

Public relations and the Big Lie: the case of Hill and Knowlton

by Scott Thompson

One year after the bombs began to rain down on Iraq, destroying civilian and military infrastructure alike and killing hundreds of thousands of people, evidence has surfaced even in the major media that a fraud was perpetrated on the U.S. Congress and on the American public to secure President Bush the “war powers” authority to wage that massacre. President Bush, working through a high-priced public relations firm and the White House’s official pollster, targeted weaknesses in the American people and the Congress to cut off opposition to the war.

Hill and Knowlton, the public relations and lobbying conglomerate, fabricated stories of Iraqi atrocities and stage-managed widely publicized hearings of a congressional “Human Rights Caucus” to bludgeon the Congress into voting up Bush’s “war power” to pursue a conflict that few, other than the Israelis and the British, wanted. One piece of information withheld from the American people was the fact that the so-called congressional Human Rights Caucus is a purely private agency, with no government affiliation, and which is funded by private contributions.

On Jan. 8, 1992, National Public Radio aired a segment exposing the fact that Hill and Knowlton had manufactured a story that Iraqi soldiers in occupied Kuwait had taken incubators from hospitals wards, leaving babies to die. On Jan. 17, ABC News’s magazine-format broadcast “20/20” also exposed the Hill and Knowlton big lie campaign, and two nights later, CBS News’s “Sixty Minutes” aired their own version.

“Sixty Minutes” showed excerpts from the Human Rights Caucus hearings, where a young girl, only identified by her first name, told the incubator story: “Mr. Chairman and members of the committee: My name is Nayirah, and I just came out of Kuwait. While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators. Took the incubators and left the children to die on the cold floor. It was horrifying.”

Caucus chairman Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) told the audience that the young girl’s identity had to be protected because she had family members still inside Kuwait who might be murdered if she were to be identified. In reality, Representative Lantos knew that this was all a lie. The girl, Nayirah al-Sabah, is the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador

to Washington, a member of the ruling monarchy, which has been cited in United Nations reports for its practice of chattel slavery. The story had been fabricated by psychological warfare specialists at Hill and Knowlton, who then coached the girl on how to deliver the phony story.

The incubator story was decisive in winning George Bush the war powers authority from the Congress. As a result, according to a December 1991 report from the Iraqi Health Ministry, 98,000 Iraqi children have died from lack of food, medicine, sanitation, and the other devastation brought on by the “allied” bombing of Iraq. This compares with the 312 Kuwaiti babies who never did die—as Nayirah al-Sabah claimed they had.

The story behind this big lie is all the more explosive, because the founder of the conglomerate of which Hill and Knowlton is a part, Martin Sorrel, started his career with Saatchi and Saatchi, a London public relations firm that has counted Margaret Thatcher among its leading clients for years. Thatcher was one of the most outspoken proponents of the idea that the United States had no alternative short of war with Iraq. In fact, as *EIR* has reported, it was Thatcher who “brainwashed” President Bush at her meeting with him in Aspen, Colorado, days after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, to consider nothing but a military solution to the crisis. Sorrel built up WPP Group PLC into one of the largest public relations conglomerates in the world, with Hill and Knowlton Worldwide as one of its major component firms.

Hill and Knowlton U.S.A. division chairman Robert Keith Gray, who had overall responsibility for this psychological warfare stunt, is a longtime Republican Party insider, who came to Washington from Nebraska during the Eisenhower years and has earned a well-publicized reputation as one of the capital’s leading homosexuals. He is a friend of both President Bush and White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray. As a favor to Bush, Gray hired Craig Fuller, Bush’s vice presidential chief of staff, as a top manager at Hill and Knowlton and Gray’s designated heir apparent. One week after the first of the radio and TV exposés of the “incubator” hoax aired, Fuller resigned from Hill and Knowlton to become senior vice president at Philip Morris Corp., in an apparent, clumsy effort to keep the myriad of scandals involving the firm from landing on Bush’s White House doorstep.

Bush ignites a war

The ABC "20/20" broadcast emphasized the personal role of George Bush in the psy-war effort. "President Bush mentioned what became known as the 'incubator atrocities' six times in one month, eight times in 44 days." For example, in November 1990, Bush stated, "Babies were pulled from incubators and scattered like firewood across the floor."

