

## UNSELL THE WAR: VIETNAM AND ANTIWAR ADVERTISING

MITCHELL HALL

AT THE END OF 1969, Senator J. William Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas, ominously warned Congress of a threat to national dissent on foreign policy: "When unlimited resources are available to a Government agency for selling purposes, the public does not stand a chance." When Fulbright's investigation brought attention to the Pentagon's extensive public relations activities, antiwar forces countered by developing their own publicity. In a now largely forgotten effort, students joined Madison Avenue professionals and political activists in a campaign to unsell the war. The Unsell project of the early 1970s expanded the antiwar movement into the advertising industry and contributed to the assault on national consensus that limited the nation's options in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

Fulbright's warning grew out of his investigation into the Defense Department's lavish spending on a "propaganda campaign" of self-promotion during the Vietnam War. The military establishment preferred that its "public information" activities not be seen as attempts to influence policy or counter dissenting opinion and hid the extent of these operations by diffusing them among its various branches. Fulbright's report exposed this deception. From 1959 to 1969, the Pentagon's public relations expenditures increased 1,000 percent to an acknowledged \$27.9 million, a figure Fulbright called "conservative." With this financing and a full-time public information force of 2,800 people, the military enjoyed overwhelming access to the public. In 1968 the navy and marines sent over 2.8 million news releases to 12,000 print and broadcast media outlets, in 1969 armed forces performances ranging from musical groups to aerial demonstrations played to audiences estimated at 20 million, and over 360 commercial and educational television stations used the U.S. Army-produced TV show "Big Picture." The potential influence on public opinion and foreign policy was enormous.<sup>2</sup>

*Mitchell Hall is professor of history at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan.*

<sup>1</sup> *Congressional Record*, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Congressional Record*, 91st Cong., 1st sess., 1969, 115, pt. 27-8; Adam Yarmolinsky, *The Military Establishment: Its Impacts on American Society* (New York, 1971), 194-210.

U.S. presidents from Harry Truman to Richard Nixon had also tried to persuade the public that events in Indochina demanded a U.S. military presence. Their efforts initially succeeded, but by the late 1960s millions of Americans had publicly demonstrated their rejection of a policy that had brought increasing sacrifice, destruction, and stalemate. Nixon's Vietnamization policy, which gradually removed U.S. ground troops but escalated the bombing, partially defused antiwar activity by early 1971. Decreasing U.S. casualties convinced many people that the war was winding down. Although massive public demonstrations occurred less frequently than before, citizens in the early 1970s continued to work to end the war in numerous and creative ways.<sup>3</sup>

As Vietnamization slowly removed U.S. troops from Indochina, the CBS television network broadcast a special report titled "The Selling of the Pentagon." Reiterating many of the points addressed in Fulbright's report, this hour-long program examined the Defense Department's public relations efforts that, in addition to recruiting volunteers and providing information, marketed a specific interpretation of the Vietnam War and the cold war to the U.S. public.

According to the report, the military establishment annually arranged hundreds of public contacts that included shopping mall exhibits, Green Beret hand-to-hand combat demonstrations, and tours by flight teams such as the Thunderbirds. In clear violation of regulations, a select group of colonels avidly promoted the U.S. presence in Vietnam in speeches they gave around the country. The Defense Department also provided weekend guided tours of military installations to VIPs, who could observe war games from a grandstand and personally fire tank guns and artillery.

Films also propagated the military's ideology. The Pentagon cooperated with Hollywood producers who portrayed the military favorably and had celebrities and journalists narrate some of its own movies. The military claimed they were informative, but films such as *Why Viet Nam* and *Red Nightmare* are more accurately labeled propaganda. Although government policy had moved toward peaceful coexistence, Pentagon films emphasized cold war rhetoric and seemed obsessed with the expansion of monolithic communism. CBS claimed that the Pentagon was "stuck in 1946."<sup>4</sup>

The Defense Department achieved its widest exposure through the news media. Daily briefings to the national press yielded only carefully selected in-

<sup>3</sup> For the Vietnam antiwar movement see Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse, 1990); and Melvin Small and William D. Hoover, eds., *Give Peace A Chance: Exploring the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (Syracuse, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> CBS Reports "The Selling of the Pentagon," with correspondent Roger Mudd, 1971, videocassette.

