



ARTICLE

Selling Selective Anti-Statism: The Conservative Persuasion Campaign and the Transformation of American Politics since the 1920s

Peter Roady 

Department of History, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Beginning in the 1920s, a network of conservatives who sought to limit the federal government's domestic responsibilities mobilized modern persuasion techniques to belittle the government's efforts to address domestic economic and social problems. Over several decades, the conservative persuasion campaign delivered billions of messages disparaging domestic programs. To assess the campaign's impact, this article proposes a new method for evaluating efforts to shape public opinion that focuses on the impact of message repetition at scale. Applying this approach, the article argues that by the late 1940s the conservative persuasion campaign had primed many Americans to embrace a strand of selective anti-statism pairing support for a robust military and foreign policy establishment with disdain for domestic economic security programs. The derisive rhetoric the conservative persuasion campaign fostered and the selective anti-statism it fueled became defining features of American politics and shaped American political development for decades.

On a rainy afternoon in January 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt encouraged Americans “to find through government the instrument of our united purpose to solve for the individual the ever-rising problems of a complex civilization.”¹ Half a century later, President Ronald Reagan told Americans that “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”² These two presidential statements illustrate a fundamental shift in how Americans perceived and talked about the government’s ability to address domestic problems. But the two statements, and the two presidencies, did not mark neat beginning and end points.³ By the time Roosevelt delivered his second inaugural address, a big effort to disparage domestic programs had been underway for more than a decade. This persuasion effort—and the conservative movement it propelled—primed Americans to embrace a strand of selective anti-statism that began to shape American political development long before Reagan’s presidency.

¹Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address,” Jan. 20, 1937, American Presidency Project [hereafter APP], <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209135>. On the weather, see Justin Grieser, “Washington, D.C. Presidential Inauguration Weather History,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/capital-weather-gang/post/washington-dc-presidential-inauguration-weather-history/2013/01/16/5def1200-5ff3-11e2-b05a-605528f6b712_blog.html. Throughout, “the government” refers to the federal government.

²Ronald Reagan, “The President’s News Conference,” Aug. 12, 1986, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/259715>. Reagan adapted the joke from Maine Senator Edmund Muskie. See Lawrence Glickman, “The Liberal Who Told Reagan’s Favorite Joke,” *Boston Review*, Aug. 6, 2019, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/lawrence-glickman-ronald-reagan-edmund-muskie-here-from-government/>.

³For a critique of the formerly common Roosevelt–Reagan bookending, see Matthew D. Lassiter, “Political History beyond the Red-Blue Divide,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 761.

The literature on American conservatism blossomed after respected political historian Alan Brinkley lamented the state of the field in 1994.⁴ Despite the outpouring of scholarship, however, leading conservatism scholar Kim Phillips-Fein is correct that “the larger questions that Brinkley posed about reckoning with the strength of conservatism in our larger U.S. history narratives have not been fully answered.”⁵ One of the biggest of these unresolved questions is why many Americans soured on domestic state building in the mid-twentieth century. Scholars have advanced many promising answers to this question, ranging from public discontent at labor turmoil and growing fears of communism to the simple change in the country’s economic fortunes in the 1940s.⁶ These explanations all have merit. But they tend to rely on changes in public opinion reflected in opinion polls or in the even cruder proxy of electoral outcomes. Both explain only *what* people believed, not *why*.

The use of polling data to try to determine why Americans believed what they believed in this period is particularly problematic. Opinion polling was in its infancy in the first half of the twentieth century, and sampling methods did not meet subsequent standards for representativeness. Rather than probability sampling—in which every American was equally likely to be interviewed—these early polls typically relied on “quota-controlled” sampling, meaning pollsters decided whom to interview.⁷ This methodological deficiency renders the results suspect. A group of political scientists devised ways to correct for this problem, but when using the cleaned data to try to explain why public support for domestic state building eroded, these scholars concluded that the precise determinants of opinion could not be traced backward from the data.⁸

Colleagues in psychology suggest an alternative—and broadly applicable—way of determining which inputs matter. They established long ago that the frequent repetition of messages shapes minds.⁹ Public opinion scholar Robert Shapiro has urged inquiries applying this insight to the study of American political development, calling for greater attention not just to the content of political messages but also to their volume.¹⁰ Applying this approach to the question of

⁴Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (Apr. 1994): 409–29. For overviews of the extensive literature on American conservatism that appeared after Brinkley’s article, see Julian Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 2 (Jun. 2010): 367–92; Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 723–43; and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Whither the Right? Old and New Directions in the History of American Conservatism,” *Reviews in American History* 44, no. 4 (2016): 644–52.

⁵Kim Phillips-Fein, “Our Political Narratives,” *Modern American History* 1, no. 1 (Mar. 2018): 83.

⁶For instance, on labor, see Eric Schickler and Devin Caughey, “Public Opinion, Organized Labor, and the Limits of New Deal Liberalism, 1936–1945,” *Studies in American Political Development* 25, no. 2 (Oct. 2011): 162–89; and Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Introduction,” in *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination*, eds. Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (Philadelphia, 2012), 1–10. On fears of communism, see Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton, 2013). On the economy, see David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, 1999), 784–7.

⁷Adam J. Berinsky et al., “Revisiting Public Opinion in the 1930s and 1940s,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 3 (Jul. 2011): 516. See also Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 127–31.

⁸Eric Schickler and Devin Caughey write that “the opinion data are not well suited to assessing the causal role” of particular factors in shaping public opinion and that “Sorting out the independent causal effect of conservative opinion leadership requires data we do not possess.” In other words, the available data can tell us only that public opinion shifted in conservatives’ favor—not why it shifted. See Schickler and Caughey, “Public Opinion, Organized Labor, and the Limits of New Deal Liberalism, 1936–1945,” 178 and 186.

⁹For instance, see Lynn Hasher, David Goldstein, and Thomas Toppino, “Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity,” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 16, no. 1 (Feb. 1977): 107–12; Lisa K. Fazio et al., “Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no. 5 (2015): 993–1002; and Lisa K. Fazio, David G. Rand, and Gordon Pennycook, “Repetition Increases Perceived Truth Equally for Plausible and Implausible Statements,” *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 26 (Oct. 2019): 1705–10.

¹⁰Robert Y. Shapiro, “Public Opinion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, eds. Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman (New York, 2016), 528–9.

why many Americans soured on domestic state building brings the nascent conservative movement to center stage.¹¹ During the intense fight over the government's domestic responsibilities from the 1920s through the 1950s, conservatives sent an ever-increasing and ultimately enormous volume of political messages—billions of them—disparaging domestic programs.¹² By the 1940s, the volume of conservative messaging swamped messages delivered by the champions of domestic state building. If the frequent repetition of messages shapes minds, then this deluge of conservative messaging demands attention.

Thanks to the careful work of many scholars, we know quite a bit about the people and organizations responsible for these messages.¹³ The work of the Du Pont brothers and J. Howard Pew, to name a few people, and the Sentinels of the Republic, the American Liberty League, and the National Association of Manufacturers, to name a few organizations, have all received thorough attention. But scholars have struggled to render clear judgments about the impact these people and organizations had on public opinion, on the development of the conservative movement itself, and on American political development more broadly. The problem stems from a tendency to evaluate these early conservative persuasion efforts independently at

¹¹Historians have noted the pitfalls associated with using the term “conservative,” which, as Elizabeth Tandy Shermer points out, did not take hold everywhere at the same time. Because the characters in this story did embrace the “conservative” label for themselves and for their movement, I feel that using the term conforms with Kim Phillips-Fein’s sound advice to let historical actors define themselves. For thoughtful reflections on the labeling issue, see David Green, *The Language of Politics in America: Shaping Political Consciousness from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca, 1987), 162–3; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York, 2009), 321–2; and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013), 7. Given the range of people involved, the term “conservative movement” adds problems of its own. Here, I follow George Nash’s suggestion that we see modern American conservatism as a big tent movement. See George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (Wilmington, DE, 2006), xiv–xv; and Jennifer Burns, “In Retrospect: George Nash’s *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*,” *Reviews in American History* 32, no. 3 (Sept. 2004): 453.

¹²Starting in the 1940s, the Ad Council tracked the number of “impressions” its messages received. For a message delivered by radio, for example, they defined a “listener impression” as “one message heard once by one listener.” See Ad Council Annual Report, 8th, “How Business Helps Solve Public Problems,” 1949–1950, Advertising Council Archives, 13-2-207, Box 7, File 503, University of Illinois Archives [hereafter UIA], Urbana, IL.

¹³Authors who have written about conservatives’ efforts to shape public opinion in this period include S. H. Walker and Paul Sklar, *Business Finds Its Voice: Management’s Effort to Sell the Business Idea to the Public* (New York, 1938); George Wolfskill, *The Revolt of the Conservatives: A History of the American Liberty League, 1934–1940* (Westport, CT, 1962); Richard S. Tedlow, “The National Association of Manufacturers and Public Relations during the New Deal,” *Business History Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 25–45; Robert Griffith, “The Selling of America: The Advertising Council and American Politics, 1942–1960,” *Business History Review* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 388–412; Robert F. Burk, *The Corporate State and the Broker State: The Du Ponts and American National Politics, 1925–1940* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Urbana, IL, 1994); Stuart Ewen, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (New York, 1996), 288–336; Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Business* (Berkeley, CA, 1998), 202–48; William L. Bird, Jr., “Better Living”: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935–1955 (Evanston, IL, 1999); Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2008); Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, 2008); Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; Marjorie E. Kornhauser, “Shaping Public Opinion and the Law: How a ‘Common Man’ Campaign Ended a Rich Man’s Law,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 123–47; Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, 2015); Mark R. Wilson, *Destructive Creation: American Business and the Winning of World War II* (Philadelphia, 2016); Julia Bowes, “Every Citizen a Sentinel! Every Home a Sentry Box! The Sentinels of the Republic and the Gendered Origins of Free-Market Conservatism,” *Modern American History* 2, no. 3 (Nov. 2019): 269–97; Lawrence B. Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (New Haven, 2019); and Charlie Whitham, *Corporate Conservatives Go to War: How the National Association of Manufacturers Planned to Restore American Free Enterprise, 1939–1948* (Cham, Switzerland, 2020).

moments in time rather than considering their collective impact over a longer period, coupled with a tendency to pay more attention to direct messaging than to indirect influence.¹⁴ By clarifying the connections between these efforts and evaluating their impact collectively—paying attention to both indirect influence and to the volume of repeated messaging—this article helps resolve longstanding uncertainty about what these early conservatives achieved.

