

FOCUS

LETTER FROM AMERICA

"Judge Starr," the Smooth Operator; "Mr. Starr", the Prevaricator

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

President Clinton has had some major moral lapse in his personal life... He did not harass anybody, did not abuse his power, nor commit "high crimes or misdemeanor." American people, who elected him twice, understand that. That is why they want him censured for his personal failings, but not removed from office...

PARTISANSHIP was out in force during Independent Counsel Kenneth W. Starr's testimony before the House Judiciary Committee on November 19. Oozing with respect and gratitude, the Republicans on the Committee, without exception, referred to President Clinton's nemesis as "Judge Starr." Eager to get their hands on him, the Democrats kept nice to a minimum, referring to him simply as "Mr. Starr," before jumping all over Starr's alleged prosecutorial misconduct. Ever the righteous soldier, Starr, the one with the spooky smile, droned on with forgettable phrases like, "possible potential offenses," "at a fairly high level of generality," "not in a person-specific way" and most irritatingly, "that's unfair." The only Clintonian obfuscation he did not indulge in was, "depends on what you mean by 'is'."

Kenneth Starr spent weeks rehearsing and videotaping his planned testimony before the Judiciary committee. Any sympathy Starr may have gained from his 12-hour ordeal was quickly wiped out the following day, when his ethics advisor, Samuel Dash, resigned, accusing Starr of advocating for impeachment, rather than a purveyor of information, his legally-defined role under the Independent Counsel statute. Mr. Dash characterized Mr. Starr's aggressive advocacy for impeachment before the committee as an "unlawful" intrusion into the House's consideration of the matter. It can therefore be argued that Mr. Starr's rehearsals constitute an illegal use of the taxpayers' money.

Mr. Starr thoroughly prepared for the hearing. While the Republicans, as expected, heaped affection on him, which he gratefully sucked in, Starr prepared meticulously for each and every Democrat on the Committee. Under intense questioning by, say African-American Congresswoman Maxine Waters, "the gentle lady from California" in Hyde-speak, Mr. Starr would be exceedingly polite and respectfully refer to her as "Congress-

woman Waters." (Rep. Waters was anything but "gentle": one worried that she might actually go for Starr's neck!) As Massachusetts' pugnacious Congressman Barney Frank, a Caucasian, questioned him, Mr. Starr was ready: "Congressman Frank, you are being unfair!" (Characterizing a question as "unfair" is a clever way of diminishing a serious accusation.) Not to be undone, Frank retorted: "In that case, I withdraw the question, because you, Mr. Starr, are the expert on asking unfair questions!"

In his testimony, the supposedly "Straight Arrow" Starr came across as deceitful and evasive as President Clinton at his worst. Replying to the question whether on January 16, Starr's agents confronted Monica Lewinsky with the intention of asking her to wear a recording device to tape record conversations with Vernon Jordan and President Clinton, Starr replied, "It was not." Then he fudged that flat denial with, "We said one of the things a co-operating witness can do is assist us in consensual monitoring. We described that at a high level of generality." Now the truth: Monica Lewinsky testified before the grand jury — in tears — that Starr's agents pressed her to tape Bette Currie, the President's Secretary, Jordan and President himself. Mr. David Kendall, the President's lawyer, produced an FBI interview report showing that Ms. Lewinsky's father and mother mentioned her not wanting to wear a tape.

As Starr's agents surrounded Lewinsky on January 16, she wanted to talk with her attorney, Frank Carter. The agents disparaged Mr. Carter (he is African-American) and discouraged her from calling him. Abbe Lowell, the Democratic committee counsel, asked Starr about this. "We would not encourage someone who is involved in felonies, as we thought at that time, to in fact reach out to a lawyer," Starr replied, adding, "There is a very clear distinction in the law and in the rule of ethics between civil matters and criminal, and Mr. Carter was representing

her in civil matters." According to Harvard lawyer and New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis: "Those are astounding statements for a lawyer to make. The law requires that a suspect who asks to talk to her lawyer be allowed to do so. Federal regulations explicitly require a lawyer's presence when an immunity deal is being discussed, as it was. Prosecutors have no right to reject a suspect's choice of a lawyer on the ground that he was retained originally for civil matters."

