



OBAMA GANDA

The Obama administration is propagandizing like it was still 2008, but this time using tax dollars like campaign donations in a way that may not be legal.

BY FRED LUCAS

This can't be true. Could Sheriff Andy have been corrupted?

The Department of Health and Human Services spent \$700,000 on a TV commercial featuring the 84-year-old Andy Griffith, explaining to seniors why the Democrats' health care overhaul was good for them and their Medicare.

In the ad, the star of the "Andy Griffith Show" says, "This year, as always, we'll have our guaranteed benefits. And with the new health care law, more good things are coming."

The government bought airtime on CNN, the Weather Channel, Hallmark and Lifetime, considered the most popular networks for seniors.

He ends the ad saying, "I think you're gonna like it," in the folksy Andy Griffith way.

The core problem with the ad is that it's not true.

The non-partisan FactCheck.org pointed out that some 10 million Medicare Advantage recipients will see their benefits cut by about \$43 a month.

"Currently, about one in every four beneficiaries is enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan," FactCheck.org said. "For many of them, the words in this ad ring hollow, and the promise that 'benefits will remain the same' is just as fictional as the

town of Mayberry was when Griffith played the local sheriff."

It might be too much to say Griffith was corrupted. He was just an actor reading his lines. The culprits would be the Obama administration that spent tax dollars on a misleading ad. Besides being misleading, it might even be illegal. After running a near flawless presidential campaign, President Barack Obama and his band of bureaucrats are still in campaign mindset and apparently haven't figured out that you don't spend taxpayer dollars on self-promotion the way you spend campaign contributions.

The bulk of these legally dubious efforts have been touting the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, better known as the stimulus law, and the \$1 trillion health care overhaul. But propaganda has spread throughout federal agencies, notably the National Endowment for the Arts, where a bona fide scandal led to the sacking of the communications director in 2009.

"What this is about is whether your taxpayer dollars should be used to promote propaganda," Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., the ranking member of the House Oversight and Government Reform committee told me. "In our case, we have federal laws that clearly prohibit propaganda, and that's clearly what this is."

Appropriations law forbids public rela-

tions activity that includes "self-aggrandizement" of an agency, its personnel or activities; something "purely partisan in nature" that is "designed to aid a political party or candidate"; or "covert propaganda" that does not reveal that government expenditures produced the messages, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Further, 18 U.S.C. Section 1913 states that "no part of the money appropriated by any enactment of Congress shall, in the absence of express





Left: Actor Andy Griffith, star of "The Andy Griffith Show," is being used by the Obama administration to promote ObamaCare. (Reuters/Fred Prouser)

Right: From left, MIT professor Jonathan Gruber, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities executive director Robert Greenstein and Urban Institute Tax Policy Center director Leonard Burman testify on Capitol Hill before the Senate Finance Committee on overhauling the health care system. Gruber frequently wrote articles, gave interviews and provided congressional testimony in favor of ObamaCare without disclosing that he was a paid PR hired gun for the Obama administration (AP/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

authorization by Congress, be used directly or indirectly to pay for any personal service, advertisement, telegram, telephone, letter, printed or written matter or other device" to influence a public official. Another statute, 18 U.S.C. Section 7321, says, "Appropriated funds may not be used to pay a publicity expert unless specifically appropriated for that purpose." Finally, the Hatch Act restricts political activity by federal officials and public agencies.

HEALTHY DOSE OF SELF-PROMOTION

Efforts promoting the health care reform bill extend beyond the Andy Griffith ad.

In March 2009, HHS contracted Jonathan Gruber, a health care economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for \$297,600 to provide "technical assistance"—a code word for a public relations hired gun.

Gruber wrote articles and gave interviews to *Time*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and other media, always speaking in favor of ObamaCare, but he never disclosed he was on the payroll. He also gave testimony to two Senate committees in favor of health care reform but never revealed he was a paid consultant for the administration. Likewise, the White House and HHS frequently cited Gruber's recent work on health care reform as if it was an independent study.

Not until he wrote a piece for the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which has stricter disclosure rules, did he reveal he

was on the Obama administration's payroll.

Liberals grumbled in 2004 after learning the Department of Education was paying talk-show host Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to promote the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind education proposal both on his show and to other black journalists. The GAO found that the government contracted Williams "without assuring that the department's role was disclosed to the targeted audience. This violated publicity or propaganda prohibition for fiscal year 2004 because it amounted to covert propaganda."

This is not to say that Gruber was not genuinely supportive of ObamaCare anymore than it is to say that Williams wasn't genuinely for NCLB. But the appearance of their sincerity is certainly tainted by the volume of tax dollars they received to opine on the matter.

Government-funded propaganda can be found going back to World Wars I and II and the New Deal.

The Clinton administration was the first to use video news releases (VNRs), which are publicity tools touting a government action using a fake reporter and a fake anchorman, transmitted to TV stations across the country. To a non-critical passive viewer, these spots looked like real news reports.