Analyzing large numbers of records associated with the people and organizations responsible for these early conservative persuasion efforts reveals a striking continuity of personnel and messaging that makes clear that these efforts were neither independent nor episodic.¹⁵ This analysis shows that the conservative movement originated in the 1920s when a small number of business leaders organized and financed initiatives to turn public opinion against the expansion of the government's domestic responsibilities.¹⁶ This interlocking directorate of business leaders formed the nucleus of what grew into the big tent conservative movement, as historian George Nash aptly characterized it.¹⁷ The first step toward a fuller appreciation of what the persuasion efforts overseen by these business leaders achieved is to see these efforts as they saw them: as components of a long-term campaign. This campaign served as a rallying point for the conservative movement starting before Franklin Roosevelt's presidency and helped the movement coalesce and gain influence by the late 1940s, more than a decade earlier than the current scholarly consensus suggests—and long before Ronald Reagan took the presidential oath.¹⁸

¹⁴The practice of evaluating various persuasion efforts independently persists even when scholars examine many people and groups in one work, as Kim Phillips-Fein does in her invaluable *Invisible Hands*. Of the National Association of Manufacturers' persuasion efforts, for example, Phillips-Fein writes "the problem with the organization's diffuse propaganda campaigns was that it was virtually impossible to measure their success." See Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 15. Richard Tedlow agrees that "It is impossible to render more than a tentative answer" about the impact of the NAM campaign specifically, but ventures that "The wide exposure and constant repetition of the Association's message probably changed some minds." See Tedlow, "National Association of Manufacturers and Public Relations during the New Deal," 40. For a blunt dismissal of these persuasion efforts that focuses on direct messaging, see William H. Allen Whyte, Jr., *Is Anybody Listening?* (New York, 1952). Glickman, *Free Enterprise*, illustrates the value of taking seriously the repetition of messages over many decades.

¹⁵The most useful records for this type of network analysis are documents like board meeting minutes and official stationery that provide lists of participants and associates.

¹⁶From the large sociology literature on movements, I conclude that a shared purpose and connectivity—specifically, organizational and communications infrastructure—make something a movement. By those measures, a conservative movement emerged in the United States in the 1920s and began to grow rapidly in the 1930s. See Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian, *Collective Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1987), 225; and Dieter Rucht, "Studying Social Movements: Some Conceptual Challenges," in *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective: A Survey*, eds. Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (London, 2017), 42–4.

¹⁷On the role of these business leaders, see Fredrick Rudolph, "The American Liberty League, 1934–1940," *American Historical Review* 56, no. 1 (Oct. 1950): 21–2, 32; Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*; Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*; Zelizer, "Rethinking the History of American Conservatism," 370; and Bowes, "Every Citizen a Sentinel! Every Home a Sentry Box!," 270–3. For Nash's characterization of conservatism as a big tent movement, see Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, xiv–xv; and Burns, "In Retrospect: George Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*," 453.

¹⁸Many scholars have argued that the conservative movement formed in reaction to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Roosevelt and the New Deal undoubtedly contributed to the movement's development and spurred the persuasion campaign that became its animating force. But the businessmen leading the conservative movement began mobilizing before the New Deal, which suggests some larger trend moved them to action. That larger trend was the expansion of the government's domestic responsibilities beginning during the Progressive Era. See, for instance, Lynn Dumenil, "'The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy': Antitatism and Education Reform in the 1920s," *Journal of American History* 77, no. 2 (1990): 500; Romain D. Huret, *American Tax Resisters* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 277; Bowes, "Every Citizen a Sentinel! Every Home a Sentry Box!"; and Glickman, *Free Enterprise*. Among many examples of works presenting the conservative movement as a reaction against the New Deal, see Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 214; Donald T. Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 1–14; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, generally; Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism*

The people running the conservative persuasion campaign believed that if Americans doubted the government's ability to solve domestic problems, they would be less willing to support domestic programs. Government—and taxes—would shrink as a result. Putting this premise into action, conservatives sowed doubt about the government's competence in the domestic sphere. The clever ways conservatives disparaged domestic programs—through amusing but damning anecdotes delivered repeatedly via trusted “opinion molders” and through “public service advertising”—helped a negative impression of domestic programs burrow into American political consciousness largely unopposed and with the methods largely unnoticed. Indeed, the fullest scholarly exploration of why the public came to look skeptically on the government focuses on what the government did to create what Amy Lerman calls a “reputation crisis” for itself.¹⁹ Government actions that many Americans found disagreeable or inept undoubtedly contributed to negative public perceptions. But this focus on government action minimizes the conservative persuasion campaign's decades-long role in interpreting government action to the public—usually critically—and therefore overlooks the extent to which those who wanted the public to hold the government in low regard helped manufacture the “reputation crisis.”

Three phases of the conservative persuasion campaign contributed most directly to the negative shift in the way Americans perceived and talked about domestic programs. The first important phase began during the second half of the 1930s when the business executives leading the conservative movement hired public relations professionals to orchestrate the campaign. These public relations specialists developed the reach and persuasion playbook that became central to the campaign's effectiveness and, by extension, to the conservative movement's influence. The introduction of two tactics in this foundational phase mattered most. First, the campaign's architects used endless repetition to cultivate impressions and make them stick. Second, the campaign's architects relied not just on direct messaging, which those who disagreed with the message might ignore, but also on indirect persuasion. The campaign's architects wooed women, teachers, religious leaders, and other “opinion molders” who could deliver tailored anti-statist messages to trusting audiences over an extended period. In this foundational first phase of the campaign, conservatives fostered the impression that the government could not solve the day's most pressing domestic problems and that its efforts to do so were farcical. But with the Roosevelt administration and its allies delivering a large volume of messages advocating for domestic economic security programs amid persistent economic depression, conservatives made little immediate headway.

During the campaign's second important phase in the first half of the 1940s, conservatives used the reach and persuasion tactics developed in the first phase to tell two stories about World War II that sowed further doubt about the government's domestic abilities.²⁰ First, conservatives cultivated the impression that the private sector, not the government, deserved credit for the return of prosperity that accompanied the huge increase in production triggered by the

(New York, 2015), 7; and John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (Philadelphia, 2021), 4. Other scholars date the emergence of the conservative movement later, to the late 1940s, the 1950s, or the 1960s. See, for example, Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*; Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven, 2009), 2, 159; Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, 2001); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater's Early Senate Career and the De-Legitimization of Organized Labor,” *Journal of American History* 95, no. 3 (2008): 678–709. Even if they differ on when the conservative movement emerged, scholars generally argue that the movement began to shape American politics in the late 1950s and gained strength thereafter. See Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor, “Introduction,” in *Beyond the New Deal Order: U.S. Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession*, eds. Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor (Philadelphia, 2019), 4–5.

¹⁹Amy E. Lerman, *Good Enough for Government Work: The Public Reputation Crisis in America (And What We Can Do to Fix It)* (Chicago, 2019).

²⁰Wilson, *Destructive Creation*.

war. Second, conservatives argued that the private sector's wartime production record proved its superior competence compared with the government, which—according to conservatives—produced little more than miles of “red tape” during World War II. Conservatives' success peddling these narratives in the face of contrary facts testified to the conservative persuasion campaign's growing power, a function largely of the increase in the volume of its messaging relative to countervailing messages.

In the campaign's third important phase beginning in the late 1940s, the campaign's architects used amusing examples of domestic policy incompetence unearthed by former President Herbert Hoover's Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government to belittle domestic programs more broadly. Working through the ostensibly nonpartisan but conservative-run Advertising Council, conservatives successfully used the guise of “public service advertising” to cloak their efforts to disparage domestic programs. This clever ruse provided the conservative persuasion campaign with a veneer of nonpartisanship and abundant free advertising space—a potent combination that enabled conservatives to swamp countervailing messages and, as *n*-gram charts make clear, helped conservatives cement rhetoric disparaging domestic programs in mainstream political discourse.²¹

In these ways, the conservative persuasion campaign primed many Americans by the late 1940s to embrace a strand of selective anti-statism that paired mockery for and reluctance to fund domestic economic security programs with rhetorical and financial support for a robust military and foreign policy establishment.²² Working in concert with and reinforcing other historical developments, this strand of selective anti-statism did much to shape American political development after World War II. Under this selective anti-statism, many Americans supported the creation of robust state capacity in the military and foreign policy realms but resisted comparable efforts to build the government's domestic policy capacity. The ironic result was a patchwork and little-respected—but still large and expensive—domestic policy establishment and an enormous, expensive military and foreign policy establishment.

The Origins of the Conservative Movement and Its Efforts to Shape Public Opinion

The modern American conservative movement and the accompanying effort to undermine public confidence in the government's ability to solve domestic problems originated in the battle to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment, which outlawed the production, transport, and sale of

²¹On the strengths, weaknesses, and pitfalls associated with the Google Books corpus and *n*-gram charts, see Ethan Adam Pechenick, Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds, “Characterizing the Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inferences of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 10 (Oct. 2015): e0137041; and Nadja Younes and Ulf-Dietrich Reips, “Guideline for Improving the Reliability of Google Ngram Studies: Evidence from Religious Terms,” *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (Mar. 2019): e0213554.

