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## The Never Ending Story: Campaigns without Elections *Burdett A. Loomis*

Every good writer and every effective politician understand the power of a good story, the right anecdote, the telling metaphor. As Bill Buford, the *New Yorker's* fiction editor, put it, "Strong narrative writing is, at its most elementary, an act of seduction."<sup>1</sup> In most seductions, emotion trumps logic, even as the story line may emphasize the logical and the believable. A campaign is nothing if not a series of seductions, from fund-raising to advertisements to last-minute solicitations for the votes of undecided voters.

The permanent campaign has made an industry of inventing, honing, and selling narratives. The campaign process is continual (if not continuous), with fund-raising for the next election requiring a new, or renewed, story line to extract contributions from the same old pockets. Even in the early months of a new Congress, political positioning often overwhelms the dynamics of deliberation and compromise. And those who govern adopt campaign techniques to sell their agendas and issues, which is part of what we mean by *the permanent campaign*. In the 1990s, with narrow congressional majorities and a series of competitive presidential elections, the permanent campaign, as other studies in this volume have shown, has come to dominate the politics of policymaking. At the same time, the permanent campaign has spread far beyond the confines of electoral politics. Interests of all shapes and sizes seek to set the policy agenda, in Washington and, increasingly, in state capitals. At first

blush, that element of the permanent campaign may seem to reflect the public posturing of advocacy groups (the National Rifle Association and Handgun Control, for example)<sup>2</sup> or of moneyed interests<sup>3</sup> that seek to influence public opinion through advertising and public relations campaigns. To be sure, those interests do sometimes target public opinion as a whole. Much more common, however, are attempts to frame an issue or a controversy for elites—ranging from the attentive public to a handful of members of a congressional committee. Just as electoral campaigns send a series of coordinated, but distinct, messages to a variety of overlapping constituencies (as, for example, all Latinos, Cubans in Miami, or the ten wealthiest Cuban Americans in Florida), organized interests do much the same, as they construct narratives that can shape discourse in various venues, ranging from a private meeting with a key senator to Cable News Network advertisements to a set of “grass-roots” messages crafted in a K Street office.

Most techniques of the permanent campaign are similar in and out of the electoral arena, with one major exception. Organized interests do attempt to influence electoral outcomes, which ordinarily require majorities to guarantee success, but they rarely seek to influence mass opinion, at least directly; to do so would be prohibitively expensive. For example, the Health Insurance Industry Association spent only \$14 million on its “Harry and Louise” ads that opposed the Clinton health care proposal in 1993–1994. Such an expenditure could not—and did not—move public opinion in any significant way, but it did influence any number of elites, from lawmakers to reporters.<sup>4</sup> The best analogy to influencing general public opinion may be the introduction of a new consumer product, which can cost \$250 million. Although a Microsoft or a General Electric might have the resources to embark upon that kind of issue-oriented campaign, such corporations have shied away from such an expense for a single message to a single mass audience. In 1998 Microsoft did embark upon a major public relations campaign to make its case in the Internet browser wars, but most of its attention was directed at elites, not the public at large. And the firm proved unsuccessful in stopping aggressive antitrust efforts by both the federal government and the states.

In their pursuit of policy advantage, organized interests use survey research, focus groups, advertising, public relations, grass-roots lobbying (often of the astroturf variety), the commissioning of think tank studies, and other techniques, and they certainly invest heavily in electoral politics. For them, the permanent campaign encompasses both elections and governing, of course, but more than that, their continuing focus remains on the issues they define as most important. Allies may be transitory, elected officials may be “here today, gone tomorrow,” but the groups’ campaigns will continue because their core interests remain in play. Consider the telecommunications industry in the 1990s. That diverse set of interests has weathered immense technological change and the first rewrite of basic communications laws since the 1930s, a time well before the invention of many contemporary technologies. Although the industry’s conventional political spending has increased dramatically over the decade, it has been dwarfed by the issue-based advertising and campaigning that began in the mid-1990s and has continued in the wake of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which moved the industry’s lobbying away from Congress and toward the Federal Communications Commission and the states.<sup>5</sup> Other issue areas (defense, retailing) may not reflect quite the same levels of uncertainty and change as telecommunications, but the relevant interests have invested more heavily in issue campaigns, such as saving the F-22 and enacting bankruptcy reforms, than they have in traditional electoral politics. Even in a highly partisan age, important issues, such as reform of health maintenance organizations, are often defined beyond the bounds of party and party majorities within Congress.

