

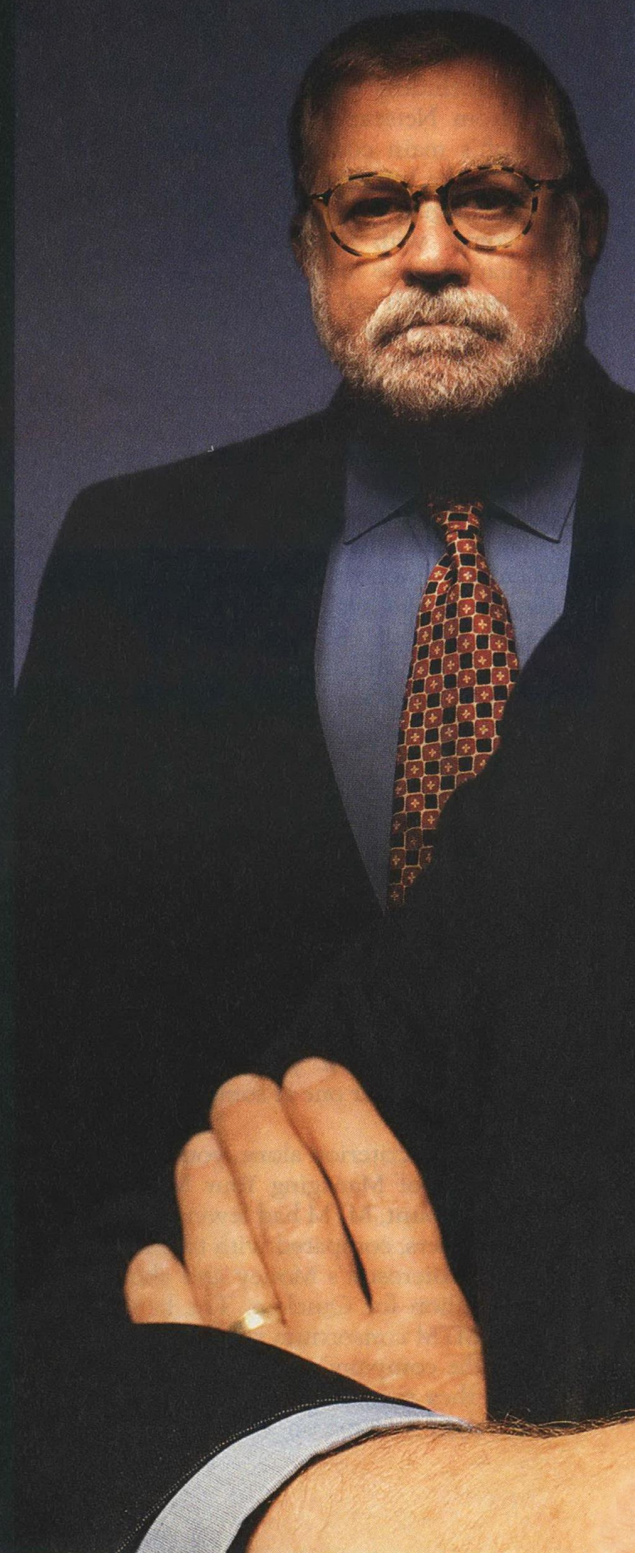
# the AGE OF SPIN

**Perception has at last won its war over reality. Meet the men who invent the truth as we know it.**

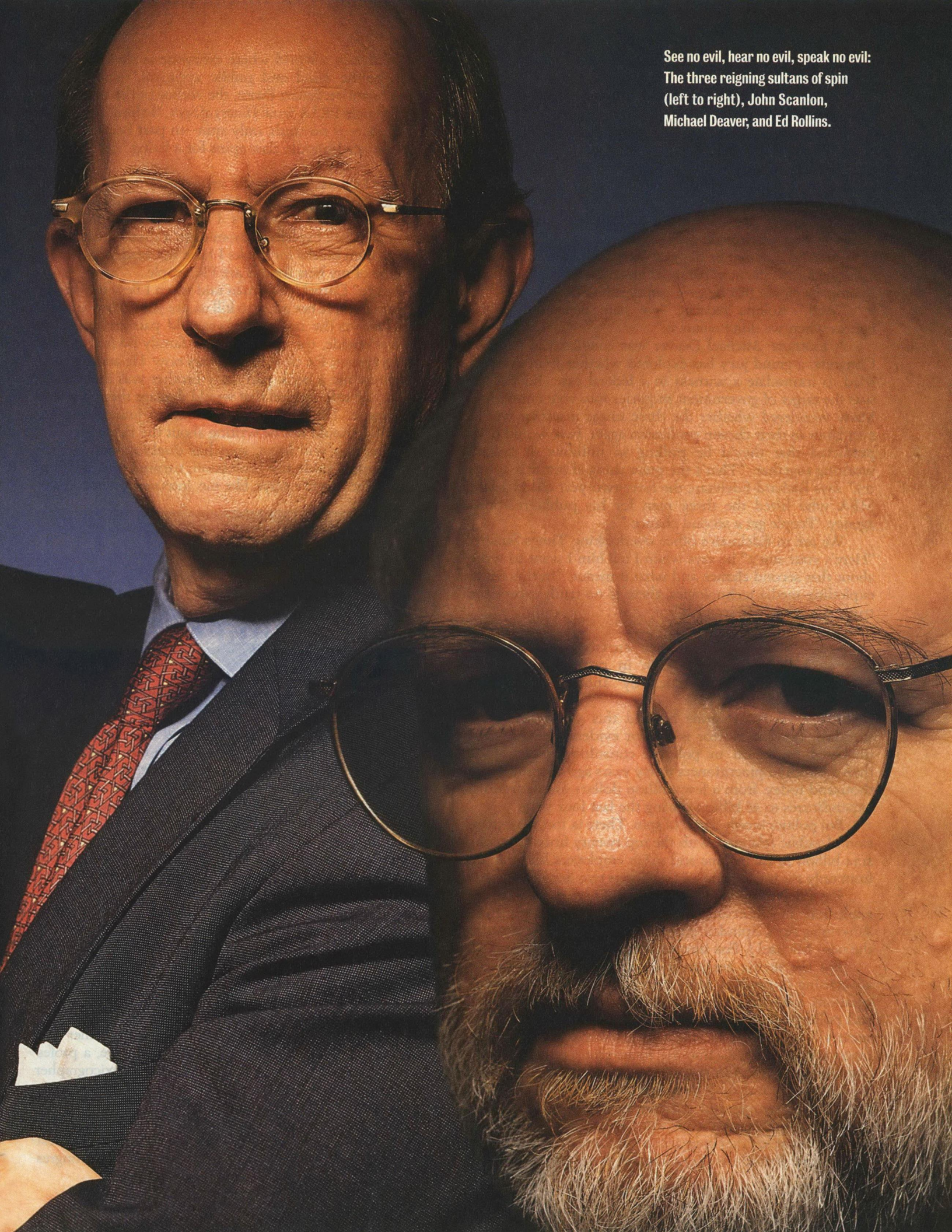
**By Randall Rothenberg**

**F**RESH FROM PRODUCING A REPUBLICAN convention that was a model of racial inclusiveness and gender neutrality, Michael K. Deaver is on the auditorium stage at the New-York Historical Society, explaining his craft. “The media don’t want to talk about substance,” says the former White House deputy chief of staff, whose earlier extravaganzas included the celebration marking the fortieth anniversary of D-day and Ronald Reagan’s “Morning in America” reelection campaign. “Our job,” he says of people who fashion and fix images for a living, “if we’re to compete with fifty-seven channels, is to design an hour of prime-time television.”

“Here’s the story,” says John Scanlon, who has taken a break from the crisis-communications seminar he is running at the Hershey Foods Corporation. “Twenty-five years ago, the PR guy was a press agent who was responsible mostly for getting the out-of-town buyers laid. The world is dramatically changed. It’s driven by the media explosion, shareholder democracy, the way the world works. Not to communicate, you put yourself at risk.”



See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil:  
The three reigning sultans of spin  
(left to right), John Scanlon,  
Michael Deaver, and Ed Rollins.



I walk up to Edward Rollins, a veteran political consultant, and ask how he is.

"Better than Dick Morris and Roger Stone this morning," he says.

This week, less than a month after Morris was forced to resign from the Clinton campaign for sucking the toes of a prostitute, several tabloids are reporting that Stone, a Republican operative, has been using the Internet to advertise his own sexual adventurism.

