

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #361 - PR Firms For Hire To Undermine Democracy

October 27, 1993

Congress will take a final "yes or no" vote November 17th on NAFTA --an issue that will profoundly affect the environment of the North American continent for decades or centuries to come.

NAFTA is short for North American Free Trade Agreement, a formal arrangement to reduce tariffs and other trade barriers between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

It is time for each of us to be asking: What do the people who represent ME in Congress think about NAFTA? Push has come to shove on NAFTA and it's time to let Congress know what YOU think.

We have previously written about the environmental destruction that NAFTA will initiate (see RHWN #303, #304, AND #305). Since then, President Clinton has added "side agreements" to NAFTA but they are weak and will be challenged in court, so seem unlikely to change NAFTA at all.

The Mexican government and Mexican business groups have spent more than \$25 million persuading Congress to say "yes" to NAFTA.[1] It helps to get the size of this lobbying campaign into perspective. Before the NAFTA campaign, the 3 biggest lobbying efforts had been these:

\*\*In 1990, Hill & Knowlton (the largest Washington PR firm) was paid \$10 million by the Kuwaiti government to persuade the American people of the need for military intervention in the Persian Gulf.

\*\*In 1987, after a Japanese company illegally exported high-tech equipment to the Soviet Union, Japanese corporations spent \$9 million for a lobbying drive to prevent legislative retaliation by Congress.

\*\*In the late 1970s, in a scandal that became known as "Koreagate," South Korean rice broker Tongsun Park acknowledged that he had distributed about \$850,000 in gifts and cash to 31 members of Congress from 1967 to 1977.

Mexico's pro-NAFTA expenditures have already exceeded the combined resources of these 3 "largest ever" lobbying campaigns.

Whichever way NAFTA goes, it can serve as a "wake up call" to the role of big-money lobbying by PR firms. There are now 170,000 PR employees in the U.S. (there are 40,000 more "flacks" than there are news reporters). These PR flacks work relentlessly to manipulate news, public opinion, and public policy.

Fortunately, we now have a new tool to help us understand how these flacks work: a new newsletter has just appeared, called PR WATCH, published quarterly. The editor is John Stauber, who says,

"The corporate flacks, hacks, lobbyists and influence peddlers, the practitioners of modern PR... have become a kind of occupation army in our democracy....

"The ascendancy of the PR industry and the collapse of American participatory democracy are the same phenomenon. The growing concentration of economic power in fewer and fewer hands, combined with sophisticated marketing techniques and radical new electronic technologies, have come together in the past decade to fundamentally re-shape our social and political landscape....

"When the corporate status quo is threatened by 'the rest of us' (seeking better working conditions, national health care, fair prices for farmers, safe food, freedom from toxic pollution, and social justice), the PR flacks, lobbyists and trade associations mobilize to crush or co-opt the outnumbered, outgunned reformers."

Under the headline "Spies for Hire," the first issue of PR WATCH

highlights one particular PR firm that specializes in gathering "intelligence" about activists: Mongoven, Biscoe and Duchin (MBD) in Washington, D.C. MBD employs 20 professionals and 14 support staff keeping track of activists for Fortune 100 clients.

Documents published by MBD contain the following description of the company in its own words: "MBD assists corporations in resolving public policy issues being driven by activist organizations and other members of the public interest community. We help clients anticipate and respond to movements for change in public policy which would affect their interests adversely....

"Forces for change often include activist and public interest groups, churches, unions and/or academia....

"MBD is committed to the concept that it is critical to know who the current and potential participants are in the public policy process, to understand their goals and modus operandi, and to understand their relative importance. To this end, MBD maintains extensive files on organizations and their leadership..."

According to company documents, MBD routinely monitors subject areas such as "dioxin," "incineration," and "landfills" and organizations such as Greenpeace International and Friends of the Earth.

PR WATCH reports that an MBD staff person, such as Kara Ziegler, "spends long hours on the phone falsely representing herself as 'a writer for Z Magazine' or a friend of a friend" gathering intelligence from and about unsuspecting activists. We spoke to Ms. Ziegler by phone October 26 [(202) 429-1800]; she confirmed that she had read about herself and MBD in PR WATCH, then excused herself from the phone with a promise to call us back with comments on its accuracy, but we did not hear from her again.

MBD co-founder and vice president Ronald A. Duchin gave a speech to the 1991 convention of the National Cattleman's Association. His talk was titled, "Take an Activist Apart and What do You Have?"[2] The talk described how corporations can defeat public interest activists.