What follows will offer a framework for understanding how interests of all sorts seek to shape the issues that mean the most to them. Although their tactics usually include ordinary lobbying and participating in electoral politics (as, for example, through political action committees), the focus here will be on the politics of issues and agendas. The argument—that issue-based initiatives and politicking make up the core of the permanent campaign for most interests—draws on literature in several areas.

**Winner-Takes-All Economics.** Even as the distributive power of the federal government declines in a balanced-budget era, the stakes grow higher as Congress, the executive, and the bureaucracy use tax and regulatory tools to effect policy change.<sup>6</sup> Many interests conclude that large expenditures are justified by the high stakes involved in the decisions.

**The Glut of Information.** Even before the Internet placed countless information sources at everyone's electronic doorstep, the glut of information on many important issues produced a "data smog" that overwhelmed the capacity to deal with it.<sup>7</sup> Equally important, legislators and other policymakers often see themselves as receiving information that precludes active discussion and deliberation. Christopher Lasch has reminded us that Walter Lippmann made that point in the 1920s, another era of information explosion. With skepticism, Lippmann observed that "information precluded argument, made argument unnecessary. Arguments were what took place in the absence of reliable information."<sup>8</sup> All interests thus seek to make their information "reliable."

**The Dominance of Narrative(s).** Information begs for structure, and narratives offer perhaps the most universal and most human means for constructing a framework for understanding. Setting the agenda, defining problems, assigning causality—all are integral to the narrative form.<sup>9</sup> A simple table or trend line contains the seeds of narrative, as does a photograph. The narrative notion overlaps with the "framing" perspective of psychology and communications,<sup>10</sup> but the concern here lies more with constructing narratives for various elites than with framing issues for the public at large.

**The Scope of Conflict.** As Schattschneider famously noted, the extent of a conflict, as well as who is involved, often determines its outcome.<sup>11</sup> Interests have always sought to expand or restrict the scope of conflict, with the assumption that broadening the conflict would help the prospective losers, who could benefit when more players and many citizens entered the fray. That remains the strategy of environmentalists, public-interest advocates, and consumer organizations, and they often benefit from such "socialization of conflict." Conversely, with immense resources that can purchase the political

expertise to play the outside game, moneyed interests can develop a permanent campaign to frame issues in the public arena. Thus, banking interests, technology companies, and the defense industry, among others, can hammer home narratives with advertising and public relations strategies that consumer organizations and environmental groups cannot ordinarily match.<sup>12</sup>

Even as interests generally emphasize their own issue-oriented aspects of the permanent campaign, they ordinarily attend to the more conventional elements of that phenomenon. That is, they form political action committees, they encourage individual contributions to candidates, they make soft-money contributions to political parties, and they sometimes spend funds independently on behalf of a favored candidate. Moreover, interests lobby in all the conventional ways. Embarking upon a highly public, issue-oriented strategy does not preclude participating in regular electoral politics or in conventional lobbying: quite the reverse. Those interests that develop extensive permanent campaign strategies on issues are likely to be veteran participants in the continuing politics of elections and lobbying, played out across the entire election cycle.

At some point, interests that act in heavily politicized ways and regularly employ a raft of techniques to affect policy and electoral outcomes become something qualitatively different from organizations that confine themselves to lobbying and participating in electoral politics. Everything ends up being politicized; communications take on a political bent; and influencing the terms of the debate, as well as electoral and policy outcomes, requires substantial investment of time, effort, and, especially, money.

#### **High-Stakes Decisions and the Calculus of Political Investment**

The battles over such issues as the Clinton health care proposals, telecommunications restructuring, and financial services reform have generated incredible amounts of spending on lobbying public officials.<sup>13</sup> Any estimate of the funds expended to affect the outcomes of those broad sets of prospective policy changes—as with the \$300 million-plus spent on financial services politicking in 1997 and 1998—is likely to be excessively low, largely because

many corporate interests and trade associations devoted substantial parts of their nonlobbying budgets to affecting the terms of the final legislation.<sup>14</sup> Although neither financial services reform, nor health care reform, nor telecommunications deregulation fell wholly into the category of “winner-takes-all” decisions, all did propose to affect about one-seventh of the national economy (roughly speaking, \$1 trillion). All sides rightly perceived the stakes as immense, and in some instances the policy options did constitute an actual “winner-takes-all” choice, as with medium-sized health insurers, who viewed their very survival at risk. Nor were those policy changes especially unusual; trade policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, tort reform, and bankruptcy legislation all represent high-stakes policy decisions, as do deregulatory measures in the electric utility industry.<sup>15</sup>

As Jeffrey Birnbaum observed, the growth of corporate—and trade association—lobbying makes good economic sense:

