

Christopher Byron

Who'll Start the Rain?

Why would a Republican public relations powerhouse hire a prodigal child of Camelot as its Washington rainmaker?

As everyone knows, you can't get through a revolving door if you're carrying too much luggage—a lesson that is currently being learned anew by the folks at the Burson-Marsteller & Co. public relations firm. Last year the Republican-rooted firm picked up a Democratic “living legend” who was expected to lure clients to the company, especially its struggling Washington, D.C. office. The would-be rainmaker? Mr. Pierre Salinger, global super-journalist extraordinaire (so to speak).

Back in the 1980s, Burson-Marsteller was the quintessence of the plugged-in Republican P.R. powerhouse. The chief operating officer, Tom Bell, was wired in to every Republican in town who mattered. He had been chief of staff to Senate Republican Bill Brock of Tennessee, and was once married to Dan Quayle's first cousin. Bolstered by the deep pockets of the Young & Rubicam advertising agency, which acquired Burson-Marsteller in 1984, Bell went on an acquisition drive that gobbled up some of the most influential Republican lobbying boutiques in town, including Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly and Gold & Liebgood.

But not even the revelations of Gennifer Flowers could

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keep the gravy train on track forever, and scarcely had Bill Clinton won the 1992 election than the phone calls of Burson-Marsteller's army of flacks stopped getting returned. The problem was acute, because, as the firm's confidential records reveal, Burson-Marsteller's worldwide financial prospects were already darkening, a casualty of the weak economy and the cost-cutting pressures bearing down on the entire flack industry.

Burson officials say their firm is healthy and growing—and it certainly looks good when compared with some other big, multi-line PR operations. But a report from the company's bean counters last August, which came out just about when Salinger was beginning work as the company's new “vice chairman,” says Burson's glory days are over. It reads, “We continue to perform below expectations, even as measured against the July forecast. We know everyone is highly conscious of the situation and is doing their [sic] best to build income and control costs.” After nearly doubling its fee income in the last two years of the Bush presidency, the Washington office saw its fee income actually drop in 1993, to \$30.5 million—an abrupt reversal of fortunes.

Other big PR operations had faced squeezes, too, with bloated staffs, high-living top brass, and (ever since the 1987 stock market crash) penurious corporate clients. The

most visible bloodletting took place at Hill & Knowlton, whose billings plunged after a series of well-publicized scandals. But Burson-Marsteller's problem was, if not the most severe, then certainly the least expected. After all, here was a firm that had put together a Washington money-machine in the Reagan and Bush administrations. Now the business in that office was coming under pressure, threatening a financial crunch on the entire worldwide enterprise—which at its peak at the start of the nineties had numbered more than 2,000 employees in sixty-two offices in twenty-eight countries.

What Burson needed was someone able to bring in new business worldwide, as well as get those Washington call-backs coming in from the Democrats. But who should be offered the job? More to the point, who could be persuaded to take it? One recently departed Burson official says a pitch was made to New York super-flack John Scanlon, who turned it down flat. (Scanlon confirms that he did indeed turn down an offer to join the firm, but says the position involved a job in New York, not Washington.)

Be that as it may, one person was clearly interested in the job, and that was Pierre Salinger, who needed to find a way to keep trading on the one credential that had kept his entire 30-year career in public life seemingly on the rise: his job as John Kennedy's press secretary from Inauguration Day 1961 to Dallas a thousand days later. In the job of global rainmaker for Burson's Washington office, Salinger thought he saw a way to do just that.

Swathed in the aromas of Camelot, Salinger after the assassination had been appointed a U.S. senator from California to fill out the term of Clair Engle. After that came a brief stint as a flack for a B-list airline, then a prestigious columnist's slot at the Paris weekly *L'Express*. Finally in 1977, Salinger caught the eye of Roone Arledge, then undergoing his own meteoric rise from head of ABC Sports to head of the network's news division. Bedazzled by Salinger's celebrity, Arledge offered him a post in Paris as a roving bigfoot for the network news division.

