

*Educating Ike:
The Evolution of Presidential PR
in 1953*

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Abstract
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Dwight D. Eisenhower had confidence in his ability to communicate his vision for America when he assumed the presidency in January 1953. By December 1953, Eisenhower's confidence was still there, but the way his White House chose to communicate with the electorate was changing. During his first year in office, Eisenhower had to cope with the transition from being a military leader to a political leader. His administration was struggling with how best to use the relatively new medium of television to its advantage. And he was frustrated by the ability of Senator Joseph McCarthy to seize the public agenda and force the administration into a defensive posture. These challenges forced changes in White House public relations. This paper argues that, by year's end, Eisenhower administration communication efforts were evolving from Hunt and Grunig's public information model of public relations to their two-way asymmetric model of public relations -- i.e. from a more reactive to a more proactive approach. This transformation may have eventually occurred over a period of time. However, the paper argues that the November 1953 disclosure that Eisenhower's predecessor may have knowingly appointed a suspected Soviet spy to a sensitive government post ignited a political fire storm that hastened these changes -- changes that influence the conduct of presidential public relations to this very day.

Educating Ike: The Evolution of Presidential PR in 1953

Imagine what it is like to be an international hero, a proclaimed savior of civilization. Also imagine the confidence one gains after receiving an overwhelming affirmation of popular support by being elected President of the United States. For Dwight David Eisenhower, this was his reality at the start of 1953. Having led a coalition of nations to victory on the battlefield just a few years earlier, Eisenhower was now about to embark upon leadership of the Free World in the midst of the Cold War. Having enjoyed so much success in such a relatively short period of time, it is easy to understand why the man known to millions as "Ike" expected that success to continue.

By the end of the year, Eisenhower had undergone an education by fire. Although still a supremely self-confident man, he had learned that the old ways of doing things did not work in his new environment. As a military leader, he and the journalists had been on the "same side." As a political leader, his relationship with reporters was more adversarial. Although he was the first Republican president in two decades, that did not earn him the automatic cooperation of a Republican-dominated Congress. And the tools of mass communication were changing. His Democratic predecessors, most notably Roosevelt, had effectively used the new mass medium of radio. Now there was yet another new mass medium, television, toward which Eisenhower was at first ambivalent and, by year's end, would come to embrace.

This paper is about the evolution of public relations during the first year of the Eisenhower administration. Its purpose is two-fold, to use theoretical models of public relations to illustrate changes that occurred in the conduct of public relations and to demonstrate that a single event, a controversy involving a dead and obscure government official, hastened this evolution.

Models of Public Relations

Cutlip, Center and Broom have identified four public relations role models based upon the functions practitioners perform. Their four models are: *the communication technician*, a non-manager concerned with the preparation of communications; *the communication facilitator*, a mediator concerned with maintaining two-way communication; *the problem-solving process facilitator*, a collaborator who works with other managers to solve problems, and *the expert-prescriber*, a definer of problems and implementer of solutions.¹ Although these models are well-suited for describing the role of an individual, such as a press secretary, they do not work as well when attempting to characterize the actions of an organization, i.e. the Eisenhower administration. That is because the unit of analysis upon which the Cutlip, Center and Broom models are based is the individual.

Hunt and Grunig have developed four public relations role models that are better suited for describing the actions of organizations. That is because the unit of analysis which makes up these models is the flow of communications, regardless of

the number of practitioners involved. The four Hunt and Grunig models are: *the press agent/publicity model*, where the practitioner serves as a propagandist; *the public information model*, the one-way dissemination of information; *the two-way symmetric model*, where practitioners serve as mediators between the organization and its publics; and *the two-way asymmetric model*, where there is two-way communication with an emphasis upon persuasion.²