²²The phrase “selective anti-statism” comes from sociologist Allen Hunter. See Allen Hunter, “Virtue with a Vengeance: The Pro-Family Politics of the New Right” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1985), 271. On conservatives' growing support for military spending in the decades following World War II, see Jonathan Soffer, “The National Association of Manufacturers and the Militarization of American Conservatism,” *Business History Review* 75, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 775–805. In his innovative book *Warfare State*, James Sparrow argues that Americans accepted “big government” in the 1940s and implies that anti-statism declined across the board. While I find much to admire in Sparrow's book—including its attention to the power of message repetition—I agree with Harry Truman and others at the time (and scholars since) who noted that an attitude of selective anti-statism better characterized Americans' views in those years. See James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York, 2011). On Truman, see the discussion in the penultimate section of this article. On the prevalence of selective anti-statism in this period, see Glickman, *Free Enterprise*, 5–6. Glickman includes a perceptive quote from *New Republic* editor Bruce Bliven circa 1943, who observed that professed anti-statists were “glad to have government interference when it works in their direction.” On other strands and examples of selective anti-statism, see Kim Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus, OH, 2001), 110–1; Lassiter, “Political History beyond the Red-Blue Divide,” 763–4; and Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 4.

alcohol.²³ The interlocking directorate of businessmen who served as the conservative movement's leaders saw the Eighteenth Amendment as what historian Robert Burk calls "The Opening Wedge of Tyranny."²⁴ In their eyes, Burk writes, the Eighteenth Amendment exemplified "the federal government's growing threat to private property, individual liberty, and personal choice."²⁵ To meet this threat, William H. Stayton, a conservative-minded, wealthy Washington lobbyist, founded the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA) in 1918.²⁶ Stayton's objective with the AAPA was broader than its name implied. Uneasy over what he saw as the trend toward greater centralized government power, he hoped to "educate the public on the broader subject of a 'proper' interpretation of the Constitution."²⁷ Despite Stayton's efforts, the AAPA made little progress toward its objectives in the first decade of its existence.²⁸

In the final years of the 1920s, however, a group of business leaders led by the brothers Pierre, Irénée, and Lamot du Pont took over the AAPA and expanded its efforts as part of what Pierre du Pont deemed an attempt "to straighten out our political affairs."²⁹ In addition to an immediate desire to replace corporate and income taxes with taxes on legalized alcohol, the du Ponts hoped an invigorated AAPA could turn public opinion against future expansions of the government's domestic responsibilities.³⁰ Pierre du Pont's private observation that "the collateral issues outweigh the liquor question" underscored that du Pont, like Stayton, saw the AAPA's work as deeper than its stated focus on Prohibition.³¹

With the generous backing of the du Ponts and the other business leaders who joined the AAPA's leadership ranks, the AAPA became a laboratory for conservatives to experiment with organizational approaches and persuasion techniques to shape public opinion at scale. As historian George Wolfskill notes, "For sheer power and professional efficiency the propaganda machine of the AAPA surpassed anything the country had ever seen."³² The AAPA's persuasion efforts marked the beginning of the conservative movement's organized effort to develop a shared vocabulary with which to disparage domestic programs. The AAPA operated research and information bureaus, which disseminated anti-Prohibition propaganda nationwide emphasizing the dangers of expanded government responsibilities and the expense, corruption, and ineptitude that followed.³³ The association also cultivated grassroots and grassstops

²³For other efforts to date the origins of the conservative movement before the wave of New Deal reaction, see Dumenil, "The Insatiable Maw of Bureaucracy"; Donald T. Critchlow, "Rethinking American Conservatism: Toward a New Narrative," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (Dec. 2011): 753–4; Huret, *American Tax Resisters*, 277; Lichtenstein and Shermer, "Introduction," 4; James Casey Sullivan, "Against the Tendencies of the Times: The Republican Party and the Roots of Modern Conservatism, 1900–1930" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2016); and Bowes, "Every Citizen a Sentinel! Every Home a Sentry Box!"

²⁴Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 29–30.

²⁵Ibid. On the role that Prohibition played in the growth of the government's domestic responsibilities, see Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the State* (New York, 2016).

²⁶Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 30.

²⁷Ibid., 30–1.

²⁸Ibid., 31–5.

²⁹Pierre du Pont quoted in Ibid., 38. On the takeover of the AAPA, see *Report to the Directors, Members, and Friends of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment*, 1928 (Washington, DC, 1929), 1–8; and Fletcher Dobyns, *The Amazing Story of Repeal: An Exposé of the Power of Propaganda* (Chicago, 1940), 8–15.

³⁰On the du Ponts' motivations, see Pierre S. du Pont, *Eighteenth Amendment Not a Remedy for the Drink Evil* (Washington, DC, 1926), 8; Dobyns, *Amazing Story of Repeal*, 17–28; Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 35–7; and Huret, *American Tax Resisters*, 143.

³¹Pierre du Pont quoted in Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 48. On the fight over the government's responsibilities in the period between 1913 and 1933, see Jesse Tarbert, *When Good Government Meant Big Government: The Quest to Expand Federal Power, 1913–1933* (New York, 2022).

³²Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*, 40. See also Dobyns, *Amazing Story of Repeal*, 15–7.

³³*Report to the Directors, Members, and Friends of the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment*, 1928 (Washington, DC, 1929), 24–31; *Annual Report to the Directors, Members, and Friends of the Association*

support among women, professional groups, and youth by creating committees and auxiliaries.³⁴ Between 1928 and 1932, the du Pont brothers contributed \$400,000 to the AAPA, equivalent to more than \$6 million today—a huge sum by the standards of political spending at the time.³⁵

Although they eventually succeeded in helping to end Prohibition, the conservatives behind the AAPA had not achieved their larger goal of halting the expansion of the government's domestic responsibilities. On the contrary, the expansion accelerated in the early 1930s. As the Great Depression deepened, the public looked increasingly to the government to address the country's economic problems. As a result, when the AAPA board of directors mothballed the organization in December 1933, they resolved "that the individual members of the Executive Committee ... continue to meet from time to time and have in view the formation of a group, based on our old membership in the association, which would in the event of danger to the Federal Constitution, stand ready to defend the faith of the fathers."³⁶ To the du Pont brothers and their long-time colleague John J. Raskob, the danger materialized in June 1934 when Franklin Roosevelt proposed what became known as Social Security.³⁷ In a series of intense discussions during July 1934, the du Pont brothers; Raskob; John W. Davis, a leading New York corporate lawyer and 1924 Democratic presidential nominee; executives from General Motors and General Foods, including Colby Chester; and other business leaders decided to try to turn the public against Roosevelt's efforts to expand the government's domestic responsibilities.³⁸

Building the Conservative Persuasion Playbook and Expanding the Campaign's Reach

The July 1934 discussions produced the American Liberty League. Headed by former AAPA president Jouett Shouse and launched in August 1934 from the same Washington, DC office from which Shouse had run the AAPA, the Liberty League said it wanted "to preserve for succeeding generations the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the safeguards of personal liberty and the opportunity for initiative and enterprise provided under the Constitution."³⁹ Although ostensibly an inclusive organization intended to advance the interests of all Americans, the League's dependence on the activism and generous financing of a couple dozen wealthy businessmen and bankers made the organization easy to caricature and dismiss.⁴⁰ Democratic National Committee Chairman Jim Farley said the Liberty League "ought to be called the American Cellophane League" since "first, it's a du Pont product and second, you can see right through it."⁴¹

Against the Prohibition Amendment, 1931 (Washington, DC, 1932), 18–9; and *32 Reasons for Repeal* (Washington, DC, 1932). For examples of AAPA anti-Prohibition propaganda, see Association Against the Prohibition Amendment postcards and stationery, Hagley Museum and Library [hereafter Hagley], Wilmington, DE.

³⁴Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 57–9. On the "grassroots" and the "grassstops," see Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*, 2.

³⁵Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 107.

³⁶AAPA Board of Directors Resolution, Dec. 6, 1933, quoted in Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*, 54.

³⁷Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat," June 28, 1934, APP.

³⁸On the discussions, see Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 134–8.

³⁹Platform and Organization of the American Liberty League, 1934, Raskob Papers (0473), Box 61, (American Liberty League (Charter)), Hagley and "American Liberty League," Statement by Jouett Shouse at the time of the announcement of the formation of this organization, Aug. 23, 1934, Jouett Shouse Collection (American Liberty League Pamphlets), University of Kentucky [hereafter Shouse Collection, UKY], Lexington, KY. See also Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*, 20; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval, 1935–1936* (Boston, 1960), 32; Jared A. Goldstein, "The American Liberty League and the Rise of Constitutional Nationalism," *Temple Law Review* 86, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 294; and Patrick C. Patton, "Standing at Thermopylae: A History of the American Liberty League" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2015).

⁴⁰Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*, 62–4; and Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 10–3.

⁴¹"Democracy Saved, Farley Declares," *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1936, 33.

Despite these political liabilities, the League boosted the conservative movement's prospects by capitalizing on the recent revolution in the fields of advertising and public relations, which became much more effective in the first three decades of the twentieth century thanks to a boom in academic psychology and the extensive experience public relations specialists gained manipulating public opinion during World War I.⁴² The fields evolved from a reliance on the dry presentation of facts to the cultivation of impressions through multichannel repetition, and from direct persuasion to indirect persuasion via opinion leaders.⁴³ Public relations specialists also learned to provide people with sticky rhetoric they would repeat, amplifying the original message.⁴⁴ The conservative movement benefited disproportionately from these advances because leading public relations professionals counted as clients many firms headed by the conservative movement's leaders. The Liberty League's decision to retain public relations consultants such as Edward Bernays, a leader in the field, brought these modern persuasion techniques into the conservative persuasion campaign, and they continued to shape the conservative movement for decades.⁴⁵

But adopting these persuasion techniques did not guarantee success. The campaign's effectiveness also depended on its ability to reach large numbers of Americans. To that end, the League and its public relations advisors expanded the campaign's reach, sending millions of pamphlets and press releases to thousands of public and college libraries; to hundreds of newspapers and press associations and editorial writers; and to an ever-growing mailing list.⁴⁶ By passing its material off as "news," the League gained extensive media coverage without having to pay for advertising.⁴⁷ The League even started its own news service, the Western Newspaper Union, to supply news stories and editorials—both written with a conservative slant and without attribution to the League—to more than 1,600 newspapers in the South, Midwest, and West.⁴⁸ The League also took advantage of free time offered by radio stations to push its conservative message over the airwaves.⁴⁹ Finally, the League published a bulletin featuring not only articles and updates on League activity but also funny and embarrassing anecdotes about the Roosevelt administration's domestic policy foibles—a continuation of earlier AAPA efforts to sow doubt about the government's ability to solve domestic problems.⁵⁰

The League mocked domestic economic security programs as farcical and ruinously expensive using a recent addition to the American political vocabulary: "boondoggling."⁵¹ The word originally referred to a leather decoration Boy Scouts produced and wore on their uniforms beginning in the second half of the 1920s.⁵² By the mid-1930s, however, conservatives had begun using the term to refer to domestic economic security programs of questionable

⁴²See Richard S. Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900–1950* (Greenwich, CT, 1979), 30, 39–40; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994), 218–33; and Ewen, *PR!*, 3, 10–1, and 116–27.