Asked to comment on the New York Times report last month that a partner in Mr. Starr's law firm, Richard Porter, had helped steer Linda Tripp to Starr, Mr. Starr replied, "I am not recalling that specifically", and "I have not conducted an investigation." As this was the first time he had heard about this allegation! Sounds familiar? Actor Jim Carrey must be saying: "Liar! Liar!"

Ever the politician, Kenneth Starr waited until the hearing to exonerate the President of any wrong-doing in the Whitewater land deal (for which he was originally appointed Independent Counsel). White House Travelgate scandal and the FBI Filegate. Had he done so before the November election, the President and the Democratic party might have benefited electorally. Asked when he came to the conclusion about the President's innocence in these investigations, in a pattern of evasion, stonewalling and falsification, Starr said he would have to "search my recollection."

(President Clinton has had some major moral lapse in his personal life. He lied repeatedly, under oath, about it. He did not harass anybody, nor commit "high crimes or misdemeanor." American people, who elected him twice, understand that. That is why they want him censured for his personal failings, but not removed from office,

he is doing an excellent job. It is partisans like Kenneth Starr, the "sex policeman", who want to make a mountain out of a mole. If President Clinton escapes with a censure, as is likely, it will be in no small measure because of the small nature of the crime, as the misconduct of an overzealous prosecutor who abused witnesses, violated the law and showed scant respect for time-honored prosecutorial practices, to get his man.

Is Public Relations Relevant Today?

by Abdul Hannan

The present generation of practitioners of public relations enjoy a unique privilege and responsibility as they have direct and easy access to the heads of government and private organisations and can influence policy decisions. They should remain constantly vigilant to safeguard and promote the prestige of their noble calling of conscience keeper.

WHILE listening to the ninth biennial conference of Bangladesh Public Relations Association, inaugurated by the Prime Minister last Thursday, I was a trifle dismayed that none of the speakers dwelt on the challenges posed by modern information technology to traditional thinking about the role of public relations. Yet, if the role of public relations is to communicate and connect with people with the right message about policies and performance of the government and private organisations, it is a difficult task as it involves understanding and accommodation of differences of culture, belief and an attitude of men and women, groups and community in the society. The messages about programmes and performance when not matched by expectations and experience of people inevitably degenerate into publicly, advertisement and propaganda, creates credibility gap and back fires. There is resentment and anger. When the policy is fair, programme delivery and performance is good, the impact is invariably favourable. But if the policy and performance is flawed, there will be adverse reaction no matter what the spin, media management and cover up efforts are by PR persons for image building and damage control.

The challenge has become more daunting today in an age of information revolution of instant and unrestricted access to information through internet, e-mail, satellite communication, cable TV, mobile phone and eaves-dropping of telephonic conversations. Today, thanks to the inundation and glut of information from various sources, the skeleton is out of the closet and nothing is secret. Everything is transparent before the prying eye of information antennas available to the public. The lines between what is private and what is public are now blurred. The information available from different sources provide an opportunity to anatomise and dissect every action of government leaders, examine and scrutinise every performance of government and private agencies and help form informed public opinion. Now there is no getting away with wrong doing, irresponsible behaviour, deceit and disimulation.

This unprecedented change in information technology calls for a dramatic change of perception, strategy and goals of public relations practitioners. These objectives cannot be achieved any more by traditional methods of issuing press releases of statements, speeches and photographs or launching of paid supplements and pamphlets which have become irrelevant exercises in futility. McLuhan's theory that medium is the message no longer holds good. It is not the techniques of communication which are important today. What is important is matter and not manner, substance and not rhetoric.

The role of a Public Relations Officer is to offer counsel and advice to the authorities so that correct policy decisions are taken and pursued in the best interest of the community, the country and the society.

But the new role enjoins enormous responsibility and challenges to PR persons. Ordinarily, in the common perception of people, there is an element of pity, distrust and contempt to the profession of public relations. PR persons are largely responsible for the diminution of their image. They are often considered a servile and obsequious lot competing for appointment and personal service of their boss. In order to be able to win over this attitude of derision and indifference and perform well in the new and demanding role as an adviser, the PR man and woman must be exceptionally capable persons of high intellectual order, must remain well informed of up-to-date happenings, views and reactions of people. Only then will they will command respect and deference in the estimation of people. Only then they will be consulted and taken into confidence in all important decision-making.