By January 1991, when Congress returned to Washington to debate whether or not to grant war powers to the President, ABC reported that several leading war hawks like Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.) picked up the theme: "Now is the time to check the aggression of this ruthless dictator, whose troops have bayoneted pregnant women and have ripped babies from their incubators in Kuwait." Said ABC reporter John Martin: "In the Senate, seven senators mentioned the incubator atrocity in the debate over whether to go to war." The resolution passed by only five votes.

ABC investigators discovered that the star witness, Nayirah al-Sabah, had been coached; the corroborating witness, Dr. Ibraheim Behbehani of the Kuwait Red Crescent, was actually a dentist, who was not qualified to certify the cause of a person's death; Amnesty International could find nothing to verify that the death of 312 premature babies had been deliberate, when it probed the allegations; a Kuwaiti pediatrician, Dr. Soad Ben-Essa, who remained in the maternity hospital, said she never saw any atrocities by soldiers and saw no theft of incubators. Furthermore, ABC was able to locate the incubators inside Kuwait which Nayirah had claimed were carried off to Baghdad.

Hill and Knowlton senior vice-president Laura Fetz-Pegado tried to tell ABC "20/20" that the firm worked for an exile-based group, Citizens for a Free Kuwait, not for the Kuwaiti government. But ABC's John Martin said, "CFFK documents, filed by law with the United States government, show that \$11.8 million of the \$12 million came from the Kuwaiti government. . . . Hill and Knowlton received almost \$6 million."

Among Fetz-Pegado's tasks was hiring the Wirthlin Group, a polling firm frequently used by the White House and the Bush-Quayle campaign. This gets to the heart of how the incubator lie was hatched. ABC's John Martin found that the Wirthlin Group ran "focus groups" to discover what "stirs or angers" people. "What they found," Martin added, "was that atrocity stories like Nayirah's worked." Hence the big lie.

Another stellar client: BCCI

Robert Keith Gray and his high-flying firm have also been grabbing headlines lately over another public relations coup, the trashing of two federal prosecutions of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI).

In testimony last year before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Narcotics, chaired by John Kerry (D-Mass.), former U.S. Commission-

er of Customs William Von Raab described a "gray network" which worked behind the scenes in Washington to derail the BCCI prosecutions. According to Von Raab's testimony, two principal players in the "gray network" were Hill and Knowlton's chairman and vice chairman, Robert Keith Gray and Frank Mankiewicz, respectively. The two other leading players in the protection network for BCCI were Washington, D.C. powerbrokers Clark Clifford and Robert Altman. Clifford and Altman were officials of First American Bankshares, a banking corporation that was illegally purchased by BCCI while the two attorneys were also representing BCCI's interests in the United States.

According to BCCI documents made public by Senator Kerry, much of the public relations work for the bank was handled by Hill and Knowlton's Frank Mankiewicz. An example of Mankiewicz's handiwork was a memorandum which circulated around Washington, attesting to the reliability of BCCI and its two top attorneys, Clifford and Altman. The memo argued that it was just "business" when Clifford and Altman borrowed money from BCCI to buy stock in First American Bankshares, leaving a "potential profit for the shareholders, after only six years, of approximately \$1 billion." The memo also covered for ongoing stock deals by Altman and Clifford after the two, as BCCI's chief American counsel, helped arrange a plea bargain for the Tampa BCCI branch, after Von Raab indicted the branch for laundering \$14 million in Medellín Cartel drug profits.

Hollywood, the ADL, and the drug connection

Mankiewicz's background suggests some reasons why he might be caught up in dealings with business associates of the Medellín Cartel. For many years, before he joined the political campaign of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in the mid-1960s, Mankiewicz had served as the West Coast Fact-Finding director for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), an organization notorious as a public relations front for the late Meyer Lansky's national crime syndicate and its offspring.

According to Mankiewicz, as communicated through his secretary at Hill and Knowlton, his father, Herman J. Mankiewicz, was a close friend of the late Hollywood studio boss and longtime ADL national chairman, Dore Schary. Schary, according to FBI files and other published accounts, came to Hollywood from Newark, New Jersey, as the result of his lifetime friendship with mobster Abner "Longie" Zwillman.

A member of the Murder, Inc. gang founded by Lansky and Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, Zwillman had invested heavily in Hollywood and become one of the Lansky syndicate's most active links to the motion picture studios and unions. Schary was installed as a senior producer at one of the major Hollywood studios, courtesy of Zwillman. In 1963, when the ADL sought to launch a high-profile fundraising drive, they got Schary to become their national director. Mankiewicz was the chief of the ADL's West Coast dirty tricks operations at the same time.