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FROM

Becoming an Effective Political Executive:
7 Lessons from Experienced Appointees

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Essays on Working in Washington by:

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Part II

Essays on Working in Washington

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By John H. Trattner

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Working with the Media

By John H. Trattner, Council for Excellence in Government
(Adapted from *The 2000 Prune Book: How to Succeed in Washington's Top Jobs*)

*(The italicized quotes below are drawn from interviews of presidential appointees for **The Prune Book** and from panelists who took part in orientation conferences for new appointees conducted by The Council and the White House from 1997 to 1999.)*

In today's Washington, good news is usually less interesting to media covering the federal government than bad news. It probably always will be—for all kinds of reasons, people simply pay more attention to bad news and, therefore, so do the media. It's just human nature. Bad news concerning your agency doesn't have to be a hanging offense, however. Yet, afraid of generating bad news, people who run federal agencies sometimes fall into the trap of trying to make no news at all. And there you have the essence of the media challenge for federal leaders.

A federal agency with a good media operation has several things going for it. First, an agency

that doesn't wait to be asked—that finds creative ways to attract objective, positive coverage and tells its story honestly and factually—can make and keep a favorable impression among people everywhere. That will boost the agency's ability to perform well across the board. Reporters and editors respect an institution that is accessible and helps them do their jobs. Implicitly or explicitly, that gets reflected in what they report. The results are not lost on that agency's citizen customers, congressional overseers, other government agencies, and the public at large.

Example: When the Defense Department prepared to deploy U.S. troops to peacekeeping duties in Bosnia in 1996, it knew all too well that a lot of public opinion in this country opposed the move. Already skeptical about the need for a U.S. peacekeeping role, Americans also worried about combat casualties in a distant war. To turn the situation around, the Pentagon adopted an assertive, consistent com-

munications strategy on Bosnia that portrayed the troop deployment as a mission to help others help themselves, not to take sides or dictate terms. As part of their assignment, American troops got media training to help them convey that message. Given easy access to American soldiers in Bosnia, journalists reported to American audiences on their life and work there. About a month into the mission, a major opinion poll showed that more than half the American public supported U.S. policy in Bosnia. Later, the American military presence was stretched beyond its original one year—and U.S. troops remain there today. Almost no one has argued, then or since, that they should come home. It was a classic example of how to take your case to the public via the media and win.

Handling Bad News

Second, since bad news is inevitable in the life of any institution, an agency that knows what to do at such times can minimize the impact.

Bad news is not like wine or cheese—it does not improve with age. You have a choice. Do you want to have a one-day story that says you screwed up? Or a three- or four-day story that says you screwed up and lied about how you screwed up and you tried to make it go away and it didn't go away? Better to just get it over with.

“The other day,” a television correspondent notes, “the FBI announced the arrest of a veteran employee of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), an auditor who had been skimming thousands of dollars for years from the DEA. The DEA put out a press release saying, here’s who the person is, here’s what the FBI said he did, here’s what we’ve done to try to fix it. Boom—the story just absolutely vanished like paint thinner. Because they stepped up to the plate and said the guy’s a bum and he’s out. That’s exactly the right way to handle it.”

Or take the story of the costly Mars Polar Lander mission in late 1999. It failed when, despite repeated attempts, no contact was ever established with the spacecraft after it was to touch down. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was on the front pages for days, with much of the coverage unfavorable. But the agency kept putting out whatever news and comment it could about the mission. “Every time we learn something about what’s happening on Mars or isn’t happening, we have told the media as we learn it,” a NASA official told a network anchorman at the time. But he wondered whether it was worth it, “since it seems to me we’re just going to continue to get the bad news

over and over again.” He wanted to know how the anchorman saw the situation. “I think NASA took a very candid approach,” was the reply. “You handled it the way it should have been handled.” Maybe there was no way to put a good face on the story, the anchorman said, “but every step along the way, the audience and I were being informed of what was going on. I think NASA is to be congratulated.” He went on to say:

We all have our share of bad news, personal, professional, agency. You get the story out there—in my view, you’re going to be a lot better off trying to cut your losses early and getting your case out than you are in delay, delay, delay.

There is a third point here. The assets an agency builds in its proactive mode are often just as useful when it must adopt a reactive stance. A federal agency official tells a story that broke about tainted milk when she was an advisor to a state governor. The milk had been contaminated by bad dairy feed. Reporters were demanding to know immediately when the state was going to pull all milk.

We just invited a group of them in to talk. We told them it was easy to think the big issue was when were we going to pull the milk. But you also had to think through a lot of other things. If you pulled all the milk, what were you going to do with it? You can’t just go pour it out, because it seeps into ground water. And what about the years spent getting people to drink milk because of the things in it that are good for them? We said, let’s talk through this domino effect and the

fact that a lot of careful thinking has to be done. And the reason we were able to say those things, at a time when the national press was really pouring in, was because we had offered proactive briefings, trying to make sure there would be a real dialogue going on when something’s happening. They were people that we had built good relationships with. I know that’s what helped us through that.