Salinger moved into a spectacular apartment on the rue de Rivoli, and took up the life of a bon vivant and world-class name-dropper. Often he could be found ensconced at the most visible table in Brasserie Lipp, Paris's premier literary and political eatery, a fitting venue for a foreigner who had been made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. Marc Gunther's recent book on ABC News¹ quotes a col-

¹ *The House That Roone Built: The Inside Story of ABC News*, by Marc Gunther. Little, Brown, 381 pages, \$23.95.

league as remarking, "Roone has made it possible for Pierre to live the life to which he always wanted to become accustomed." Buoyed by his credentials on the Parisian social circuit, Salinger was appointed Paris bureau chief in 1978, then in 1983 was elevated to the still grander slot of chief European correspondent. "Pierre was by far the best known American in Paris," says a correspondent for a rival network at the time. "He was better known than any ambassador or corporate CEO. Every Frenchman knew his name."

It is no small accomplishment to be able to promote oneself into the role of living legend, and that alone made Salinger valuable to ABC News—at least for a while. In his spare time, Salinger also managed to author eight books on various subjects, and that, too, is no mean feat. A recent adulatory profile quotes one ABC official as observing that Pierre could simply pick up the phone and get any number of heads of government on the line—an invaluable resource for any global news organization.

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Yet whatever his accomplishments as ABC's official Door Opener to the Palace, Salinger was less impressive as an actual journalist. The trouble was, he never quite seemed to realize it. Instead, he kept confusing his stature as one of the last figures of

Camelot with his role as a working journalist, creating a sense of overblown self-importance that enveloped him like a cloud. Marc Gunther cites a hilarious example—when Salinger began a news segment by declaring, "This is Pierre Salinger in Rome," as the screen showed a close-up of the Pope disembarking from an airplane.

A colleague in Europe still recalls Salinger's coverage of a TWA hijacking in the mid-1980s, especially his grand entrance upon arriving in Algiers via chartered plane from Nice. As he strode across the tarmac, there was the pilot tagging behind, carrying his bags. Salinger stayed on the scene half a day, then strode back across the tarmac and departed heavenward. In fact, it may well have been only by chartered jet that Salinger could have gotten to the hijacking at all. But jealous rivals saw only the spectacle of the pompous super-journalist making yet another fashionably late arrival—and early departure.

Salinger did have a coup or two. Gunther notes, for example, that reporting by Salinger helped ABC scoop the world on the Iranian hostage release story. Nonetheless, in 1987 Salinger got the first really bad break of his broadcast career, as ABC, under intensifying cost-cutting pressures after its takeover by Capital Cities, gutted its Paris operation, and transferred Salinger to London. Interviewed for this story, Salinger said that the main reason was that ABC News was picking up a portion of his taxes and that the tax burden was expected to be lower on him in Britain.

Whatever the case, Salinger plainly did not want to move. "It was my employer's decision, not mine," he said. In Paris, Salinger had long since established himself as the government's first choice whenever a top official wanted to be interviewed on subjects of interest to Americans. But in London—home to the largest and most talented pool of American journalists abroad—Salinger was just one correspondent among many.

Nor were the British as bowled over as the French by Pierre Salinger. Unable to open doors with the mere mention of his name, he had to compete in the workaday world of breaking news, and this made his self-puffing efforts seem even more out of place and distasteful.

Off-the-record interviews with past and present ABC news people rarely brought flattering comments. One told of Salinger's empire-building efforts to construct a "bureau within the bureau" in London, and of underlings getting whipsawed in turf struggles between Salinger and the London bureau chief, David Glott.

Salinger said that he and Glott, to whom he referred as "my deputy," got along famously. But a London bureau source recalls otherwise, recounting an incident in which a recently hired Salinger aide was chewed out by Salinger for even listening to an attempt by Glott to countermand a Salinger order that would have sent the person to the Middle East on a story. "Pierre does not make the decisions around here," roared Glott. "I am the one in charge." When Salinger learned of Glott's explosion, he called the subordinate to his office and shouted that Glott could stuff it and to get on a plane pronto. Salinger prevailed and the subordinate headed for Heathrow.