formation from the Pentagon's public relations division. The armed forces also maintained their own media arm, producing over two million press releases each year. Local newspapers generally snapped up uncritically this flood of news about the awarding of medals and promotions. Military television crews provided combat footage to supplement network coverage but often staged the action. Similarly, military officials frequently held pre-interview briefings with soldiers in the field to ensure a standard acceptable story before allowing network TV reporters access to them. CBS questioned the impact on a democratic society and free press of a vast military information system that portrayed violence as glamorous, advertised expensive weapons like cars, and presented biased opinion as fact.<sup>5</sup>

Ira Nerken, a twenty-year-old political science major at Yale University, missed the initial broadcast of "The Selling of the Pentagon." In reading about the controversy it aroused, Nerken reasoned that if the war could be sold to the public, it might also be unsold. He remained optimistic that, sufficiently informed, national opinion could bring the war to a close. "How can the American people decide what is right," he asked, "when we don't even know what's going on?" In sharing with other students and faculty his idea of advertising against the war, Nerken elicited an enthusiastic response and formed an organization of about twenty people.<sup>6</sup>

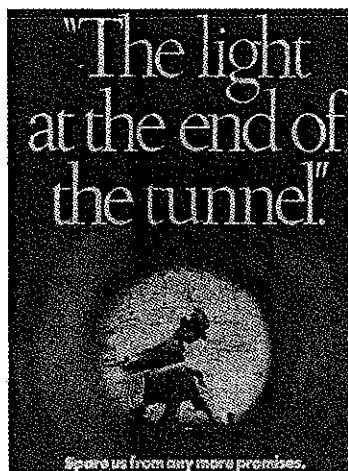
Using the media to publicize antiwar views was not a new idea. Print ads occasionally appeared in leading newspapers, and ad hoc groups produced some radio and television spots. One organization, for example, raised nearly \$0.5 million to support the Hatfield-McGovern amendment in 1970-71, but Madison Avenue talent had never been tapped on a large scale.<sup>7</sup>

The key in turning this idea into action came when one of Nerken's instructors introduced him to David McCall, president of LaRoche, McCaffrey & McCall, a large New York advertising agency. McCall had long opposed the war without taking a public position. "Just as the creative community had been waiting for something," he later explained, "I'd been waiting." He

<sup>5</sup> CBS Reports "The Selling of the Pentagon."

<sup>6</sup> Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: Plan Seeks to Unsell the War," *New York Times*, 23 March 1971, 60; Stanley Fisher Jr., "Unsell! On War Planned at Yale," *New Haven Register*, 5 April 1971, copy in Ira Nerken files; Susan Braudy, "The New People," *Glamour*, June 1971, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Collins, "War Foes' Pullout Pitch," *Newsday*, 15 June 1971, 11A; George James, "Madison Ave. Sings Dove Song," *Hackensack (N.J.) Record*, 17 June 1971, A-1, A-16; Carl Rogers, interview by author, tape recording, 30 June and 29 July 1992; Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963-1975* (Garden City, N.Y., 1984), 331; DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 286.



*Unsell ads were a form of moderate antiwar activism, opposing government policy while avoiding confrontational and divisive actions.*

Unsell ads were a form of moderate antiwar activism, opposing government policy while avoiding confrontational and divisive actions. Their approach reflected the existing state of the larger antiwar movement. By the early 1970s, internal disputes over strategy and ideology had weakened the influence of movement radicals; the larger liberal constituency dominated antiwar activity. Liberals increasingly emphasized electoral strategies for ending the war, with the general public opposed to escalation but tolerant of Vietnamization. They worked primarily through the Democratic Party to elect dove candidates, advocated having Congress set a date for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, and challenged what they saw as an abuse of presidential power.<sup>10</sup>

McCall and James McCaffrey, chair of LaRoche, McCaffrey & McCall, rallied the advertising community and invited ad agency people who disagreed with the Pentagon's version of the war "to create advertising in all forms that will help unsell the war." Posters went to eighty executives in sixty agencies with explanatory letters that indicated "we are not interested in

decided that Nerken's idea was "something worth taking a shot at."<sup>8</sup>

This collaboration represented moderate antiwar activism. Nerken, while joining protest marches and lobbying Congress, viewed confrontational tactics as counterproductive. McCall insisted that the ads must be responsible, accurate, and in good taste. Those who joined them, from agency executives to university students, reflected the same caution. Viewing hostile and deliberately divisive actions as unacceptable, they believed open dissent on government policy was protected by, and a strength of, democratic government.<sup>9</sup>

Their approach reflected the existing state of the larger antiwar movement. By the early 1970s, internal disputes over strategy and ideology had weakened the influence of movement radicals;

<sup>8</sup> "Student Sells Ad Agency On an Antiwar Campaign," *New York Post*, 25 March 1971, 33; Dougherty, "Advertising: Plan Seeks to Unsell the War," 60; Braudy, "The New People," 143; David McCall, interview by author, tape recording, 17 July 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Ira Nerken, interview by author, tape recording, 8 July and 5 August 1992; McCall interview.