[Even] in relatively small changes to larger pieces of legislation . . . big money is made and lost. Careful *investment* in a Washington lobbyist can yield enormous returns in the form of taxes avoided or regulations curbed—an odd negative sort of calculation, but one that forms the basis of the economics of lobbying.<sup>16</sup>

The nature of high-stakes decisions makes such investment almost mandatory, given the potential for tremendous gains and staggering losses. In addition, the usual cost-benefit logic that applies to most managerial decisions—lobbying extensively versus building a new plant or embarking on an ambitious new research project—does not apply when the stakes are high, because the potential benefits or costs—or both—are so great that virtually any expenditure can be justified, even if its chance to affect the outcome is minuscule. The need to establish a clear link between a certain lobbying tactic or strategy and some bit of subsequent policy success is not very important, in that such linkages are difficult to demonstrate in the best of circumstances. In addition, a single general strategy may include a large number of tactical initiatives, to the point where objectively assessing the success of individual actions becomes impossible.

Two implications flow directly from that state of affairs. First,

firms and their representatives enter the lobbying fray with high hopes and low expectations. As one lobbyist put it, referring to a major issue, “If I throw in a million here or a million there, I may get a hundred million back. And there are probably enough cases like that so [my clients] keep throwing money in.”<sup>17</sup> Second, lobbyists and corporate strategists find such circumstances extremely attractive because there is virtually no accountability for the way immense amounts are spent. One veteran Washington representative described such high-stakes maneuvers: “Lots of money is spent externally for internal reasons—to cover your ass.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, spending on issue-oriented permanent campaigns and electorally oriented permanent campaigns often overlaps, as advocacy groups, corporations, and trade associations “invest” in parties, candidates, and policies.<sup>19</sup>

It is a mistake to make an excessively precise distinction between spending on candidates through contributions and providing information to elected officials with lobbying, advertising, or public relations campaigns. Nevertheless, information exchanges between interest groups and legislators may well differ from the seeking of influence through contributions or favors. Interest-group scholar Jack Wright noted that interests

achieve influence in the legislative process not by applying electoral or financial pressure, but by developing expertise about politics and policy and by strategically sharing this expertise with legislators through normal lobbying activities. . . . [Organized interests] can and do exercise substantial influence even without making campaign contributions[,] and . . . contributions and other material gifts or favors are not the primary sources of interest group influence in the legislative process.<sup>20</sup>

Even if information, and not favors or contributions, reflects the basis for interest-group influence, does that mean that money is unimportant? Or that all information is equal? Hardly. Inevitably, some interests possess many more resources to develop information that shapes policy debates. For that reason, a disproportionate share of the policy and political information that flows toward decision-makers reflects the views of well-heeled interests that subsidize think tanks, pay for surveys, and engage public relations firms. High-stakes decisions generate rising levels of investment, and the most affluent interests are best positioned to participate.<sup>21</sup> That

said, those interests do not always win, as the tobacco and firearms industries have discovered in the 1990s.

### Many Voices, Many Messages

Never has more information been more easily available to policymakers than at the present. On all but the most arcane issues, no member of Congress, staffer, bureaucrat, or lobbyist can sensibly argue that he or she desperately needs more policy information or additional data—at least in terms of the state of knowledge at a given moment. Although some information remains closely held and is thus valuable, in most instances the problem for policymakers is excessive, not insufficient, information. As political scientist John Kingdon and would-be reformer Ross Perot noted, Washington is awash with any number of solutions for any number of problems—from tax rates to saving Medicare to military preparedness.<sup>22</sup> District and national sources bombard legislators with information that they have no time to digest.

David Shenk, in his aptly titled *Data Smog*, argued that more than just the *volume* of data, the *sources* of information reduce its coherence.<sup>23</sup> Nor is it just any information that muddies the waters. Rather, “with the widening pool of elaborate studies and arguments on every side of every question, *more expert knowledge has, paradoxically, led to less clarity.*”<sup>24</sup> And everyone can play. As Hugh Heclo noted, “Information about politics and public affairs now flows continuously into the public forum. . . . But the complexity of public problems usually gets lost in the dramatic factoids and disconnected commentaries.” In the welter of information, coming from a multitude of sources (and through a variety of media), “data seldom speak loudly for themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