Offense or Defense?

“There are generally two kinds of agencies,” says the network television anchorman. “One has an agency head or press chief who, when the press calls, says ‘let’s see what we can do.’ The other is the ‘oh, my God, it’s the media, now what?’ kind. Chances are the first kind of agency is going to get a lot better treatment, because there’s going to be more cooperation there. I think it takes a sea change in mentality.”

No question—spending less time in a reactive crouch and more on advance planning, effective public communications, and outreach is the best investment for working with the media. We’ve already seen the value of proactivity. What are the other specific elements of that strategy?

Communicators. A former agency public affairs official who was also a television reporter and anchor says, “Get your communication people in on things early, not when decisions and actions are fully formed.” Indeed, government public affairs people have long argued that they should be on hand when policy is taking shape, not after

the fact. That allows them to understand what the policy is to be and ask all the tough questions now that the press will ask later. It permits them to see to the vital, often neglected, task of coordinating an agency's public communication with other relevant government institutions. Sometimes their participation can help improve the policy decision itself. Sometimes it will alter the way policy is to be presented publicly. Listen to the advice of a leading national public opinion expert:

In government, you need to spend a lot more time figuring out this is going to be the story, this is how we're going to do it, this is how we're going to use the secretary or the under secretary, this is the position.

So one fundamental of good media strategy is that communications people have to be there on offense and defense. It is promotion and damage control, all wrapped into one. Years ago, a government communicator put this concept into words for all time: Public affairs people want to be there "at the take-offs as well as the landings" (when it will also be their job to pick up the pieces if things don't go well).

This is not a question of policy works versus communication people. The question is: What's the mission? If you're going to put together a good program, you've got to think of what all the down sides are. Somebody has to be at the table seeing it from that other perspective.

Technique. Next, agency seniors who deal personally with journalists on an individual basis should have one or two rules of thumb in mind. "Go in with an agenda," says a White House official. "That takes some skill so that you don't simply ignore the question on the table. You need to answer the question asked. But, as quickly as you can in the construct of that question, get to what it is that you want to say." Don't give a journalist total control of the agenda. "If you have something to say, make sure you say it. Don't have to offer the excuse later that, 'Well, she never really asked me about X.' "

An agency assistant secretary who meets fairly often with reporters says he usually starts by speaking on a background basis for a while (meaning that what he says cannot be attributed to him by name or position). That's "just to get a feel for what the reporter is about and what the questions are." He thinks it's important to "get a sense of what role you're being cast in for the interview. You have to figure out where the reporter's coming from, what kind of a story is being written, and then you can decide how you can write your own part. If they're just casting you as the dumb government bureaucrat, chances are you want to avoid saying anything that will confirm the impression." Other specific advice:

- Respond promptly to calls from journalists, giving yourself the chance to add the administration's or your own personal point of view to the story and supply information that expands its scope or meaning.

- When possible, especially on policy issues, work both sides of a newspaper—the editorial board as well as the reporters. "Sometimes an editorial board takes wrong-headed or uninformed positions," a correspondent observes frankly. "They do their thing and they don't usually share it with the reporting staff."
- Use the specialized media, the "trade press," in addition to the mainline media. These publications and television channels can make a big difference on particular issues on which they focus. As one reporter joked, "I'm sure, if you work in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, there's a *Modern Bricks Magazine*. Or *Food Stamp Monthly* if you're at Agriculture."

Quality. The third element of a media operation that works is the quality of what's being said. Journalists are often in a hurry, driven by deadlines and competition. Government leaders don't face those particular kinds of pressures. They have less excuse for being inaccurate in what they convey publicly.

The news cycle today is constant. It's not just the evening paper and the evening news. There is talk radio and the net and the cable channels. So there is terrible tension between getting the story right and getting it right away. You need to do both, but it's more important to get it right. The press puts a higher priority on getting it right away. Their biggest fear is they will be in a lot more trouble for being late than for being wrong. You have to have a higher priority on

getting it right. You've got to have your credibility. It's the most important thing, it's why you were brought into this government, in part, and it's what you need to take out of this government with you when you leave.

Never lie in speaking with journalists in any official capacity. Sooner or later, but inevitably, you'll be caught and your credibility—assuming there's any left—will never be the same. It's also bad for the people you work with, your agency, and your administration. Be as factual and accurate as possible.

But also remember the story about the witness being sworn in at court who, when asked to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, asked, "Which one do you prefer, judge?" In other words, you don't have to volunteer information that isn't being asked for, but what you do say should be the truth.