⁴³Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, 1928), 47–61. See also Ewen, *PR!*, 192–6, and generally.

⁴⁴Bernays, *Propaganda*, 49.

⁴⁵Burk, *Corporate State and the Broker State*, 164.

⁴⁶*Bulletin of the American Liberty League* 1, no. 1 (Aug. 1935), Shouse Collection, UKY, 3.

⁴⁷Wolfskill, *Revolt of the Conservatives*, 66.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰See, for example, *Bulletin of the American Liberty League* 1, no. 5 (Dec. 1935), Shouse Collection, UKY, 3.

⁵¹For instance, see American Liberty League Document No. 72, "Dangerous Experimentation: A Discussion of Policies and Performances Apparently Based upon the Belief that Perpetual Motion Is Progress and Involving the Squandering of Public Money upon Socialistic Undertakings of Doubtful Constitutionality," Oct. 28, 1935, Shouse Collection, UKY; and American Liberty League Document No. 133, "Federal Bureaucracy in the Fourth Year of The New Deal: A Study of the Appalling Increase in the Number of Government Employees," Aug. 23, 1936, Shouse Collection, UKY.

⁵²*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (New York, 2002), 254; and "Deutsch Gets Boon-Doggle—the Real Thing," *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 1935, <https://www.nytimes.com/1935/04/11/archives/deutsch-gets-boondoggle-the-real-thing-word-coined-long-ago-for.html>.

value. The term burst onto the national political scene in April 1935, when the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Wall Street Journal* pounced on an amusing story about a crafts-maker seeking work relief funds to make boondoggles.⁵³ The *Wall Street Journal* published a piece the next day decrying “A Nation of Boon-Doggles.”⁵⁴ The League amplified these efforts to belittle domestic programs through its multichannel persuasion campaign. In a national radio broadcast in June 1936, League President Jouett Shouse told Americans, “The New Deal has instituted a series of boondoggling enterprises which are as ridiculous as they are unwise.”⁵⁵ The League also distributed lengthy lists of questionable domestic economic security initiatives to millions of Americans in a leaflet called “The New Deal Boondoggling Circus” and in a longer pamphlet.⁵⁶ An *n*-gram chart showing boondoggle’s increasingly frequent appearance in print sources beginning in the 1930s makes clear that the word stuck (see Figure 1).⁵⁷

So did the negative impression of domestic programs the word boondoggle fostered. But the League’s progress incorporating modern persuasion techniques into the conservative persuasion campaign and popularizing derisive rhetoric that devalued domestic programs proved insufficient to defeat Roosevelt in 1936, while what one conservative critic called “New Deal propaganda” continued to flood the country.⁵⁸

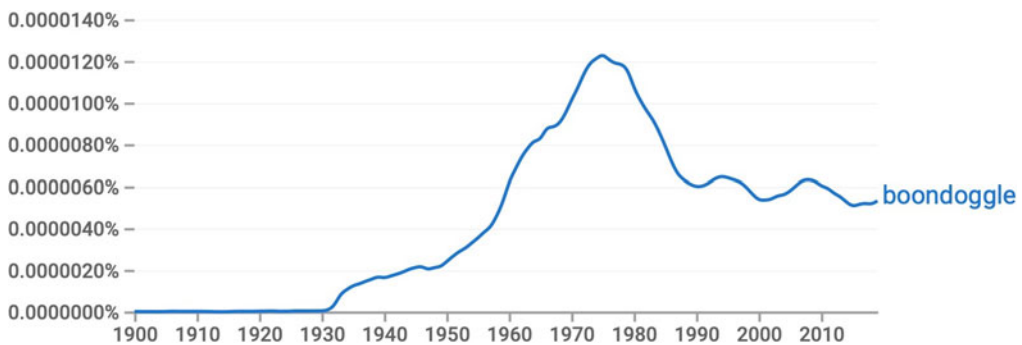


Figure 1: *n*-gram chart for “boondoggle” in American English, 1900–2019.

⁵³“Relief Dancing Stirs Laughter of New Yorkers: Outsiders Do Most of the Teaching,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 4, 1935, 7.

⁵⁴“A Nation of Boon-Doggles,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 5, 1935, 4.

⁵⁵American Liberty League Document No. 128, “The New Deal vs. Democracy, Speech of Jouett Shouse, Broadcast over the National Broadcasting Company network,” June 20, 1936, Shouse Collection, UKY, 5.

⁵⁶“The New Deal Boondoggling Circus,” May 27, 1936, Jouett Shouse Papers, Box 16, Folder 28, UKY; and American Liberty League Document No. 78, “Work Relief: A Record of the Tragic Failure of the Most Costly Governmental Experiment in All World History,” Nov. 25, 1935, Shouse Collection, UKY, 15–8.

⁵⁷For the *n*-gram chart, see https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=boondoggle&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cboondoggle%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cboondoggle%3B%2Cc0. Among many publications, the *New York Daily News*, the country’s most popular newspaper and a vehicle for conservative messaging, picked up the phrase. On the paper, see Matthew Pressman, “The New York Daily News and the History of Conservative Media,” *Modern American History* 4, no. 3 (Oct. 2021): 219–38. Influential conservative radio pioneer Clarence Manion also delighted in talking about government “boondoggles” during his broadcasting career from 1954–1979. See, for example, *Manion Forum* No. 302, July 10, 1960, Clarence Manion Papers, PMMN 1/07, #302, University of Notre Dame Archives [hereafter Manion Papers, UNDA], Notre Dame, IN; *Manion Forum* No. 628, Oct. 16, 1966, Manion Papers, PMMN 1/14, #628, UNDA; and *Manion Forum* No. 1277, Apr. 1, 1979, 3. On Manion’s influence, see Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2016).

⁵⁸Elisha Hanson, “Official Propaganda and the New Deal,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 179, no. 1 (May 1935): 177. On how the Roosevelt administration countered charges of

Roosevelt's resounding re-election largely discredited the American Liberty League and left the business executives leading the conservative movement in need of a new vehicle for their persuasion efforts. They found it in the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). Established in 1895 to represent the interests of American manufacturing companies, the NAM fell on hard times during the Depression.⁵⁹ During the winter of 1931–1932, however, a group of business leaders calling themselves the “Brass Hats” did to the NAM what the du Pont brothers had done to the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment, taking over the organization, revitalizing it, and placing it in the vanguard of the conservative persuasion campaign.⁶⁰ The reinvigorated NAM concentrated on making public opinion less favorable to the government and more favorable to the private sector.⁶¹ The NAM decided not merely to retain public relations consultants—as the Liberty League had done—but also to bring public relations specialists Walter Weisenburger and James P. Selvage in house, marking a further step in the professionalization of the conservative persuasion campaign.⁶² When General Foods Chairman and former Liberty Leaguer Colby Chester took over the NAM presidency in 1936, NAM's persuasion efforts took off.⁶³

The NAM developed an effective persuasion playbook that built on the successes and learned from the mistakes of the AAPA and the Liberty League. The playbook emphasized reach and repetition. Observers at the time expressed astonishment at the NAM campaign's reach. An unnamed United States Senator noted—accurately, if perhaps apocryphally—that the NAM “used every possible method of reaching the public but the carrier pigeon.”⁶⁴ After spending the better part of an afternoon listening to Walter Weisenburger describe NAM's efforts, a member of the NAM's Public Relations Advisory Committee declared “I am perfectly overwhelmed by the amount of work you people do.”⁶⁵ The NAM campaign repeated the conservative message to tens of millions of Americans every day, often multiple times per day.⁶⁶ A NAM campaign summary captured the extent to which Americans of all ages—mostly unwittingly—encountered the conservative persuasion campaign from the time they woke up in the morning until the time they went to bed at night.⁶⁷ Americans heard the conservative message on the radio upon waking, read it in articles planted in their morning newspapers, encountered it on billboards and public transit ads on the way to work, read it

boondoggling, see Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933–1956* (New York, 2006), 141–9.

⁵⁹Jennifer Delton provides the most comprehensive account of NAM's origins in *The Industrialists: How the National Association of Manufacturers Shaped American Capitalism* (Princeton, 2020).

⁶⁰On the “Brass Hats” and the takeover of NAM, see *Ibid.*, 29–32; and Andrew Workman, “Manufacturing Power: The Organizational Revival of the National Association of Manufacturers, 1941–1945,” *Business History Review* 72, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 286–8. On the broader history of NAM's leadership, see Phillip H. Burch, Jr., “The NAM as an Interest Group,” *Politics & Society* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1973): 110–4 and 110n34–112n35.

⁶¹Tedlow, “National Association of Manufacturers and Public Relations during the New Deal,” 31.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 32.

⁶³Walker and Sklar, *Business Finds Its Voice*, 54–5.

⁶⁴Quoted in Richard W. Gable, “A Political Analysis of an Employers' Association: The National Association of Manufacturers,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1950), 369.