By all appearances, the Eisenhower administration followed the public information model of public relations when it took power in January 1953. Hunt and Grunig note that it is the public information model that is most typically used in government public relations efforts. As they write, organizations using this model often rely upon a "journalist in residence" to communicate objective information. In many ways, this is an ad hoc approach to public relations, one based less on research and more on a desire to influence public opinion.³ The "journalist in residence" of the Eisenhower administration was James C. Hagerty, who served as presidential press secretary during Eisenhower's two terms in office. Hagerty had been a reporter for *The New York Times* from 1934 until 1942, serving the last four years as a legislative correspondent in the newspaper's Albany bureau. From 1943 until 1952, Hagerty served New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, first as executive assistant and later as press secretary. It was from this association that Hagerty became involved in the Eisenhower presidential campaign in 1952.⁴

Eisenhower saw great value in public relations. As Stephen E. Ambrose has written, the ability to communicate was one of Eisenhower's basic principles of

leadership.⁵ Some insights into Eisenhower's attitude comes from the notes of Ann C. Whitman, the president's personal secretary. Following a September 28, 1953, White House staff meeting, she wrote:

"He (the President) then spoke of the value of public relations. He never believed in the theory that public relations could be handled by one man - public relations is a matter for the entire group. It must come up directly or indirectly in every staff meeting. He said "public relations is nothing in the world but getting ideas put out in such a way that your purpose is actually understood by all people that need to understand it in order to get it done efficiently and well." He said each day everyone of group must get some new idea on how the public relations idea can be sold to the country. Here is an activity with which each member of group is vitally concerned. In this, the adage is correct "an ounce of prevention or preparation is certainly better than a pound of cure." If we all get our imaginations working, he feels that we will see considerable improvement in relations with the public and the country. To the country to Department heads we must bring the composite of experience of experts in presentation of facts before the public."⁶

There is evidence that Eisenhower was wary of many of the strategies employed by public relations practitioners. During the 1952 campaign, he was quoted as saying that he wanted nothing to do with so-called public relations gimmicks, such as contrived campaign statements. "The people who listen to me want to know what I think -- not what I think about what someone else thinks," Eisenhower said.⁷ However, this wariness did not keep the General from going along with script writers who were telling him what he believed and should say in his television spot advertisements. During one filming session, a writer reported that Eisenhower shook his head and said, "To think that an old soldier should come to this."⁸

However important Eisenhower viewed the practice of public relations, it was an obscure subject to many others within the White House. On the day after

Eisenhower spoke to his staff, Commerce Under Secretary Walter Williams led a staff discussion about the coordination of public relations efforts. That session prompted Whitman to write in her diary, "For whatever it is worth, the whole business worried me because it sounded so fascist - you think this way, you say this in answer to that, etc."⁹

Balance the president's view of public relations with his view of the press. Although Ike understood the role reporters play in a democracy, he saw them as a group as "far from being as important as they themselves consider."¹⁰ He also took what they wrote at face value. "I have seen, when they occurred, the actual incidents reported, or I have understood the motives of individuals written about," Eisenhower wrote in his diary. "Rarely is such writing accurate."¹¹

Despite these feelings, Eisenhower felt the media were important enough "to insure that much government time is consumed in courting favor with them and in dressing up ideas and programs so that they look as saleable as possible."¹² Nor was it his style to confront journalists, either. As his private papers indicate, Ike's complaints about reporters and their stories were usually limited to his correspondence with close friends.

Eisenhower's views of public relations and journalism appear to be consistent with the Hunt and Grunig public information model. The communication appears to be one-way, from the source (the government) to the receiver (the electorate). The goal was the dissemination of truthful information.¹³ The prevailing view of the president at the start of his administration appears to have been: armed with the

right information, the public will make the right choices.