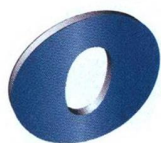
"You know," says Rollins, "guys in my business feel terrible when we become public figures."

I remind him that he has just written a book in which he calls one former client a "paranoid lunatic" and another "such a complete cipher that he gave empty suits a bad name."

"Well," Rollins redacts, "we hate becoming public figures when we don't control it."

A footnote: Michael Deaver was convicted of lying to Congress; a grand jury has explored whether John Scanlon tried to intimidate a witness in a federal case; Ed Rollins was the target of government inquiries into vote tampering. Many wondered whether the three image maestros would ever labor in their chosen profession again. Few would have predicted that they'd be pulling in millions of dollars working together. "That's the great thing about this country," says Richard Edelman, the forty-two-year-old Harvard MBA who hired the three men for his public-relations agency. "People get a second chance."

We are in Edelman's office overlooking Times Square. "Here's your story," he says when I tell him I want to write about that second chance and what it means. "In this era of exploding media technologies, there is no truth except the truth you create for yourself."



ONCE, IT WAS CALLED FICTION, DISSEMBLING, fudging, lying. Now, in professional circles, created truth goes by another name. It's known as "spin."

For reasons beyond this year's headlined scandals, the spin doctor is in. For evidence, there is the unabated escalation in political consulting, from fewer than a hundred practitioners thirty years ago to some seven thousand today, from a few million dollars in quadrennial expenditures to \$8 billion during the last four years.