<sup>10</sup> DeBenedetti and Chatfield, *An American Ordeal*, 277-311.

cheap, superficial, anti-American work. We are interested in thoughtful and honest advertising, created by people who love their country."<sup>11</sup>

The immediate response was highly favorable. McCall organized an advertising agency committee of nearly fifty prominent ad executives to demonstrate the breadth of the industry's support and establish the project's credibility with the media and general public. His appeal to the advertising industry, however, met some resistance. McCall estimated that 10 percent of the ad industry was "absolutely vituperative," and some agencies did not display the posters because their managers disapproved.<sup>12</sup>

To provide factual background material for the creative work of Unsell, McCall proposed a briefing at Yale to link advertising people with experts on the Indochina conflict. Nerken contacted experts to address the briefing on various aspects of the Indochina war. Most of those contacted quickly agreed to participate, but a few proved unable. Nerken invited Daniel Ellsberg to speak, who wanted to help but was preoccupied with a major project and "too busy xeroxing something." Three months later the *New York Times* began printing the Pentagon Papers.<sup>13</sup>

Working out of a small New York office McCall had provided him, Nerken received enthusiastic responses from individuals who volunteered their services. Plans for Unsell spread by word of mouth, but the enormity of the task remained somewhat daunting. "Everyone takes his own time to become convinced," commented Nerken. "People are tired of marching. But they're also tired of the war. . . . Maybe we're being unrealistic, but . . . if we were realistic, we'd just feel hopeless."<sup>14</sup>

Over two hundred New York advertising people attended the early April briefing at Yale's law school auditorium. Paul Warnke, former assistant secretary of defense, and Morton Halperin, former deputy assistant secretary of defense, explained Nixon's Vietnam policies, and both urged setting a deadline for total withdrawal of U.S. troops. A representative of Vietnam Veterans Against the War discussed war crimes and problems veterans faced. A member of Concerned Asian Scholars described corruption within the Saigon government and the spreading antiwar feeling in South Vietnam. A

<sup>11</sup> Dougherty, "Advertising: Plan Seeks to Unsell the War," 60.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Mayer, "Young Admen Sold on Ending the War," *Newsday*, 5 April 1971, 9; McCall interview; Nerken interview; "Prominent Ad Executives Support Unsell," n.d., CALC Records, series 4, box 31, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as CALC Records).

<sup>13</sup> Nerken interview; McCall interview.

<sup>14</sup> Brady, "The New People," 218.

person from the Herbicide Assessment Commission to South Vietnam showed slides of defoliation and crop destruction, and a former ABC correspondent in Vietnam detailed the strained relationship between the press and the military. Perhaps the most influential speaker was Milton Rosenberg, professor of social psychology from the University of Chicago. He identified the constituencies most ambivalent about the war and the arguments most likely to turn them against it: the deaths of U.S. troops, the economic consequences for the United States, and the creation of national discord.<sup>15</sup>

Such information provided a starting point for the creation of the ads. Yale students, working as an additional research unit, fielded questions from ad people and tracked down individuals or information. Briefing participants responded enthusiastically, and McCall announced an early May deadline to submit finished ads to a review panel that included Yale's President Kingman Brewster, retired marine General David Shoup, Morton Halperin, and former U.S. ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer. This panel would evaluate the ads and eliminate those that were inaccurate, unfair, or inferior. The approved ads would be reproduced and offered to the news media as public service announcements.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately over three hundred artists, writers, directors, and producers from nearly fifty advertising agencies donated their time, skills, and facilities to the campaign. They contributed 125 print ads, 33 television commercials, and 31 radio spots. The committee estimated that over \$1 million worth of artistic time and expenses had been donated to the effort, one of the largest contributions ever made to the U.S. peace movement. Given the heavy response and the cost of reproducing the ads, the materials exceeded what could reasonably be used, but during the campaign Unsell distributed at least 12 television, 18 radio, and numerous print ads to the public.<sup>17</sup>

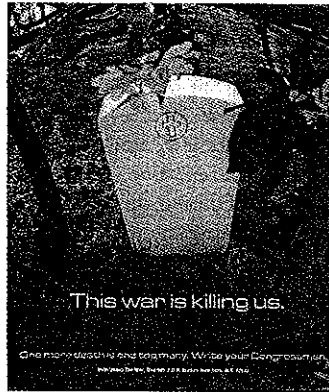
The advertising agency committee revealed the finished products to the public at a June press conference. Emphasizing pragmatic over moral issues, the ads targeted the U.S. mainstream with moderate messages built around themes discussed at the Yale conference. Several urged bringing all U.S.

