

Why would he maintain a fiction belied by his own American Tobacco files, which he voluntarily donated to the Library of Congress?

He may not have remembered just how clearly his papers contradicted the story he was telling, especially since they were nearly forty years old by the time he left them to the library, and he probably didn't have the time or energy then to review all 805 boxes. He may not have felt the abstracts he received on health studies offered conclusive enough proof on smoking's dangers. Or he may not have believed the files could harm him, since the library had agreed not to make them public until after he died.

It's even more likely, however, that he understood public opinion well enough to know what a bombshell it would be, for him and for the tobacco industry, to reveal how early they had suspected smoking's deadly effects. He wouldn't actually destroy any of his files, either because that would be dishonest or because he felt they were too precious a record of his achievements. So he simply did what he'd done in so many campaigns for American Tobacco: he told only that part of the smoking story that served his interests and those of his former client, and he told it often enough, and in such convincing fashion, that he probably began to believe his own rhetoric.

PUBLICITY MEN TRADITIONALLY SOLD THEIR SERVICES BASED ON their ability to chart the straightest course to their client's objective. If the aim was to sell more bacon, they would find ways to take a bite out of the business of other bacon-makers. If they were working for a book publisher, they would promote his titles and push the press for favorable reviews.

Eddie Bernays's approach was considerably more circuitous and infinitely more effective.

In the mid-1920s a huge bacon producer, Beechnut Packing Company, hired Bernays to help restore sales that had sagged as a country on the run trimmed its morning meal to juice, toast, and coffee. Deciding there was no point in trying to steal business from other ailing bacon producers, Bernays resolved to transform America's eating habits. He persuaded a famous New York doctor to write his colleagues asking whether they supported hearty or light breakfasts. Hearty won big, newspapers spread the word, people followed their physicians' advice, and sales soared of the two items most identified with big breakfasts—bacon and eggs. Thus the artery-clogging

combination became forever linked in the American lexicon as well as on the American breakfast table.

He used a similar strategy in 1930 when he went to work for Simon and Schuster, Harcourt Brace, and other major book publishers. "Where there are bookshelves," he reasoned, "there will be books." So he got respected public figures to endorse the importance of books to civilization, and then he persuaded architects, contractors, and decorators to put up shelves on which to store the precious volumes—which is why so many homes from that era have built-in bookshelves.

The Bernays touch also shaped the world of medicine. Shortly after he signed on with the Multiple Sclerosis Society, he pointed out that the name of the illness was more of a mouthful than most Americans could digest. He urged pruning it back to MS, which the society did, helping transform an obscure ailment into a favorite cause.

Bernays's tactics differed, but his philosophy in each case was the same. Hired to sell a product or service, he instead sold whole new ways of behaving, which appeared obscure but over time reaped huge rewards for his clients and redefined the very texture of American life. Some analysts have referred to his methods as strategic or lateral thinking—mapping out a solution based on a client's standing in the wider economy and society rather than on narrow, vertical considerations like how they were faring against other bacon makers or booksellers. Bernays preferred the phrase "appeals of indirection," plotting a path to a client's goal that seemed roundabout but ultimately removed underlying as well as immediate impediments.

In retrospect we can pin an even simpler label on what he did: Big Think.

Big Think meant more than just refusing to be constrained by convention; Bernays consciously defied convention. He was convinced that ordinary rules didn't apply to him, and he repeatedly proved that he could reshape reality. He also took clients to places they had never dreamed of going, places that scared them at first but thrilled them when, as often happened, the public rallied, as he'd predicted. Sometimes his campaigns involved strategies so complex and oblique that even he had trouble following the script, which often involved

front groups, letter-writing campaigns, and alliance after alliance; at other times his tactics were artfully simple, like reducing a name to its initials. Sometimes they appealed to the best instincts of clients and consumers; at other times he launched schemes he knew were wrong, and he willfully deceived the public. Always, however, there was a grand concept, the brash, bold, big thinking that grew out of his being more ingenious than his competitors, more cocksure, and generally more expensive. The big fees made him rich, but more important, they helped convince clients that his advice was worth its cost and that, since he was earning as much as their chief executive officer, it was with the CEO that he should be plotting strategy.

Big Think was part P. T. Barnum and part J. P. Morgan, blended in a way that was uniquely E. L. Bernays.

This new and evolving approach to publicity, its creator insisted, required new and evolving job titles. Before World War I he was content to call himself a press agent. By 1919, when he opened his first office in three rooms on East Forty-eighth Street, he'd decided "publicity direction" better conveyed the sweep of his labors. But something still was missing, something that would convey the seriousness of his advice and the range of his skills. So a year later, when he was testifying in a lawsuit involving his client Enrico Caruso and a reporter asked his profession, he tried yet another title, one he felt finally was worthy of his new enterprise: public relations counselor.

Those who caught his testimony that day could have been excused for mistaking the small man with the black mustache and gray demeanor for a traveling salesman or perhaps a new arrival from Central Europe. But if they looked closer they'd have noticed the passion with which he pleaded his case, the kind of passion that was redefining the fledgling field of public relations. Advertisers had always pressed consumers to pick one product over another, and press agents had shilled stories for clients, but now Bernays and a band of colleagues were skillfully manipulating symbols and trends in ways that affected what average Americans ate for breakfast, what sorts of homes they bought, and what colors they chose. And the PR men were doing it so adeptly that most people never realized it was

happening and couldn't have conceived of how it was transforming the country.

Today, thanks to records made available upon Bernays's death in 1995, we can look backstage and see what strings he was pulling. And in the process we can better understand the dramatic world of public relations, a universe that has come to include hundreds of thousands of publicists, pollsters, advertising executives, and strategic planners, and that plays a more profound role than ever in our lives.