But politics is only a part of spin. There is, too, the expansion of public relations, with the top twenty firms reporting \$1.14 billion in fee income and 10,661 employees last year, up from only \$64 million and 2,654 workers two decades before.

But PR is simply a piece of spin. There is, as well, the explosion in observation, newsy and novelized, from *Advertising Age's* Spindex and Slate webzine's *The Spin* to the new Michael J. Fox hitcom, *Spin City*.

But the media are just a component of spin. So are advertising (a product unto itself), hype (sponsored exaggeration), lobbying (the persuasion of government officials), and polling (the analytical foundation of the spininformation society). So are direct mailing, grassroots campaigning, investor relating, media training, focus-group managing, jury consulting, opposition researching, issue managing, satellite uplinking, and speechwriting. Together with television and radio networks and stations, newspapers, magazines, and wire services, they constitute a veritable Media-Spin-industrial Complex that appears to guide every image we receive, every decision we contemplate, every action we take.

"We live in a world where everyone is always battling for the public mind and public approval," says Hunter College historian Stuart Ewen, the author of the magisterial new chronicle *P.R.: A Social History of Spin*. "I think the public believes there is no truth, only spin—in part because much of the educated middle class spins for a living."

BLESS ME, FATHER, FOR I HAVE SPINNED.

In the past two years, I have written speeches for CEOs and advertorials for senior VPs. I helped a (successful) U. S. Senate candidate explain economics to a disaffected public. I have written blurbs for books I have not read.

Some of my best friends are PR people.

"Randy," Daniel J. Edelman said when I flew to Chicago to see him, "you're not going to kill us, are you?" How could I? I have known the seventy-six-year-old patriarch of Edelman Worldwide, the earth's largest family-owned public-relations agency, for close to ten years now. He and his wife, Ruth, threw me a book party. My brother was their client. Even if I had information that would damage them, I would not reveal it. Under the conventions of journalistic engagement, I should not be writing about the Edelmans.

But as you will learn, spin has disabled many of the traditions that guide my profession, turning once-free observers of the world's ways, like me, into needy dependents.

**In the 1950s, spin still  
1972 it had passed from  
for polishing the truth.  
not simply to augment**

How and why this has happened is well represented by the forty-four-year evolution of Edelman, from Dan's putative invention of the national press tour to the assembly under one roof by his son Richard of three of the world's most accomplished spinners. The Edelmans' story says reams not only about the evolution of public relations and the media but about an America untethered from substance and now wholly predicated upon image. "We all simply float in a media ether," says Neal Gabler, a historian of celebrity culture. "It is the end of modern epistemology: There is nothing but spin."

In the 1950s, *spin*, as a verb, was used synonymously with *deceive*. By the time it made an appearance in politics—in 1972, managers of John V. Lindsay's short-lived presidential campaign were already talking of "spinning" reporters—it had passed from negative to neutral, becoming shorthand for polishing the truth.

Central to this semantic shift is the understanding that spin cannot be a demonstrable lie. "It's what a pitcher does when he throws a curveball," says William Safire, a professional spinner before he became a pundit and lexicographer. "The English on the ball causes it to appear to be going in a slightly different direction than it actually is."

Safire traces modern spin back thirty years, to when Richard Nixon was preparing his second run for the presidency. Touring the country on behalf of Republican congress-

sional candidates, Nixon found himself derided by Democrats as the “new Nixon”—the opposition’s way of signaling his deceptiveness. Nixon, ever mindful of the charge that he lacked core values, objected. One day, Safire took him aside. “Why not leapfrog everybody, admit there is a ‘new Nixon,’ and join it?” the PR man said. Nixon took his advice and, when asked, began conceding that he had changed, along with the nation, thus disarming the opposition’s weapon.

“That,” recalls Safire, “was spin. It was taking the momentum of a question and turning it around jujitsu style.”

But in the three decades since the reinvention of Richard Nixon, spin has grown more sophisticated. Once spinners saw that they could deflect or augment existing truths, they went one step further and began inventing their own.

They had the news media on their side. In his 1961 classic, *The Image*, historian Daniel Boorstin noted that much of what we see and hear as news is created by newsmen who, from the earliest days of the commercial press, were responsible less for reporting truth than for filling space and time. These exercises—some, like opinion polls, commissioned by the news media; others, like press conferences, fashioned by outsiders to aid us in our task—Boorstin dubbed “pseudoevents.” They are not spontaneous but planned; they exist solely to be reported or reproduced.

Pseudoevents are not spin, however, only a means to it.

So is Bob Dole’s conversion from deficit hawk to tax cutter.

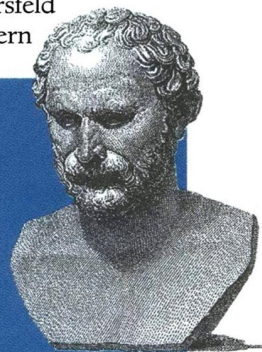
When Harvard University draws together the chief executives of seven rap-music labels, a bevy of stars, several television networks, and a basketball league to create a “new social norm” that discourages violence among inner-city boys, that is spin.