⁶⁵Meeting of the Advisory Committee, NAM Committee on Public Relations, Mar. 17, 1939, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 112 (Committee - Public Relations Advisory Committee - General, 1939), Hagley, 14.

⁶⁶For estimates of the campaign's reach at various points, see Report of the National Industrial Information Committee for the Year 1941, Hagley; Report on the 1945 NAM Public Relations Program (NIIC) and Preview for 1946, undated [1945], NAM Records (1411), Series 3, Box 846 (NIIC Subject- Public Relations- Aug. 1945–1946), Hagley; and NAM Salesletter, Jan. 17, 1949, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 110 (Public Relations Div. Programs, 1949–1948), Hagley. For an outside assessment of the NAM campaign's reach, see Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor—Hearings Pursuant to S. Res. 266, 74th-76th Congs., 1936-1940, Parts 17 and 18.

⁶⁷A Day in the Life of an Average American, undated [1939], NAM Records (1411), Series 3, Box 845, (NIIC Subject- Misc. NIIC Material - 1940), Hagley.

again in publications provided at work or at school, and heard it again in lectures in civic clubs and at the movies in the evening.⁶⁸ This daily deluge of conservative messaging mattered because, as psychologists have shown, the frequent repetition of messages shapes minds.⁶⁹

The public relations professionals running the NAM campaign also concluded from the Liberty League's direct messaging failures that shifting public opinion would take time and that conservatives needed to devote more energy to delivering messages indirectly through trusted "opinion molders," among whom the NAM counted women, religious leaders, and teachers.⁷⁰ These people had the power to deliver the conservative message to trusting audiences without arousing suspicion, and they also had special influence over what the NAM called the "on-coming generation."⁷¹ The NAM's efforts to woo different groups of opinion molders followed the same pattern: lavish them with attention, supply them with material, and groom them at conferences.⁷² For example, the NAM sent packages to the heads of women's clubs around the country containing everything needed to hold a successful meeting on topics of interest to conservatives: sample meeting invitations and announcement flyers, program outlines, talking points for the discussion leader and other speakers, and even a draft discussion summary to distribute after the meeting.⁷³ The importance of women and religious leaders to the conservative movement's subsequent development suggests the NAM invested wisely.⁷⁴

The NAM's efforts to shape young minds via teachers proved just as important to the conservative movement's long-term fortunes. The NAM sent thousands of lesson plans to teachers, complete with supporting print and visual materials as well as booklets teachers could assign as homework.⁷⁵ By 1939, Weisenburger reported, "We are getting more requests [for this material] than we can possibly fill," and by the early 1940s, "two of every three American high school students" read NAM booklets in school.⁷⁶ The NAM also worked to control the distribution of rival messages by commissioning a study of 800 popular school textbooks "so that its members might move against any that are found prejudicial to our form of government, our

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹For instance, see Hasher et al., "Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity" and Fazio et al., "Repetition Increases Perceived Truth Equally for Plausible and Implausible Statements."

⁷⁰Objectives, Strategy and Techniques of the NIIC Public Information Program, Mar. 23, 1943, NAM Records (1411), Series 3, Box 842, (NIIC Administrative - NIIC Program Committee Mtg. 3-23-43 - 1943), Hagley. See also Gable, "A Political Analysis of an Employers' Association," 323-4.

⁷¹Meeting of the Advisory Committee, NAM Committee on Public Relations, Mar. 17, 1939, NAM Records, Hagley.

⁷²Your Public Information Program in Action, Annual Report for 1942, National Industrial Information Committee, undated [1942], NAM Records (1411), Series 3, Box 842, (NIIC Administrative - Annual Reports - NIIC - 1942), Hagley.

⁷³Meeting of the Advisory Committee, NAM Committee on Public Relations, Mar. 17, 1939, NAM Records, Hagley, 15; and Gable, "A Political Analysis of an Employers' Association," 335.

⁷⁴On the importance of women to the conservative movement, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; June Melby Benowitz, *Days of Discontent: American Women and Right-Wing Politics, 1933-1945* (DeKalb, IL, 2002); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, 2005); Kirsten Delegard, *Battling Miss Bolshevik: The Origins of Female Conservatism in the United States* (Philadelphia, 2012); Michelle Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, 2012); and Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Mass Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York, 2018). On the importance of religious leaders, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2010); and Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

⁷⁵The NAM Story (Speech material covering NAM structure, activities, services, and the 1948 Public Relations Program), May 10, 1948, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 110 (Public Relations Div. Programs, 1949-1948), Hagley, 10. See also Gable, "A Political Analysis of an Employers' Association," 352.

⁷⁶Meeting of the Advisory Committee, NAM Committee on Public Relations, Mar. 17, 1939, NAM Records, Hagley, 6 and Your Public Information Program in Action, Annual Report for 1942, NAM Records, Hagley, 25.



Figure 2: *n*-gram chart for “government intervention” in American English, 1900–2019.

persuasion campaign. “One of the most encouraging things,” Weisenburger told the Public Relations Advisory Committee in 1939, “is the fact that more and more we are becoming recognized as conservative headquarters.”⁸⁷

Private Sector > Government

The people running the NAM campaign used its wide reach and indirect influence to tell Americans repeatedly that they could not count on the government to provide the economic security they wanted and that they should look to the private sector instead. Just as Franklin Roosevelt called attention to the government’s constructive role in communities through visits to stadiums, bridges, dams, and other pieces of federally funded infrastructure, so too did NAM member companies begin publicizing the role their operations played in sustaining communities around the country. But the NAM and its member companies also took this approach one step further by minimizing or omitting completely the government’s contributions. A General Motors (GM) campaign exemplified this approach. At open houses, in short films, and in newspaper advertisements, GM emphasized that its paychecks enabled local businesses to thrive.⁸⁸ The government did not feature. As the NAM campaign’s architects summarized the message: “private enterprise is the only source of jobs” and therefore the only source of “real security.”⁸⁹

The public relations specialists running the NAM campaign saw in World War II an opportunity to emphasize the private sector’s contributions to Americans’ wellbeing and to minimize the government’s contributions.⁹⁰ Massive government wartime spending paid for a dramatic increase in production and a return to full employment, but the NAM campaign did everything possible to ensure the government did not receive credit for the return of prosperity. And at this crucial moment, the Roosevelt administration dialed down the volume of its messaging in support of its domestic economic security agenda.⁹¹

⁸⁷Meeting of the Advisory Committee, NAM Committee on Public Relations, Mar. 17, 1939, NAM Records, Hagley, 4.

⁸⁸See Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 241–4.

⁸⁹Theme of 1939–1940 Program, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 112 (Committee - Public Relations - General, 1939), Hagley.

⁹⁰Untitled NAM-NIIC PR Campaign Plan, undated [1943], NAM Records (1411), Series 3, Box 843 (NIIC Subject- Advertising- 1943), Hagley, 43–7 of the PDF. For related efforts by conservative business leaders during the war to undermine public support for domestic programs, see Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 321–4.

⁹¹For instance, domestic policy hardly featured in Roosevelt’s 1942 State of the Union addresses. See Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Address,” Jan. 6, 1942, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210559>. See also John W. Jeffries, “The ‘New’ New Deal: FDR and American Liberalism, 1937–1945,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 410–5.

Along with the endless repetition of their messaging, conservatives succeeded in denying credit to the government because most Americans engaged in war production felt they were working for companies, not the government. As historian Mark Wilson has shown, this belief was an ironic consequence of the Roosevelt administration's decision to use the government-owned, contractor-operated (GOCO) model for the vast majority of wartime production.⁹² Under the GOCO model, the government paid for vast new plants like the million-square-foot bomber plant near Dallas, Texas, and leased many of them for \$1 a year to companies like North American Aviation to operate.⁹³ At its peak, 38,000 people worked at the North American Dallas bomber plant, and they received paychecks from North American—not the government.⁹⁴ Reliance on the GOCO model for so much wartime production allowed conservatives to foster the impression that business, not government, deserved credit for the increased economic security many Americans felt even though government contracts provided those jobs.⁹⁵

The public relations specialists running the NAM campaign also used World War II to cultivate the impression that the private sector was more competent than the “bungling” government and that the government's principal contribution to the war effort was miles of “red tape.”⁹⁶ Conservatives lionized the private sector's contributions to war production and omitted the crucial details that the government paid for and supervised the overwhelming majority of it.⁹⁷ An October 1943 *Service for Plant Publications* article circulated by the NAM emphasized the leadership of business executives, the “men who equip our fighting forces, men who meet payrolls, pay taxes, employ millions—the men upon whom Americans have always leaned for jobs, for wages, for a higher standard of living.”⁹⁸ A piece in the March 1944 issue of *Service for Plant Publications* argued similarly that “Production is Proof” that “We Run It”—in other words, business runs the country.⁹⁹ Using every element of its multichannel campaign, conservatives told Americans again and again that the private sector deserved credit for the “miracle of production” and the return of prosperity. By denying credit to the government for both, the NAM hammered home the message that the private sector was both more competent and better able than the government to provide the economic security Americans sought as they emerged from the Great Depression.¹⁰⁰

Using “Public Service Advertising” to Disparage Domestic Economic Security Programs

The Advertising Council, run by an influential set of conservative public relations experts and business executives, succeeded the National Association of Manufacturers as the most important player in the conservative persuasion campaign in the late 1940s. The Ad Council developed out of advertising executives' frustration with negative public perceptions of their

⁹²Wilson, *Destructive Creation*, 62–91.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁴On the number of employees at the North American Dallas bomber plant, see Department of the Navy, “Integrated Cultural Resource Management Plan: Naval Weapons Industrial Reserve Plant, Dallas, Dallas County, TX,” July 2002, 8–32.

⁹⁵The reliance on the GOCO model sheds further light on the paradox that Lisa McGirr explores in *Suburban Warriors*, with defense plant workers in Southern California playing a leading role in the conservative movement and adopting selectively anti-statist views even though the government was, in effect, paying their wages. On the consequences of policy design choices on public perceptions of the government, see Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago, 2011).