On another occasion, Salinger found himself having trouble getting responses to his memos to New York. To remind the brass who they were dealing with, he sent yet another rocket to New York, this time attaching a photo of himself to it and splashing "HOT NEWS" across the top.

The next day, the news desk in New York held its routine conference call with all the field bureaus, and the "World News Tonight" producer who hosted the meeting began with this announcement: "Yesterday someone sent a memo to World News with the words 'Hot News' written across the top. To that individual and to all of you I want to say that there is no such thing as 'hot news' at ABC. There is news or there is no news. I do not want to see a memo like that ever again." Everyone in London knew the culprit was Salinger, who reddened in the face and got up and stormed back to his office. (His office, of course, happened to be the plushiest in the bureau, featuring an oversized oak desk, a couch and sitting area, and walls adorned with awards and photographs of himself with the world's

high-and-mighty.) The subject never came up again, and there were no more memos with "Hot News" across the top.

Salinger seemed to enjoy torturing one bureau executive, Ned Warwick, a Capital Cities man sent to London as a budget-cutter. Salinger would summon him to his office and—after pointedly not inviting him to sit—berate Warwick about one thing or another. If an assistant happened to be in the room and asked whether to step outside, Salinger would dig the knife in even deeper by saying, "Oh no, this isn't important," then continue with his diatribe.

Salinger's wife, Nicole, was a piece of work, and would make periodic grand appearances in the London bureau with the family dog on a leash. Handing the pooch to Salinger she would announce that it was *his* time to start handling some of the domestic chores at the Salinger house—which would cause twitters of approval all over the news room.

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Salinger's record as an actual investigative journalist was mixed. "His sources were obscure and often paid money for their information," says one of his London aides at the time. "But the information they provided was often unverifiable, and sometimes

demonstrably false." That was particularly so with his reporting on the December 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103.

Shortly after the bombing, Salinger concluded—based largely, it would appear, on input from a pro-Libyan contact living in Paris—that Syrians were behind the attack. Thinking he'd uncovered the biggest scoop of the age, Salinger tried to interest the CIA in what he thought he knew, and began feeding confidential ABC research files to a female contact in the personnel records branch of the CIA. She in turn had been angling to get herself reassigned to a CIA group doing work on terrorism—and started passing the files around the Agency to promote herself as someone with access, via Salinger, to the internal files of ABC News.

According to a letter from the CIA contact, the flow of information and documents from Salinger continued for six months. The woman's June 1989 letter strokes Salinger's ego, telling him that her superiors are anxious to see whatever else he could come up with. In my interview with him, Salinger did acknowledge supplying the materials to the CIA, but said he did so only to help shed light on the Pan Am 103 bombing itself. Pan Am was trying to implicate the CIA in the bombing and Salinger would soon assert that the DEA might be implicated. It seems likely that Salinger was simply hoping to open up a back-channel for swapping ABC News information for tidbits from the CIA—something the letter from his CIA contact clearly suggests was on his mind.

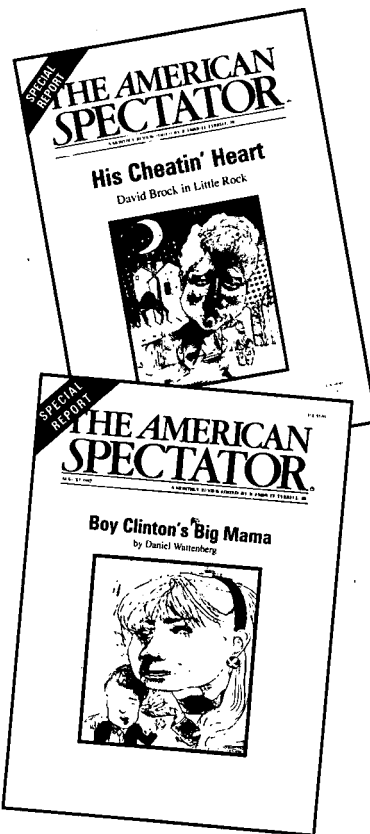
In any event, Salinger's information was basically worthless, and when it reached the CIA anti-terrorism group working on the bombing, it was dismissed, in the words of one group official, as "junk." But that didn't stop Salinger from getting ABC to put it on the air—even to the point of actually naming the alleged bombers. Thus, in November 1989, Salinger starred in an ABC "PrimeTime Live" special, fingering three specific individuals known as the "Kenyan Three": Mohammed al-Makoussi, Ibrahim Twafik-Youssef, and Hassan Hadi al-Ahar. According to Salinger, they were working for Syrian-backed terrorist Ahmed Jibril, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Further, reported Salinger, the information came to him from "sources inside the terrorist movement."