Forces For Change

Between Inauguration Day and early November, there were a number of forces at work that were to change the administration's approach toward public relations. At the outset of the administration, public relations wasn't a matter of great urgency. President Eisenhower enjoyed immense popularity, with a Gallup approval rating ranging between 67 - 74 percent during his first seven months in office.¹⁴ Craig Allen has noted that public communication was not a high priority early in the administration. Instead, the focus was upon internal and legislative communications.¹⁵ It wasn't until February 17, nearly a month after taking the oath of office, that the president conducted his first radio and press conference.¹⁶

As late as October 30, the administration discussed a reduction of government public information services. At a cabinet meeting on that date, the president "emphasized the need for quality rather than quantity" and asked the cabinet "to review the numbers and functions of these people with a view to reducing the quantity." Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson agreed with the president, saying that a study of department public information activities by "disinterested outsiders" will "probably result in a personnel reduction of 33%."¹⁷

Nevertheless, pressures for changing the way it communicated with the public were building upon the White House. One force for change was the realization of the differences between Eisenhower's relationship with journalists

during the war and now as president. Both Ambrose and Allen have written that, as a military leader, Eisenhower had always advocated on behalf of someone else's policies. As president, he was forced to defend his own policies. Ambrose also wrote that "all of the reporters were on his side as a general, but as President he faced a press corps of which at least half the working members were Democrats."¹⁸ And as Allen notes, the size of the Washington press corps made it difficult for Ike to have the informal relationships with individual reporters he had enjoyed during the war.¹⁹

Another force for change was television. Eisenhower's team believed that television could do for Ike the same thing radio did for Franklin Roosevelt -- make the president an overpowering presence in American life. Eisenhower's 1952 campaign had established important precedents in its use. Although the nominee continued the tradition of whistle-stop campaigning, he also adopted an aggressive television strategy. Because Eisenhower had been a well-known national figure for a decade, his strategists chose to concentrate on selectively targeted regional spot advertising in the three weeks preceding the election.²⁰ They also engineered an elaborate telecast that one writer said reduced the traditional election-eve candidate's speech to being "a relic from Model-T days."²¹

Television figured prominently in the campaign's defining moment. Stung by criticism of an alleged campaign slush fund, vice presidential nominee Richard M. Nixon took to the airwaves September 23, 1952, and delivered a speech that probably saved his political career, the so-called "Checkers Speech." After Nixon's

30-minute nationally televised address was completed, Eisenhower is reported to have told Republican National Committee Chairman Arthur Summerfield, who paid for the television time, "Well, Arthur, you certainly got your \$75,000 worth tonight!"²²

With the coming of the new administration, Eisenhower's advisers were unsure how to best use the relatively new medium. They received many suggestions, some of which were unsolicited. Less than two weeks after the election, movie mogul Darryl F. Zanuck urged the president-elect to, "Talk frequently to the people. Revive the Fireside Chat, this time on television."²³ Before the inauguration, the incoming administration considered a proposal for a series of filmed monthly half-hour reports from the White House using "every applicable motion picture technique to accomplish its objectives."²⁴ The idea was ultimately rejected, as one aide noted, because "you never heard an announcer say, 'you will now hear President Roosevelt in a fireside chat by transcription.'"²⁵

In the early days of his administration, Eisenhower raised the possibility of televising his news conferences. He was, nevertheless, wary of television. This is made evident by an August 5, 1953, memorandum to Hagerty:

"I heard this morning, after we returned, that my talk to the Governors' Conference was recorded and broadcast over one of the Washington stations at 10:30 last night.

"I would appreciate it if you would make sure that I am informed whenever my talk I make is either being broadcast live or recorded for later broadcast. I simply want to prevent any embarrassment that might possibly occur."²⁶

More than 40 years after the fact, it is hard to imagine a president with any

expectation of privacy for his or her public words!

United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who had been Eisenhower's 1952 campaign manager, urged the president in an October 15 memorandum to embrace the medium of television as never before. "Eisenhower must be the first great television President just as Roosevelt was the first great radio President," Lodge wrote. "This has not happened yet."²⁷

By November 1953, Eisenhower had made three nationwide television addresses. The last had been in June, to introduce Oveta Culp Hobby as his new secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. As Craig Allen has noted, the appearances "seemed to lack spark and imagination" when compared to the entertainment programs that preceded and followed the president's remarks.²⁸ The White House was planning another television speech at year's end to promote its 1954 legislative agenda. But there was a sense that the same old formula was not going to work.