⁹⁶Wilson, *Destructive Creation*, 139–47.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 48–138, 274.

⁹⁸“Businessmen Look Ahead,” *Service for Plant Publications*, no. 88, Oct. 1943, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 112 (Public Relations - Service for Plant Publications, Jan. 1941–Oct. 1944), Hagley.

⁹⁹*Service for Plant Publications*, no. 93, Mar. 1944, NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 112, (Public Relations - Service for Plant Publications, Jan. 1941–Oct. 1944), Hagley.

¹⁰⁰Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* 128–9; and Wilson, *Destructive Creation*, 286.

profession in the 1930s and dissatisfaction with Franklin Roosevelt's success in expanding the government's domestic economic security responsibilities. At a joint meeting of the Association of National Advertisers and the American Association of Advertising Agencies in Hot Springs, Virginia, in November 1941, leading advertising executive James W. Young made the case to his colleagues that they needed to deploy the power of advertising on behalf of themselves and "free enterprise."¹⁰¹ The final lines of Young's speech called his colleagues to arms: "We have within our hands the greatest aggregate means of mass education and persuasion the world has ever seen—namely, the channels of advertising communication. We have the masters of the techniques of using these channels. We have power. Why do we not use it?"¹⁰² Young's address moved his colleagues to action, but before they could get their effort off the ground, Japanese attacks and a German declaration of war brought the United States fully into World War II.¹⁰³

Like the public relations specialists running the NAM campaign, the Ad Council's conservative leaders saw the war as a tremendous persuasion opportunity. Through what they called "public service advertising," advertisers and businesses would aid the war effort and generate public goodwill for themselves while also demonstrating business leadership on matters of national importance and subtly denigrating domestic programs. Although ostensibly a nonpartisan organization, in private the Ad Council's leaders made clear their conservative views and opposition to the Roosevelt and Truman administrations' domestic economic security policies.¹⁰⁴ Like the NAM, the organization was, as Ad Council Director and General Foods executive Charles Mortimer, Jr. put it, "a creature of business."¹⁰⁵ The Ad Council's decision to continue operating after the war reflected its leaders' belief that the organization could play an important role in the coming "ideological battle."¹⁰⁶ At least some Ad Council staffers clearly agreed. When they came across a pamphlet from an organization called The People's Lobby advocating further expansion of the government's domestic economic security responsibilities, they marked up the pamphlet in pink pencil—noting the deliberate use of that color to reflect what they perceived as the pamphlet's socialist tinge—and filed the pamphlet in their Future Plans folder.¹⁰⁷

But the Ad Council's conservative leaders understood that the organization's ability to influence public opinion depended on maintaining a solid veneer of nonpartisanship.¹⁰⁸ The Ad Council's success maintaining that nonpartisan veneer enabled the organization to sell its work as "public service advertising," making the organization even more valuable to the conservative movement than the continuing NAM campaign. In "public service advertising," the

¹⁰¹James Webb Young speech, November 14, 1941, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/282, Box 1 (James Webb Young (Speeches)), UIA. On the meeting, see also Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *Journal of American History* 77, No. 4 (Mar. 1991): 1307–9.

¹⁰²Ibid. On Young's speech, see also Griffith, "Selling of America," 390. For insight into Young's political views, see James Webb Young, *The Diary of an Ad Man: The War Years June 1, 1942–December 31, 1943* (Chicago, 1944).

¹⁰³"The Background and Beginning of the Ad Council," 1952, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/207, Box 10, File 647a, UIA, 11-6; Griffith, "Selling of America," 390; and Leff, "Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," 1309.

¹⁰⁴For instance, see the revealing exchange of letters between Ad Council Chairman James W. Young and influential conservative J. Howard Pew in 1945 and between Young and prominent conservative and advertising executive Bruce Barton in 1946. Young to Pew, Oct. 25, 1945, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/305, Box 3 (Council Future Plans - 1945) (2), UIA and Barton to Young, September 19, 1946, Brophy Papers, Box 1 (Correspondence, 1946-), Wisconsin Historical Society [hereafter WHS], Madison, WI.

¹⁰⁵Mortimer to Repplier, Nov. 26, 1954, Brophy Papers, Box 2 (Advertising Council- Correspondence, 1954–1956), WHS.

¹⁰⁶Ad Council Board Minutes, May 11, 1945, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/201, Box 1, (War Advertising Council Minutes, May–June 1945), UIA.

¹⁰⁷Which Way Will America Choose, undated [1945], Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/305, Box 3, (Council Future Plans - 1945), UIA.

¹⁰⁸Wall, *Inventing the "American Way,"* 176.

Ad Council developed a subtler and more effective means of indirect persuasion than what the NAM achieved working through “opinion molders.” The nonpartisan image also enabled the Ad Council to obtain vast amounts of free advertising content and space from media and advertising companies, giving the organization even greater reach than what the NAM, quite impressively, had managed.¹⁰⁹ Messages delivered by the Ad Council made billions of reader, viewer, and listener “impressions” each year.¹¹⁰ As a repetition tool, the Ad Council had no match.

In the period after World War II when the government’s domestic responsibilities remained undetermined, the Ad Council helped to foster a selective anti-statism by encouraging Americans to support spending for “national security,” defined narrowly to include only foreign policy and physical security, and to oppose spending for domestic economic security programs increasingly saddled with the “welfare” label.¹¹¹ Truman understood and deplored what conservatives were trying to do. He noted in January 1947: “There are certain programs of Government which have come to be looked upon as ‘welfare programs’ in a narrow sense. This has placed them in an insulated compartment,” where, Truman understood, they would likely receive less public support.¹¹² The cold war’s onset a few months later all but guaranteed substantial investments in military and foreign policy capacity.¹¹³ The question at the time was: would the country also expand its domestic policy capacity substantially? The conservative persuasion campaign helped ensure the answer would be no. “[T]he essence of the advertising method,” Ad Council Director Charles Mortimer, Jr. reminded his fellow Ad Council board members, “is repetition—of saying basic facts over and over until, like postage stamps, they stick to one thing until they get there.”¹¹⁴ In the years after World War II, the “basic facts” the Ad Council repeated over and over sowed doubt about the government’s domestic policy competence and testified to the private sector’s superiority.

Ironically, former President Herbert Hoover rose from the political grave to supply the Ad Council with ammunition for its subtle but powerful selectively anti-statist campaign. Beginning in late 1947, Hoover chaired the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, which the Republican-controlled 80th Congress created to provide the template for shrinking the government ahead of an anticipated Republican victory in the 1948 presidential election.¹¹⁵ Even before Harry Truman’s surprise victory denied conservatives the opportunity to enact the commission’s recommendations directly, Hoover saw the need to sell the public on the commission’s recommendations. A Hoover Commission memo from January 1948 underscored the importance of making “people see the entire meaning of the whole report in terms they can understand,” such as “The hope for freedom and lasting good government,” “Removal of the fear of bureaucratic control,”

¹⁰⁹See “Advertising in a Mobilized Economy,” Address by Thomas D’Arcy Brophy, Apr. 6, 1951, Brophy Papers, Box 25 (Speeches, 1950–1953), WHS, 7.

¹¹⁰For one year’s count, see Ad Council Annual Report, 8th, “How Business Helps Solve Public Problems,” 1949–1950, Advertising Council Archives, UIA.

¹¹¹Griffith, “The Selling of America,” 388. On the emergence of separate “national security” and “welfare” states, see Peter Roady, *The Fight for National Security: Franklin Roosevelt, Conservatives, and the Origins of the Most Powerful Term in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA, forthcoming 2024).

¹¹²Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress: The President’s First Economic Report,” Jan. 8, 1947, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/232721>.

¹¹³On periodizing the cold war, see Anders Stephanson, “Cold War Degree Zero,” in *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, eds. Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (New York, 2012), 19–50.

¹¹⁴Mortimer to Board of Directors, October 30, 1947, Brophy Papers, Box 1 (Correspondence, 1947), WHS.

¹¹⁵Joanna Grisinger, *The Unwieldy American State: Administrative Politics since the New Deal* (New York, 2012), 153–4; Interview with Don K. Price, July 20, 1970, Herbert Hoover Oral History Program Interviews (XX028), Box 19, (Price, Don K.), Hoover Institution Archives, 27–30 [hereafter HIA], Stanford, CA.

and “Inviting them to fight waste, duplication, and the cancerous growth of bureaucracy.”¹¹⁶ Truman’s victory only made the task more urgent.

Hoover sought a public relations expert to help build public support for his commission’s recommendations. On the advice of a friend, he selected Charles Coates, an assistant director of public relations at General Foods, the company that had supplied so many of the conservative persuasion campaign’s architects.¹¹⁷ Coates and the other conservative public relations experts advising the Hoover Commission devised a simple and devastating strategy for publicizing the commission’s findings. They decided to highlight amusing examples of government folly in the domestic policy realm unearthed by the commission to persuade the public that such ineptitude was endemic and that the “bungling bureaucrats” working on domestic policy did not deserve high levels of either tax dollars or public trust.