Most of what Bernays did at the beginning, when he was severing his ties to the Committee on Public Information and setting up his own practice, was aimed at helping American industry accommodate to the economic and social changes wrought by World War I. The pattern had been for firms to alter their product line or pitch to fit changing consumer tastes; Bernays believed that, approached the right way, consumers themselves could be made to do the adjusting.

That's what happened when Venida, a leading maker of hair nets, watched in horror as more and more women cut their hair so short they didn't need mesh to maintain it. Some had grown used to wearing short hair when they worked in wartime factories; others were aping dance idol Irene Castle, who'd bobbed her hair so it wouldn't interfere with her spins and dips. Bernays didn't panic, and he didn't try to sell more hairnets. Rather, he got health officials to urge, and occasionally order, food workers to wear nets to keep their hair out of the food. He got labor leaders to urge women factory workers to wear nets to prevent their curls from being caught in the machinery. And he got leading artists to proclaim that the standard for American beauty was long, flowing locks—which, of course, needed to be kept in place with a net.

Luggage makers were equally alarmed by changing tastes when they sought out Bernays in the late 1920s. Flapper fashions, which included scanties, short skirts, and cloche hats, took up less space than earlier multilayered styles. Staterooms on ships and trains allocated less and less room for luggage, and new-style traveling salesmen traveled light. The PR man counterattacked, again through the back door. He got magazines and newspapers to set a standard whereby well-

bred travelers carried large wardrobes, and he urged architects to design more storage space, colleges to inform students of the many bags they needed to bring to campus, and health officials to explain why it was unsanitary to share a valise. Then he found a celebrity—singer-comedian Eddie Cantor—to pose while packing his big trunk for a concert tour.

The formula was simple: Bernays generated events, the events generated news, and the news generated a demand for whatever he happened to be selling.

"Not only God but counsels of public relations are masters of the mystic pulls of gravitation," *The Nation* observed in a 1927 issue. "Mr. Bernays holds, furthermore—and we cannot but agree with him—that the principle is applicable to *all* types of merchandise. . . . And so, happily, the consumer may forever cease from buying what he freely wants; and the Kingdom of Heaven of the Salesman will come upon earth."¹

. . .

Working that kind of otherworldly charm was easiest with major clients, who were less likely to be scared off by the machinations of Big Think and more likely to have the resources needed to pull it off.

The Bernays client list, which he said numbered 435 over his forty years of full-time practice, reads like a Who's Who in American commerce and culture of that era—General Electric, General Motors, Nash-Kelvinator, Philco Radio and Television, and U.S. Radium. From the world of art Bernays had the Ballet Theater and New York Philharmonic, playwright Eugene O'Neill, actor-theater manager Henry Miller, and painter Georgia O'Keeffe; from finance there was Mutual Benefit Life Insurance as well as Title Guarantee and Trust; and, from the communications industry, Columbia Broadcasting System, National Broadcasting Company, *Cosmopolitan*, *Fortune*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, the *New Republic*, and *Time*. Hoteliers came to Bernays for advice, too, from the Waldorf and McAlpin in Manhattan, the Saint George in Brooklyn, and the Book-Cadillac in Detroit. Union clients included the Brotherhood of

Railroad Trainmen and the International Union of Electrical Workers, and retailers included the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, F. W. Woolworth, and R. H. Macy.

Procter and Gamble was one of Bernays's biggest clients and, after thirty years, his most loyal. Its problem in the early days was simple but vexing: children didn't care about keeping clean and had no use for P&G's primary product, Ivory soap. His solution was simple but brilliant: "Children, the enemies of soap, would be conditioned to enjoy using Ivory."

The idea came to him when a sculptor wrote to Procter and Gamble asking for big blocks of Ivory to carve in place of clay. Seizing on the publicity potential of this idea, Bernays set up a committee, which in 1924 organized a National Soap Sculpture Contest with cash awards and lots of press coverage. Sculptors, architects, and other artists over the years transformed blocks of soap weighing up to 1,000 pounds into likenesses of portly William Howard Taft and sinewy Charles Lindbergh, Alice in Wonderland, the Empire State Building, and a battle scene from the Middle Ages.

The focus eventually shifted to schoolchildren, who received brochures explaining that the only tools needed were "a pen knife or paring knife. Two orange sticks (such as ladies use for the care of their fingernails—you can get them at any drug store). A wire hair-pin about three inches long. A yard of string or covered wire." The leaflet also advised youngsters to "use discarded models for face, hands and bath. You will love the feeling of cleanliness that comes from an Ivory Soap bath once a day."²

The contests continued for more than thirty-five years, until 1961, using a million cakes of soap a year and inducing untold thousands of contestants from ages six to eighty-six to spend hour after hour whittling away at big white bars of Ivory. While its commercial success is tough to measure, Bernays's sculpting scheme clearly helped make Ivory the all-American soap, much as he'd established bacon and eggs as the all-American breakfast.

Not all of his grand conceptions for Procter and Gamble panned out so well, though, and some never made it to the drawing board.

