



The Ledger

Other Voices: Feds have high-dollar 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 of the old “Bridge to Nowhere” to Ketchikan, Alaska, federal support for a teapot museum or the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame, studies of swine odor and research of drunken mice.

Last week, the Government Accountability Office, the government’s own number-crunchers, issued a report that outlined 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 it 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.

Chris Edwards, an analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, told the Washington Times 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.

As the GAO observed, the government has legitimate reasons for communicating with the people. Public affairs personnel also help furnish information to the news media to help explain government programs and initiatives. But there is a huge difference between that and hiring a battalion of professional spin doctors at an annual average of \$90,000 apiece to spread the message of government proficiency and efficiency that often seems in doubt.

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 just so much hype, spin and legacy burnishing.