Perhaps the greatest force for change was a realization that the administration had to do a better job of controlling the public agenda. That had not been a problem at the outset. The new president's handling of foreign affairs earned him a high approval rating from the American people. According to Ambrose, Eisenhower's April 16 "Chance for Peace" speech before a gathering of the American Society of Newspaper Editors was the finest of his presidency. Ambrose writes that the address evoked the greatest positive worldwide reaction to a statement made by any American since the unveiling of the Marshall Plan.²⁹ Only three months later, on

July 26, an armistice was reached in the divisive Korean War -- another boost for Ike's popularity.

Despite this success, there was evidence of some erosion in public support by the end of the summer. In the September 12-17 Gallup Poll, the president's approval rating had dropped to 61 percent -- still high by any standard, but lower than at any other point in the fledgling presidency.³⁰

What was particularly exasperating for Eisenhower was what he saw as the primary source of this erosion: an unholy marriage of the right wing of the Republican Party and sensationalist journalists. Although he had difficulties with several members of his own party, Eisenhower's biggest headache was Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. Much of what the administration was trying to accomplish was being overshadowed by McCarthy's anti-communist crusade. Ike laid much of the blame for McCarthy's notoriety upon journalists. He told friend and Coca Cola executive William E. Robinson, "We have here a figure who owes his entire prominence and influence in today's life to the publicity media of the nation." Eisenhower then complained, "Now these same media are looking around for someone to knock off the creature of their making."³¹

Just as in his approach with seemingly hostile journalists, Eisenhower avoided direct confrontation with McCarthy. "Senator McCarthy is, of course, so anxious for headlines that he is prepared to go to any extremes in order to secure some mention of his name in the public press," Eisenhower wrote in his diary. "I really believe that nothing will be so effective in combatting his particular kind of

troublemaking as to ignore him. This he cannot stand."³² The problem for Eisenhower was that what he saw as a deliberate strategy of silence toward McCarthy was being viewed by many in the media as, at best, submission to and, at worse, tacit approval of McCarthy.

By the fall of 1953, the need for improving White House public relations was being widely discussed within the administration. The president's previously stated comments at the September 28 staff meeting may well have been the opening shot. Lodge's "television President" memo of October 15 is another indication of these discussions. However, the best indication of this concern is Eisenhower's November 5, 1953, memorandum to the cabinet. Dated just one day after the first anniversary of his election, the president wrote, "While key and top echelon figures in the fields of Journalism, Publications and Public Relations are pro Administration, yet the so important lower echelons have not been too successfully wooed." He cited what he called "the overworked red herring of McCarthyism" and a focus on a Republican setback in an October 1953 Wisconsin special congressional election as examples of how "this lower echelon 'slanting' of news and Administration stories" can do "inestimable damage."³³ The irony is that within 24 hours of the penning of this memorandum, an event would occur that would serve as a catalyst for major changes in the Eisenhower administration's approach to public relations.

The Harry Dexter White Crisis

In a November 6, 1953, speech at a business luncheon in Chicago, Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. ignited a political fire storm when he accused former President Harry Truman of knowingly appointing a Soviet spy to a high government office. The official in question was Harry Dexter White, who served May 1946 to April 1947 as American Director of the International Monetary Fund. "Harry Dexter White was known to be a Communist spy by the very people who appointed him to the most sensitive and important position he ever held in government service," Brownell said. "The failure of our predecessors to defend the government from communist infiltration left the new Administration a necessary but very difficult task."³⁴

In fact, there was evidence to suggest that Brownell's suspicions were correct. Prior to his January 23, 1946, nomination to the IMF post, White's name had been included on two FBI lists of government officials suspected of espionage. Both lists had been transmitted to Brigadier General Harry Vaughan, a presidential military aide and liaison for FBI matters at the White House.³⁵ A third, more detailed, FBI report on White was received by Vaughan, Attorney General Tom Clark and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes on February 4, 1946.³⁶ Unlike the first two, this report sparked a reaction. However, by its own admission, the White House moved too slow to prevent White's Senate confirmation on February 6.³⁷ White suddenly died of a heart attack in August 1947, days after espionage allegations against him were made public, but before the Truman administration's sloppy handling of the

affair had been uncovered.