The Bush administration relied on VNRs to promote the Medicare prescription drug law, which, along with the Williams payola,

prompted outrage by House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who said in January 2005, "We must probe the disturbing depths of these scandals to determine how such unethical decisions are being made. These underhanded tactics are not worthy of our great democracy. The president's commitment to freedom around the world should extend to the freedom of the American people to live without their tax dollars being used to run a government propaganda machine."

Not a peep from Pelosi about the Obama propaganda machine.

CBS News reported that White House Office for Health Reform Director Nancy Ann DePearle sent bulk, unsolicited, partisan e-mails to the federal workforce touting the importance of ObamaCare. A March 11, 2010, e-mail began by saying, "625—that's the number who lost their health insurance every hour in 2009." A March 12, 2010, e-mail warned, "No ifs, ands, or buts about it—if we do nothing to reform our broken health care system, costs will continue to skyrocket and break the budgets of American families, small businesses and the federal government." A March 16, 2010, e-mail had the subject line, "There but the grace of God go any one of us."

During the ObamaCare debate, the Department of Health and Human Services homepage had a link to "State your support for health care reform this year." Clicking on



this took a visitor to www.HealthReform.gov. This site had a letter in support of health care reform, collecting names for support.

"Because the form letter is clearly designed to influence members of Congress when considering health care reform, it would be impermissible for HHS to spend money from its annual appropriations to support its distribution," said a report by the Republican staff of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

RECOVERY ENCOURAGEMENT

It would be comical if it weren't so wasteful. Millions in tax dollars from the ineffective stimulus law are being spent to promote the stimulus law.

The National Science Foundation paid \$193,956 to researchers at Rice University in Houston and the University of Texas at Dallas to "estimate the impact of stimulus funds on the perceptions of citizens and the choices of local community decision makers," or spending stimulus money to study what people think of the stimulus, according to an oversight report of wasteful stimulus spending by the offices of Republican Sens. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and John McCain of Arizona.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) will bear a newly designed emblem. The emblem is a symbol of President Obama's commitment to the American People to invest their tax dollars wisely to put Americans back to work. ... The Primary Emblem should not be displayed at a size less than 6 inches in diameter."

These signs posted near stimulus-funded projects, were initially required, but that requirement was relaxed to "strongly encouraged" for most federal agencies, according to reports from several inspectors general. However, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Commerce still require the posting of these signs for any stimulus-funded projects, according to IG reports.

The signs generally say "Putting America to Work," the name of the law and the website, Recovery.gov.

By far, the Department of Transportation had the strictest guidelines and biggest expenditures for posting signs. In most cases, the purpose clearly was for promotional reasons. For instance, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) guidelines say "the signs should be solely used to publicize ARRA funding of an airport project,"

other project partners" but also says, "such secondary signs should be smaller and less prominent than ARRA Project Sign."

A July HUD inspector general report found that the department tried to give credit directly to President Obama. HUD sent an e-mail to recipients of the department's stimulus dollars that said, "HUD's policy is to encourage recipients of Recovery Act funds to identify Recovery-funded projects, to the extent possible and reasonable, with clear signage." This e-mail included an attachment with two templates for a sign. One included a blank white space where the details of the specific project could be inserted over the words, "Funded By: American Recovery and Reinvestment Act; Barack Obama, President." Based on a sampling of projects, HUD estimated it spent \$314,181 on promotional signs.

"The highway signs and yard signs are uniquely wasteful because, unlike most traffic construction signs that can be reused for several years, the Recovery Act signs will be outdated when the program expires in 2011," the House oversight committee report said. "Furthermore, the signs provide no relevant traveler information—they are purely intended for propaganda purposes.

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That same oversight report found the National Institutes of Health (NIH) spent \$363,760 in stimulus money to pay Palladian Partners Inc. of Silver Spring, Md., to promote its stimulus spending.

"When does a federal project cross the line from simple self-promotion into propaganda?" the Coburn-McCain report asked. "The project requires Palladian to develop 'web-based real-life stories that underscore job and infrastructure creation and accelerated ARRA [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act] research findings.' Indeed, interested citizens can go to the NIH Recovery Act website and learn about the \$12.2 million stimulus grant NIH is spending on 'Facebook for Scientists' and another story on how 'Researchers Pull in Big Bucks Under Recovery Act.'"

Further, a March 2009 directive from the White House Office of Management and Budget said, "Projects funded by the

according to the DOT inspector general's report.

In a report to the Recovery Accountability and Transparency (RAT) Board, Joel Szabat, a deputy assistant secretary for Transportation, was dismissive of the cost of signs.

"Of the \$38,600,000,000, the Department of Transportation finds that no more than \$8,154,000 in federal Recovery Act funding, and \$433,000 in state or local funds, have been spent in the posting of Recovery Act signs, logos or emblems," he wrote in a letter to the RAT Board.