Consider Bernays's plan of counterattack when P&G's archrival, Lever Brothers, tried to replace Ivory with its own floating soap—Swan. The way to sink Swan, Bernays argued, was to get reporters to write stories saying that swans were vicious creatures that attacked children. P&G executives didn't buy that tactic. "[Bernays] thought the only way to respond was tearing [Lever Brothers] down a little and hopefully destroying them, which of course [his tactic] never in the world would have done," recalls Oliver Gale, who ran P&G's public relations department from 1937 to 1957.³

Soap sculpting had its own rough moments. In the early years a prizewinner in New York was disturbed when his girlfriend jilted him. He sneaked into her home while she was out and, to calm his nerves, carved up bar after bar of soap. When she returned and refused to reconcile with him, he practiced his art of sculpting on her and her mother. A reporter who visited the murder scene tried to link the killer to the contest, but contest officials denied any connection and insisted the carvings were the work of young girls.⁴

Mack Trucks approached Bernays in 1949 with an even more imposing challenge. It could handle competition from other truck makers but not from the railroads. Fearful of losing their grip on shipping, train operators had launched a fierce campaign to convince the public that trucks were ruining the roads and to persuade states to levy road taxes high enough to price trucks out of the freight business.

The railroads, however, hadn't counted on Big Think. "Our population was growing," Bernays recalled later. "So was the number of passenger and truck automobiles. The static element was the highway system of the country. An idea hit me. Since no present solution was possible, maybe a future solution would assuage the frustrations of the public. If we could promise American motorists future satisfaction on their roads and work to bring that about, the gripe against the heavy trucks would be dissipated and tomorrow the problem would be solved." Promoting truck sales by building roads was, as the PR man acknowledged, "the most indirect kind of indirection," and while it seemed logical to him, it required all his skills of persuasion to get Mack to think that far ahead and delay gratification that long. Even

tougher was getting Congress to commit the billions of dollars needed to construct a national highway system.⁵

But by now he'd worked out a recipe for solving problems like this, and as always with this man who was so consumed by symbols, new recipes demanded new names for the ingredients. His campaigns always began with an "overt act"—a stunt staged so cleverly that the press would think it was newsworthy—in this case a luncheon in the Waldorf-Astoria's grand ballroom at which the only speaker was Mack president E. L. Bransome and the sole topic his plan for paving the countryside. The next step was "segmenting," or identifying potential allies so they could be targeted with appeals. Bransome and colleagues obliged by barnstorming the nation, enlisting in their cause a curious collection of truck drivers, milk dealers, tire and rubber workers, and members of women's traffic clubs and men's driving clubs. Then he organized the "front groups"—the Trucking Information Service, the Trucking Service Bureau, and Better Living Through Increased Highway Transportation—which mailed out promotional letters and founded state associations to run local campaigns. Mack and Bernays brought Israeli ambassador Abba Eban onboard by agreeing to assemble trucks in Israel. They won over U.S. Army Chief of Staff William L. Barriger by convincing him that trucks were essential for warfare in the dawning atomic age. In all of this their aim was to get the attention of the public and, through it, the U.S. Congress.

It worked: Congress in 1950 approved \$566 million in road-building funds for each of the next two years, and two years later it upped the ante to \$652 million, the most it had ever authorized and a critical step toward completion of the interstate highway network. While several other forces were pushing for such a system, none was as determined as Mack and its allies. And while the railroads' share of the shipping business already was slipping, this helped cement the trend toward greater reliance on roads and less on rails.

Bernays's Mack campaign also set a model for lobbying that is still used in today's world of high-priced political action committees. He managed to unite disparate elements of an industry, in this case trucking, to battle a common enemy, the railroads. He realized that his

greatest challenge was to rally the public to his cause, he knew the way to do that was to appeal to pocketbook issues, and he proved that in the face of such an onslaught, Congress could be persuaded to spend billions of taxpayer dollars.

Other clients required their own tailor-made approaches—some straightforward stunts, some more sophisticated manipulations of symbols, but all bearing the Bernays flair. For Cartier, the international jeweler, he inserted a plug in the 1931 movie *Fifty Million Frenchmen*, getting Maurice Chevalier to croon, "You've got those ways, those fetching ways, that make me rush out to Cartier's." That was sweet music to the Fifth Avenue jeweler and to what would become an entire industry devoted to product placement. For Dodge's 1928 Standard Six model he got Charlie Chaplin to record a radio ad. Worried that Chaplin's speaking role might give him stage fright, Bernays insured the actor's voice for \$5,000 with Lloyd's of London, generating even more coverage. And for Dixie Cups he founded a Committee for the Study and Promotion of the Sanitary Dispensing of Food and Drink. One ad featuring a beautiful woman carried this caption: "Unwanted kisses are common enough in the lives of pretty girls. No wonder they avoid the rain of kisses promiscuously placed on the rims of publicly used and re-used glasses. Have your drinks in Individual Dixies and be exclusive. Be more than exclusive. Be safe! No lips ever touch a Dixie brim until it touches yours."⁶

America's brewers were more concerned about sanctimoniousness than safety. Prohibition was repealed in 1933, but it wasn't long before thousands of communities declared themselves dry, and the temperance movement picked up steam. So in 1935 the brewers picked up Bernays.

His strategy was familiar to every student of war, and of baseball: carefully analyze your opponent's game plan, and if you can't overcome it, co-opt it. That meant promoting beer as "the beverage of moderation" in a way that would distance it from distilled liquors and inoculate it against the temperance movement's argument that all alcohol posed the danger of overindulgence. He persuaded beer retailers to cooperate with law enforcement to ensure that their product

was used responsibly, and he published "evidence" that beer was not fattening and had a caloric value equal to that of milk. He told homemakers that beer would make for a richer chocolate cake; told farmers that brewers were major buyers of their barley, corn, and rice; and told laborers that beer was the one alcoholic beverage they could afford. And he published booklets and wrote letters claiming that beer was the favorite drink of the ancient Babylonians and the monks of the Middle Ages as well as of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and the Pilgrims.