<sup>15</sup> Steven R. Weisman, "Yale Parley Held on Antiwar Ads," *New York Times*, 4 April 1971, 6; "Unsell Conference," report, 3 April 1971, copy in author's possession.

<sup>16</sup> Nerken interview; Weisman, "Yale Parley," 6; "Unsell Conference"; Mayer, "Young Admen Sold on Ending the War," 9; McCall interview. Sources are imprecise on who actually served on the review panel.

<sup>17</sup> Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising: A Campaign to 'Unsell' the War," *New York Times*, 8 June 1971, 64; "Help Unsell the War," n.d., CALC Records, series 3, box 15; Carl D. Rogers to Linda Block, 26 November 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; "Television Commercials to Unsell the War," transcript, and "Radio Commercials to Unsell the War," transcript, n.d., CALC Records, series 3, box 15.

troops home by 31 December 1971, others referred to U.S. combat deaths or other ways that the war hurt the United States, and many urged citizens to contact their congressional representatives. One magazine ad pictured an unending line of military gravestones and declared, "Unfortunately, this is the only deadline we have in Vietnam. One more death is one too many. Write your Congressman." Another showed a dimly lit voting machine with the caption, "The war is more likely to end here. Vote in peace." The text addressed the frustration of years of antiwar effort. "After the marches and speeches and draft card burnings. After the emigrations and withheld taxes and blockaded build-



*Unsell ads conveyed the domestic costs of U.S. participation in the Vietnam War.*

ings. The student killings and burned effigies and strikes and arrests. After all this, there is still a war." It urged people to send representatives to Congress who would vote to end to the war by the end of the year. Perhaps the most widely distributed print ad was a takeoff of the classic military recruiting poster. It showed Uncle Sam with his head bandaged, hat under his arm, coat torn, and hand out-stretched, captioned "I Want Out."<sup>18</sup>

Electronic media messages also effectively conveyed a sense of the war's toil on the nation. Radio commercials featured songs, testimonials from veterans, and people at home describing the agony and frustration the war caused. In one ad titled *It's My War*, a woman read aloud her letter to her senator. She rejected the claim that Vietnam is "Johnson's war" or "Nixon's war." "It's my war and your war and I want it over," she demanded. "If you want to represent me, vote to have all armed forces withdrawn by December 31, 1971." "If you're against the war write your Congressman," the announcer gently chided the listener. "If you don't, you're not really against the war."<sup>19</sup>

The April 1971 Senate testimony of John Kerry, former navy lieutenant and a leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, highlighted one televi-

<sup>18</sup> Dougherty, "Advertising: A Campaign to 'Unsell' the War," 64; sample sheets of magazine ads, n.d., Ira Nerken files; "Unselling the War," *Time*, 21 June 1971, 12;

<sup>19</sup> "Radio Commercials to Unsell the War," transcript, n.d., CALC Records, series 3, box 15; Unsell radio commercials, tape recording, copy in author's possession.

sion ad. In another television spot, titled Apple Pie, Uncle Sam served pieces of pie to a group of Americans who represented blacks, labor, students, the elderly, and other groups. The largest piece went to a cigar-smoking general who wolfed it down. The announcer spoke over the picture, indicating that most taxes go "to pay for wars past, present, and future."<sup>20</sup>

With the creative work completed, McCaffrey organized the effort to entice TV, radio, and print outlets to present Unsell to the public. Representing the advertising agency committee, McCaffrey and Maxwell Dane, chair of Doyle Dane Bernbach, appealed to media outlets to provide free public service time to Unsell ads to balance the federal government's presentation of the Vietnam conflict. The antiwar project mailed sample scripts of its ads to eight thousand media executives, promising the actual materials free of charge to those willing to run them.<sup>21</sup>