Duchin says activists fall into 4 categories: radicals, opportunists, idealists, and realists. To defeat activists, Duchin says, corporations must use a three-step divide-and-conquer strategy. The goal is to isolate the radicals, "cultivate" the idealists and "educate" them into becoming realists, then co-opt the realists into agreeing with industry.

Here are excerpts from Duchin's talk, as reported in the June, 1991, issue of CALF NEWS CATTLE FEEDER:

"[T]he activists we are concerned about here are the ones who want to change the way your industry does business--either for good or bad reasons: environmentalists, churches, Public Interest Research Groups, campus organizations, civic groups, teachers unions, and 'Nader-ites.'"

### The Radicals

"[Radical activists] want to change the system; they have underlying socio-economic/political motives; [are] anti-corporate--[they] see the multinationals as inherently evil; winning is unimportant on a specific issue; [they] can be extremist/violent; [their] involvement in a particular issue can be a diversion from pursuit of their real (unarticulated) goals."

### The Opportunists

"The public policy process breeds opportunists because the process offers visibility, power, followers and, perhaps, even employment.... The key to dealing with opportunists is to provide them with at least the perception of a partial victory.... [Opportunist activists] exploit

issues for their own personal agendas; [are] only involved in an issue if personal gain [is] available; can be, but not normally, extremist/violent...."

### The Idealists

"Idealists want a perfect world and find it easy to brand any product or practice which can be shown to mar that perfection as evil. Because of their intrinsic altruism, however, and because they have nothing perceptible to be gained by holding their position, they are easily believed by both the media and the public and, sometimes, even the politicians.

"Again, because of their altruism, the idealists are hard to deal with. As long as their motivation remains pure their credibility for the positions they support will be viable. Idealists must be cultivated and one should respect their position. It has been arrived at through a sense of justice. They must be educated.

"Certain of the idealists,... e.g., churches,... have a vulnerable point. If they can be shown that their position in opposition to an industry or its products causes harm to others and cannot be ethically justified, they are forced to change their position.

"Once the idealist is made fully aware of the long-term consequences or the wide ranging ramifications of his/her position in terms of other issues of justice and society, she/he can be made into a realist.

"Without support of the realists and the idealists, the positions of radicals and opportunists are seen to be shallow and self-serving.

"Thus, while a realist must be negotiated with, an idealist must be educated. Generally, this education process requires great sensitivity and understanding on the part of the educator."

### The Realists

"[Realists] can look beyond the issue at hand; understand the consequences; can live with trade-offs; [are] willing to work within the system; [are] not interested in radical change; [are] pragmatic.

"The realists should always receive the highest priority in any strategy dealing with a public policy issue. It is very important to work with and cooperate with the realists...

"In most issues, it is the solution agreed upon by the realists which becomes the accepted solution, especially when business participates in the decision making process. If business opts out of the policy process, the voices of the idealists and the radicals take on more strength.... [R]ealist leaders and groups are the best candidates for constructive dialog leading to mutually satisfactory solutions. Idealists often can be convinced over time to take a more realistic view. If your industry can successfully bring about these relationships, the credibility of the radicals will be lost and the opportunists can be counted on to share in the final policy resolution...."

### Grass-Roots Organizations

"The Grassroots Organizations... are very important... due to their commitment to a radical change in the way America governs itself.... These organizations do not trust the... federal, state and local governments to protect them and to safeguard the environment. They believe, rather, that individuals and local groups should have direct power over industry. Not only does this make these groups difficult to deal with, it makes it impossible to predict with any certainty what standards will be deemed acceptable. I would categorize their principle aims right now as social justice and political empowerment--using the environment as a platform."

GET: PR WATCH, 3318 Gregory Street, Madison, WI 53711; phone (608) 233- 3346; fax: (608) 238-2236. \$60/yr. for individuals and non-profits; \$300 for corporations.

--Peter Montague

=====

[1] Charles Lewis and Margaret Ebrahim, "Can Mexico and Big Business USA Buy NAFTA?" THE NATION Vol. 256 (June 14, 1993), pg. 826.

[2] Joel Bleifuss, "PR Spies," IN THESE TIMES September 20, 1993, pgs. 12-13.

Descriptor terms: public relations; pr; nafta; mexico; trade barriers; non-tariff barriers to trade; pr watch; environmental movement; mongoven biscoe and duchin; backlash; wise use movement; intelligence; spying; john stauber;