It is important that a PR person is consulted in decision-making because by training and experience a Public Relations Officer is supposed to be professionally competent to anticipate the potential reaction of a certain policy decision. But ironically, what is most unfortunate is that the first hurdle a PR man faces in the performance of his duties is in communicating with the authorities, who more often than not hold his views in disdain with disastrous consequences.

I cannot help sharing a few of my own personal experiences for the benefit of knowledge and understanding of the present generation of PR persons. I recall an episode when I was the PRO to Akbar Kabir, Adviser, Ministry of Information, Bangladesh-Soviet Friendship Society had invited Akbar Kabir and Professor Abul Fazal, Education Minister as guest of honour on the occasion of an anniversary of the Society. Mr. Akbar Kabir asked me to write a speech for him for the occasion. I wrote a brief speech dwelling on the existing cordial and friendly relations between the two countries. He was not satisfied with my reticence and

wanted me to elaborate on the contribution of Soviet Union during our liberation war. I pointed out that the relation had become cool and sour since the change of government in 1975 after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and it was not the government policy to speak on the past role of Soviet Union. To substantiate my claim, I pointed out the statements and speeches of government leaders during the visit of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister, Nikolai Firsov to Dhaka. He was not impressed and insisted on my elaborating the speech in line with his suggestion. I held on to my conviction.

It was not easy to argue with Akbar Kabir who was an enlightened person in his own right and belonged to the illustrious Kabir family including Professor Humayun Kabir, Jahanir Kabir, Alamgir Kabir, and others. Finally, he said he would speak extempore and asked me to leave the draft speech on his desk. In his speech Prof Abul Fazal dwelt at length on Soviet contributions during our liberation war and extensively quoted Soviet President Podgorny's warnings and Soviet veto in the UN Security Council as well as mentioned Nixon's tilt towards Pakistan and the reported movement of the US 7th fleet towards the Bay of Bengal in aid of Pakistan on the eve of liberation of Bangladesh. Mr Kabir rose on the dais to speak. He brought out a single page from his pocket and read out the brief speech. It was taken aback. It was the one that had left at his desk. The next morning he called me to his office. He was in an expansive and pleasant mood. He said that early in the morning President Zia had called him on the phone to know why he had not stopped Prof Abul Fazal from speaking in so many words on the Soviet and American role during our liberation war. It was clear that Prof Abul Fazal's remarks caused diplomatic ripples and embarrassed the government. A few months later, the Professor, revered as the conscience of the nation, resigned on ground of 'bad health'. Nobody missed the message though.

I recall another episode when I was the Press Officer at the Bangladesh Mission to the UN in New York. The then President of Bangladesh made a six-day visit to New York to attend the UN Children's summit. However, two days of his visit were conspicuous by the absence of any programme. On enquiry, I learnt that the President would spend two days in Denver for rest and recreation at the invitation of some US

Congressmen. My predicament was that if we sent news reports of his vacation in Denver, it may not be accepted in good grace back home as our people were not used to seeing their President going on vacation. On the other hand, if we left those two days completely unaccounted for, it might give rise to much-raking rumours and gossips in Bangladesh.

I consulted the problem with Press Minister in Washington who agreed with my apprehension and said that he knew the authorities of a university in Denver and suggested that, if approved, he could arrange an invitation from the university to the President to speak to the faculty and students on Bangladesh Affairs. I discussed the proposal with our Ambassador. The President when approached by the Ambassador declined the proposal and reportedly remarked that back home he worked 18 hours a day and needed some rest. There was no news about his activities for two days in Bangladesh newspapers and television. After a few days the weekly Holiday headlined a front page story 'The President goes on a Roman holiday'.

The essence of the message I wish to convey through recollection of these experiences is to instill a sense of resolve and relevance, direction and purpose in the mind of present generation of practitioners of public relations. They enjoy a unique privilege and responsibility as they have direct and easy access to the heads of government and private organisations and can influence policy decisions. They should remain constantly vigilant to safeguard and promote the prestige of their noble calling of conscience keeper. They should treat the area of their job as a mere clausum and not allow forays into its sanctity, by uncivil broadsides of nonprofessionals to keep the profession undefined. They should opt for truth and honesty, and not for expediency and never play second fiddle.

Under no circumstances, they should deviate their position by abdicating their responsibility to give correct advice to the authorities according to the dictates of their best professional judgement and highest moral integrity in the interest of the people. Else, they would be accused of complicity and guilt by association and held responsible for aiding and abetting perpetuation of authoritarianism, corruption and cronyism, deprivation, dishonesty and injustice in society.

