



Origins of the epithet ‘government by public relations’: Revisiting Bruce Catton’s *War Lords of Washington*, 1948

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ABSTRACT

While it might make public relations professionals and faculty cringe, the term ‘government by public relations’ is a negative one, implying that governmental decision-making is guided by appearances rather than on the merits. This tag line is a relatively common American put-down of politicians and senior civil servants. This article examines the origins of the term, locating its usage in the WWII memoirs of Bruce Catton, then a government public information officer and later a renowned popular historian of the American Civil War. Catton’s use of the term, his 1948 book *War Lords of Washington*, and his philosophy of government public information are examined in more detail to give context to the phrase ‘government by public relations.’

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1. Introduction

‘Government by public relations’ is a relatively common political and journalistic epithet. It is usually used sneeringly, often by an outsider regarding insiders in the capital, and generally aimed at the executive branch and the bureaucracy. It is a putdown of manipulative and fake packaging in the presentation of controversial public policies. As with the negative use of the acronym ‘PR,’ the accusation of government by public relations is nearly impossible to rebut. How does one *prove* that a policy decision was made without considering potential public reaction? Indeed, *should* decisions really be made without such considerations? Of course not. But the search for the illusive Holy Grail of government *without* public relations seems like an endless Washington game.

The widespread usage of the term ‘government by public relations’ naturally raises the question who coined it? And what did he or she originally mean? What was the context that led to its creation? This historical investigation explores the origins of the term, appraises the first source it appeared in and the context in which it was made.

This inquiry, therefore, is both an historical and a literary study. As the former, it used mainstream historical research techniques. Primary sources included government documents, original writings, memoirs, biographies and contemporaneous newspaper coverage. As a literary study, secondary sources included book reviews, references in the academic literature, and references in popular periodicals. The search functions of digital databases, such as Google Books, permitted identifying uses of a specific phrase or references to a particular book. Similarly, the search functions of ProQuest Historical Newspapers and NewspaperArchive.com permitted identification of journalistic coverage that would have been impossible with pre-digital research methods.

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2. 'Government by public relations'

Bruce Catton, a writer of bestselling popular histories of the American Civil War in the 1950s and 1960s, coined the phrase 'government by public relations' in his 1948 book *The War Lords of Washington*. A former journalist, he had served during World War II as a public information officer for the War Production Board. In a tell-all and score-settling memoir about his experiences, Catton's running theme was that the production mess during the war was addressed partly by public relations techniques that soothingly improved the appearance of major decisions, but merely covered up botched and wrong choices.

Specifically, he used the phrase 'government by public relations' when he criticized a 1944 policy imposing a curfew on night-time activities and establishments, ostensibly to save electric power for war production needs. According to Catton, that was a frivolous and misleading policy, because electricity consumption was relatively low at night and therefore its use by places of entertainment was not competing with war-related production. In his view:

What was being done was not being done because it would help to win the war; it was being done—by all but open admission—to make the public realize that there was a war on, to impose “sacrifices” on the public at home, to arouse public emotion and help shape public psychology. It was *government by public relations* carried to its logical and cockeyed extreme. (1948, 293, emphasis added)

This was not a throwaway observation. Rather, similar comments appeared throughout the book. He felt that the entire orientation of the war production effort was “for making performance *look* good rather than making it good in fact” (1948, 37, emphasis in original). In another example, regarding a call for the public to reduce the consumption of rubber and to donate rubber items, Catton alleged that politicians “had spent their time worrying about what people were going to think, rather than about the action the facts in the situation demanded. . . . And so the rubber mess was finally settled in exactly that way, by a public relations device pure and simple” (1948, 169).

Catton's overall point was somewhat contradictory. On one hand, “The simple and unalterable fact, of course, is that no government agency whatever, at any time or under any circumstances, has any business even having a public relations program” (1948, 76). This anti-PR message was fierce:

In the long run a public agency gets good public relations only by deserving them, and if it even tries to get them in any other way it is attempting to commit a fraud upon democracy. You can put it down as Rule One: Whenever you find a government department, bureau, or commission beginning to shape its words or its deeds so as to create a desired public reaction, you have found an agency that is right on the verge of stepping on its own tail feathers. (1948, 76)

However, according to Catton, it was OK for a government agency “of making just as many of the facts public as the good Lord will permit. Our whole form of government is based on the idea that the people call the shots” (1948, 76). But Catton never explained how to differentiate supposedly self-serving government public relations (bad) and maximal release of government information (good).¹

Without necessarily knowing its source, the phrase gradually entered journalistic and academic usage and became a common one. One of the indications of the power of the phrase was that it was almost never defined or explained by its users. Rather, writers apparently considered the term so self-explanatory and self-evident, that there was no seeming need for further elaboration.

For example, 'government by public relations' was a term used negatively in academic publications (in reverse chronological order) in 2007 (Orr, 19, chap. 2), 1997 (Knudson, 103), 1986 (Meyer, 128), 1982 (Jansen, 212) and 1956 (Morris, 89). Similarly, examples of reporters and newspapers using the term occurred in 2006 (Pincus, 83), 1987 (*Missing the Point*), 1983 (Krassner), 1974 (Anderson), 1971 (Ashmore) and 1960 (*Lack of Growth*).

However, the source of the phrase 'government by public relations' is more significant than mere linguistic trivia or pedantic academic research. Rather, Catton's book was a powerful and lasting denunciation of public relations in government. Therefore, the book itself and the author deserve some re-examination, more than six decades after the original publication.

3. Bruce Catton, before *War Lords*

Bruce Catton (1899–1978) was renowned for his post-WWII career as a popular historian.² Catton was one of the founders and editors of *American Heritage* magazine, an historical journal aimed at a middle-brow readership. He wrote 15 books about the Civil War, including a trilogy on the Army of the Potomac, a trilogy called *The Centennial History of the Civil War*, and the last two volumes of a trilogy on General Ulysses Grant (begun by Lloyd Lewis). Catton also wrote several other freestanding books about the war, including a one-volume history of the war.

¹ Catton, generally, repeated these points a year later in a chapter on the traditional government handout: “The urge to use it so as to create the impression that government's job is being done properly—as a substitute for going out and doing the job properly in the first place” (1949a, 169, chap. 11).

² His full legal name was Charles Bruce Catton, but he preferred to omit his first name. However, for its official records of civilian employees, the Civil Service Commission [CSC] initially insisted on its strict format of last name, first name, middle initial. The first time he appeared in a CSC personnel directory, he was listed as “Charles B. Catton” (US CSC, 1942, 22). He got that changed in future editions.

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