"Beer is a sort of vaccination against intemperance," argued a typical Bernays campaign brochure, this one urging people to vote for a Texas ordinance legalizing the sale of beer. "The 'bootleggers' thrive upon the stronger beverages, distilled spirits, those that carry the 'kick' in concentrated form, in small packages easy to conceal. . . . Where beer is accessible the liquor bottle 'on the hip' is not so much in evidence, whether that be in the home or at a public place, or—most important of all—in an automobile. Many sincere temperance workers believe that the best way to fight intemperance is to legalize the sale of beer everywhere."⁷

Such pearls of wisdom cost big dollars. In 1931 Bernays handled publicity for the first aviators to cross the Pacific nonstop, a brief assignment that netted him \$4,000—which was \$1,000 more than the lead pilot earned. In the 1940s the Columbia Rope Company paid him \$40,000 a year for advice on "a multiplicity of problems, most of which I found insoluble." The Bank of America, meanwhile, solicited his advice on such matters as how to make reluctant regulators accept branch banking, advice they felt was worth \$60,000 a year, which Bernays says was \$10,000 more than the bank president's salary.

Fees like that quickly added up. Bernays's ledgers show that in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, his income reached \$98,513.55. Of that, profits were \$60,183.17—the equivalent of more than \$700,000 in 1997 dollars. And his earnings generally went up from there, with profits increasing as much as fivefold by 1935. In contemporary terms that means he was earning several million dollars a year.

His approach to money was simple, as he told an interviewer in 1985: "We decided that public relations advice is more important than legal advice, because legal advice is based on precedent but public relations advice might actually establish precedent. So we found out what lawyers charged, and we charged more. Up to then—1919, 1920—the most PR people received was \$125 a week. Our first fees were \$12,000 annual retainers and rose sharply from that."⁸

Steep fees made it hard for any but the wealthiest to afford his counsel, but Bernays reduced and sometimes waived his charges for clients like the American Library Association, the Cardiac Committee of the Public Education Association, and the Mary Imogene Basset Hospital. He also served as chairman of the Citizens Committee for Better Schools of New York City and vice chairman of the Concert Committee of the New York Stadium, and he was a member of the boards of the Hospital for Joint Diseases of New York, the Metropolitan Educational TV Association, the New York Shakespeare Festival, and the Carnegie Hall Corporation. Beginning in 1946, he says in his memoirs, he committed half of his professional time to non-profit work.

Even when representing the rich, he was democratic in his sales pitches. He convinced blue-blooded Cartier's to institute \$5 and \$10 departments during the Depression, and he eventually terminated his relationship with the longtime client because, he said, "I gave serious thought to the wisdom of handling jewels during a depression and concluded that, in all conscience, I could not continue."⁹

At other times, he zeroed in on the elite of the elite, advising the Sherry Netherland Hotel to send solicitations to America's "1,000 wealthiest widows," owners of Rolls Royces, seniors at Ivy League colleges, and a "wide mailing list chosen from the social registers or blue books of New York and other leading cities."

Targeted mailings were one tactic he used on behalf of the Fifth Avenue hotel. This strategy is considered routine today, but it was pioneering in 1949. To analyze the hotel's clientele he ordered up a Dun

and Bradstreet ratings check on one hundred guests who had paid with credit cards. And he commissioned a field study on how services at the Sherry Netherland stacked up against those at the Plaza, the Ritz-Carlton, and other top-of-the-line hostleries in Manhattan, checking on everything from whether the bellman opened the windows and adjusted the shades to whether a room had clean ashtrays, telegram blanks, a thermos, and running ice water.

Bernays even did his own review of the elegant Carnival Room, unmasking deficiencies everywhere he turned. The two hostesses wore dresses that "looked a bit bedraggled, not freshly ironed. They didn't give a spritely impact to the eye." The principal headwaiter "was completely oblivious of us." The kitchen pantry was visible from his table and was "not immaculate. . . . Doors of pantry now painted red might be painted in stripes like the rest of decor to maintain pattern." As for the food, "my wife had a practically cold filet mignon and I had a warm—not hot—roast beef." The music might have soothed his raw nerves, but it was "no more or less pleasant than the dinner music one hears over the radio or in any place of equal or even less merit."¹⁰

That and other data generally went onto index cards, tens of thousands of them, stored in file drawers and referred to again and again, anytime he or an associate needed an address or phone number, a stored fact or tip to be followed up on—a sea of minutiae, swelled by a tide of simple tasks, that made up the big picture of Big Think. If one card didn't offer the answer, if one tactic didn't provide results, he moved on without pause to the next card or strategy.

An equally important maxim of Big Think was that extremism in defense of a client wasn't a vice and could be a virtue, even if it meant fighting dirty. In 1933, for example, Bernays helped Allied Chemical battle a bid by stockholders to make the company release data on its finances. One tactic was to suggest that the dissenting stockholders' ties to Belgium raised a threat of "foreign domination"—a strategy that should have been anathema to Bernays, who had been outraged when his Austrian roots were used to question his loyalty to America during World War I.

His methods often drew scathing criticism—*Editor and Publisher* branded him "the young Machiavelli of our time," and Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, in a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, called Bernays and fellow PR pioneer Ivy Lee "professional poisoners of the public mind" who exploit "foolishness and fanaticism and self-interest."¹¹ But his hardball approach also attracted clients. Executives of the Jackson Heights Corporation told him they wanted his help with a new housing development, Bernays said, "because anyone who was a 'menace' of the proportions I was described by *Editor and Publisher* must be good." And *Printer's Ink* magazine, which like *Editor and Publisher* had skewered him over the years, later hired him as an adviser.