In fact, much of the information came either from Salinger's pro-Libyan chum in Paris, or from other journalists who, in some cases, were simply passing along information they heard from each other. The information was disbelieved by the CIA officials who reviewed it prior to airing. But the show went ahead anyway, and Salinger won several awards for it.

Thereafter, in the spring of 1990, a freelance investigator with ties to ABC learned that the CIA was in fact investigating the possibility of *Libyan* involvement in the bombing, and had passed on to Salinger the name of a key suspect, who happened to be living in London at the time. The tip proved to be prescient, for it wasn't long after that the U.S. and Britain jointly accused the Libyan government of having orchestrated the bombing. In any event, Salinger badly mishandled the lead. Not knowing what to make of the information, he told an aide to go to the suspect's apartment and "interview" him. The aide did exactly that, in the process alerting the man to the fact that he was a suspect in the bombing.

With the finger of suspicion now beginning to point toward not Syria but Libya, "PrimeTime Live" in December 1990 ran a rehashed version of the

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November 1989 story. The show again starred Salinger. But by now, having apparently realized that it had named the wrong bombers in the earlier account, ABC simply eliminated all mention of them in its new and improved version of events—without, of course, acknowledging that the earlier story had been wrong in any way.

Salinger also played a clumsy role in the so-called April Glaspie affair, which featured reports of Glaspie, then the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, wittlessly giving Saddam Hussein what he interpreted as a green light to invade Kuwait. Salinger, long viewed as a soft touch for the Arab cause, was slipped a transcript of the Glaspie-Saddam meeting in late August 1990. ABC News wanted to use the transcript as the peg for an invasion special a few days later, but a source in London says Salinger was frantic to get it on the air immediately, and when the brass in New York would not oblige, he told an aide on September 4 to leak the transcript to the British newspaper the *Guardian*. The aide refused, but a week later the *Guardian* was out with the story anyway, suggesting that Salinger himself had done the deed.

Salinger says the assertion is false. Although he does admit to having supplied the Glaspie transcript to the *Guardian*, he says he didn't do so until after ABC had used it for a special entitled "A Line in the Sand," which aired on Tuesday night, September 11, 1990. Moreover, said Salinger, he checked personally with "World News Tonight" before doing so.

But does Salinger's claim make sense? On Wednesday morning, September 12, 1990, the *Guardian* published an entire story on the Glaspie-Saddam meeting, complete with lengthy verbatim quotes from the actual transcript translation that Salinger's ABC underlings had prepared. The story appeared in all four editions of the newspaper, the first one of which was put to bed at 8:45 p.m. London time. Allowing for the five-hour time difference between New York and the U.K., the first edition of the *Guardian* was actually published ahead of the ABC broadcast, supporting the claim of the London source that the *Guardian* received the Glaspie transcript before ABC News went on the air, not after. The writer of the *Guardian* story, Hella Pick, confirmed to me that Salinger gave her the transcript and that he did so not after the ABC news story was broadcast but earlier in the day of September 11.

In one instance that has since become a matter of embarrassment to Salinger and Burson alike, Salinger managed to entangle his own affairs with those of the network, then drag the entanglements with him to Burson-Marsteller. The situation began to develop in January 1993, when Salinger

parlayed his credentials as a World War II vet—along with his top-drawer political and social contacts in France—into the chairmanship of a nonprofit project to raise money for a memorial to commemorate the Allied invasion of Normandy. Yet while continuing to work as a paid consultant to ABC News, he promoted the Normandy memorial undertaking—for which he worked as an unpaid "volunteer"—to the network's "Good Morning America" show, and wound up being put on the air to talk up the project.