That's still almost \$9 million sucked out of the private sector that could have employed people.

And no local politicians or contractors should think about taking equal credit for a project. The Federal Railroad Administration guidance states, "Grantees may elect to have a secondary project sign which identifies

For those reasons, and because the signs promote a website that contains additional misleading propaganda, the signs amount to tax-subsidized billboards touting the success of the stimulus program."

The department spending the least on signs is Defense, which estimated spending \$11,000 on all of its recovery project signs, while the General Services Administration spent \$120,000 on these big advertisements. The Department of Commerce estimated that it spent \$76,952 on signs.

The EPA did not even bother to estimate the cost of signs, despite a request to do so from both the RAT Board and Congress, citing only nine out of 4,687 stimulus-funded projects. Most other agencies based their estimates only on a sampling rather than an accurate accounting, so the public may never find out how much it's paying for stimulus propaganda.

"The president promised the American



people that he would hold stimulus recipients accountable for 'every dollar' of spending; a promise he cannot keep if his own departments cannot tell the RAT Board or Congress how much taxpayer money is being wasted on self-congratulatory signs or other wasteful spending plaguing stimulus projects," Issa wrote RAT Board Chairman Earl Devaney.

What the federal government's strong encouragement to post signs at stimulus-funded projects have in common with the arts program is an implied statement that in order to get the money, a grant recipient—be it an artist or local government building a road—must promote the Obama agenda. Whether grants for arts or highway projects were required on promoting the Obama administration, it is impossible to believe grant recipients didn't come away with that message.

THE ART OF PARTISAN POLITICS

To put the arts endowment controversy into perspective, it should be understood that National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding for a single art project can generate up to seven times the grant value in private grants. The agency is the largest funder of arts in the United States.

In August 2009, NEA Communications Director Yosi Sergeant invited a group of "artists, producers, promoters, organizers, influencers, tastemakers, leaders or just plain cool people" to participate in a conference call sponsored by the White House Office of Public Engagement. The point of the call was supposed to be to promote the president's "United We Serve" project, a program to promote national service. The Aug. 10, 2009, call attracted 75 participants.

One participant in the call was Shepard Fairey, who created the famous "HOPE" poster during the campaign at the request of Sergeant, then part of the Obama campaign.

"We want to encourage you to take advantage of this opportunity," Sergeant said.

"Pick something, whether it's health care, education, the environment," Sergeant told the call participants. "Take photos. Take videos. Post on your blogs. Get the word out. Like I said, this is a community that knows how to make a stink."

Sergeant said artists can work "to help lay a new foundation for growth, focusing on core areas of the recovery agenda—health care, energy and the environment,



Artist Shepard Fairey signing his Barack Obama "HOPE" poster in the Echo Park area of Angeles. Fairey was part of a NEA conference call to create propaganda for Obama's "United We Serve" program to promote national service. (Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

safety and security, education, community renewal."

The House oversight report said this "was signaling that failure to participate could affect the status as NEA grantees."

Sergeant resigned after the scandal came to light. Both the White House and the NEA acknowledged that Sergeant acted improperly.

"This call was not a means to promote any legislative agenda, and any suggestions to that end are simply false," NEA chairman Rocco Landesman said in a statement. "Rather, the call was to inform members of the arts community of an opportunity to become involved in volunteerism."

The statement continued, "Some of the language used by the former NEA director of communications was, unfortunately, not appropriate and did not reflect the position of the NEA. This employee has been relieved of his duties as director of communications."

JUSTIFYING ASTROTURF

One reason the Justice Department might be loathe to probe taxpayer-subsidized propaganda by other departments is that such an investigation would inevitably lead to its own doorstep.

The DOJ hired Tracy Russo, who did blog outreach for the John Edwards presidential campaign, as a department blogger. Russo was not content just to blog. Rather, she sought out websites critical of the Obama administration and posted anonymous comments in the administration's defense. Blogging and campaign communities call

this "astroturfing."

In October 2009, Reps. Issa and Lamar Smith of Texas, the top Republicans on the Oversight and Judiciary Committees respectively, wrote Attorney General Eric Holder to request information about the activity of the public affairs employees at Justice but got no response.

"The GAO has frequently ruled that covert propaganda violates federal law and appropriations riders," the House oversight report said. The Hatch Act "prohibits the use of publicity experts unless specifically appropriated for the purpose. Additionally, the Justice Department is held to an even higher standard of conduct than other agencies as it is tasked with enforcing the nation's laws in an objective, non-partisan and nonpolitical manner."

But even without a Justice Department to investigate, Congress could soon look into this Obamaganda with a new Republican majority in the House.

"It fits into the growth of this tendency in government, which is a growth in propaganda," Issa said. "The only reason that it's not a scandal per se is the president's predecessor did it, not as much. President Clinton did it, not as much. President Reagan probably did it, not as much. The point that we are trying to make is that it's time for this to come to an end." •

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