Nerken and fellow student Charles Finch started receiving responses within a week. Surprisingly, 75 percent of those early inquiries came from the more conservative South and Midwest. Nerken handled an increasing amount of the details during the summer as McCall returned full-time to his business activities. Nerken and Finch, inexperienced but recognized by their Unsell co-workers as creative, perceptive, and hard-working, continued to push the media to use the Unsell materials. By early July, 200 radio stations, over 20 TV outlets, and nearly 80 publications had expressed interest in running the ads.<sup>22</sup>

Media response mixed appreciation for the artistic work with a lukewarm reception for the message. *Advertising Age* called the ads "direct, emotion charged and of first rate quality," and found the campaign "well organized and highly visible." *Time* declared them free of "radical vitriol," while *Newsweek* noted their professionalism and message that was "never mawkish." In criticizing the campaign, *Advertising Age* blamed advertising agencies for waiting too long. "The war has been a hot issue for nearly ten years," an editorial observed, "yet it took a college student to come along with the 'unsell the war' idea and sell it to the agency people." *Time* echoed that sentiment, calling the campaign "somewhat belated" given that opinion polls

<sup>20</sup> "Television Commercials to Unsell the War," transcript, n.d., CALC Records, series 3, box 15; "John Kerry," transcript, n.d., CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

<sup>21</sup> Nerken interview; Form letter from James J. McCaffrey and Maxwell Dane, 7 June 1971, Ira Nerken files; Dougherty, "Advertising: A Campaign to 'Unsell' the War," 64.

<sup>22</sup> Candace Cuniberti, "Vietnam Comes to Madison Ave.," *The Financial Times* (London), 17 June 1971, 17; "Unselling the War," *Newsweek*, 21 June 1971, 69; James, "Madison Ave.," A-1, A-16; McCall interview; Rogers interview; Patricia O'Haire, "The Big Unsell," *New York Daily News*, 2 July 1971, 6.



showed that most Americans already opposed the war. The conservative *National Review* attacked Unsell's ideology, charging that most of the nation's media was biased against the war, arguing that a campaign such as Unsell was unnecessary, and condemning the participating agencies for "coercing support for a political point of view," for failing to go through the Advertising Council, and for sacrificing their "professional integrity."<sup>23</sup>

The *National Review's* charges of coercion were unsupported. Unsell's leadership ideologically opposed such tactics as economic boycotts and they used persuasion to get local media to run ads as a public service. If they had been inclined to coercion, Unsell workers lacked the necessary leverage. Corporate advertisers, not advertising personnel, had the coercive power of financial clout. As Nerken later pointed out, "we didn't have any economic power behind us."<sup>24</sup>

Unsell had its share of early successes. Because of duplicating expenses, it proved more difficult to find volunteers to reproduce ads than to create them, but following the Yale conference, film labs and printers offered some free technical aid. Friendly media squeezed Unsell ads into extra space, and, during the summer, Nerken solicited free time on 285 billboards around the country. Unsell also exhibited its products and sold buttons in a rented Madison Avenue gallery. The biggest success came when the Taft Broadcasting Company, with seven television and ten radio stations in some of the country's larger markets, agreed to use the ads. This breakthrough not only represented a victory in distribution but indicated that Unsell could be taken seriously by various political positions. As a Taft executive explained, "To a great extent they represent a point of view with which we strongly disagree," but the ads portrayed "a point of view that was held widely and responsibly."<sup>25</sup>

Still, Unsell never convinced the major broadcast networks to air its material as ads. Recognizing the restraints that the news media worked under following attacks by the Nixon-Agnew administration, Unsell was generally pleased with the amount of publicity it received. "We knew that it was too

<sup>23</sup> "Admen and the War," *Advertising Age*, 21 June 1971, 12; "Unselling the War," *Time*, 21 June 1971, 12; "Unselling the War," *Newsweek*, 21 June 1971, 69; Patrick D. Maines, "The Unselling of the Vietnam War," *National Review*, 10 August 1971, 858-9.

<sup>24</sup> McCall interview; Rogers interview; Nerken interview.