And so on. Ad spinfinitum.

FROM DEMOSTHENES PRACTICING PUBLIC SPEAKING WITH A mouthful of pebbles (350 B.C.) to the first evidence of official public-opinion polling (by a seventeenth-century governor of Texas) to the first use of the term “news release” (1907), the elements of spin have been with us for centuries.

That these activities could be conjoined—that a public could be identified, analyzed, and, in theory at least, systematically influenced—dates back only a bit more than sixty years, to when future CBS president Frank Stanton helped bring to the United States an Austrian statistician named Paul Lazarsfeld. Together, they developed the first rudimentary device for gauging radio listeners’ preferences, the Stanton-Lazarsfeld Program Analyzer, a forerunner of today’s Nielsen meters.

What’s important is less the machine than its meaning. The alliance between Stanton and Lazarsfeld marked the first time in the history of modern



Demosthenes,  
Greek spinmeister (384–322 B.C.).

**meant the same thing as *deceive*, but by negative to neutral, becoming shorthand. It was not long before spin became a way or deflect truth but to create it.**

The burnishing of an irrelevancy until it appears to be germane, the redirection of a truth until it seems to be *the* truth, spin might be defined as the creation of pseudoattitudes—the momentary feelings that are produced in response to artificially assembled information and images.

Pseudoattitudes are like the satiety born of an MSG-spiked meal: They are felt, even deeply, but not for long. Yet during that brief period of emotion, pseudoattitudes are, pardon my marketingspeak, actionable. They induce the affected to do something or, equally important, not to do something: hold a stock, cast a vote, withhold a guilty verdict.

“Here’s how I describe what I do,” one leading financial-world spinner told me recently over breakfast. “You walk into a room with a thousand dominoes side by side, and you’re asked which one you can push that will only knock down one other. And you do it real quickly and back out of the room and close the door, and no one knows you’ve been in there.”

So when a rarely performed procedure called “intact dilation and extraction” is renamed “partial-birth abortion” and some Americans react by supporting limits on women’s reproductive freedom, that is spin.

So is retitling abortion “reproductive freedom.”

When voters are persuaded of Bill Clinton’s uxoriousness by his mother-in-law’s testimony in a Democratic-convention videotape, that is spin.

communications that theorists, researchers, media executives, and sponsors joined together not only to understand the public but to manipulate it.

Underlying this association was a philosophy that had been bubbling around in scholarly circles for several decades. For years, intellectuals had believed that the public acted rationally in response to stimuli. Turn-of-the-century muckraking journalists even referred to themselves as “progressive publicists,” the title carrying their presumption that citizens, once exposed to information about government, business, or society, would react logically and force change.

World War I altered their beliefs. The difficulty of mobilizing the citizenry against a distant enemy made the progressives question the slow speed at which rationality worked its magic. The concurrent rise of rotogravure, radio, and movies gave them new tools—images and sounds—to attempt to quicken the pace of persuasion.

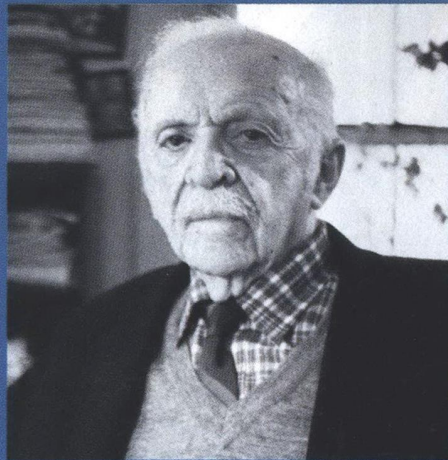
The final rejection of the progressive credo came with the 1922 release of the book *Public Opinion*. In it, political philosopher and former leftist Walter Lippmann asserted that, earlier theories notwithstanding, people did not react rationally to information. Rather, they were responding to the “pictures inside their minds.” It was the job of an elite—in government, business, and the press—to fabricate those pictures for them. That, says [continued on page 76]



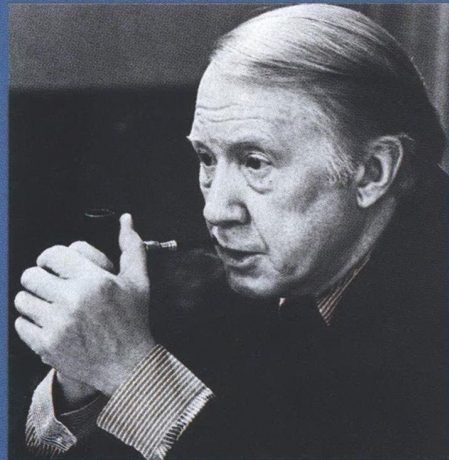
## The Godfathers of Modern Spin



Walter Lippmann, pundit.



Edward Bernays, inventor of public relations.