Salinger's promotional efforts, launched from the platform of ABC's morning show, helped raise millions for the project, and ultimately led to the foundation's becoming a Burson client. Unfortunately, the project's finances thereafter careened out of control, with much of the money that Salinger helped raise being allegedly diverted to other purposes. Salinger himself has been accused of no wrongdoing. Nonetheless, since \$3 million in project seed-money came from federal funds through the sale of commemorative coins, the General Accounting Office is now investigating, as is the Internal Revenue Service.

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By the time Salinger became involved with the Normandy project, it was clear his days at ABC were numbered. Perhaps sensing as much, Salinger tried to play his Camelot card one last time, and, following Bill Clinton's 1992 victory, began promoting himself to

New York to be reassigned to Washington as the network's bureau chief; after all, now that a 1990s version of John Kennedy was set to move into the White House, what better man for the job? But ABC would have none of it, and told him his contract would not be renewed.

It was at this point that the offer materialized at Burson-Marsteller. "The company thought it was buying a magic bullet—and a fat Rolodex—to solve Burson-Marsteller's problems," says a top executive who recently left the firm. "In fact, it brought in a guy who'd been out of the loop for thirty years, with no one to speak of in his Rolodex at all." The truth was, hiring Salinger showed just how out of the loop Burson-Marsteller itself was.

Salinger arrived in grand style. Given the title of vice chairman, Salinger was said to have been lured aboard by a \$500,000-plus salary and plenty of perks—one of which was visible to anyone who worked on the company's tenth floor, where workmen began knocking down walls to turn two abutting offices into a suite grand enough to suit the tastes of a Hollywood mogul.

Salinger's hiring was celebrated at a Burson-sponsored gala thrown at Washington's Willard Hotel. Everyone who counted in Democratic circles was invited. Unfortunately, most of the people who turned up were Burson-Marsteller's

own clients. From the people who really counted there were plenty of sincere-sounding regrets, but the highest-ranking warm body from the administration who actually showed up was a staff flack from the Treasury Department.

Ted Kennedy did make a walk-on appearance, but never got farther than the door into the ballroom. A Burson-Marsteller official, standing just inside the doorway, recalls seeing Kennedy say hello to Salinger, then scan the room warily for friendly faces. Seeing none, he clapped Salinger on the back and said, "Great to have you back . . . gotta run" (or some such), and beat a quick retreat.

Back at the office, the circumstances that accompanied Salinger's arrival could not have been worse. Scarcely had the news gone out when the brass at Burson's parent company, Young & Rubicam, announced a desperate, new get-tough policy to cut costs: Whenever the firm loses an account, everyone who worked on it gets fired.

Within a month the exodus had begun.

In September, the company announced a buy-out offer to encourage anyone who wanted to leave to do so, and the mob scene at the down-elevator resembled panic. Worse, in many cases, the people deciding to cash in their chips were among the best and most talented in the company. There was, for example, Wayne Pines, one-time deputy commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration. Pines had been the big star in Burson-Marsteller's pharmaceuticals group; when he left, so did much of Burson's ability to wheel and deal inside the agency. Nearly a dozen other heavyweights slip-streamed out the door behind him, taking many of the firm's biggest and most lucrative accounts.

In the words of one official, it wasn't long before life at the firm had begun to suggest the corporate equivalent of nuclear winter. The biggest remaining account in the office was the Government of Mexico, but when NAFTA passed, there was nothing left to do for the Mexicans and *that* business all but dried up, too. According to an insider at the firm, the Mexico account had been generating roughly \$4 million a year in fees, but is now bringing in less than a quarter of that amount.