<sup>25</sup> Nerken interview; Brady, "The New People," 218; Carl [Rogers] to Dick [Fernandez], 6 December 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; O'Haire, "The Big Unsell," 6; John L. McClay to Ira Nerken, 8 September 1971, Ira Nerken files; "End to Viet War Sought Through Ads," *Danville (Va.) Bee*, 9 October 1971, in CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

controversial for . . . ABC or CBS to put free ads on," notes David McCall. "On the other hand they did a tremendous amount of publicity . . . without our asking for it."<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the campaign, Unsell received as much publicity through news reports as it did through advertisements. The quality and controversial nature of the material, the prestigious agencies involved, and the novelty of young college students initiating the project all stimulated attention and generated free media coverage. Even stations that refused to donate public service time made Unsell a topic on the nightly news or the subject of a talk show.

Having received less attention than other aspects of the campaign, distribution proved to be more difficult than anticipated and contributed to other problems. With no fundraising arm, Unsell encountered problems in stocking an adequate supply of the ads and had to ration what it sent out. Maintaining press interest after the initial flurry of attention became an ongoing task. By mid-June, telephone, production, and other expenses had built a \$6,000 debt for a campaign that had relied on small donations to survive.<sup>27</sup>

A number of barriers worked against smoother distribution operations. Federal Communications Commission regulations, requiring stations to provide equal time for opposing views on "controversial issues of public importance," made some broadcasters reluctant to provide air time to openly antiwar ads. Stations willing to run free public service announcements also faced the possibility of losing advertising revenue from customers antagonized by Unsell's viewpoint. If media outlets refused to broadcast or print the ads as free public service announcements, Unsell would have to consider raising funds to buy advertising time, a task it had neither anticipated nor relished.<sup>28</sup>

With its attention focused on production rather than marketing, Unsell encountered additional problems inherent in the campaign. It lacked a built-in constituency or the organizational resources to conduct a national distribution effort. Local media felt little pressure to run ads offered by mail from New York. The result was a relative lack of success in getting messages on the air and in print. Because many ads focused on U.S. casualties, the sell became harder as Vietnamization brought more U.S. troops home in favor of an esca-

<sup>26</sup> Nerken interview; McCall interview; Roger Hickey, interview by author, tape recording, 8 July 1992; Rogers interview.

<sup>27</sup> Nerken interview; Cumiberti, "Vietnam Comes to Madison Ave.," 17.

<sup>28</sup> Dougherty, "Advertising: A Campaign to 'Unsell' the War," 64; Nerken interview; McCall interview.

lated air war, diluting one of the Unsell campaign's central themes.<sup>29</sup>

As with other antiwar actions, Unsell made its public statements in the face of potentially damaging consequences. Although participants acted as individuals because agency clients would undoubtedly be divided over the issue, there were some repercussions. One of LaRoche, McCaffrey & McCall's biggest accounts, Standard Oil of New Jersey, received torn up credit cards and accusations that they employed a communist advertising agency. When Standard Oil inquired, McCall explained that some individuals in the agency were working on Unsell and defended their right to do so. After deliberating for a couple of days, Standard Oil headquarters informed McCall that although they disagreed with the campaign's message, they agreed that individuals had the right to participate in it and dropped the subject.<sup>30</sup>



*The public response to this ad was a decisive factor in shifting control of the Unsell campaign to CALC.*

In the summer of 1971, Unsell had produced a series of high-quality ads and generated a significant amount of publicity, but its momentum had slowed. Carl Rogers, recently hired to the national staff of Clergy and Laymen Concerned (CALC), the nation's largest religiously oriented antiwar organization, first saw Nerken and the Unsell ads on a *Today Show* interview. The production impressed him, but he believed Unsell could be used more effectively and that CALC had the organizational base to expand its visibility. For CALC, Unsell offered a creative, professionally done method of getting its antiwar message across, and was also a prospective fund raising tool.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Ad Makers Unite To Unsell the War," *Rolling Stone*, 3 August 1972, 12; "Unsell," [1972], CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

<sup>30</sup> McCall interview.

<sup>31</sup> Rogers interview; Richard Fernandez, interview by author, tape recording, 29 July 1992. CALC had nearly 50 chapters nationwide and a mailing list of roughly 40,000 by the early 1970s. For CALC see Mitchell K. Hall, *Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War* (New York, 1990).