Not only do we have *hyperdemocracy* (Heclo’s term), but we also have *hyperpolitics*, with almost every interest having a voice and some kind of claim on public policymakers.<sup>26</sup> What makes democracy and politics “hyper” is the constancy of communication, coupled with the number of interests making their claims. The cable-Internet-driven notion of “all news, all the time,” fostered by cable television and the Internet, meshes firmly with the notion of “all-directional advocacy,” in which groups lobby citizens, decision-



makers, and the media by sending out campaign-like messages to anyone who might be an audience.<sup>27</sup>

In that context, the quantity of information often affects its quality—both the quality of the information itself and the capacity for its coherent interpretation. Either we get niches of information, communicated by specialists and enthusiasts to each other,<sup>28</sup> or we get campaign-like sound bites, slogans, and symbols, even when the subjects at hand (budget politics, health care, test-ban treaties) and the related decisionmaking processes are complex. The public can turn away from many controversies, but policymakers cannot. So, to entice the public and to cater to the needs of legislators and other policy elites, interests strive to place their information in context. They seek themes and story lines that will connect—narratives that will convince the public and provide the possibility of explanation for legislators.

#### Narratives as Explanations

For elected officials, audiences come in all shapes and sizes. For example, a legislator may pay attention to a few local notables, the district's constituents, a single important organized interest, or a set of political action committee managers.<sup>29</sup> In virtually every instance, the linkage is cemented through a common understanding, based on a narrative that ties the actor to the audience. Rarely does one dominant narrative or a single given story dictate a legislator's position. Rather, a good tale will include the fodder for a set of acceptable explanations, constructed to fit various groups of voters and interests. As Richard Fenno pointed out, a legislator must stockpile many explanations for a whole range of actions, especially votes. "There isn't one voter in 20,000 who knows my voting record," he quoted one House member, "except on the one thing that affects him."<sup>30</sup>

In a related vein, Grant Reeher found that legislators use stories as ways to think through difficult issues that confront them. Even sophisticated policymakers employ stories to process information. Cognitive psychologists would predict as much in their characterization of individuals as "cognitive misers."<sup>31</sup> Narrative, Reeher noted,

supplies cognitive shortcuts, provides an organization for the other, more specific organizations of attitudes, and places them in a familiar context. It tells us what items of information are to be treated as evidence and what items are irrelevant. It also invests the information with both meaning and purpose.<sup>32</sup>

Organized interests of all stripes take seriously the task of providing material for congressional explanations. On some issues the narratives come to dominate the discourse, as with the legions of HMO horror stories that defined the playing field on patients' bill of rights legislation.<sup>33</sup> Lobbyists and grass-roots advocates offer up stories that members can incorporate in their communications with constituents. Or legislators and their staffers may draw upon public themes articulated by interests through advertisements and public relations campaigns: to the extent that their stories are adopted, interests tend to claim credit—both internally and externally—for influencing the policy discourse.

Lawmakers and lobbyists share the desire to reduce uncertainty as they make policy. In an era when most “iron triangles”—linking Congress, the bureaucracy, and organized interests—have disintegrated, to be replaced by much looser and more inclusive issue networks, alternative means of organizing the policymaking process have grown in importance. As Deborah Stone observed, to cut through the multitude of voices and rhetoric, “causal stories” play increasingly important roles in shaping agendas and particular decisions.<sup>34</sup> Such stories are usually more specific than the narratives put forward to organize the discourse—and structure the conflict—within broad policy communities. Indeed, many causal stories are spun out in relatively private settings of congressional subcommittees or executive agencies, where sophisticated, complicated arguments can be made and understood.

If narratives are powerful, what is the nature of that power? Literary scholar Jay Clayton saw the strength of narrative as “not individual but neither . . . precisely collective; it arises from one’s participation in established networks of expertise.”<sup>35</sup> But many actors and interests participate within dozens, even hundreds, of distinct networks. Participation merely allows an individual or interest the chance to employ narrative powerfully. All messages are not created—or delivered—in an equal fashion. Resources are cru-

cial in developing and conveying meaningful communication. Survey research and focus groups help determine what message is most palatable or most powerful; political consultants, public relations firms, and advertising professionals craft themes that appeal to policymakers, partisans, and the public audiences, though rarely to all simultaneously.

In terms of shaping the policymaking process, two types of competition among narratives come into play. First are the competing “causal stories” that imply very different policy choices on such issues as welfare, violence, and trade. Second, and equally important, are those narratives that socialize (expand) or privatize (limit) the scope of conflict. Narratives are important on both those dimensions (causality and socialization of conflict) because they ordinarily mix together empirical and normative elements. Thus, causal stories both “purport to demonstrate the mechanism by which one set of people brings about harms to another set” and “blame one set of people for causing the suffering of others.”<sup>36</sup> It is no wonder that so many narratives flow from Washington think tanks with distinct ideological leanings—for example, the conservative Heritage Foundation, the libertarian Cato Institute, or the “New Democrat” Progressive Policy Institute. Stripped bare, however, the analyses are both stories in themselves and the grist for many other stories—as with Charles Murray’s welfare studies presented in *Losing Ground* and *The Bell Curve* and the many responses inspired by those works.