Frank Stanton, broadcaster.

tion of New Coke and later, on behalf of Michael Milken, tried to spin the public into believing that junk bonds were good for society. But the opportunities seemed so limitless that Sawyer (who died last year) bought a firm specializing in focus groups, hired Ed Rollins and John Scanlon, and tried to structure an entire company around the creation of pseudoattitudes for business.

“What came together—and I don’t know whether it was totally his invention or an amalgam of him and me—was the realization that the same thing was happening in business as had happened in politics,” says Scott Miller, Sawyer’s former partner, who now spins for Coca-Cola and Microsoft. “It wasn’t simply the cynical equation that politicians were like toothpaste. It was that the same dynamics were driving the audiences for both.”

The tsunami that had engulfed entertainment and then politics—spinners prefer the word *democracy*, but a more apt phrase might simply be “the public gaze”—was overwhelming business. Between the mid-1960s and today, the percentage of Americans holding stocks—and thus caring about corporate performance—has doubled. Workers’ pensions, once held comfortably in stable bond funds, sit increasingly in stock mutual funds, from and to which people can switch virtually at will. The change is reflected in stock-market volume, now fifty times what it was in the sixties. It’s realized in the booming coverage of business, particularly its problems; in this decade alone, according to the Institute for Crisis Management in Louisville, stories about executive dismissals and class-action lawsuits are up more than 170 percent.

No wonder, then, that fund managers and corporate executives, once shielded from the public gaze, must now contend with it day in and day out. “To be interested in image proactively, rather than reactively, is more part of the CEO’s job description today than ever before,” Thomas Neff, one of the nation’s leading executive-search consultants, told me recently.

The consequences of inattention can be staggering. Intel Corp.’s attempt last year to slough off a barely consequential flaw in its Pentium chip cost the company \$500 million in share value, management time, lost production, extra staffing, and advertising, according to Minh A. Luong, a Purdue graduate student who is writing his dissertation on crisis management. Intel had ignored Kriegel’s Rule, named for spinner Jay

Kriegel, who propounded it: “Any individual action today has multiple consequences for multiple audiences, any or all of which might be taking action of their own.”

The Sawyer/Miller Group wasn’t alone in understanding Kriegel’s Rule and its implications. Other consultants—like former Reagan aides Linda Robinson and James Lake and onetime Democratic handler Ken Lerer—were leaving politics to run spinterference for business. The Harvard School of Public Health got fifteen television production companies and the three major networks to provide more than 160 mentions in prime-time programming and \$100 million in free network advertising in order to spin the concept of the “designated driver” into the American consciousness.

Worried about the loss of clients and revenues, mainstream public-relations firms tried to crack the spinners’ territory. Burson-Marsteller, the nation’s largest PR firm, started touting its expertise at “perception management.” Some tried acquisitions; in 1993, the Bozell advertising group bought and merged Sawyer/Miller with Robinson, Lake, Lerer & Montgomery, a deal that prompted the rancorous exit of such senior Sawyer/Miller partners as Rollins and Scanlon.

The Edelmans wanted to play in this territory. The opportunity to meld Rollins, Scanlon, and Deaver was too tantalizing to pass up. “I look at them,” says Richard Edelman, who became CEO of the firm this year, “as pieces in a puzzle.”

There was real money at stake—crisis management, litigation PR, and reputation management can earn a public-relations agency \$300 to \$500 an hour in fees, twice the rate of old-fashioned, press-release-writing product PR.

Besides, clients who once demanded ink were now requesting spin. In 1992, when the Federal Trade Commission accused Weight Watchers International of deceptive advertising—the government considered its weight-loss claims exaggerated—Edelman went into overdrive, assembling all the elements of a modern political campaign: focus groups to develop the company’s “messages”; briefing materials for “nutrition and media influentials”; “third-party spokespersons,” who, properly “media-trained,” would lend the imprimatur of objectivity to Weight Watchers’ case. Because of Edelman’s classic application of Paul Lazarsfeld’s two-step theory of media influence—which posited that the mass media affect us not directly but through the filter of “opinion leaders”—“the story,” Richard Edelman [continued on page 124]

## The Age of Spin

[continued from page 77] tells me, “went away in a day.”

How to make other such stories go away?

Mike Deaver was one way. Convicted in 1987 of lying to Congress and a grand jury about his post-White House lobbying activities, Deaver, fifty-eight, is nonetheless considered the spindustrial wizard of symbolism, “a master at delivering a message through very good stage management, probably as good as there’s ever been,” according to Burson-Marsteller cofounder Harold Burson. Part of Deaver’s talent—surprising in a world awash in the quick flashes of MTV videography—is his utter lack of imagistic subtlety. In his worldview, people who might reject an overt statement—that the Republican party, for example, is “inclusive”—will nonetheless assimilate that belief if it’s encapsulated in simple nonverbal images, such as television shots of black and Hispanic faces on the floor of the Republican convention. “We make our decisions based on feelings and impressions,” Deaver says, “rather than intellect and substance.” Edelman hired him four years ago.