Make sure people can understand what you are saying. If a government communication is unintelligible, a university media expert argues, people assume the agency or office that put it out is trying to hide something. Here's a perfect example, offered by the television reporter cited earlier:

The deputy assistant secretary is there, in all of his deputy assistant secretary-hood, trying to explain this and he's not speaking English. He's saying that "the share of the youth cohort that has sustainable exposure to illicit substances has been trending downward," when what he

really means is fewer kids are using drugs. So speak English. Ask yourself if your next-door neighbor will understand what you're saying. How would you say it on the telephone to your mother? Write it down that way.

Don't let a crisis or emergency situation, destroy the quality of what you say publicly or affect how you handle the media. "Take a breath and tell them you have to get back to them," says the former senior White House executive—"you have to track it down, round it up, find out." Don't jump out with statements or position papers before you know what's actually happening. "It's just a question of experience and judgment," as the White House official sees it. "Sometimes, if you just let it go, it turns out not as big a crisis as you thought it might be."

Capable press spokespersons are vital. Maybe they have been journalists themselves, maybe not, but they have to be people who can talk with calm confidence to the press in any setting, on any basis, individually or in formal briefings. Good spokespersons are articulate, informed, and up-to-date on the institutions they represent, their policies, and their actions. Remember that spokespersons are only as good as the quality of their information and access to policy makers. Deny them either of these, and you cripple their ability to advance or defend the interests of their agencies or the administration. Make them mouthpieces only, without reasonable latitude to think, inquire, or speak on their own, and the media will ignore them. Take them into your confidence

and trust, and they will help you get the results you're looking for.

Surviving in the government/media culture.

The fourth important component in a good media strategy is productive working relationships with journalists, in which each side has reasonable confidence and can expect reasonable treatment. Right, you might well say—and, in the current Washington climate, about as likely as the sun rising in the west.

True, government and media co-exist in a wary relationship too often characterized by mutual suspicion. True, there are certain mind-sets on both sides—among them, that government executives are obfuscating, over-loyal, condescending, usually ready to run for protective cover; that reporters are imperious, self-important, poorly informed, vulnerable to the instincts of the herd. No one would deny that there is more than a little justification for these sentiments. But they shouldn't dominate the scene. Consider the following excerpts from the comments of three of the print and television journalists quoted earlier as they focused on this question of attitude:

Newspaper correspondent: *"Reporters don't expect you to make yourself look bad or your agency look bad. In fact, a lot of times, part of our mission is to present a balanced story, whatever it is. To be fair, we try to let each side make its very best argument. We'll sort through a lot of listening to try to get the kernel of what your case is. Don't presume that some-*

one is coming at you with any particular agenda or ideological bias or even to make you look bad.”

Television anchor: *“Credibility is all we have. Without it we have no reason to do what we do. Why should we risk our credibility by misrepresenting the information that is given us? We may test the information. But it would be foolhardy of us, whose livelihood depends on credibility, to try to manipulate the facts until they become non-facts.”*

Newspaper correspondent: *“I expect people to tell me the truth and deal with me in good faith and they only get one chance. If they don’t, then I know where they are and can never trust them again. That doesn’t mean I would never talk to them again. It’s just that I have a sense of what their ethics are.”*

Television correspondent: *“Ninety percent of people in government think the media only care when they screw up. Wrong. Yes, the media are fascinated when government screws up. Bad news is interesting. But the media love it when people in government win, when they succeed. Help them help you tell your own story.”*

Newspaper correspondent: *“It’s a really delicate human relationship. In the end we’re just all people and we don’t want to burn our sources. We want to be able to come back to you on another day and have you take our phone calls and give us information. But we don’t want to be in the bag for somebody either. It’s a delicate line to walk.”*

Leaks

At some point most political leaders, appointed as well as elected, find themselves dealing with the consequences of anonymously disclosed information, or leaks. Typically, a leak is the product of a one-on-one contact with a journalist initiated by an individual with the intention of exerting a specific effect. Because of its total lack of sourcing, any information that gets into the media in this way needs extra scrutiny.

How do you know a leak when you see one? While it’s not always simple, one frequent clue is the complete anonymity of the source—though that by itself is not conclusive. Second, since they are agenda-driven, leaked stories usually have some kind of target: a policy, a cause, an action, an individual. Third, now and then a story based on a leak will claim to reveal confidential or surprising information, previously undivulged, perhaps with a whiff of the sensational.

Bottom Line

The evidence suggests that an objective, outgoing stance with the media over the long term is likely to produce similar treatment in return. Will there be exceptions and aberrations? Of course. Can a federal department or agency afford to relax when its relations with the media are in good shape? Of course not. It should carefully think out its media operation and carefully manage it—all the time. There’s no such thing as a free ride with the media. Whatever the degree of pain or pleasure you

think you are deriving from media coverage of your agency, the coverage isn’t going to go away. It only makes sense, therefore, to invest the extra effort that makes it as positive and beneficial as possible.