Still, many different kinds of narrative are possible. An extended, complex story spun out at length and in private for a congressional staffer would not work when presented to most average citizens. In those instances, narratives are ordinarily truncated, left with little more than metaphors or symbolic appeals.<sup>37</sup> (See table 7-1.) As Murray Edelman observed, “Unless their audience is receptive to the depiction of a condition as a problem, leaders and interest groups cannot use it to their advantage.”<sup>38</sup> A complex, detailed narrative may, by definition, restrict the receptivity of a mass audience. What remains to be seen, then, is how various audiences are addressed in constructing problems and posing solutions. Interested narratives can be spun around either problems (global warming), solutions (tax credits for emissions), or both, depending on the audience. And the

**Table 7-1 Narratives, Interests, and the Scope of Conflict**

Number of Individuals and Interests Affected	Scope of Conflict	
	Narrow	Broad
Few	<b>Niche Politics</b>	<b>Symbolic Politics</b>
	Detailed private narratives	Truncated narratives
	Sketchy public narratives Pure political "muscle"	Highly public reliance on symbol and myth
Many	<b>Policy Community Politics</b>	<b>Public Confrontation Politics</b>
	Detailed narratives, available to public, but not widely disseminated	Combination of detailed narratives (personal lobbying, including local elites) and truncated narratives (public relations, ads, astroturf)
	Coalitions unified around agreed-upon narratives	Highly visible coalitions

storytelling may well have more of an impact outside ordinary electoral politics, a venue in which claims are more likely to be subject to both enhanced scrutiny and counterclaims. Interests may well prefer to “campaign” beyond the bounds of electoral politics, where competition may be less vigorous.

#### The Scope of Conflict and the Reach of Policy

In hopes of shaping the policy thoughts and political considerations of political elites, organized interests fashion their narratives to suit particular audiences. As the scope of the conflict broadens, narratives become less complex, and meaning is more frequently conveyed by metaphor and symbol. What this means is that different policy arenas, as framed by the scope of the conflict and the number of individuals ultimately affected by policy decisions, will encourage distinctive communication patterns. (See table 7-1.) The policy and political information conveyed by interests (among other actors) to the multiple audiences varies greatly from quadrant to quadrant; at the same time, the general themes of the messages remain at least roughly consistent.

In the symbolic and public confrontation arenas, the audiences

are extensive, although only occasionally would the great majority of all citizens be included within the audience—as, for example, during the Great Depression or the Second World War. Still, for interests—and leaders—to influence those audiences, they must tap into well-developed social myths. As John Nelson observed, “[P]olitical myth-making provides crucial requirements for the virtuous practice of mass persuasion.”<sup>39</sup> But tapping into myths does not mean that they cannot be changed. In fact, constructing arguments around myths and metaphors may well encourage changes in meaning.

In the end, however, politicians usually employ metaphors that reinforce social stereotypes or those of dominant interests within a policy community.<sup>40</sup> Audiences responded to such characterizations as Ronald Reagan’s description of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and his desire to protect us with “Star Wars” technologies. Presidents possess great advantages in employing such symbols and metaphors, when compared with legislators or lobbyists. On occasion, however, an individual legislator, such as Newt Gingrich with the Contract with America or Bill Bradley with tax reform, can succeed in shaping the nature of a policy debate, as can an interest group, such as the health insurers on health care reform or the AFL-CIO on NAFTA (and later “fast track” procedures for trade bills), especially when the news media elevate and repeat their narratives into positions of prominence.

Interests have often employed narratives to attempt to change the scope of conflict, usually because they are losing the battle within a policy community, but sometimes because they enthusiastically seek a wider and more decisive victory.<sup>41</sup> In an era of zero-sum budget politics, reduced governmental spending (as a percentage of the total GDP), and divided government, the temptation to change the scope of conflict is great. Indeed, the incentives are at least as great to use the resources of the permanent campaign to privatize conflicts as to socialize them. Devolution of responsibilities to the states is one way to move a conflict away from broad public attention and allow the states, with their own balance of forces, to decide matters, often largely out of sight. Likewise, the resources of the permanent campaign can move a conflict into the open at the

national level (as, for example, electricity deregulation), so that it can be implemented, usually in more private regulatory venues in the states. Thus, the group Americans for Affordable Electricity, chaired by former congressman and current top lobbyist Bill Paxon, argues in a full-color, inside-cover advertisement in the *New Republic* that “electricity doesn’t stop at the state line” and that “only Congress can guarantee all Americans the freedom to choose and save.”<sup>42</sup>