Light's Golden Jubilee, the 1929 celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas A. Edison's invention of the electric light, is widely regarded as Bernays's shining triumph and one of the brightest public relations performances ever. But close inspection casts his role in a dimmer light, raising doubts about the PR maestro and his profession.

The jubilee came at a busy time for Bernays, who was urging women to reach for Luckies instead of sweets, pushing Cartier's jewels, Dodge's Victory Six car, Knox's gelatin, and New Jersey Bell's new phone services. Yet, as he wrote later, "to many we were still sensation mongers and ballyhoo artists—a menace to the integrity of press and business alike. I hoped for a dramatic event that would make others see us as we saw ourselves."¹²

The Golden Jubilee was that event. Bernays had a true hero in Edison, a truly significant invention in the incandescent light, and a nation that, in the heady days before the stock market crash, believed the boom would last forever and was forever ready to celebrate. All that remained was to decide who would plan the bash—General Electric, which had been invited in by a collection of Edison's friends and colleagues called the Edison Pioneers, or Henry Ford, who idolized Edison and volunteered to step in when the aging inventor said

he was worried that GE would commercialize the celebration. Ford won out, getting the event moved from GE's headquarters in Schenectady to Ford's own backyard—Dearborn, Michigan—with GE invited along as a junior partner.

General Electric, meanwhile, asked Bernays to handle its end of the publicity, and soon after he came onboard things started happening. Newspapers reprinted issues from fifty years before announcing Edison's discovery. Letters of tribute poured in from luminaries like Albert Einstein and General John J. Pershing. George M. Cohan wrote a song called "Edison—Miracle Man," and Admiral Richard Byrd named a beacon in the Arctic after the inventor. Proclamations were issued from New Hampshire to New Mexico and by leaders of countries as diverse as China and Canada. And the post office issued a commemorative two-cent stamp printed in red, which depicted Edison's lamp with rays emanating outward.

The jubilee itself, on October 21, 1929, drew one of the most impressive lineups ever. The greats included President Herbert Hoover, Marie Curie, Orville Wright, Will Rogers, and J. P. Morgan. Bernays managed to land in the center of things, as he recalled later: "The president stood outside the [train] station, flanked by a crowd of guests, his aide, and his personal physician. Nobody seemed to be in charge, so I pushed into the crowd and yelled for the 'gentlemen please to move back, form a line, and meet the president in orderly fashion.' I stood opposite Mr. Hoover. As the line moved slowly between us, I asked the name of each approaching man and repeated it to the president."¹³

Activities reached a climax when Edison appeared on the second floor of his laboratory, which Ford had moved from New Jersey to Michigan, and demonstrated, for millions of radio listeners worldwide, how he first lit a light. "Will it light? Will it burn?" NBC Radio's Graham McNamee asked, fanning the anticipation. "Or will it flicker and die, as so many previous lamps had died? Oh, you could hear a pin drop in this long room. Now the group is once more about the old vacuum pump. Mr. Edison has the two wires in his hand; now he is

reaching up to the old lamp; now he is making the connection. It lights!"¹⁴

No matter that, as the celebration was dying down, Edison slumped in his chair and turned a deathly white. He was helped into a nearby room, laid on a sofa, and given medication, then taken to the Ford home and put to bed for several days. That did little to diminish the elation, as the jubilee was universally judged a triumph.

In one account after another, credit was lavished on a certain public relations man. "The high point in promotion work for 1929—which should certainly win a Harvard advertising prize—was the feat of persuading the post office to get out a special two-cent stamp advertising Mr. Edison's electric light," wrote *The Nation*. "But a close runner-up has been the publicity given, free of charge, to the advertising stunt of bringing bright boys from forty-eight states to Mr. Edison's New Jersey laboratory. Every day for a week these lads—aided by the forethought of the publicity man in arranging for the simultaneous presence of Messrs. Edison, Eastman, Ford, and Lindbergh—made the front pages. Every day the thought was subtly instilled into impressionable young minds that the electric-light companies yearned to help bright boys and to achieve more inventions, all for the benefit of the dear old Ultimate Consumer. . . . Credit for this super-advertising, we understand, belongs to Mr. Edward L. Bernays, 'counsel on public relations.' If Mr. Ivy Lee is to maintain his reputation, he will have to do some tall thinking."¹⁵

The New Yorker agreed: "Bernays works well with multimillionaires, as the success of the great celebration shows. Under Ford's aegis he got into touch with governors, other countries, syndicates, etc. Under his direction committees were formed from Maine to Honolulu, holidays declared, lights turned on and off, speeches made, and a special stamp issued by the Post Office Department. Of course, the real greatness of Edison deserved all these things, and the people from the President down were sincerely desirous of honoring him in a big way, but it took a public-relations counsellor [*sic*] to put it over."¹⁶

The *Atlantic Monthly*, meanwhile, said that "Henry Ford was

supposed to be the manager of the show, but the man who set the stage and pulled the strings attached to all the dignified marionettes was Edward L. Bernays.¹⁷ And Yale University psychologist Leonard Doob called what Bernays did in Dearborn "one of the most astonishing pieces of propaganda ever engineered in this country during peace time."¹⁸

Edison himself wrote Bernays to offer his "sincere thanks and appreciation" for the "immense amount of thought and work [that] was expended." The note's tone, however, suggests that it was a form letter.¹⁹

In the best tradition of his young profession, Bernays didn't merely bask in the publicity, he used it to his own advantage. "Will any of your clients celebrate important anniversaries in 1930?" asked a circular distributed by the Bernays office. "The remarkable tide of goodwill created by the Light's Golden Jubilee celebration of the 50th anniversary of the incandescent lamp proves that occasions of this kind can be made to capitalize on the past and to focus public attention on the present and the future. If our experience in handling the public relations aspects in the Light's Golden Jubilee and other clients interests you, we should be glad to discuss with you the anniversary possibilities of your clients."²⁰

Yet some historians view the jubilee as a tribute not to Bernays's brilliance but to his propensity for puffery, especially where his own role in history is concerned—and to a penchant for secrecy that was tantamount to duplicity.

