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## PR takes unfair hit for McClellan's book

By Dennis Elliott

Isn't it amazing? A public figure authors a book that is quite revealing from his personal view and provides the public with a firsthand accounting of things it had already suspected. Yet the author becomes criticized for not vocalizing the dissention discussed in the book he felt while employed and for the timing of speaking up while his former boss is still in office. And further, isn't it remarkable, and disturbing, that the significance of the content of the book becomes lost and that a profession becomes indicted and the subject of ongoing banter?

The public relations profession became a focal point of criticism owing to a commentary by a CBS News legal analyst, Andrew Cohen, about Scott McClellan's book, "What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception," which provides insight into McClellan's years serving as the White House press secretary in the Bush administration. The commentary went so far as to label McClellan a liar.

Let's start with the basics. Consider the following not as a defense of McClellan's book or his actions or lack of action while in the White House, as some critics have chosen to point out.

McClellan had a highly visible position as the press secretary. We have seen him standing at a lectern providing administration statements and briefings and answering questions from the media about the topics at hand and many times in what is best described as a hostile environment. He was a spokesperson following direction.

He was not setting policy. But he was fulfilling the requirements of his position just as an employee in a similar role for a Fortune 500 corporation would be by providing the media with information during a crisis, conveying quarterly earnings data for analysts or introducing a new product or service.

The book provides what for many is troublesome insight about the "selling of the Iraq war" and examinations of other White House-related topics that have invaded our daily lives as reported by the media. At its worst the book awakens or, depending on your viewpoint, confirms the public's doubt about the ethics of its leaders.

It inflames sensibilities about the deaths of Americans in a war that was forced upon U.S. citizens and pours more fuel on the flames that burn brightly about the actions of an unpopular president whose abilities and administration are repeatedly questioned. For many it also begs the question, or at least makes them wonder, why given his accounting in the book that McClellan did not leave the White House much sooner.

Is public relations really the profession of the press secretary and whose job description includes the criterion to lie to the American people? Perhaps critics are mixing circumstance with convenient opportunity.

Consider the "sources" of any individual serving as press secretary. The information these individuals disseminate comes from the strategic assessment and conclusions of the president, his advisers, the Cabinet and others. To imply that McClellan had a pivotal vote in decisions is absurd, although we can assume that his counsel was sought in terms of the potential interpretation of information released by the White House.

It is also suggested that any personal dissention now visible through the book should have been vented at the time and subsequently would have changed history – a powerful statement, but the truth of it will never be known.

There is no question that the bird has already escaped the cage when one considers the timing of McClellan's claims and assertions. No argument. But one must also consider the condition of the White House culture at the time of the many events that are addressed in the book. It could not have been a pleasant environment and one that undoubtedly continues today.

Cohen has chosen to file the public relations profession and labels all public relations practitioners who are accurate and truthful as unemployed. Indicting an entire profession with inflammatory language and making associations that are so broad and sweeping in nature provides no service to the public. What's next? Perhaps – all legal analysts reflect bias and are purveyors of non sequitur?

Cohen has chosen to label McClellan a public relations person and in derogatory fashion criticize a profession that contributes to the public good every day. Most every occupation has or certainly has the potential for producing villains or those who have stepped beyond the bounds of integrity and ethical behavior. In that regard public relations as a profession is no different from law, medicine, politics, sports and, yes, even journalism in the ability to serve up examples of inappropriate conduct and violations of ethics codes.

But we are to take from Cohen's comments that public relations professionals are all liars. Are the well researched campaigns intended to inform and educate the public about AIDS or encourage support for organizations providing hope to the homeless or those informing the public about a health risk from a company's product all false? To label the profession as being one based on lies disseminated to the public is in itself a despicable act.

McClellan has chosen to speak up, but is it really appropriate to call him a liar because he has wrestled with his own conscience? And what's the point about singling out public relations when the facts of the profession's good work are easily demonstrated?

If individuals feel compelled to throw stones, there are far bigger and better targets that do the public a disservice than McClellan and the public relations profession.



File

Scott McClellan responds to questions in his role as White House spokesman in 2005.

Dennis Elliott, a longtime public relations executive, is the Riley Visiting Professor at the Indiana University School of Journalism. He wrote this for The Journal Gazette.

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