In a different vein, interests frequently alter their focus away from policies that will affect large numbers of individuals (the “public confrontation” sector in table 7-1) and develop story lines that are essentially symbolic. Thus, the high-profile fight over late-term, “partial-birth” abortions remains highly emotional and extremely visible, even if few individuals directly feel its impact. Rather, the efforts to ban “partial-birth” abortion procedures have taken on the elements of an extended, symbolic campaign on the grisly details of the procedure that stands for a much broader social conflict.

Interest groups have always known that choice of venue and scope of conflict can make a huge difference in determining policy outcomes. With great resources and sophisticated strategies, many organized interests have embraced long-term, expensive issue campaigns that relate to, but remain separate from, the regular cycle of electoral politics. In recent years, many such efforts have come into existence; they have ranged from deregulation of electricity to bankruptcy reform to defense of the “right to bear arms.” That does not imply that the traditional means of influence inside lobbying and election-based efforts have been superseded. But the wars of influence in the capital have opened another front: one for which lobbyists, campaign firms, pollsters, and public relations experts seem to be all too willing to volunteer. Thus, not only does the “permanent campaign” become more entrenched over time, but it expands its reach beyond the realm of candidates and elections.

#### Financial Services, Telecommunications, and Health Care: The Core of the Permanent Campaign

Given the emphasis on the term *permanent campaign*, the temptation is great to focus on elections or at the least on election-like activities

such as polling, focus groups, advertising, and the like. To be sure, the interest-group campaigns described here do have many of those elements. For the most part, however, they do not have the ultimate goal of electoral campaigns to win a popular election. Rather, the constituents in the campaigns are mostly elites of various stripes, and the legislative votes that conclude the campaigns are often anticlimactic.

In large part, the politics of high-stakes interest-group campaigning takes place within the “policy communities” that encompass such complex issues as health care, telecommunications, and financial services. Even if an issue becomes highly public, such as the “choice of physicians” in the Clinton health care package or cable television rates in the telecommunications bill, the complexity and interrelatedness of the nest of major issues make it almost impossible to keep the scope of conflict socialized. Any “public confrontation” victory (see table 7-1) will likely be transitory, in that dozens of important and highly connected decisions still need to be made, and only the policy community members can work through their complex nature.

Although individual firms such as Merrill Lynch and Mobil have long spent considerable amounts of money to influence the policy debate, the nature of the permanent campaign can best be viewed by examining the three largest interest-group concentrations of spending on total lobbying and campaigning. (See table 7-2.) The financial services–insurance–real estate sector, the communications–electronics sector, and the health sector combined to generate \$268 million in campaign contributions in the 1997–1998 cycle, a figure that pales in comparison with their lobbying expenditures of \$1.042 billion over that same time.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, many expenditures go undercounted or uncounted in the collection of lobbying data.<sup>44</sup> As Baumgartner and Leech pointed out, those data are part of a pattern that demonstrates a tremendous bias toward the business sector.<sup>45</sup>

The absolute amount of funding is certainly important, but perhaps more significant is the capacity for interests to spend enough money to tell their stories in any number of overlapping and highly sophisticated ways. Thus, in 1999 health insurers planned to spend more than \$20 million in attacking the specter of rising health costs

Table 7-2 Lobbying and Campaign Expenditures, 1997-1998

Sector	1997-1998 Campaign Contributions	1997-1998 Lobbying Expenditures	Lobbying as a Percentage of Total Expenditures
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	\$154,414,056	\$378,159,242	71%
Lawyers & Lobbyists	\$69,790,807	\$32,560,725	32%
Labor	\$60,777,724	\$44,379,999	42%
Health	\$58,803,092	\$326,415,297	85%
Communications/ Electronics	\$54,553,753	\$338,453,610	86%
Agribusiness	\$43,262,232	\$205,117,793	83%
Ideological/ Single-Issue	\$42,428,534	\$149,438,607	78%
Energy & Natural Resources	\$41,146,858	\$282,602,274	87%
Transportation	\$35,531,510	\$227,324,383	86%
Construction	\$32,857,600	\$39,336,892	54%
Defense	\$11,431,320	\$96,640,555	89%