In a 1976 book historian David L. Lewis writes, "In later years many writers, in discussing the jubilee (which has become a 'public relations classic'), have greatly magnified Bernays's role. . . . Actually Bernays only helped to handle the press, and, in fact, he would have had nothing to do with the Dearborn celebration had not Ford, who had obtained Edison's promise to attend the dedication of the village on October 21, permitted General Electric to tie in the jubilee with the Ford ceremony. It was Ford's show, and it was he who issued the invitations to the prominent guests. As for the reconstruction of the Edison build-

ings, that project was begun before anyone in Dearborn had ever heard of Bernays."²¹

Ten years later Lewis, a professor of business history at the University of Michigan, read an interview in the *Detroit Free Press* where Bernays boasted about his role in the jubilee, calling it his "greatest triumph." Having gotten a decidedly different version from those close to Ford, Lewis started to write a rebuttal titled "Bernays Bragging Again" but decided against it, as he explains, because Bernays "was an old fellow and I didn't want to hurt his feelings."²²

Bernays's name is only rarely associated with the jubilee in official histories at the Henry Ford Museum or in Edison's papers. And even before the event occurred in 1929, *Editor and Publisher* caught him doing a bit of exaggerating, implying he was handling press not only for the jubilee but also for President Hoover—a suggestion that was greeted by surprise at the White House and backpedaling by Bernays, who publicly expressed hope that he had not "embarrassed Mr. Hoover."²³

Did he deserve the credit others lavished on him and that he had heaped upon himself? Yes and no. Five boxes of Library of Congress papers on the celebration make clear that he was more than merely a press agent, that he helped dream up promotions which made the event an international extravaganza, and that he was involved in the sort of detailed orchestration that Ford's staff probably didn't want to be troubled with. The fact that Ford confidants remembered things differently isn't surprising. They and their boss resented from the start the involvement of GE and its hyperactive publicity man. Also, they may not have been aware of all that Bernays did behind the scenes or why it mattered, next to the \$3 million Ford spent and the yeomanlike work his architects and builders did. And Ford's well-documented anti-Semitism likely soured his and his staff's perception of Bernays.

Bernays's papers and his many recollections of the jubilee over the years make clear, however, that he did embellish his role, which becomes a bit more vital to the celebrations with each retelling. By 1977 the journal *Dun's Review* was crediting him with having

orchestrated the relocation to Dearborn of the New Jersey building where Edison invented the lightbulb. As Lewis suggests, as more and more principals who might have contradicted him passed away, Bernays's version became the official version.

Bernays also upset his PR colleagues and others by perpetually taking center stage during the jubilee. He "incurred Ford's wrath after the dedicatory party arrived in Dearborn because he tried repeatedly to inject himself into a group picture with Hoover, Edison, and the host," Lewis wrote. "Ford took [newspaperman and Ford adviser] Fred Black aside and told him to 'get Bernays the hell out of here or I'll have [Ford bodyguard] Harry Bennett's men throw him over the fence.' Black told Bernays of Ford's threat, and the publicist moved out of camera range."²⁴ Scott M. Cutlip, a prominent PR historian, said such behavior "was characteristic of Bernays. He always confused who the client was. It's a basic principle of PR that the public relations man stays in the background."²⁵

But it was Bernays's secrecy that elicited the loudest outcry. As *Editor and Publisher* noted shortly before the celebration, "it is known that Bernays has been at work upon the Jubilee since last spring. . . . Just who his employers are is not known."²⁶ Five days after the bash the journal still was in the dark: "No one knew who was employing him, but Bernays freely admitted he was being paid. He told one newspaper man that he was acting for the 'Edison Pioneers.' His copy frequently mentioned the electric light and power industry. He may have been employed by Ford interests, or General Electric, or Westinghouse or Edison Lamp or all of them cooperatively."²⁷

Bernays made a conscious effort to get people to believe the celebration was unfolding spontaneously rather than being stage-managed by GE or anyone else. He wrote early in 1929 to a GE sales promotion executive, "Did you see the enclosed [article] in the *Times* of this morning? . . . The slant in this article, from the standpoint of propaganda, is all wrong to our mind. It gives the emphasis to the technique of how interest will be brought about rather than to create the impression that this will be an event that has developed naturally."²⁸

His defense then, as always, was the age-old principle of client con-

fidentiality. "We would no more violate our confidence," he said, "than would a doctor or a lawyer." But while doctors and lawyers don't identify clients, they also don't seek to mislead the way the GE team did. And Bernays's argument is disingenuous since, as far back as 1930, he was naming clients for reporters writing sympathetic stories.

. . .

Questions raised about Light's Golden Jubilee also can be asked about other Bernays campaigns and other claims he made over the years.

Did his ingenious soap sculpture initiative, for instance, really revolutionize the way Procter and Gamble sold Ivory? No, says Oliver Gale, the longtime P&G public relations boss: "I don't think Eddie Bernays had any idea how we sold soap. The real world of selling soap was not of interest to him. . . . His ideas were conceptual and creative and magical, but they had very little effect on our business. That's where I think he came up short." Robert G. Eagen, a later P&G public relations chief, agrees. The soap sculpture project, he explains, was "a worthwhile thing, sort of a low-cost project. Did it help us sell soap? I doubt it. We had much more efficient ways of selling soap."²⁹ Official histories of the sculpture contest make clear that Bernays's claim that 21 million children took part the first year can't be substantiated and probably is a gross exaggeration.