The writer is a former Press Counsellor, Bangladesh Mission to the UN, New York.

Whose Amartya Is It Anyway?

The Left is sure Amartya's leftist. The Right thinks he's rightist. Everyone wants a piece of his action.

by Paromita Shastri

"**I**T'S not immediately obvious that by presenting the analysis in the manner he has presented it, Amartya Sen has helped to clarify the underlying realities; a few at least would be led to assert that he's desperately anxious to obfuscate realities." Ashoke Mitra, leftist economist and MP, reviewing Amartya Sen's book *Poverty and Famines*, 1982. Translation: Amartya Sen is a running dog of capitalism.

Throughout his long career and voluminous writings, Sen has done little but give voice to the muddle-headed views of establishment leftists who dominate his world of academics and non-governmental organisations. Robert L. Pollock, editorial page writer of *Wall Street Journal*, largest-circulated US daily known for its pro-establishment stand. Translation: Amartya Sen is a retrogressive leftist.

Who else (besides Amartya Sen) has pleaded for globalisation plus social investment? Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar, right-wing economic journalist in his weekly column *Swaminomics*. Translation: Amartya Sen is a liberal free-market capitalist. Even the IMF loves him.

The whole tribe of economists is being elevated because of the Nobel Prize given to Amartya Sen." Montek Ahluwalia, former World Bank economist and former finance secretary, in *The Telegraph*, 18 October, 1998.

Translation: Whatever he is, it is our duty now to praise this man as no one has been praised before.

Who said you couldn't be everything to all the people all the time? What's common to the above random quotes is that the speakers are all using Sen and his work to promote their own ideas, ideologies, and political beliefs. Sen's philosophy and ethics have been — and are being — used like water, taking the shape of whatever vessel it's poured into. So we have a man who

is a definitely-non-left-wing champion of the poor and

the underprivileged, who argues the same line as the World Bank and IMF.

* Is just a peddler of poverty.

the exotic south Asian-sub-Saharan variety, just like that other petty leftist Brahmo Bengali Satyajit Ray.

* By being awarded the Nobel Prize has finally proved to the world that India's economic policies are the best.

* Has created an economic

ouevre that has little theoretical underpinnings, whose work on famines has added little to

prevailing economic knowledge on the subject?

* In the meantime, every

man who perhaps once was on

the same train (not necessarily in the same compartment) with

Professor Sen, is all over Indian

newspapers and magazines,

writing about his friend Babu,

and how he gave indications

even from a hundred feet off

that he was going to win the

Nobel Prize for Economics.

* That's at a reflected-glory

level on a personal scale. On an

ideological plane, Sen's motherland is seeing a rather acrimonious war over him — a war of

appropriation. Perhaps the

best example of which is Swami

Aiyar's comment on Sen,

where in a thinly-veiled attack

on the leftists, the writer (a frequent World Bank consultant)

tries to show there's no con-

tradiction between Sen's theo-

ries and the line taken by the

WB and the IMF: "Reacting to

criticism from people like

Sen, IMF in the late 1980s

started safeguarding social and

anti-poverty programmes in

structural adjustment loans."

Surrenough, this admiration gets echoed across the

earth by the world's famous

Fund-Bank basher, Harvard

economist Jeffrey Sachs: "Sen

has helped give voice to the

world's poor. And that's no

small matter, for their very

lives may depend on having

their voices heard."

If the Fund, increasingly under attack

due to an ailing global

economy, has changed its

stance, it could be more because

of the dismal failure of its

restructuring programmes in

poor nations, rather than Sen's

criticism. An argument buttressed by former

WB economist Surjit S. Bhalla,

usually labelled extreme right

wing: "If concern for the poor is considered the criterion for being leftist, then all of us are leftists. The difference between the left and the right is the difference in the ways they look at solving the social ills of poverty, illiteracy or gender inequality. In that, I may have a difference with Sen insofar as he wants the State to take charge of these problems."

Emphasises Ashok Guha, close associate of Sen and professor of economics at JNU: "Intellectually, Amartya has always carved out his own space. He's an original. In fact, social choice was dead end for economists. But Amartya travelled a lonely road. His unwavering commitment to moral and ethical values probably delayed his getting the Nobel." So if Sen's a misfit in the traditional Left vs Right debate, it has been his well considered