The expense and demands of the campaign ultimately led to its transfer to CALC. Shortly after seeing the Unsell ads, Rogers contacted Nerken, who nervously faced growing bills and increasingly felt frustrated with the details of such a large campaign. The deciding factor in shifting control of the campaign concerned the Uncle Sam ad. When it ran in *Time's* story on Unsell, thousands wrote to the magazine requesting a poster. Unprepared to produce and distribute so many posters, Unsell negotiated with a publisher to handle the requests. The contract had taken Unsell from a shoestring budget to indebtedness, so Nerken gratefully volunteered to turn over the campaign in return for CALC paying the bill. While he returned to classes, Nerken continued to volunteer with Unsell as his time permitted.<sup>32</sup>

CALC took over in September and reinvigorated the campaign by blanketing thousands of radio and television stations, magazines, and newspapers with renewed offers of free ad samples. Working out of CALC's New York headquarters, Rogers served as Unsell's director and divided responsibility for the campaign into geographic areas.<sup>33</sup>

CALC's network of local chapters often served as the core of individual Unsell groups, but committees developed all over the country, drawing support from local Councils of Churches and such organizations as Women Strike for Peace or Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Their chapters contacted local media directly for free public service time and space. An estimated 25 percent of those approached accepted the ads enthusiastically. The majority who refused argued that they already provided a fair balance of opinion on the war or that their acceptance of the controversial Unsell spots would require them to run pro-war commercials for balance. On rare occasions groups that did not get public service time raised money to buy air time.<sup>34</sup>

Grassroots activity produced favorable results. By early October nearly 50 electronic media stations had ordered Unsell materials, with print ads appearing in local and campus newspapers as well as magazines such as *Business Week*. When the campaign ended several months later, 113 television and 450 radio stations had run the Unsell ads as public service announcements and aired them in some of the nation's largest markets. CALC

<sup>32</sup> Rogers interview; Nerken interview.

<sup>33</sup> "New Ads Offer Alternative to 'Selling of the Pentagon'," *American Report*, 5 November 1971, 1S; Carl [Rogers] to Dick [Fernandez], 6 December 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; Rogers interview; "CALC Takes Lead in Unsell Campaign," *American Report*, 5 November 1971, 1S.

<sup>34</sup> "Ad Makers Unite To Unsell the War," 12; Carl [Rogers] to Trudi [Young], 28 November 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; "New Ads Offer Alternative," 1S.

even took a cashier's check to ABC TV to buy a minute of Superbowl time, but ABC refused to run the spot. Hugh Hefner donated an entire page of the March issue of *Playboy*, worth \$39,000, to an Unsell ad.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the strength of CALC's organizational base, some problems remained. Because so many of the ads focused on getting out of Vietnam by the end of 1971, some sympathetic individuals rejected the materials as outdated. Rogers recognized timing as one of the campaign's limitations. "My biggest regret," he wrote to one executive, "is that groups like BEM, CALC, and Another Mother For Peace . . . were not involved in the initial stages of the Unsell effort, since I know that we could have launched a hell-of-a-campaign by this time." Efforts by local chapters of Another Mother for Peace produced "an avalanche of mail" that strained Unsell's resources. The volume of requests exhausted available stocks and led to delays in filling orders, which drew accusations of "poor organization." Unsell ran over budget, and, with TV and radio production costs exceeding \$7,000 early in 1972, CALC's national staff solicited financial help from its chapters.<sup>36</sup>

Local Unsell groups encountered various responses to their requests for public service time. Although certain managers and editors personally found some of the ads too strong, others liked them but rejected them out of fear of public perception. The Unsell office, in fact, received reports of sporadic demonstrations against local stations that broadcast its ads. Stations generally preferred to avoid controversy, but several ran right-wing materials that generated income.<sup>37</sup>

By the end of 1971, a number of factors stimulated thoughts of expanding the Unsell campaign. CALC's major reservation about the advertising material was the lack of references to the problems and suffering of the Vietnamese. A new phase of Unsell would allow CALC to build a highly coordinated campaign that more closely reflected its own political concerns.

<sup>35</sup> "End to Viet War Sought Through Ads," *Business Week*, 25 September 1971, 119; "Unsell the War' Ads Are Unveiled," *Advertising Age*, 19 June 1972, 123; Occasional Memo, 20 March 1972, CALC Records, series 4, box 1; James R. McGraw, "Unselling of the Pentagon," *American Report*, 9 June 1972, 53; Fernandez interview.

<sup>36</sup> B. S. Weiss to Carl D. Rogers, 9 November 1971; Carl D. Rogers to Linda Block, 26 November 1971; Carl D. Rogers to Bernard S. Weiss, 22 November 1971; Donna Reed Owen, Barbara Avedon, Dorothy B. Jones to Dear Friend, 16 November 1971; Carl [Rogers] to Dick [Fernandez], 6 December 1971; Carl D. Rogers to Al Eisenberg, 15 October 1971; The Unsell Staff to Dear Friend, n.d.; "Unsell," [1972]; The Unsell Staff to Dear Friends, 4 February 1972; all in CALC Records, series 4, box 31. BEM stands for Business Executives Move for Vietnam Peace.

