The Non-Partisan Fact-Finding Committee for Hoover 1932

Edward Bernays had the pleasure of counseling a winner when he did some PR work for Calvin Coolidge in 1924 (see page 75). It wasn’t the same story in 1932, when Bernays was called in to help the Herbert Hoover campaign convince the electorate that the American economy was on the rebound. “I suggested the formation of a committee I would advise,” Bernays recalled many years later. “Leaders of groups would be asked to support him.” In due course, a “Non-partisan Fact Finding Committee for Hoover sent telegrams to leaders in various occupations, asking them to support Hoover.”¹ The results were mixed. One of those solicitous telegrams is reproduced on the next page, followed by responses from scholars at Amherst, Buffalo, Dartmouth, Harvard, Minnesota, Northwestern, Stanford, and Virginia.² We especially enjoyed the note scribbled at the bottom of the letter from Dartmouth College president Ernest M. Hopkins: “Don’t use.”

How much has public intellectual culture changed since Bernays served Coolidge and Hoover? Compare the letters on pages 113–119 with the coverage of “Historians for Obama” at InsideHigherEd.com. What would Barack Obama’s historians — or Fred Thompson’s law professors, or John Edwards’s economists, or John Kerry’s Nobel Prize winners — say if they thought about the roots of their own behavior? One view is that “groups of citizens, self-defined by occupation or ideology or ethnic group or

religion or gender, have been doing this since the late 19th century,” and scholars publicly plumping for presidential candidates are simply carrying on this important tradition, “in which voluntary associations thrive and take the obligations of citizenship seriously.”3 But for good or ill this academic politicking also perpetuates a powerful 20th-century tradition: the presentation of carefully selected academic opinions as expert consensus for the purpose of swaying public opinion. Bernays’s PR genius lives on.

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Mr. Herbert Wachsmann, Secretary
Non-Partisan Fact-Finding Committee for Hoover
799 Broadway
New York City, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Wachsmann:

Your wire asking for a statement of my views relative to the farm relief program outlined by Governor Roosevelt has been received. Because I have no desire to express opinions which will be employed for political purposes I have not followed your suggestion that I wire you a statement of this kind.

The prevailing tendency in campaign consideration of economic problems appears to be that of being more concerned with popularity of the expressions rather than with their soundness or adequacy. This tendency by no means is monopolized by any one candidate or party. There is need for greater recognition and better understanding of fundamental facts and consequences involved in problems affecting agriculture such as, for instance, problems of international trade, tariff, international debts, credit, taxation, price levels, production control, marketing and land policies. I am also wondering if there is not room for greater admission of the limitations of political and governmental action in the solution of these problems. The tendency seems to be one of being long on promises and short on fulfillment because promise is so easy.

Under existing conditions, a person whose interest is primarily that of trying to find and understand facts and to analyze and reason clearly would not seem justified in attacking the program of one candidate or one party merely for the purpose of rendering aid to another whose pronouncements may be equally subject to criticism.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

Chief of Division
Mr. E. E. Hunt
799 Broadway
New York City

My dear Hunt:

Naturally I am much flattered that your Committee wants a statement from me on business conditions, and if I were a specialist in this field, I should be glad to give you one hundred words. However, since I am not, I think I had better keep my opinions to myself.

With best regards,

Cordially yours,

Percy W. Bidwell

PWB: KT
September 28, 1932

Dr. E. E. Hunt
796 Broadway
New York City

Dear Dr. Hunt:

I have your telegram of September 31st and I wish that I might conscientiously give you the sort of statement which you request. While we do believe in this part of the country that there are some signs of economic recovery, the impression is widely prevalent that a great deal of the stock market improvements, as well as of the recent signs of renewed activity in industrial enterprise are, in considerable measure, the results of propaganda methods.

My field of particular interest is that of agriculture. If cotton prices could again reach and continue the levels of some three weeks ago, there would be a great improvement in agricultural conditions in the South. However, it is a tragic situation when farmers pay nine per cent more for things they buy than they did in pre-war times and receive forty-three per cent less for what they have to sell. I had hoped that President Hoover would institute policies calculated to remedy this serious disparity. His achievements along such lines have been largely negative in nature, if not positively harmful, and I am forced to the conclusion that agriculture will fare much better under Franklin D. Roosevelt than under President Hoover. Quite frankly, I think it would have been in very much better shape under Ex-Governor Alfred E. Smith than it has been in the administration of President Hoover.

I am certain that you will understand the frankness with which I have spoken in this regard.

With kindest personal regards, I am

Very sincerely yours,

[Signature]

WILSON GEE
Mr. E.R. Hunt
Non-Partisan Fact Finding Committee for Hoover
799 Broadway, New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Hunt:

In reply to your night letter of September 21st
I wired you last night, collect, as follows:

"Underlying American economic conditions have unquestionably improved since spring. Economic confidence and stability have been fostered by various agencies set up by the government work non-partisan lines. Accumulating facts thus at first hand is essential to intelligent, timely action. Gratifying that present situation is no worse in view depressed, disturbed situation abroad along with usual seasonal dullness and aftermath speculative orgy at home. The London Economist states editorially that our worst is past. Business barometers past fortnight record actual betterment. A sudden spectacular improvement would be fatal to healthy recovery, but a potential ground-work for business amelioration has been laid."

Very truly yours,

Elliot G. Mears
Professor of Geography, and International Trade
September 17, 1932

Mr. Herbert Nachman
799 Broadway
New York, N.Y.

Dear Sir:

I am no authority on agricultural economics and I have no views on the subject that I consider at all worth publishing. You have given me a totally undeserved compliment.

Yours very truly,

[Signature]

Comptroller
Mr. Herbert Wachsmann, Secretary
Non-Partisan Fact-Finding Committee for Hoover
799 Broadway
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Wachsmann:

I have on my desk this morning your wire asking for a statement concerning Governor Roosevelt's farm relief program as outlined in his Topeka speech.

I do not believe that I can make any statement that will educate public opinion at this time. I have found conditions much better for education on such matters after election than before. It may or may not be information for you that the six points in Governor Roosevelt’s specifications for making farm relief effective exactly fit the Voluntary Domestic Allotment Plan introduced into Congress by Republican Congressman Hope of Kansas and Republican Senator Norbeck of South Dakota. I am enclosing a copy of Congressman Hope’s statement concerning this plan. I expect that Governor Roosevelt had this plan specifically in mind when he outlined his six specifications.

Yours very truly,

[Signature]

JDB:KT
J. D. Elack

Dictated by Dr. Black
but signed in his absence.
Non-Partisan Fact-Finding Committee for Hoover
799 Broadway
New York, New York

Gentlemen:

In reply to your telegram just received I most emphatically will not make such a statement as you request.

I am a Republican and expect to vote the Republican ticket but I take exception in maximum degree to the tactics of those who are undertaking to win the election by picturing all of the wisdom and all of the patriotism as monopolized by the Republican party. I think on the whole that there is more wisdom and more genius and more experience perhaps among the Republicans than elsewhere at the present time but I consider it fundamentally disloyal to the country, to say nothing of its being highly impolitic from the point of view of expediency, to wage the campaign that the Republicans have been waging and that you ask me to endorse in a statement that the country is in real danger from a change of administration. I do not believe that it is.

Yours truly,

[Signature]