Conservatives did not want the Hoover Commission to share the fate of so many other blue-ribbon panels that faded into obscurity soon after completing their work. To keep pressure on the White House and Congress and to keep the Commission’s findings at the top of the public’s mind ahead of the 1950 midterms and the 1952 presidential election, in March 1949 a group of conservatives launched and generously financed the Citizens Committee for Reorganization of the Executive Branch of the Government.¹¹⁸ The Citizens Committee nurtured public skepticism about domestic programs by fostering the impression of government incompetence in the domestic sphere. In a fundraising letter to the heads of top companies, Citizens Committee Campaign Chairman—and former Liberty Leaguer and NAM President—Colby Chester made clear the bottom-line benefits businesses would reap from the campaign: “The long-range value of an educated, tax-conscious, civically-alert public cannot be estimated in dollars and cents.”¹¹⁹

Charles Coates moved over from the Hoover Commission staff to lead the Citizens Committee’s public relations effort, which drew on and expanded the persuasion playbook developed by public relations professionals for the NAM. It was a big operation. A speaker’s bureau supplied speakers for appearances around the country and equipped them with “startling facts”—most drawn from domestic programs—that underscored “the absurdities of poor [government] management.”¹²⁰ Advertising across all media, a touring exhibition, and a series of conferences reinforced this derisive way of talking about government.¹²¹

The Citizens Committee also continued the conservative movement’s efforts to shape young minds, sending materials to schools and universities and setting up student committees on campuses.¹²² In addition to material for instructors to use in the classroom, the Citizens Committee offered a movie that provided “A colorful & dramatic picture of the work of the Hoover Commission.... The camera takes you to Washington for an intimate sightseeing

¹¹⁶Confidential review of Commission’s public position, Jan. 24, 1948, First Hoover Commission Records (XX312), Box 14 (Progress Report), HIA, 2.

¹¹⁷Interview with Clarence Francis, October 3, 1968, Herbert Hoover Oral History Program Interviews (XX028), Box 8 (Francis, Clarence), HIA, 10–1.

¹¹⁸Press Release [on creation of the Citizens Committee for Reorganization of the Executive Branch of the Government (CCREBG)], Apr. 10, 1949, First Hoover Commission Records (XX312), Box 15 (First Commission- Press Releases), HIA. For background on the Citizens Committee, see Johnson to Brophy, Mar. 23, 1949, Brophy Papers, Box 35 (Hoover Report, 1949–1950), WHS. On the Committee’s finances, see Chester to Presidents of Top Companies, Oct. 6, 1949, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (3), HIA; Johnson to Hardware Companies, Oct. 18, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (3), HIA; and Colby Chester to Non-Contributing Companies, October 23, 1951, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (1), HIA.

¹¹⁹Chester to Presidents of Top Companies, Oct. 6, 1949, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (3), HIA.

¹²⁰See *Speakers Handbook*, undated, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (7), HIA; *Revised Speakers Handbook*, undated, CCREBG Records, Box 3 (6), HIA, 14–6; and *Notecard Waste Examples*, undated, CCREBG Records, Box 10 (1), HIA.

¹²¹Collection Description, CCREBG Records (52007), HIA.

¹²²For a synopsis of the Citizens Committee’s efforts aimed at students, see Coates to Board of Directors, Apr. 10, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (10), HIA.

tour of the sprawling government departments, bureaus, and agencies.... It takes you inside for a view of the people at work.... It reveals the obsolete equipment, the vast tangle of red tape ... the overlapping and duplication.”¹²³ Material of this sort not only sowed doubt about the government’s competence, it also reinforced wartime conservative messaging about the private sector’s superiority. Like the NAM’s earlier emphasis on students, the Citizens Committee’s student work proved a shrewd investment in the conservative movement’s future.

The Citizens Committee also continued the pattern of cultivating women, including by giving women prominent speaking roles at the National Reorganization Conference in December 1949. Oveta Culp Hobby, an influential conservative, set the tone for the conference in her opening speech.¹²⁴ The government, she said, had become “unwieldy and clumsy. Being so, it has become irksome and of decreasing service and satisfaction to the people.”¹²⁵ A subsequent speech, delivered by a person identifying herself as Mrs. Wesley C. Ahlgren, cleverly cast doubt on the government’s competence. Ahlgren called her address “The Housewife’s Point of View” and argued that the responsibilities of the housewife and the government were broadly similar but that the way the government went about the job left much to be desired. Ahlgren said she was “flabbergasted” to learn from the Hoover Report how incompetently the government did its job. She then provided some folksy examples.¹²⁶ “When you go marketing, you first look to see what is in the cupboard, and make your marketing list accordingly. Not so Uncle Sam. The Hoover Commission estimated that government supplies to a value of probably 29 billion dollars are stored in various offices and warehouses, with no complete inventory of them anywhere.”¹²⁷ She concluded that she “could continue indefinitely with examples of confusion, overlapping, and waste in our Federal Government that would produce some mighty unpleasant conversations around the dinner table if they had been duplicated, on a smaller scale, in our own homes.”¹²⁸

The Citizens Committee launched two large advertising campaigns to spread this selective message of government incompetence far and wide. The first campaign, the National Reorganization Crusade, began in 1950 and included robust print and radio components.¹²⁹ The Citizens Committee followed a simple formula in this campaign: emphasize the Hoover Commission’s bipartisan credentials and then sow doubt about the government’s competence by providing amusing examples—almost always from the domestic policy realm—of government “waste,” “red tape,” and “inefficiency.” One newspaper ad showed a puzzled farmer who received five different responses from five different agencies to a query he sent the government. Another provided a longer list of similar examples of government incompetence.¹³⁰ Radio programming highlighted examples of government “waste” and “inefficiency” in vivid terms. “Automobiles are clogging our streets, but Uncle Sam is still using horse-and-buggy methods,” said one ad.¹³¹ “Twenty four administrators and supervisors for 25 workers,”

¹²³Mailing to various college librarians, Apr. 25, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (10), HIA.

¹²⁴For biographical information on Hobby, see James Barron, “Oveta Culp Hobby, Founder of the WACs and First Secretary of Health, Dies at 90,” *New York Times*, Aug. 17, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/08/17/obituaries/oveta-culp-hobby-founder-of-the-wacs-and-first-secretary-of-health-dies-at-90.html>.

¹²⁵Text of Speeches Delivered at the National Reorganization Conference, Volume 1, Dec. 12-13, 1949, CCREBG Records, Box 9 (5), HIA, 6.

¹²⁶Ibid., 32.

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹On the National Reorganization Crusade, see Ade to State Chairmen and Executive Secretaries, Feb. 21, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11, (4), HIA and National Reorganization Crusade, Apr. 14, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (4), HIA.

¹³⁰See the attachments to Johnson to Presidents of Top Companies, Apr. 21, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (4), HIA.

¹³¹Ferris to State Chairmen, Executive Secretaries and County Chairmen, Apr. 4, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (12), HIA.

declared another.¹³² The radio content also continued the long-running conservative effort to increase “tax consciousness.”¹³³ “I know a business that’s losing over 8 million dollars a day. It’s your business ... [the] Federal Government ... your money being lost!”¹³⁴ Another radio spot reported that “If you are an average citizen, you work 47 days a year to support this good old Pandemonium on the Potomac known as your Federal Government.”¹³⁵

In 1951, the Citizens Committee persuaded the Ad Council to coordinate an even larger advertising campaign on behalf of the Hoover Report. Howard Chapin of General Foods coordinated the campaign. Leading advertising agency J. Walter Thompson prepared the ads.¹³⁶ Like the 1950 National Reorganization Crusade, the Ad Council campaign dramatized the Hoover Report’s vivid accounting of government “waste” and “inefficiency” to sow doubts about domestic programs. A series of ads depicted Americans talking about government “boon-doggles.” One trucker asks another, “Isn’t that the load of government lumber I hauled down from Alaska a week ago?” “Yeah,” the other trucker replies, “I just got orders to haul it back again!”¹³⁷ In another ad, a woman and a man stand outside a new building. The man asks, “Isn’t that new government hospital open yet?” The woman replies, “NO. They never even bothered to find out whether they could get enough doctors to staff it!”¹³⁸

Other ads nudged Americans toward a form of selective anti-statism by encouraging them to support spending for “national security” but to oppose spending for “welfare.” These ads accepted higher taxes to pay for physical security but provided vivid examples of why citizens should not want to pay for “wasteful,” “bungling” domestic programs. “Defense costs mean higher taxes—no one can help that. But no one wants to pay higher taxes for waste and inefficiency.”¹³⁹ The headline at the top of one ad declared, “Poor service at prohibitive cost is typical of many government agencies.”¹⁴⁰ Another ad compared public insurance programs unfavorably to private ones. Two men watch a woman walk down the street with her two children. The first man says to the other, “We ought to get together and do something for Mrs. Green!” The second man replies, “That’s right! Bill died almost 3 months ago and his G.I. insurance hasn’t come through yet.”¹⁴¹ The ad noted that “private insurance companies settle most death claims within 15 days.”¹⁴²

President Truman understood what conservatives were doing, found it infuriating, and tried to push back. Conservatives, Truman told the National Civil Service League in a feisty speech on May 2, 1952:

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³On earlier conservative efforts to cultivate “tax consciousness,” see Theme of 1939–1940 Program, NAM Records, Hagley, 9 and Selling America to Americans, undated [1939], NAM Records (1411), Series 1, Box 110 (Speakers Bureau - Speeches - Our Stake in National Defense), Hagley, 12. See also Huret, *American Tax Resisters*, 154, 161.

¹³⁴Ferris to State Chairmen, Executive Secretaries and County Chairmen, Apr. 4, 1950, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (12), HIA.

¹³⁵Ferris to Members of the National Speakers Bureau, Sept. 28, 1949, CCREBG Records, Box 11 (12), HIA.

¹³⁶On the roles of Chapin and J. Walter Thompson in the Ad Council campaign on behalf of the Hoover Report, see <https://archives.library.illinois.edu/uasfa/1302310.pdf>. See also Coates to Chapin, Feb. 29, 1952, CCREBG Records, Box 16 (C (4)), HIA.

¹³⁷Government Reorganization - Hoover Report, 1950, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/207, Box 8, File 530, UIA.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Government Reorganization - Hoover Report, 1951, Advertising Council Archives, 13/2/207, Box 9, File 585, UIA.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Ibid.