Source: "Money in Politics Alert, The Big Picture: Campaign Contributions and the 1998 Elections," Center for Responsive Politics, October 18, 1999.

in an attempt to ward off (or at least modify) so-called patients' bill of rights legislation.<sup>46</sup> The advertisements combined direct-issue advocacy with campaign-based advertising, as some were run in Iowa and New Hampshire, while others were broadcast in Washington, D.C., and still others were directed at Republican senators in several states.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in 1999, the patients' bill of rights legislation became part of the extended warfare over medical expenses and responsibilities. "It's a permanent campaign," observed Mark Merritt, the major strategist for managed care providers.<sup>48</sup> At the core of the lobbying effort was a combination of extensive survey research, done by Bill McInturff of Public Opinion Strategies, which in turn tested arguments based on economists' studies that higher health insurance costs will result in larger numbers of uninsured individuals. Then, the campaign, sponsored by the Business Roundtable, framed the issue on a state-by-state basis. "We found that when we argued the big [national] numbers . . .



people were kind of unimpressed, but when we started breaking things down into the impact on *individual states and individual districts*, we had much more impact,” a Roundtable spokesperson stated.<sup>49</sup> Just as there are only a few swing districts in contemporary House elections, which receive immense infusions of resources and outside advertisements, so too are there a handful of key legislators to be targeted in issues-based campaigns.

If health care conflicts remain highly public, the struggles over telecommunications policy, while well reported, continue to be fought out within the extremely complex, even inchoate, policy community that includes media giants and combinations that defy easy categorization.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the outcome of one Oregon court case hinges on the definition of AT&T as a telephone company rather than as a cable firm. As with the health care industry, telecommunications lobbying expenditures make up more than 85 percent of the industry’s combined totals for lobbying and campaign contributions. For every dollar contributed to campaigns or spent on elections, firms in the telecommunications industry spent six dollars on lobbying—and additional funds on litigation, another interest-group activity.

Even those figures may seriously understate the amount of resources dedicated to crafting and presenting narratives designed to sway a relatively small number of decisionmakers. Microsoft, whose first full-time Washington lobbyist was hired in 1995 (and worked in a Chevy Chase office, far from K Street or Capitol Hill), greatly expanded its operations in the contentious late 1990s, as it came under fire for antitrust violations.<sup>51</sup> Using a combination of advertising, grass-roots organization of its business partners, retailers, and shareholders, think tank studies, and public relations campaigning, Microsoft embarked upon, then publicly backed away from, a \$40 million campaign to “create a political climate that discourages the Justice Department from seeking aggressive sanctions in the [antitrust] lawsuit.”<sup>52</sup> If the campaign was disowned, the overall strategy and tactics remained largely dedicated to framing the Microsoft perspective. The *Washington Post* reported:

Microsoft has a simple story to tell lawmakers on Capitol Hill: It would be unfair to penalize a company for success that helped set off the company’s

economic boom. [Lobbyists] carry a poll by the firm of Democrat Peter Hart and Republican Robert Teeter showing that two-thirds of Americans believe that Microsoft benefits consumers and that the suit is wrong-headed.<sup>53</sup>

Microsoft's mushrooming efforts to influence policies and mitigate outcomes may be exceptional, but the entire telecommunications-electronics-computer industry has just begun to have its weight felt. Internet lobbying groups have sprung up, including one headed by a former Netscape general counsel, and their members have the financial strength to tell and retell simple stories about complex processes.<sup>54</sup>

The last of the three major lobbying groups, which represents the financial services, insurance, and real estate industries, has long played the combination of inside and outside games that characterize the issue-oriented permanent campaign. Even more than on fluid and difficult-to-predict communications issues, the banking reform stakes were huge. John Yingling, chief lobbyist of the American Bankers Association, argued, "The way we saw it, if we didn't get this legislation, we were going to disappear."<sup>55</sup> A bit of hyperbole, perhaps, but his sentiments were close to those expressed by many insurance companies in the Clinton health care battles—and echoed by them on this issue. Although the bankers—and insurance companies and brokerages—did make major contributions, tilted 60 to 40 percent in recent years toward the ruling Republicans in Congress, their major campaign over the years focused on antiquated rules in an age of electronic transfers and global competition. Ironically, the 1999 legislation did not change much in the financial services sector, in that many of the corporate players had already crossed from banking to brokerage to insurance, through merger or court rulings. As with telecommunications policy in 1999, the major interests wanted to tell one story—modernization and competition—while seeking to restrain other actors, such as Wal-Mart, from entering the marketplace.<sup>56</sup>