It could be that other PR executives at Procter and Gamble didn't recognize the long-term consequences of what Bernays was doing, that they were concerned with day-to-day sales while he cared about Ivory's long-term reputation with consumers. The full-time PR men also might have resented the intrusion of a part-time consultant, especially one who started at \$12,000 a year in 1923 and almost certainly got raises over the next three decades. And it's possible that the bolder claims in the stream of profiles on him were pumped up by reporters who knew it made a stronger story to credit him with everything from orchestrating a presidential visit to relocating an inventor's lab, and by columnists like Walter Winchell who Bernays says started the rumor that he, rather than the post office, was behind the Edison stamp.

What about the brash claims in his autobiography and in scores of articles he wrote which maintained, among other things, that his work for Dodge was responsible for "keeping the auto industry rolling," that his work for General Motors helped convince that company and corporate America at large of the primacy of PR, that his efforts in Massachusetts "pretty single-handedly" got a law passed making it illegal to fire workers based on age, that he got Franklin Roosevelt to name Henry Wallace secretary of agriculture, and that he was the man behind the "mental hygiene" movement reinventing itself as "mental health"?

Many of these claims are difficult to confirm or deny. The companies involved say they don't have the records, and Bernays's files don't make clear whether his machinations were effective. Most of his co-workers are dead or don't remember. Press accounts often simply repeat his version of what happened, which is to be expected when you outlive your contemporaries, are more skilled at getting across your viewpoint, and write an 849-page autobiography that, while too cumbersome for most readers to plow through, has been used repeatedly by historians writing about such varied topics as cigarette sales and the U.S.-backed defeat of Guatemala's socialist regime.

But some of his claims clearly come up short. That happened with the Green Ball and the Committee on Public Information. It happens again with his often-repeated assertion that he was the one who got United Parcel Service to paint its trucks brown to blend in with residential neighborhoods. UPS officials can't find any record of his involvement and say brown was chosen simply to match the popular Pullman railroad cars. Mental health historians agree that Bernays may well have suggested the switch from mental hygiene, but so did many others. No one remembers his participation when the national associations actually changed their titles in the mid-1940s. He did battle age discrimination in Massachusetts, but the law he claimed credit for was approved more than twenty years before he moved to the Bay State.

Even stranger circumstances surround Bernays's insistence, in his memoirs and in stories over the years, that *Time* magazine founder Henry Luce wanted to cut him in at the beginning as an investor and

PR adviser. "I declined their offer of \$125 a week for public relations counsel because I thought their evaluation of the market was incorrect and I didn't want to take their money for a project I felt would not succeed," Bernays wrote forty-two years later. "Besides, our fees were higher than they could afford to pay."³⁰

His Library of Congress papers tell a decidedly different story, however. On April 9, 1923, Bernays sent Luce a four-page letter expressing his conviction that "the appeal of *Time* is potentially an appeal to the entire American public," outlining his ideas for promoting the magazine, and offering to do that promotional work for \$100 a week. Luce wrote back on April 27, "We are not yet ready to undertake any considerable obligations for public counsel relations," but he left the door open for the future. Bernays answered on April 30, saying, "I should be happy at any time to co-operate with you because I really believe in the future of your magazine."³¹ He ultimately did help out with press releases on the opening of the magazine, "as a *beau geste*," and years later he did PR work for *Time*.

It's unclear why he amended the story for his memoirs, especially since the actual account was available in his personal papers, which were due to be made public upon his death. Perhaps he enjoyed the opportunity for self-deprecation by pointing out how wrong he'd been in misjudging *Time's* potential, although his letters make clear he was right in predicting its rosy future. Perhaps, looking back more than four decades later, he couldn't find the right papers to jog his memory and simply got it wrong. Most likely he was embarrassed that Luce declined his offer of help and decided to leave that detail out of his memoirs.

And his contention that he carried clout at General Motors? Paul Garrett, GM's longtime PR guru, says he was the one who pushed GM to hire Bernays, but only because his boss insisted that the company get all the advice it could during the depression. Garrett had faith that Bernays would quickly wear out his welcome, and he wasn't disappointed, as he made clear in a 1963 letter to a graduate student chronicling his career. "You can do what you want about Bernays," Garrett wrote. "To me the kindest thing all around would be not to mention

him at all . . . Eddy [sic] had no 'impact' on me in the development of my public relations philosophy for General Motors. If I were to compile a list of twenty-five men inside and outside General Motors who had an impact on my development during the early General Motors years, it would not even occur to me to put Eddy on that list. . . . This whole Bernays thing has assumed a dimension that is ridiculous as I think it would be clear from the fact that we dismissed him at the end of his first year. But I would very much prefer professionally not to do anything on my part to hurt him, who is after all a much older man in the profession than I."³²

That wasn't the first time Bernays was fired, or the last. His short tenure with client after client suggests he didn't always make the impact he claimed, and even a thirty-year relationship like the one he had with Procter and Gamble ended with his dismissal. "I had the unhappy task of telling him," Gale recalled. "His whole approach was indirect, and that just kind of fell by the wayside as far as we were concerned. It no longer was pertinent."³³

