How Public Relations Helped Start the First Gulf War

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. By January, 1991, a coalition of international forces, including the United States, engaged the Iraqi military, and by February, the First Gulf War was over. In hindsight, it seems simpler than it actually was. Although the United Nations officially sanctioned military action against Iraqi, the success of selling the idea to the American public wasn’t a foregone conclusion. Even though polls conducted following the war showed a high level of support (around 80 percent), at the time of the Iraqi invasion and subsequent buildup and engagement by American and coalition forces, support hovered at around 50 percent or less. What wasn’t so clear is how the American public arrived at such a high level of support in such a short period of time. There are more than a few, including many in the public relations industry, who believe it was PR that tipped the scales.

In a public hearing of Congress’s Human Rights Caucus on October 10, 1990, a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl named Nayirah presented some startling testimony. She said she had seen Iraqi soldiers remove babies from hospital incubators, leaving them to die on the floor. Her stunning testimony was repeated worldwide and cited frequently in the ensuing national debate in the U.S. over whether to commit American troops to the Middle East conflict. President George H. W. Bush mentioned it frequently as he drummed up support for military action. As journalist Ted Rowse put it two years later, “It was a major factor in building public backing for war.”

Shortly after the war ended, however, NBC news interviewed Kuwaiti hospital officials who flatly denied any such thing had ever happened. Almost a year later, a story by Harper’s magazine publisher John R. MacArthur appearing on The New York Times op-ed page revealed that Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. and had not even been in Kuwait at the time she claimed the atrocities occurred.

It seems that all of this had been part of a complex public relations campaign mounted by Hill & Knowlton (HK)—at the time, the world’s largest PR firm. HK had been talking with the government of Kuwait since just after the Iraqi invasion began and had taken over the operation of a “front” group called “Citizens for a Free Kuwait,” financed almost entirely by the government of Kuwait (which also paid HK $11.5 million to get its message out). Due in large part to HK’s public relations campaign on behalf of the Kuwaiti government, the United States entered the war, on a 52-47 vote. Although HK denied any wrongdoing, observers both inside and outside the field of public relations have denounced the use of deception, and it has become a case study in what not to do if you want to be considered ethical.

---

