1959]). *The Manchurian Candidate* (New York: Pocket Star Books).
- Goulart, Ron (1978). *Capricorn One* (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal).
- Hyams, Peter (1976). *Capricorn One, November 30, 1976* [screenplay]. Photocopy of typescript, unpublished.

- Lee, Mordecai (2001). "The Image of the Government Flack: Movie Depictions of Public Relations in Public Administration," *Public Relations Review* 27:3 (Fall) 297-315.
- Pyne, Daniel, and Dean Georganis (2003). *The Manchurian Candidate, August 18, 2003* (screenplay). Typescript, unpublished. Retrieved April 4, 2009:
<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Manchurian-Candidate,-The.html>
- Robbins, Tim (1991). *Bob Roberts: A Documentary, Final Draft, September 18, 1991* [screenplay]. Photocopy of typescript, unpublished.
- Rodat, Robert (1997). *Saving Private Ryan, Early Draft*. Unpublished. Retrieved April 3, 2009:
<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Saving-Private-Ryan.html>
- Searls, Hank (1964). *The Pilgrim Project* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Tilson, Don James (2003). "Public Relations and Hollywood: A Fistful of Publicity," *Public Relations Quarterly*, 48:1 (Spring) 10-13.
- Wielde, Beth A., and David Schultz (2007). "Wonks and Warriors: Depictions of Government Professionals in Popular Film," *Public Voices* 9:2, 61-82.