#### Interests, Issues, and the Permanent Campaign

The outlines of the permanent campaign as practiced by organized interests in American politics offer few surprises. In many ways the

public is inured to the claims and counterclaims of myriad interests, as waves of information wash over a mostly uninterested citizenry. Still, the stories—of environmental degradation, of HMO indifference, of the glorious choices available to telecommunications consumers—gush forth, based on individual experiences, focus groups, and survey research. Issues are frequently condensed into catch phrases and symbols. Moreover, in the wake of the campaign rhetoric, the framing techniques, and the attempts to manipulate information, important decisions are made: to deregulate cable television rates, to allow patients to sue their employers over HMO decisions, and to permit banks and brokerage firms to enter each others' markets. As Murray Edelman has long reminded us, symbols and substance are wrapped around each other, and the decisions made in the wake of the permanent campaign over issues have substantive results.<sup>57</sup> The stakes are high.

At least three implications of the permanent campaigning on issues deserve attention. First, and not to belabor the point, organized interests often campaign a lot more on issues than on electoral politics. The magnitudes of spending offer some general insights into what interests see as important and how they seek to achieve their goals. Money in politics can make a difference, but we may want to reconsider how that is so.

Second, and more concretely, the infusion of permanent campaign tactics and funding into interest-group politics contributes to the decline of deliberation in Congress. If the stakes are high, and interests have "invested" a great deal in both politicians and the framing of issues, why would they encourage deliberation? As Lasch argued, "Argument is risky and unpredictable, therefore educational." Going further, argument "carries the risk . . . that we may adopt [our opponents'] point of view."<sup>58</sup> That is scarcely the goal of issues-based campaigning. After investing millions of dollars, interests are rarely open to actual deliberation, which may change the shape of the issue under discussion. Compromise is possible, because it carries little risk and falls within the range of acceptable outcomes. But to engage in actual deliberation on free trade, health care, or telecommunications policies could lead to unanticipated policy outcomes, however beneficial their total effects might be.

Better to reduce the possibility for surprise by constructing narratives that lead to safe positions for legislators and predictable outcomes for interests.

Finally, the permanent campaign on issues favors those interests that can bring the most resources to bear in a context where the disparity in resources is usually immense. Citizens' groups can, of course, make a difference, as Jeff Berry has argued and as losses by the tobacco industry have attested.<sup>59</sup> The very power of constructed narratives allows moneyed interests to make the case that they are acting to benefit citizens and consumers as part of their overall argument on a given policy. Thus, health insurers advertised that they were protecting the "right to choose," when in fact they were complicit in reducing the choices available as they encouraged HMO restrictions. The regional Bell companies and the long-distance providers fought a battle as to who was most in favor of competition (to benefit consumers, of course) at the very time they were trying to maintain control over the markets they dominated.

In 1998 telephone utilities and lobbyists for telecommunications and electronics firms spent \$93 million, while the major citizens' group, the Consumer Federation of America, could muster no more than \$420,000. Given such an imbalance, it would be foolish for long-distance coalitions, regional Bells, Intel, Microsoft, and dozens of other interests to place their fates in the hands of elected officials. Their permanent campaign on the issues gives them an overwhelming advantage, most of the time in most venues. As David Cohen, the codirector of the Advocacy Institute—a training ground for citizen groups—realistically conceded, "The whole effort of these campaigns is to prevent a second opinion from occurring."<sup>60</sup>

### Notes

1. Bill Buford, "The Seduction of Storytelling," *New Yorker*, June 24–July 1, 1996, 12.
2. Hugh Hecla, "Hyperdemocracy," *Wilson Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 62–71.
3. Darrell M. West and Burdett A. Loomis, *The Sound of Money* (New York: Norton, 1999).
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6. Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook, *The Winner-Take-All Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Pietro Nivola, "Regulation: The New Pork Barrel," *Brookings Review* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 6–9.
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8. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 170.
9. David Rochefort and Roger Cobb, eds., *The Politics of Problem Definition* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); Deborah Stone, "Causal Stories and the Formation of Political Agendas," *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (1989): 281–301.
10. See, for example, Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communications* 42, no. 1 (1993), 51–58.
11. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960).
12. Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, "Business Advantage in the Washington Lobbying Community: Evidence from the 1996 Lobby Disclosure Reports," paper delivered at the 1999 Midwest Political Science Association meetings, Chicago, April 14–16, 1999.
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22. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, 2d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
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  31. Grant Reeher, *Narratives of Justice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 31.
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  39. John S. Nelson, “What If the Government Was Never a Machine or a Man? Myth as Cognition and Communication in Politics,” University of Iowa, no date.
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