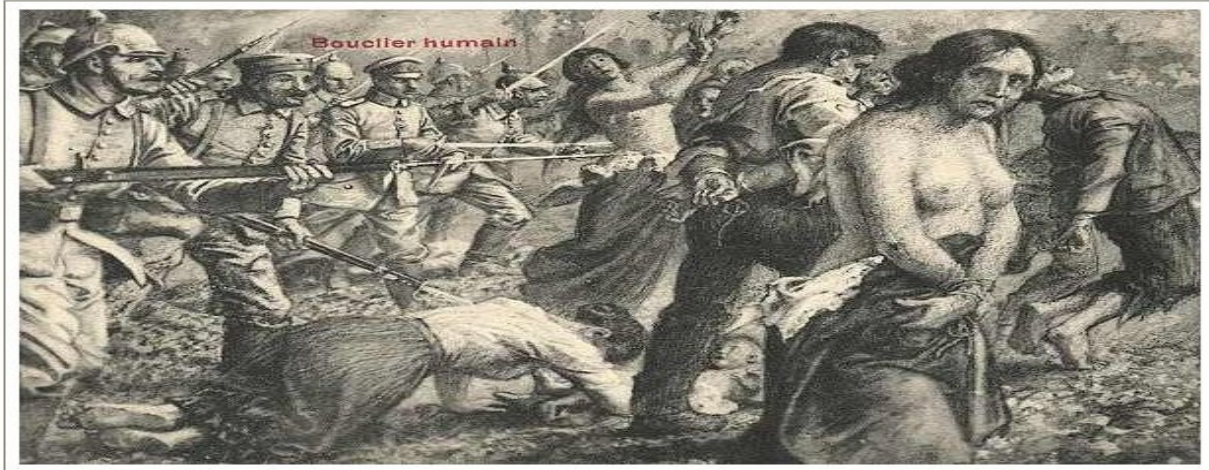


Nurse Nayirah, Hill & Knowlton and the March to War

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Media and Politics



A war in the Persian Gulf, built on the foundations of exaggerations; sounds eerily familiar, but this case involves another Bush in another decade. If the W administration believed it could get away with selling the current Gulf war on exaggerations, it's only because the previous Bush administration had done it so deftly. Kuwait carried out one of the most well-heeled public diplomacy campaigns in history on the American people, congressional leadership and media, one that the Bush administration would co-opt for their march to war. The information campaign involved public diplomacy and outright propaganda disseminated by highly connected former administration players-turned-public relations hucksters. The Kuwaiti PR coup came with the purchasing of one of the strongest public relations firms in the world, Hill & Knowlton. Meanwhile, the Bush administration was willing to piggyback on this deceptive campaign for its own ends as a means to garner support for war.

“We disseminated information in a void as a basis for Americans to form public opinion,” declared Hill & Knowlton Vice Chairman Frank Mankiewicz. Mankiewicz himself would coach the star of the show, “Nurse Nayirah” who helped fill that void with testimony to the congressional Human Rights Caucus, offering up a falsehood based on an old fiction from another era. The wanton massacre of women and children; the bayoneting of mothers and babes by blood-thirsty hordes of soldiers—compelling claims during World War I, just as compelling in the lead-up to the Gulf War in 1991. Nurse Nayirah would offer tear-filled testimony, claiming to have witnessed Iraqi soldiers taking babies out of incubators and leaving them to die on cold hospital floors in occupied Kuwait. This gruesome tale became circulated throughout the media sphere and helped garner the necessary support to launch a war. In reality, the tale ended up being specious claims peddled by the teenage daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States.

The lead-up to the Gulf War entailed an information campaign of false messages, dubious claims and discredited tales that had been recycled from a previous propaganda campaign waged by France and Britain against Germany— one that was also discredited. This paper is an examination of the “Nurse Nayirah” incident in the lead up to the first Gulf War, and the role this event played in shaping the march to war; it is an examination of media and politics through a public diplomacy lens. While the whole public diplomacy campaign conducted by Hill & Knowlton was fraught with deception, the author will solely examine the Nurse Nayirah incident. The purpose of this paper is to focus on a clear example of a powerful public diplomacy campaign that was swallowed by a pliant media and duped American democratic polity.

Historical precedent

Public diplomacy entails the dissemination of message to a foreign public; the dark side of such craft is propaganda. “The first casualty when war comes is the truth,” the apt words of Senator Hiram Johnson. His statement came amidst a different conflict, but one that saw a similar claim of barbarity. During the Great War, when Germany overran tiny Belgium, reports of atrocities carried out by Germany against Belgian

civilians became propaganda fodder for the Allied public diplomacy campaign. The Huns were slaughtering women and children, so the Bryce Committee reported¹.