Ed Rollins came next. He, too, had had what Dan Edelman refers to as his “incidents.” There was Rollins’s best-selling betrayal of scores of client confidences in his memoir, *Bare Knuckles and Back Rooms*. Then there’d been his brag that the successful gubernatorial campaign he’d managed for New Jersey Republican Christine Todd Whitman had paid black ministers to keep their Democratic flocks away from the polls. Under investigative threat, Rollins said he’d lied. “Ed is the barber’s son with the bad haircut, the cobbler’s kid with no shoes,” says a former colleague. “He doesn’t take his own advice; were he a candidate, he would shut up.”

Dan was nervous when Richard told him this past summer that he wanted to bring in Rollins, fifty-three. But Richard considered Rollins’s talent crucial to the invigoration of the agency. Blustery and self-aggrandizing, the former White House political director boasts an ability to force a strategy through an organization. In politics, his position is termed “general strategist.” In corporate crisis management, where chaos is a centrifuge, this is no small role. “To get campaigns to turn around involves controlling madness, forcing your will, order, and discipline on incoherent organizations,” says Mark Malloch Brown, who worked with Rollins at Sawyer/Miller and is now chief spinner for the World Bank.

When Rollins called John Scanlon to ask his advice about the Edelman offer, the third piece of the puzzle fell into place. Scanlon, sixty-one, had helped invent the field of litigation PR at Edelman in the mid-eighties before leaving for Sawyer/Miller. He’d spurned several offers to return. Then, earlier this year, Scanlon was caught distributing unflattering personal information about a renegade cigarette-company scientist who planned to testify that his former employer had for years hidden evidence of tobacco’s harmful effects. Scanlon says he did nothing more than negotiate with journalists the transmission of accurate and relevant data about the scientist’s credibility to newspeople. Nevertheless, his exposure put him inside a PR man’s nightmare. He was ambushed by a *60 Minutes* crew outside his Manhattan apartment house. Mississippi’s attorney general called him “a man whose modus operandi is to defame anyone who reveals inconvenient information about his clients” and subpoenaed Scanlon to testify in the case the state had lodged against Brown & Williamson, the tobacco company. “The conventional reading is, he collaborated on a McCarthyite attack on an innocent guy,” says one friend. The whole affair, the friend adds, left Scanlon “badly damaged, bleeding.”

But the Edelmanns were willing to overlook this “incident” as well. Loyalty to an old colleague certainly played a role, but so did their recognition of his peculiar talent: Scanlon represents the spinner as media sociologist.

At first blush, his skill seems little more than a knack for name-dropping. “Peter Jennings” and “Mike Wallace” fall from his lips like crumbs, as indeed they are to hungry reporters concerned about their own futures. His journalistic affiliations are the stuff of legend. When I called to ask him who could best explain to me how Scanlon became Scanlon, the only names he provided were those of prominent journalists: *The New Yorker*’s Ken Auletta, *U.S. News & World Report*’s John Leo, and this magazine’s Pete Hamill. He was even involved with the writer Tony Lukas in trying to lure the media critic Jonathan Alter away from *Newsweek* to revive the media magazine *More*. Partly because of these connections, partly because of his pugilistic delight, Scanlon is, among New York spinners, “the singular obsession,” says one *New York Times* reporter. “He’s the one who symbolizes the most evolved version of the species.”

His prowess derives from his early friendships with the *Commonweal* crowd, the writers who revolved around the liberal Catholic magazine in the 1960s. The son of Irish immigrants and an ex-seminarian with a love of literature and leftist politics, Scanlon fell in quite naturally and spent many a night carousing with these and other bookinists at the now-defunct Lion’s Head, a literary saloon in Greenwich Village.

**“We know more about journalists. “I know must have access to the require. You are more**

Scanlon was a passionate opponent of the Vietnam War and a leader of Eugene McCarthy’s insurgent Democratic presidential campaign in 1968. At that point, spinning was only an avocation; Leo recalls Scanlon placing an article in the *Times* about the revival of Brooklyn’s Park Slope neighborhood, in which Scanlon had bought a house. But his journalistic and antiwar connections landed him a job as the press attaché in New York City’s Department of Commerce. Later, he did PR work for financier Felix Rohatyn, who was trying to save the city from insolvency. He served a brief stint as a book editor, then opened his own PR firm. Over the years, he developed a high-profile practice, planning and executing media strategies for clients in trouble, most famously CBS when it was sued by General William Westmoreland over a 1982 documentary the general contended was libelous.

Many with whom he has worked credit Scanlon’s success simply to access—a “media rainmaker,” one former Sawyer/Miller colleague calls him. In fact, it’s more complicated than that. Among his tactics in the Westmoreland case was the operation of a countermedia tour to attack the reliability of a book about the suit in the same cities where the book’s author was appearing. Then and now, Scanlon has distinguished himself by his ability to com-

prehend and re-create the flow of an existing news story.

