

DAILY COMMERCIAL

The federal government's PR force

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Whenever Americans moan about how their government wastes their tax money, we tend to think of readily identifiable villains or boondoggles. Think Ronald Reagan's "welfare queens," the old "Bridge to Nowhere" to Ketchikan, Alaska, or those wonderful ideas assembled by some budget watchdog groups, such as federal support for a teapot museum or the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, studies of swine odor and research of drunken mice.

The Pentagon tends to get a pass even though its fiscal travesties can dwarf other federal money-wasters. Many of us are old enough to remember the reports from the 1980s of the Defense Department buying \$640 toilet seats for aircraft, \$400 claw hammers and \$37 screws. But there are more recent examples. Consider the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which has devoured more than \$400 billion to develop over the past decade and still has trouble flying at night or in bad weather, or the \$500 million our government doled out to recruit and train 5,000 rebels in Syria, but only found five. Yes, five.

At least the military tends to get something tangible for the dinero it tosses into various black holes. Yes, the cost is outrageous, but the Pentagon still wound up with those toilet seats.

But earlier this week the Government Accountability Office, the government's own number-crunchers, issued a report that outlined dubious defense spending, and that of other agencies, on something less tangible.

The agency analyzed federal spending on public relations staffing and advertising between 2006 and 2015. Here are some key findings.

- The Obama administration had added nearly 700 public relations flaks to the federal payroll during President Barack Obama's first term, and as of 2014 employed roughly 5,100 staffers to handle messaging and advertising duties at a yearly cost to taxpayers of nearly \$500 million in salaries.
- The median salary for those spokespeople ran about \$90,000 a year in 2014, which was up from \$77,000 in 2006.
- During the decade covered by the study, the government doled out nearly \$1 billion a year on average for PR and ad work. The Pentagon was the biggest consumer, spending an average of \$626 million a year, or more than 60 percent of the total. The Defense Department also employed 2,100 people for this duty, or roughly 40 percent of the government's PR workforce.

- The Department of Veterans Affairs posted the largest increase in staffing, roughly doubling its PR department from 144 people to 286, who were paid an average of \$87,000 a year.
- While spending on PR efforts flattened out under Obama, his administration on average still spent about \$100 million more per year on that than the Bush administration, based on the data for the last three years of George W. Bush's presidency.

The GAO did not offer any recommendations. The agency noted that the study was conducted to get a handle on government PR work amid the "changing media landscape," as influenced by the growth of social media. While that was the intent, the GAO added that the scope of the study did not include some factors that could be considered PR, but could not be severed from other actions of the agencies reviewed.

Yet Chris Edwards, an analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, told The Washington Times that the effect is that taxpayers are spending a bundle for "one-sided propaganda" that relates only the benefits of the program without fully explaining their cost or economic effect.

An old adage holds that you get what you pay for. Republican Sen. Mike Enzi of Wyoming, the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, asked the GAO to look into this. He should probably dig deeper to learn whether taxpayers are receiving legitimate information about programs or so much hype, spin and legacy burnishing.