Brownell's disclosures set off a series of charges and counter-charges. Within hours of the speech, Truman defended his actions. The former president claimed that he had been aware of the allegations and had, ultimately, fired White. No sooner than Truman's comments were transmitted on the news wires that Hagerty said at his afternoon press and radio conference that Truman wasn't telling the truth.³⁸ On November 10, Truman, Byrnes (who had since become South Carolina's governor) and Clark (who had since become a U.S. Supreme Court Justice) were subpoenaed to testify before a congressional committee about their knowledge of the White case.³⁹ That evening, before a sympathetic audience in New York, the former president lashed out at "fake crusaders who dig up and distort records of the past to distract attention of the people from the political failures of the present."⁴⁰ This set the stage for what James Reston of *The New York Times* called "one of the stormiest White House news conferences of recent years."⁴¹ For 19 minutes on the morning of November 11, Eisenhower was peppered with some of the harshest questions of his entire presidency.

Although the press conference rules of the day prohibited direct attribution of quotations to the president, Eisenhower managed to cool some of the passions by indicating that he didn't think Truman "knowingly damaged the United States" and saying that he opposed the subpoenas of Truman, Clark and Byrnes.⁴² *The New York Times* reported on its front page the next day, "President Eisenhower took some of the personal and political rancor out of the Harry Dexter White case today

by defending the patriotism of former President Truman."⁴³ The president further distanced himself from the controversy by declining to answer additional questions on White at his November 18 press and radio conference. Eisenhower also insisted during that session that communists in government would not be a major issue in the 1954 mid-term elections.⁴⁴ In making these statements, the president had largely defused the White controversy. He also had learned an important lesson about the value of news conferences, one that he would soon put to use.

The White drama would have all but fizzled out if not for the actions of Harry Truman. The former president had contradicted himself several times during the course of the controversy -- at first denying and later acknowledging that he had seen the FBI reports. Meanwhile, Byrnes substantiated Brownell's account.⁴⁵ Truman further undercut his own position by making several conflicting statements during a nationally televised speech on November 17 -- at first saying he suspected White all along and then defending White. Truman's conflicting statements, combined with Eisenhower's defusing comments, combined to take heat off of the White House. However, Truman also used the speech to accuse the Eisenhower administration of "embracing McCarthyism" and "debasing" the presidency.⁴⁶ That opened the door for Senator McCarthy, who, because his name had been used by Truman, demanded and got equal time from the networks. In a televised reply eight days later that Sherman Adams described as more of "a tirade against the White House and the State Department" than a response to Truman, McCarthy contradicted Eisenhower and said the communists in government issue

would play a big role in the upcoming elections.⁴⁷

McCarthy had been a burr in Eisenhower's saddle for some time. Richard Nixon wrote that a McCarthy-Eisenhower "feud" had grown out of the anti-communist crusader's attacks on Eisenhower's mentor, General George Marshall. In his memoirs, Nixon described the strained relationship as it existed in 1953:

"Most Republicans in the House and Senate were then still strongly pro-McCarthy and wanted Eisenhower to embrace him, while the predominantly liberal White House staff members opposed McCarthy and wanted Eisenhower to repudiate him. The President himself was torn. He disliked McCarthy personally, not only because of the attacks on Marshall but because of his coarse familiarity, which Eisenhower found distasteful. But he was reluctant to plunge into a bitter personal and partisan wrangle, aware that if he repudiated McCarthy or tried to discipline him, the Republican Party would split right down the middle in the Congress and the country"⁴⁸

Ironically, McCarthy's speech opened the door for a significant change in White House media relations. After the speech, there was considerable pressure placed upon Eisenhower to publicly rebuke the Wisconsin senator. This pressure came from both within and outside of the White House. As has already been documented, direct confrontation was not Eisenhower's style. The president's response was a prepared statement at the start of his December 2 radio and press conference. Without mentioning him by name, the president distanced himself from McCarthy by repeating his belief that communists in government would not be an issue in the 1954 elections. Because the news conference prohibition against direct attribution still stood, the president's statement was distributed as a news release after the meeting with reporters. This approach served Eisenhower's purposes well by getting his exact words on the record without having to directly

confront McCarthy.