"I've been hanging around and privy to journalists' conversations for thirty years," explains the bearded, bulky Scanlon. "I know what their deadlines are. I know their bitches. I know their moans. I follow media gossip. I read nine newspapers a day. A real story, you define the elements of why it's good, identify the right outlet and the right reporter, and anticipate the questions he'll ask. Do that often enough, they'll virtually always take your call."

What distinguishes the fiery Scanlon from his smoother brethren, though, is a resentment of the media that derives from his anti-institutionalism—from what his friend Hamill calls his "nobody-knows-the-English-better-than-the-Irish style." In Scanlon's worldview, news organizations are a powerful, monolithic establishment as badly in need of reform as the Democratic machine he challenged in his anti-war days—so much so that he sees no contradiction in representing other powerful, monolithic institutions, such as the tobacco companies, against the media. "The media," Scanlon says, "are all too often predictable and have a hardening of the categories. They are blind to the long term and ignorant of the complexities of economic processes. There is a kind of media tribalism that I don't think is declining but increasing."

How this baleful insight translates into action is well summarized by Ed Rollins, whose Edelman office is next door to Scanlon's, when I ask him what he knows about my business that I do not.

Simon to this tale of seamy sex—or from the *Star* to the *Times*?

Klores leaned in. "I understand news better than 99 percent of the people reporting news," he told me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"News," he said, "is a product. Like any other."

"You mean like a box of Tide?"

"Yeah," Klores said. "Sometimes you get a defective box and you gotta fix it."



IT USED TO BE THAT A STORY IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES* would differ, in content and affect, from a story in the *Enquirer*. When Dick Morris can jump from one to the other in less than a day, you understand that the boxes and their contents are, seemingly all of a sudden, the same. The inverted-pyramid news story—the "who, what, where, when, why, and how" lead I learned as a high school newspaper editor—has been replaced by a new requirement: narrative and celebrity. That's the spinners' "fix."

"The business matrix, the sports matrix, the political matrix, the entertainment matrix," says superspinner Ken Lerer, whose clients range from David Letterman to Viacom, "it's all now the same media matrix."

If newpeople are uneasy about this development, spinners revel in it. For they know that if news is a packaged product, they are the DeBeers cartel of the Information Age, in control of the glittering executives, the shimmering

**you than you know about us," Ed Rollins says of your hot buttons. Most working reporters inside, because process is what your editors dependent on us than ever, so you can't burn us."**

"I know how you people think," says Rollins, typically bluff. "I know your hot buttons. You are more dependent on us than ever, so you can't burn us. You will always try to tell only a piece of our story, to preserve access. Most working reporters must have access to the inside, because process is what your editors want. We know more about you than you know about us."

One of the best spinners I know, Dan Klores, put this even more bluntly. We'd just come from Klores's office, where he'd spent ten telephone minutes telling Roger Stone how to handle the reports, set to break the next morning in the *Star* and *The National Enquirer*, that the political consultant had sought participants for a ménage à trois over the Internet. ("Use humor," Klores had told him. "Say, 'Hey, that sounds like a very interesting guy.'") Dan then flipped through one of the six fat Rolodexes on his desk and placed a call to Richard Gooding at the *Star* to see whether he could displace the story, which Stone said wasn't true. He couldn't.

Over dinner, I marveled at the scene I'd just witnessed. I'd known Klores for years, had taken story ideas from him at *The New York Times*, sought information from him for *Esquire*, even sent clients his way. How was it, I wondered, that he could move so effortlessly from clients like musician Paul

celebrities, the sexy stories, and the other gems we need for our economic existence. As story and character have risen in importance—as Jack and Jackie gave way to Gary and Donna, then to Gennifer and Bill, then to Roger and the Net—the need for verifiable truth has diminished.

One might even say that deconstruction—the theory that literary texts are not an infallible guide to a single set of truths—has migrated from the academy into the news media, where it has mutated into a doctrine that denies the existence of truth altogether. "In an unconscious way among journalists," muses E. J. Dionne Jr., a *Washington Post* columnist, "there is a philosophical war going on between a theory that says there is no truth and another that says there is a truth and it's still worth pursuing."

I fear the old school is losing that battle. After all, the *Newsweek* editor who published the line "Hitler's diaries—genuine or not, it almost doesn't matter in the end" not only kept his job but, thirteen years later, approved senior editor Joe Klein's decision to lie to his colleagues about his authorship of the novel *Primary Colors*. He even published Klein's lie. Rationalizing his action after the secret got out, the editor, Maynard Parker, said simply, "This is not a matter of national security. This is more a matter of who shot J. R."



True—and, awash in pseudoevents, embarrassed by their own susceptibility to pseudoattitudes, more Americans than ever are tuning out the shenanigans of the Media-Spindustrial Complex. The best evidence is in politics, where consultants this year discovered that they must run three times more advertising than a decade ago to achieve an equivalent impact in the polls.