Know that they cannot persuade the people to give up the gains of the last 20 years. But they think they can undermine those gains by attacking the men and women who have the job of carrying out the programs of the Government. And so they have launched a campaign to make people think that the Government service as a whole is lazy, inefficient, corrupt, and even disloyal.¹⁴³

Truman thundered that “there is no more cancerous, no more corrosive, no more subversive attack upon the great task of our Government today, than that which seeks to undermine confidence in Government.”¹⁴⁴ Truman was not just pandering to his audience. His superheated rhetoric reflected anger at conservatives’ success in undermining public support for his efforts to address lingering socioeconomic problems through domestic policy.¹⁴⁵

Conservatives had attacked domestic programs as wasteful and inefficient since the 1920s, but the public could dismiss these critiques as self-interested or partisan when they came directly from organizations known to be run by wealthy business executives. The National Association of Manufacturers’ use of indirect persuasion via “opinion molders” helped make these criticisms stick. So did the Ad Council’s delivery of conservative messaging through “non-partisan public service advertising.” By making a sport out of highlighting examples of domestic policy ineptitude and fostering the impression that such ineptitude was widespread, the Ad Council’s “public service advertising” cemented a derisive way of talking about domestic programs that contributed to the growth of a strand of selective anti-statism that embraced “national security” spending but resisted “welfare” spending. Even before the onset of the cold war in March 1947 re-opened the taps of military spending, Truman’s budget requests began to reflect this selective anti-statism. When he presented his 1948 budget request to the Republican-controlled Congress in January 1947, Truman asked for nearly ten times more money for the military and international initiatives than for domestic programs to address domestic problems—a disparity that persisted through the end of Truman’s presidency.¹⁴⁶

Consequences

As a prominent citizen in the 1950s and a politician beginning in the 1960s, Ronald Reagan embodied the strand of selective anti-statism that opposed domestic economic security programs but supported “national security” spending. Testifying before the House Ways and Means Committee in 1958, Reagan emphasized his support—and the motion picture industry’s support—for defense spending but pressed for “an across-the-board percentage cut” in the government’s other programs.¹⁴⁷ In his role as a General Electric spokesperson in the 1950s and then as a professional politician beginning in the 1960s, Reagan followed the approach honed by the conservative persuasion campaign since the 1920s, peppering his speeches with “staring facts” belittling domestic programs to build support for this selective anti-statism.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³Harry S. Truman, “Address at the 70th Anniversary Meeting of the National Civil Service League,” May 2, 1952, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/230618>.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵On Truman’s failure to expand the government’s domestic responsibilities, see Richard E. Neustadt, “Congress and the Fair Deal: A Legislative Balance Sheet,” in *Harry S. Truman and the Fair Deal*, ed. Alonzo L. Hamby (Lexington, KY, 1974), 15–41.

¹⁴⁶See Harry S. Truman, “Annual Budget Message to the Congress: Fiscal Year 1948,” Jan. 10, 1947, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-budget-message-the-congress-fiscal-year-1948> and Harry S. Truman, “Statement by the President Reviewing the 1953 Budget,” Aug. 19, 1952, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-reviewing-the-1953-budget>.

¹⁴⁷Ronald Reagan, “House Ways and Means Committee,” Jan. 27, 1958, in *Actor, Ideologue, Politician: The Public Speeches of Ronald Reagan*, eds. Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe (Westport, CT, 1993), 17.

¹⁴⁸See, for example, Ronald Reagan, “Business, Ballots, and Bureaus,” May 1959, in *Actor, Ideologue, Politician*, eds. Houck and Kiewe, 18–27; and Ronald Reagan, “Encroaching Control: Keep Government Poor and Remain

The 1964 speech “A Time for Choosing” that launched Reagan’s national political career epitomized the approach.¹⁴⁹ In the speech, Reagan wove together amusing examples of domestic policy incompetence—a three-year-old, \$1.5 million building in Cleveland demolished by government planners! Youth training programs that cost more per year than Harvard tuition!—into a coherent narrative supporting his assertion that “government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector.”¹⁵⁰ “There’s been an increase in the [number of] Department of Agriculture employees,” Reagan told the audience. “There’s now one for every 30 farms in the United States, and still they can’t tell us how 66 shiploads of grain headed for Austria disappeared without a trace.”¹⁵¹ The conservative audience laughed.¹⁵²

By the time the upheavals of the 1970s might have led even Americans who did not identify as conservative to doubt the government’s domestic policy competence, the conservative persuasion campaign had spent decades and millions of dollars using repeated messaging to prime Americans to see domestic programs in a negative light.¹⁵³ To the many Americans who had received this conservative message unwittingly for years and who were looking for an explanation for the country’s recent troubles, the domestic policy incompetence message rang true—and not just among conservatives and Republicans. Three years before Ronald Reagan told Americans in his first inaugural address that “government is the problem,” President Jimmy Carter declared flatly in his 1978 State of the Union address that “Government cannot solve our problems.”¹⁵⁴ Bill Clinton’s presidency continued the Democratic Party’s turn away from using domestic policy to address domestic problems.¹⁵⁵ By 2021, even many self-identified liberals and progressives considered the government less competent than the private sector.¹⁵⁶ Low regard for domestic policy and the strand of selective anti-statism to which this sentiment contributed had crossed party lines and become defining features of American politics.

The conservative persuasion campaign’s reach, indirect influence, and repetition of messages disparaging domestic programs contributed much to its success. But the campaign also benefited from two features of the American political system that have often left domestic programs with few defenders. Americans generally have a low level of knowledge of what the government

Free,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 27, no. 22 (Sept. 1, 1961): 677–81. On Reagan’s time at General Electric, early political career, and use of this rhetoric, see Earl B. Duncel, interview by Gabrielle Morris, Apr. 27, 1982, transcript, Government History Documentation Project: Ronald Reagan Gubernatorial Era, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA; Houck and Kiewe, eds., *Actor, Ideologue, Politician*; Thomas W. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* (New York, 2006); Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 111–4, 147–8; and Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 121–4, 498–504.

¹⁴⁹See Glickman, *Free Enterprise*, 234–5.

¹⁵⁰Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” Oct. 27, 1964, Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA, <https://www.reagan-library.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

¹⁵²For the audience’s reaction, see the video recording of the speech: https://youtu.be/_VBtCMTpVeA.

¹⁵³On the crises of the 1970s and their effect on public perceptions of government, see Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York, 2019), ch. 1.

¹⁵⁴Ronald Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” Jan. 20, 1981, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246336> and Jimmy Carter, “The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” Jan. 19, 1978, APP, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245063>. See also Glickman, “The Liberal Who Told Reagan’s Favorite Joke.” Glickman notes that it was also in the mid-1970s that prominent Democrat Edmund Muskie’s “I’m from the government and I’m here to help” joke took off across party lines.

¹⁵⁵Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*, 264; Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, x; and Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York, 2018), 696–700.

¹⁵⁶Lydia Saad, “Trust in Federal Government’s Competence Remains Low,” Gallup Poll Social Series, Sept. 29, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321119/trust-federal-government-competence-remains-low.aspx>. Edelman, a public relations firm, reported that as of 2020, business held “a massive 54-point edge over government as an institution that is good at what it does (64 percent vs. 10 percent).” See “2020 Edelman Trust Barometer,” Edelman, Jan. 19, 2020, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2020-trust-barometer>.

does and are often oblivious, sometimes by design, to the ways in which they benefit from domestic programs.¹⁵⁷ And Americans' elected representatives in Congress have an interest in the public perceiving the government as incompetent domestically because that perception enables elected officials to present themselves as essential troubleshooters for constituents.¹⁵⁸ These two features of the American political system left the field open for those who wanted the public to hold domestic policy in low regard to spread their message largely unopposed.

Viewed as a whole, the conservative persuasion campaign launched in the 1920s must be taken seriously by anyone who wants to understand American political development thereafter. And so, more broadly, must any big efforts to shape public opinion that achieved similarly high levels of reach and repetition.¹⁵⁹ The champions of limited government lacked a widely shared rhetoric with which to diminish public support for domestic state building prior to this campaign. With the introduction of rhetoric belittling domestic programs, the conservative persuasion campaign supplied that shared rhetoric, helping conservatives coalesce into an effective movement and then—through the campaign's reach, indirect influence via “opinion molders” and “public service advertising,” and use of repetition—helping the conservative movement grow and priming many Americans to embrace a strand of selective anti-statism that became a defining feature of post-World War II American politics.

Under this selective anti-statism, many Americans supported the creation of robust state capacity in the military and foreign policy realms but resisted comparable efforts to build the government's capacity to address domestic problems through domestic policy. Ironic consequences followed. While conservatives succeeded in slowing and constraining domestic state-building—it took more than twenty years for liberals to build on the foundation Roosevelt laid, and even the Great Society programs of the 1960s were more limited than they might have been—the imbalanced state that emerged still proved far larger than the conservative persuasion campaign's original architects envisioned.¹⁶⁰ The reduction in public confidence in domestic policy long sought by conservatives also proved costly. Without public support to create sufficient capacity to address domestic problems with domestic policy, politicians at times turned to the military and foreign policy to try to solve domestic problems—at great cost to the United States and the world.

Peter Roady teaches history at the University of Utah. His first book, *The Fight for National Security: Franklin Roosevelt, Conservatives, and the Origins of the Most Powerful Term in American Politics*, will be published by Harvard in 2024. For helpful feedback and support, the author thanks Darren Dochuk, Sarah Snyder, Kim Phillips-Fein, Mark Wilson, Richard John, Micah McElroy, Alice Friend, Salem Elzway, Celia Roady, and Steve Roady; archivists at Hagley, Hoover, Illinois, and Wisconsin; and the anonymous reviewers for *Modern American History*. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

¹⁵⁷On this point, see Mettler, *Submerged State*.

¹⁵⁸See David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, 2004); and Dean Yarwood, “Stop Bashing the Bureaucracy,” *Public Administration Review* 56, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1996): 611–3.

¹⁵⁹Jill Lepore provides a useful example of the value of paying greater attention to big efforts to shape public opinion by centering some such efforts in *These Truths*.

¹⁶⁰Among the vast literature on the Great Society, a useful starting point is Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 2007), 198–249. Schulman emphasizes how decades of conservative attacks on domestic programs influenced the Great Society's design.