“Murder, lust and pillage prevailed over many parts of Belgium on a large scale unparalleled in any war between civilizations in the last three centuries²,” the report proclaimed. The British-sponsored committee sought to investigate the charges of German carnage against Belgian women and children, and its “findings” included allegations of the public rape of Belgian girls in Liege, bayoneting of a baby by a gang of German soldiers and other tales of mutilations³. Slaughtered Belgian babies made for a propaganda coup for the Allies, even if the allegations later proved unsubstantiated.

Journalist and historian Philip Knightly later wrote in his book, The First Casualty:

“By the time the atrocity story was discredited it had served its role. It had not only rallied opinion on the home front and strengthened the resolution of Britain and France to prosecute the war to the finish, but had also achieved the important task of lowering the resistance to the war in the United States.⁴”

The use of the dead babies as propaganda would be recycled some eight decades later in another attempt to sway American public opinion towards a war.

The lead up

Kuwait had been invaded by Iraq, and the Kuwaiti royal family was in exile and with considerable means at their disposal. Kuwait was cognizant of the need to sway American public opinion towards war, and to this end helped bankroll an organization serve as their lobbying arm, Citizens for a Free Kuwait (CFK). Funded by nearly \$12million, CFK began as a nonprofit charity group to work on Washington and lobby for liberation. The CFK quickly hired the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton (H&K) to carry their message to Washington and to the fourth estate.

Republicans tightly connected to the Bush and Reagan administrations ran H&K. Chairman Robert K. Gray had been active in the Reagan presidential campaigns, while the firm’s president Craig Fuller had served as Vice President Bush’s chief of staff⁵. Bipartisanship existed as well. MacArthur notes Democratic connections came from the company’s vice chairman Frank Mankiewicz, who was a close aide to Robert Kennedy and high level adviser in the McGovern campaign, and senior vice president Thomas Ross- the Pentagon’s spokesman during the Carter years⁶.

For their services, H&K would collect nearly \$11 million. Former U.S. Information Agency (USIA) officer Lauri J Fritz-Pegado headed the H&K team. The public diplomacy campaign was impressive, including a litany of events such as: Kuwait Information Day on twenty college campuses (9/12/1990); National Day of Prayer for Kuwait in churches across the country (9/23/1990); National Free Kuwait Day (9/24),

¹ Bryce Committee Report on Deliberate Slaughter of Belgian Non-Combatants, London, United Kingdom, December 1914, available at <<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9B06E3DD153EE033A25750C1A9639C946496D6CF>>

² CF John MacArthur, Second Front, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992, p.52

³ John MacArthur, Second Front, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1992, p.53

⁴ CF *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*, p.49

⁶ *ibid*

declared in by thirteen state governors⁷. Tens of thousands of t-shirts and bumper stickers were also distributed, plus thousands of glossy media kits for the press⁸.

The Rape of Kuwait

The first reference to the baby incubator story came in London's *Daily Telegraph* on September 9, 1990. The source was an exiled Kuwaiti housing Minister, Yahya al-Sumait. The *Telegraph* paraphrased al-Sumait as saying, "babies in the premature unit of one hospital had been removed from their incubators so that these too, could be carried off." Meanwhile, two days later the *Los Angeles Times* ran a *Reuters* story quoting two semi-anonymous evacuated Americans (Cindy from San Francisco and her traveling companion Rudi) claiming to have witnessed the same gruesome event⁹.

The story gained further traction in an Amnesty International report. For the record, Amnesty would later disassociate itself with the report, and sources claimed that the story came directly from Hill & Knowlton¹⁰. The story reached citation at the American apex soon after.

The first mention by President George H.W. Bush at a news conference on October 9, 1990:

"I am very much concerned, not just about the physical dismantling but of the brutality that has now been written on by Amnesty International confirming some of the tales told U.S. by the Amir [of Kuwait] of brutality. It's just unbelievable, some of the things at least he reflected. I mean, people on a dialysis machine cut off, the machine sent to Baghdad; babies in incubators heaved out of the incubators and the incubators themselves sent to Baghdad. *Now, I don't know how many of these tales can be authenticated*, but I do know that when the Amir was here he was speaking from the heart. And after that came Amnesty International, who were debriefing many of the people at the border. And it's sickening."¹¹

However, the *coup de grace* would come the following day on Capitol Hill, and directly effect the course towards war.