The success of this action emboldened the White House to take the next logical step. Following the president's next radio and press conference on December 16, Hagerty surprised White House reporters by releasing audio recordings of the session for use by the broadcast networks. He went on to say that reporters were free to directly quote the president from the transcripts. "I think this is the first step in opening it (presidential news conferences) up to other media."⁴⁹

The Transformation of White House PR

Within a relatively short six-week period, the conduct of presidential news conferences had changed. The president, who had only a few months earlier expressed concern that a public speech had been rebroadcast without his knowledge, was now willing to change the rules of engagement and allow everything to go on the record. Although internal documents suggest that these changes were inevitable, they also suggest that these changes were hastened by events surrounding the White case.

There were other changes in White House public relations taking place during this period. At the height of the White controversy, on November 23, 1953, Eisenhower sent his cabinet a memorandum on the need for establishing "an effective public relations position" for the administration. It was the second such memorandum that month. In it, he wrote, "we have a task that is not unlike the advertising and sales activity of a great industrial organization. It is first necessary to

have a good product to sell; next it is necessary to have an effective and persuasive way of informing the public of the excellence of the product." Eisenhower also discussed the value of bringing in outside experts to help focus the administration's public relations efforts.⁵⁰ Perhaps not coincidentally, it was also during this period that actor Robert Montgomery was asked to help in production of a year-end presidential address.⁵¹ In doing so, Montgomery became the first presidential television consultant.

In late 1953, White House communication efforts were beginning to evolve from Hunt and Grunig's public information model of public relations into their two-way asymmetric model of public relations. According to Hunt and Grunig, the purpose of communication in the public information model is simple dissemination of information.⁵² That appeared to be Ike's attitude during his September 28 staff meeting. ("Public relations is nothing in the world but getting ideas put out in such a way that your purpose is actually understood by all people that need to understand it in order to get it done efficiently and well.") Contrast that with the November 23 memorandum when he wrote, "it is necessary to have an effective and persuasive way of informing the public of the excellence of the product." The purpose for communication had shifted from dissemination to persuasion -- what Hunt and Grunig say is the purpose for communication in their two-way asymmetric model. They also note that the two-way asymmetric model is typical of competitive businesses and agencies -- the very organizations Eisenhower said he wanted to emulate. The hiring of outside consultants, indicative of more

sophisticated research, is also consistent with the two-way asymmetric model⁵³

This does not suggest that a total transformation from the public information model to the two-way asymmetric model had occurred in less than one year. In fact, one can argue that a total transformation never took place during the life of the Eisenhower presidency -- perhaps the topic of another paper. Nevertheless, significant changes did take place and appear to have been hastened by the White controversy.

Conclusion

The first year of the Eisenhower administration was a time of learning -- especially in the area of public relations. Eisenhower came into office on the crest of an electoral landslide. He enjoyed enormous personal popularity. As one might be having led the free nations of the world to victory in war, he was confident he could lead those same nations to prosperity in peace.

However, it wasn't that easy. Ike had to make the transition from a military leader implementing the orders of others to that of a political leader establishing, defending and persuading others about his own policies. He had to come to terms with television -- a medium in which he saw both promise and danger. And he learned a lesson that all White House occupants eventually learn, that being president does not automatically give one control over the public agenda.

The changes that occurred in White House public relations appear inevitable. But it also appears likely that they were hastened by the controversy surrounding

Harry Dexter White. In the process, the administration moved from a generally passive approach of just informing the people to a more aggressive strategy designed to sway public opinion.

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