



2014-022

Mordecai Lee, *Promoting the War Effort: Robert Horton and Federal Propaganda, 1938-1946*.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xx, 278. ISBN 978-0-8071-4529-6.

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Mordecai Lee (Univ. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)¹ uses the career of Robert Horton to examine American government public relations during the World War II era. Horton, a Vermonter who moved to Washington in 1929, was a left-leaning reporter and radio commentator. In an exposé of racism in the criminal justice system,² for example, he reported on three African American men in Mississippi who were tortured until they confessed to a murder they did not commit. A supporter of the New Deal, Horton served from 1938 to 1946 in the federal government, where he promoted President Franklin Roosevelt's "arsenal of democracy" and war mobilization efforts.

Lee credits Horton with developing novel public relations practices. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor, he explains, government information efforts were considered acceptable as public service or educational campaigns as long they promoted widely held values, served as presidential communication, or were part of wartime mobilization endeavors, as in World War I. Even then, they were still controversial if perceived as propaganda, which was considered untruthful and undemocratic, or too partisan, which provoked the opposition party. Horton walked a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable by conducting fact-based information campaigns, maintaining credibility with the press, and adopting a transparency policy with the public. He sought to raise civilian morale by publicizing the practical needs and accomplishments of the national defense buildup.

Horton faced difficulties in carrying out his PR responsibilities at the Maritime Commission from 1938 to 1940. Created in 1936, the Commission oversaw ship construction and the training of the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps. After war broke out in Europe in 1939, German submarines sank British ships at a time when Great Britain increasingly relied on American supplies. Horton and FDR both wanted to project the importance of American shipping, which was constrained by the Neutrality Act. To justify the Commission's operations and spending, Horton cast its work as patriotic, furthering the proud tradition of American seamanship and keeping the United States competitive with other nations.

For his effectiveness at the Maritime Commission, Horton was rewarded with a tougher job. From June 1940 to June 1942, he directed the Division of Information (DOI) for the newly created Office of Emergency Management in the Executive Office of the President.

He was a public administrator trying to conduct the kind of generally noncontroversial public relations programs that civil servants are expected to conduct, and, simultaneously, he was a political appointee within the administration of a president who was now an active political candidate. All that on top of the very controversial activity in which his agency was engaging: preparing for a war that was opposed by many Americans. In the overheated and hothouse partisan atmosphere of Washington in that period, every step Horton took had the potential to trigger a political landmine. (34)

Horton made sure that Americans learned about defense production through newsreels, Hollywood film shorts, radio spots, posters, photographs, pamphlets, and feature articles. He preferred to centralize PR under his control to avoid the release of contradictory information. His strategy of transparency entailed reporting how much money was spent and delivering bad news as well as good. In addition, he set up field

1. He has also been a member of the Wisconsin state legislature and is the author of *The First Presidential Communications Agency: FDR's Office of Government Reports* (Albany: SUNY Pr, 2005) and *Congress vs. the Bureaucracy: Muzzling Agency Public Relations* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2011).

2. "Not Too Much for a Negro," *The Nation* 141 (11 Dec 1935) 674-76.

offices across the country where Public Information Officers publicized local versions of the national story of defense production.

After FDR's re-election in 1940, Horton's information campaigns became more openly persuasive in intent, aimed at arousing popular support for national defense with the "minuteman drive," the "Guns Not Gadgets" pamphlet, and "The New Victory Program." Public salvage campaigns, such as "Pots to Planes," associated with wartime in American memory, actually began before the Pearl Harbor attack. The film unit of the DOI, "Hollywood on the Potomac," produced *Army in Overalls* (June 1941), about the Civilian Conservation Corps building military sites, and *Bomber* (October 1941), about the construction of the B-26, written and narrated by Carl Sandburg. Its radio series, "How We Build Airplanes" and "You Can't Do Business with Hitler," aired in 1941 and 1942. To promote subcontracting, "Defense Special" trains, painted red, white, and blue, crisscrossed the country with displays of sixty thousand necessary products that small manufacturers could produce; this yielded eleven thousand contracts. Horton reached out to conservative organizations and newspapers, including the American Legion and the *Chicago Tribune*, asking them to support festivities for commemorative days—"Bill of Rights Day," "I'm an American Day," etc.—which served as news pegs for more stories about defense.

Although Horton pioneered a number of innovative information campaigns, as Lee observes, the Roosevelt administration did not see public opinion polls move toward support for going to war. Horton had done all he could, short of outright "propaganda" (104): his staff had preached urgency with a "Time is Short" poster aimed at factory workers and abandoned neutrality in a pamphlet claiming isolationists were "doing a job for Hitler" (98). In 1941, FDR set up additional agencies to shape opinion. The dynamic but disorganized New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt were appointed director and assistant director of the Office of Civilian Defense, tasked with boosting national morale. Mrs. Roosevelt attracted needed attention to the campaigns but, as a "tireless do-gooder idea machine," created much extra work for staffers who could hardly ignore her suggestions (107). FDR also established the Office of Facts and Figures, headed by poet and Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish, to address big questions, such as how to convince Americans that the fight against fascism was everybody's fight.

The Japanese attack in December 1941 brought an end to the cautious approach to mobilization. "Remember Pearl Harbor!" became the slogan. Once the United States was at war, Horton's DOI produced so many press releases a day that it had to provide summaries of them. But, as Lee demonstrates, Horton still stuck to the facts; he just produced more of them. The DOI deployed speakers, radio programs, art competitions, and films. Katharine Hepburn narrated *Women in Defense* (1941), written by Eleanor Roosevelt, and Orson Welles narrated *Tanks* (1942).

After the government's information agencies were reorganized in 1942, Horton and much of his staff moved to the new Office of War Information, but not for long. The thorny Horton did not play well with others, Lee notes. Nor did his belief in a centralized full-service federal PR shop prevail in wartime Washington. Horton moved to the Office of Public Administration, then to the Interior Department, and finally back to the Maritime Commission.

As Lee acknowledges, his examination of federal government PR has an "inside baseball" quality that will appeal to specialists in government communications, bureaucratic politics, and Washington at war (26). He discusses, for instance, the importance of the DOI's duplicating policy in establishing centralized control, the intricacies of bureaucratic budgeting, and Horton's practice of burying certain types of bad news in long, boring announcements released late on Fridays. Lee even recounts an actual baseball game played in the spirit of friendly rivalry between Horton's staff and news reporters, which the public information officers won 20 to 18. The inclusion of such details shows that Lee envisions readers quite knowledgeable about the period. For another example, isolationist Senators Gerald Nye and Burton Wheeler are mentioned in a polling question without explanation of their efforts to condemn the Roosevelt administration and Hollywood for conducting pro-war propaganda (116).

Promoting the War Effort is a discerning investigation of government propaganda, politics, and the care and feeding of the press, particularly in the challenging period 1940–41. It sheds light on FDR's leadership in

his dealings with wartime bureaucrats; his successful practice of “uniting and conquering,” for example, by pairing General Motors CEO William Knudson, a Republican, and labor leader Sidney Hillman, a Democrat, as co-directors of the Office of Production Management; and his preference for working around rather than with Congress. Mordecai Lee has also clarified what sort of propaganda is deemed appropriate in time of crisis as well as the accompanying political constraints, ethical issues, and questions of effectiveness. As head of the Division of Information, Robert Horton, a former reporter himself, thought it essential to maintain good relations with the press, while delivering simple, apparently neutral, practical information that disguised elements of advocacy. He also believed that winning the war required an informed citizenry. When the war was won, he left Washington, returned to Vermont, and did not look back.