Nurse Nayirah

It was at the October 10, 1990 hearing of the congressional Human Rights Caucus, chaired by the California Democrat Congressman Tom Lantos and Illinois Republican John Edward Porter, that the "Nurse Nayirah" tale would become an immediate sensation. At the hearing, a young girl named "Nayirah," (the Caucus noted her last was name withheld for "fear of retribution for her family still in Kuwait") proffered vivid, dramatic testimony, stating:

"I volunteered at the al-Addan hospital... While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns, and to into the room where 15 babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the babies on the cold floor to die."¹²

⁷ *ibid*, p.50; Arthur Rowse, "Flacking for the Emir," *The Progressive*, May 1991, p.21

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*, p.54

¹⁰ Jarol B. Manheim, "Managing Kuwait's Image," p.140, in Bennet and Paletz (ed), *Taken by Storm*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1994

¹¹ CF Nicholas Cull, "The Perfect War," *Transnational Broadcasting*, January 2006, available at <<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Cull.html>>

¹² MacArthur, *op cit*, p.58

Meanwhile, other witnesses, such as Deborah Hadi, would recount tales of Iraqi soldiers bayoneting pregnant women to the wall. Beyond the 154 members of Congress on hand to hear the tearful “first-hand” account of “Nurse Nayirah,” there were also fifteen television crews and scores of reporters to disseminate the story.

The effects of Nayirah’s sobbing, choked-up testimony were immediate. Once the incubator story hit the airwaves, it had a tremendous impact on the march to war. According to MacArthur, “of all the accusations made against the dictator [Saddam Hussein], none had more impact on American public opinion.¹³” President Bush would cite the story on eight occasions in the next two months, including in his important January 1991 interview with David Frost¹⁴. The incubator story was also cited by seven senators as the deciding factor to support the January 12, 1991 Senate resolution authorizing war (the resolution passed by five votes), while six of their Congressional colleagues pointed to Nayirah testimony as being the lynchpin behind their decision to support the war.

The nexus between H&K’s goals of selling Kuwait’s plight and the White House’s direction was explained by H&K’s Craig Fuller, who stated on *60 Minutes*, “Getting [the Kuwaitis] message across was completely in line with the goals of the Bush administration. By helping the Kuwaiti citizens, it was clear we would be helping the Bush administration.¹⁵” Meanwhile, the Bush administration, as it was busy comparing Hussein to Hitler in the press, was entirely willing to burnish its case with tales of depravity by the Iraqi forces.

Critique

The incubator story would be recycled on multiple occasions on the lead-up to war, including in the United Nations Security Council hearings*. The incubator story became an integral part of the march to war, and few media outlets ever challenged the story, they simply ran it as fact. Only the *Seattle Times* and *USA Today* ran any stories that contradicted the allegations (both buried in the back pages), while ABC’s Peter Jennings cited the human rights organization Middle East Watch’s refusal to confirm the story. The selling of Iraqi barbarity had a definitive effect on the nation’s press, as twenty-four of the nation’s twenty-five largest newspapers editorialized in favor of war to liberate Kuwait¹⁶.

After Kuwait was liberated, ABC reporter John Martin would investigate the incubator claims, interviewing Kuwaiti hospital officials who admitted the story to be false (March 15, 1991). However, the reality behind the testimony would appear in January 1992, in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*. In his piece, John MacArthur, the publisher of *Harper’s Magazine*, would reveal that “Nurse Nayirah” was really the

¹³ *ibid*, p.54

¹⁴ Cull, *op cit*; Manheim, *op cit*, p.140

¹⁵ *CF ibid*, p. 144

[□] In that case, a women identified only as a Kuwaiti refugee shared the same incubator story, she turned out to be Fatima Fahed, a Kuwaiti television star and wife of the Kuwaiti Minister of Planning (Manheim, p.140)

¹⁶ Rowse, *op cit*, p. 20

daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the US¹⁷, and Hill & Knowlton had been instrumental in preparing her testimony. Nayirah had been coached in her testimony and rehearsed her lines at the Hill & Knowlton office, literally down the hall from the offices of the Congressional Human Rights Foundation—also headed by Congressmen Lantos and Porter, which was a rent-free tenant at the H&K's headquarters. The Congressional Human Rights Foundation also later received a \$50,000 contribution from Citizens for a Free Kuwait¹⁷. After MacArthur's revelation, news outlets like the *New York Times* ran editorials criticizing the behavior of Hill & Knowlton and the Human Rights Caucus, but took no reflection in their own shortcomings in their role surrounding the incubator tale.

When the truth finally did come out about the reality of the Nurse Nayirah affair and the role of Hill & Knowlton, the war had already been won and the Bush administration was on its way out of office. The incubator story had already been circulated in the media and gained full traction, and was used by supporters of the war to strengthen their case. The media failed in its role as watchdog, or even basic fact checker, and sadly set precedent for future failures in the face of dubious claims by administrations intent on going to war.

¹⁷ Congressman Lantos admitted that he knew the witnesses identity, Congressman Porter claims otherwise; Ambassador al-Sabah said both congressmen were aware of Nayirah's identity (MacArthur, p.59)

¹⁷ Manheim, op cit, p.140

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