"I think people sense how deep the spin is," says Larry McCarthy. "Each cycle, they put on higher boots just to wade through it. I don't just mean politically, either. Look at the new-season promos on the networks: Everything is the 'greatest new show,' 'most exciting.' I'm forty-four years old now, been watching TV since I was nine. That's thirty-five years of hype and at least twenty years of disbelief. The difference is, now people are exposed to it at every level of their life. It's in the news, movies, politics. I think people think there is a truth still out there, but they gotta wade through so much shit to get to it that it's not worth the effort."

Some believe that with the new technologies, the spin cycle must slow down. Edelman Worldwide is planning on it. Richard Edelman takes me down to the floor where his company's new interactive unit is busily creating Web sites for Bacardi, Butterball turkey, and others. "If television is the ultimate emotional vehicle, the computer is the ultimate rational vehicle," he says as an assistant clicks me through a menu of rum recipes. "The way people buy a car or decide to vote will be based on the credibility of the information. I argue that in a world where the rational will triumph over the emotional, PR actually has an increased role and responsibility. There are ramifications to misleading spin."

But I am not so sure.

## my crack-up

[continued from page 109] rearranged, glass broken. Toxic June lost a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of gin.

As we continue to roll and roll, and one missile or another whistles past me (a shaving-cream canister a moment ago), I gain more appreciation for the devil in these ancient dogs with whom I sail. If something of nature's will had bucked me from my bed at home, I'd be knocking back a third double rye and ringing real estate agents by now. All my fellow passengers are doing, however, is complaining about the shoddy carpentry, as wardrobe doors and drawers bang open and shut in every cabin. "I'm ashamed to say it's British workmanship," said Agatha of the Lakes. "It's rubbishy."

I'm impressed by the resilience of these people this morning. I think I have been selling them short. Way to rodeo, you old farts.

**12/21/95, At sea.** After lunch today, I made my way to the bow for the first time. Thirty-ton containers, the size of railroad cars, stacked on one side of the slender walk along the rim of

the ship, the gunwale on the other, and a moist deck underfoot, moving to the primordial rhythm of the deep. The sea came over in great cold sprays. There is a foremast with a lookout post the Russians manned when they were breaking ice, but the Brits had never had need to staff this station, and now it was forlorn. It looks like a little air-traffic control tower or an enclosed crow's nest on top of a short shaft. The captain had never been in it, nor did he know whether it was locked, but he made me welcome to explore. There was some rust, and the hatch did not want to cooperate, but I managed to dog it open with my shoulder. Seawater sloshed inside. Iron rungs ran up the bulkhead through what felt like a one-man vertical tunnel. Very close in there. Wet, thick air. I emerged into a kind of cockpit. There was a life jacket, and a bench with a busted slat. The windows were crusted in salt. There was a black phone, to the bridge I assumed, with some instructions in Russian. I appeared to be the only one at large on the ship outside the accommodation block. The Atlantic Ocean parted before me, for me, majestic and frighten-

I think back to an anecdote Stuart Ewen relates in his new book. In conjunction with his research, Ewen taught a class on the history of spin. One day, he received a call from his college's own PR department: A newspaper reporter was writing a story on unusual courses and planned to visit his class. Ewen and his students predicted that the reporter would never appreciate their course. So they decided to augment her experience. They promised that, on the appointed day, they would all show up dressed in black. The students further agreed that they would throw up their hands en masse in response to Ewen's questions—but that a right hand up-thrust would indicate a real answer while a left hand would signal Don't call on me. The ploy worked. In her subsequent story, the reporter called the students "urban hipsters" and likened the class to "a coffeehouse exchange of ideas."

One thing about the incident troubled me. I took Ewen out for espresso after I'd finished his book to ask him about it. Didn't any of the students, I wondered, object to participating on the grounds that it was wrong to fool people?

"This kind of manipulation of reality has become so normalized that people don't question it," Ewen responded. "They thought of it as a game in which the rewards outweigh the guilt over having manipulated someone."

"And the more they studied journalism," he continued, "the less guilt they felt. Because they realized that journalism is a product of those kinds of manipulations. My students, when they read that article, felt empowered. They felt for the first time that news was something they had an impact on rather than something that had an impact on them."

I left the café dispirited. I'm no saint, but it's unnerving to learn that in today's world, oh, Lord, we are all spinners. ■

ing. For the half hour I spent out there, I felt utterly alone on the world.

**12/23/95, At sea.** "What's new with you?" I say to Andrey, the Russian third officer, on the bridge.

"What do you expect?"

Silence.

"Do you play cards?" Andrey asks.

"No."

"It is a passer of time."

Silence.

"Well," I say to Andrey, "tell me about your life."

"My life is a dark place."

Russians. Surly peckerwoods.

**12/25/95, The Caribbean.**

I was a self-made reformed debauchee of the first water, two years on the wagon and gaining on three—until hours ago. My tongue was a very ungrateful color this morning. I'd call it a New World blackberry. My guess is I'm in more trouble than I know.

Agatha of the Lakes kissed me with passion at the party last night. I had never had such a gesture from an old lady. I would like to think that my displeasure with it had nothing to do with her age, that it was just some-

# THE AGE OF SPIN

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