As for new business, the firm has recently signed up the American Legion for a "multi-year" deal that will be worth "seven digits," says the insider. But another new piece of business seems pretty desperate by any measure: a

\$1.2 million account funded by Philip Morris and known as the "National Smokers' Alliance." Its bizarre mission: to promote the positive side of tobacco—an account that Burson has struggled mightily to keep secret. Salinger, an obsessive cigar smoker, is listed in corporate filings as a member of the Smokers' Alliance board, yet he is identified not as a Burson-Marsteller official but as a "former U.S. Senator."

Meanwhile, even the big cheese himself—Tom Bell—has departed for the greener pastures of a corner office at Gulfstream Aerospace, and Salinger keeps doing his best to drum up new business. "He's invaluable to us," says Charles Black of Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly, enthusing over Salinger's ability to dazzle clients and impress the high and mighty. Unfortunately, Salinger's charm doesn't seem to be going far in Washington. Says Black, "He spends 90 percent of his time abroad," citing places like Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.



Yet for all Salinger's efforts, that much expected cloudburst still hasn't developed, and there looks to be little rain in the forecast anytime soon. In a move reminiscent of his days as an Arab-leaning journalist, Salinger tried unsuccessfully to land an account representing the Palestine Liberation Organization—an effort that Burson officials clearly wish would be forgotten and insist is now dead. "It didn't actually involve the PLO at all," a Burson official explains lamely, "just some Arab-Americans who wanted to

support the PLO in the peace process."

Salinger's Normandy Foundation business also seems to be something the Burson folks would just as soon forget. When questioned on the matter, Burson's chief operating officer in its Washington office said he was unaware of any such client. But a receptionist at the foundation says Burson does indeed do work for it, a fact Salinger confirms. (After looking more deeply into the matter, the Burson honcho reported back that he stood corrected, but allowed that the account was being run out of New York and has nothing to do with Washington.)

In the event, don't count Salinger out yet. So long as some CEO somewhere still clings to the faint and fading memory of King John of Kennedy and his Court, there will doubtless be new opportunities still to be tapped by Camelot's crown prince of self-promotion. □

Yale Kramer

Day at the Beach

*How disaster was turned into victory at Omaha Beach—
and why nothing comparable could happen today.*

Omaha Beach

The weather, the weather—leaden, low-lying nimbus clouds, with sharp, cold winds whipping in from the channel, and periods of slashing rain—dominates the preparations for the main events of D-Day as it dominated the main event fifty years ago. It's as if the gods of war want to remind and reproach the light-hearted here—the French, mostly, and the young—of what it was like then, when three thousand Americans fell on this beach.

The battle that raged on this narrow strip of sand and pebbles—barely ten yards wide at high tide—was one of the most terrible of the American war. It ranks with Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, and Tarawa in ferocity and bloodiness. Although briefer than those great struggles—it lasted only eight or nine hours—it too was one of those in which two armies of men clash, each knowing from the outset that there can be no retreat, that only their wills can determine the outcome.

For the men who fought that day, the Battle of Omaha Beach became a spiritual struggle and perhaps that is why we accord it a special place in our memory. Spiritual, not in the large sense in which Eisenhower thought of Operation



Overlord as a crusade to annihilate the evil of Nazism, but in a more personal sense. The spirit that came from every man that day, alive, wounded, dying, or dead—from every dog-face, every noncom, every ninety-day wonder, every field officer; from their fear, their desperation, their grit—was what eventually won this four-mile strip of beach.

You can sense this when you talk to the old men who were here then. They seem to be the only source of authenticity and perspective in the sea of media and officialdom

that has overtaken the commemorations. As they wander through the quiet symmetrical beauty of the American Cemetery on this cold and rainy day, passing the many crosses that say "*Here rests in honored glory a comrade in arms known but to God,*" searching for a lost friend, or perhaps something of themselves from fifty years ago. Each one of their stories is a mixture of loss, fear, pride, and, often, humor. And most of them know that, although they will never be back to this place, they have never been away from it.

In a sense, the relatively brief battle of Omaha Beach, significantly more critical than the fighting that went on at the other four assault beaches, foreshadowed the titanic struggle for the rest of Normandy. Except for Stalingrad, the Battle of Normandy—Overlord—was the

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