Bernays admitted that his clients often let him go sooner than he'd have liked, but he had an explanation for every firing, usually involving personalities rather than performance. With General Motors, he told a different story than Garrett, attributing the company's refusal to extend his one-year contract to an article in a Detroit newspaper that credited him, rather than two GM vice presidents, with delivering a GM loan to two failing Detroit banks during the depression. "That line of type in the *Detroit Free Press* about Bernays, the \$12,500,000 personal representative of Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., who had saved Detroit from economic collapse, had a greater force in the situation than any other thing I had done or might do," Bernays wrote in his memoirs. "The line had rankled in the minds and hearts of the two vice presidents, who were deeply frustrated by missing their great opportunity for glory. When the termination date arrived, the contract was not renewed." As for Garrett, Bernays said he was "as green about public relations as I was about motor mechanics," adding that Garrett and the other GM publicity men "were to make decisions on the public rela-

tions program I was presenting to them, but none had the requisite knowledge or experience on which to base such decisions."³⁴

Similarly, he said that Procter and Gamble dismissed him because he insisted on keeping his PR organization small even though P&G wanted a big firm able to handle everything from writing and printing to mailing, polling, and press-agentry. "I had decided long ago," he wrote, "that I wanted to be an independent adviser, not head of a public relations factory, where my time would be spent as an executive. I preferred problem solving to drill majoring."³⁵

"People ask me why clients discontinued our services," he wrote on another occasion. "There are almost as many causes as there were clients. A change of policy with no ascertainable reason for it was one case. . . . Sometimes a client's unrealizable expectations are not met. Sometimes his realizable hopes have not been met, due to no circumstances the public relations counsel can possibly control. Sometimes the relationship is severed because the counsel on public relations has been so successful that the client feels he can proceed on his own. Sometimes a man in the organization, after a year's experience with counsel on public relations, convinces the client he doesn't need outside help, hoping to profit thereby."³⁶

Never, judging from his writings, was he fired for anything that was his fault.

Yet if his short tenures reflect his shortcomings, the fact that he continually landed new, bigger clients attests to his reputation for producing results, to his resiliency, which let him bounce back from falls that would have kept down less resourceful men, and most of all to his ability to persuade prospective clients that his troubles with earlier clients weren't his fault. And if some of his claims clearly were exaggerated, others were quite accurate and often even understated. Consider his taking credit for shortening multiple sclerosis to its familiar initials, MS. Sylvia Lawry, founder and director of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, recalls that "when we were first organized there was a lot of conjecture about whether we should change our name to one that could more easily be dealt with by the public.

Bernays said we shouldn't change the name but should use the initials MS. He was the first to suggest that. Whenever other problems came up over the years," she added, "I'd ask myself, How would Eddie Bernays have reacted? Usually I knew the answer, and I'd follow the advice."³⁷

The American Heart Association tells a similar story about his claim that he helped take the group "from its unimportance and made it a large, effective organization." It was the \$1.5 million that the association got from Procter and Gamble's radio show *Truth or Consequences* that let the organization go national, officials say, and Bernays apparently was the one who picked the association out of all the charities seeking such support. What about his insistence that he helped shape the Columbia Broadcasting System and, through it, the wider worlds of radio and TV? Sally Bedell Smith, biographer of longtime CBS boss William S. Paley, tells a similar story, saying "Bernays gave Paley advice not only about publicity but about organizational structure, sales techniques, and scouting talent." And she credits the PR man with scripting Paley's promise to Congress that the networks would aggressively promote public affairs and news programming. The fact that he wrote that bold pledge, Smith adds, means that Bernays shares with Paley the blame for CBS's failure to deliver on its high-minded proposal.³⁸

Bernays's stories almost always began with a factual account, then were puffed up as he recounted his own role or insisted that whatever happened was a "first of its kind." As his granddaughter Hester Kaplan says, "I never doubted his stories; I just doubted their magnitude."³⁹

It was tough to get mad at Bernays, though, because he was such a good storyteller and brought such energy to each tale, especially in his later years. And it was tough to separate fact from fiction because, like Woody Allen's character Leonard Zelig, Bernays was present at so many key moments in history and, unlike Zelig, he often did markedly influence the outcome.

So why did he embellish?

Doris Held, Eddie's older daughter who is a psychotherapist, looks to her profession for insight. Having grown up in the shadow of Freud,

his overachieving uncle, and Ely Bernays, his domineering father, Eddie overcompensated by making his big achievements even bigger, she says. "He couldn't let it be, he had to keep on constructing it and defining it and embellishing it."⁴⁰

People who live as long as he did often magnify their accomplishments, remembering vividly their triumphs and barely recalling their failures. "He reminds me of the war veteran whose exploits grow in stature with the passage of years and the deaths of his comrades," writes David Lewis, the University of Michigan historian. "He was a public relations pioneer and had a great career. Why not leave it at that instead of making exaggerated claims?"⁴¹

Leaving it at that, however, would have denied who Eddie truly was—the consummate PR man—and what he did for his clients, which was meticulously massage the facts, then filter them through letters, speeches, and front groups until even he could not say for sure what was truth and what spin. This, after all, was the man who got kids to carve bars of soap into works of art and persuaded their parents to serve bacon and eggs for breakfast. Ballyhooing like that for a living and believing in it so ardently, he found it tough to turn off the rhetoric even when he was telling his own story.

The irony, as Lewis notes, is that Eddie's actual accomplishments were so momentous that he didn't need to bend the truth. And embellishing the way he did with Light's Golden Jubilee raised unfair doubts about whether he deserved credit for all the precedent-setting campaigns he really had carried out.

Eddie knew about the whispering; he knew colleagues and historians bought most of what he was selling but doubted some of his stories. He resolutely denied that he exaggerated, and when questioned, even into his late nineties, he would jump up from his desk and begin pulling papers from his files, eager to prove he'd done precisely what he said. But he also conceded in his autobiography, and again and again in conversations, that "in an era of mass communication, modesty is a private virtue and a public fault."