<sup>37</sup> Fernandez interview.

At the same time Vietnamization changed the nature of the war. As the number of U.S. casualties fell, the issue of U.S. combat deaths became less effective as an appeal to the public. Although opinion polls indicated 75 percent of the nation opposed the war, Nixon's policies attracted support from over 50 percent, showing that Nixon was successfully selling the continuing war as the beginning of peace. The passing of the 31 December target date for removing U.S. military forces threatened to make the primary thrust of the campaign obsolete.<sup>38</sup>

In response to these concerns, CALC held preliminary discussions with west coast advertising executives. After finding significant interest in contributing to Unsell, CALC's second phase started in January 1972 on the west coast with Frank Greer handling most details from his San Francisco office. Volunteer creative teams met a month later for briefings that provided both information and documentary footage on the air war. To avoid wasted effort, the phase two committee asked for advertisement ideas and scripts rather than completed ads. A review panel selected the best concepts and passed them on to production crews who eagerly signed on, though a few feared their business would suffer if word of their participation spread. There was an excitement among California agencies that were eager to apply their skills to something more meaningful than selling detergent or blue jeans. Most of the production work took place in Los Angeles, where Unsell staffers coaxed and pleaded with producers, filmmakers, and others to provide the necessary time, personnel, and equipment for free. Producers unable to meet that request provided work at cost.<sup>39</sup>

While production work continued, executives publicly explained the rationale for phase two. During a press conference in March 1972, one executive emphasized the war's continuation as the main thrust: "We are trying to get across to the American public, who have been told repeatedly that the war is 'winding down,' that they are being deceived again." Another executive later portrayed Unsell as a moderate option to rising frustration and social disorder. "We want to provide an outlet for rage that is an alternative to

<sup>38</sup> "American Report Vibrations," 3 December 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; Rogers interview; "Unsell," [1972], CALC Records, series 4, box 31; "Unsell the War' Ads Are Unveiled," 123; Carl [Rogers] to Dick [Fernandez], 6 December 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; "Ad Makers Unite To Unsell the War," 12.

<sup>39</sup> "Unsell the War' Ads Are Unveiled," 123; Carl [Rogers] to Dick [Fernandez], 6 December 1971, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; Rogers interview; Hickey interview; Frank Greer, interview by author, tape recording, 3 March 1993; James R. McGraw, "Unsell Goes West," *Help Unsell the War*, March 1972, 1, CALC Records, series 4, box 1; McGraw, "Unselling of the Pentagon," S3; "Ad Makers Unite to Unsell the War," 12; The Unsell Staff to Dear Friends, 4 February 1972, CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

burning something down," he commented. "We want to show ourselves firmly on the side of reason."<sup>40</sup>

Unsell released phase two to the public in mid-June. The new ads built around the themes of the continuation of an impersonal and automated air war, the immorality of the current technological effort, and the war's draining of U.S. resources. Roughly 350 people from California ad agencies, film companies, and recording studios contributed an additional estimated \$1 million worth of advertising time and talent. Their output included 12 television commercials, 11 radio ads, nearly 20 print ads, and 4 billboards. Actors contributed to the narration and on-camera work. Workers also revised a number of the outdated phase one ads. Although the ads were nonpartisan, CALC clearly hoped to maintain the war as a major issue in the 1972 presidential campaign.<sup>41</sup>

Television messages typically spoke of the ongoing destruction in Vietnam and of the responsibility U.S. citizens had in bringing the war to a close. Perhaps the most memorable of the new spots was titled Citizen. Actor Henry Fonda spoke directly into the camera, explaining that the war had eroded his pride in the United States and ending with: "What can you do about it? Well, this is still a democracy, isn't it?"<sup>42</sup>

CALC repeated its distribution efforts from phase one, offering ads to the nation's TV and radio stations at no cost and relying primarily on its network of local chapters to contact media outlets. National organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee, Another Mother For Peace, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation urged their members to get involved in Unsell. Local groups occasionally raised money to buy air time when local stations refused to provide free time. On rare occasions CALC's national office paid for placing ads when key markets proved resistant to providing free public service time, but it also used Unsell as a fund-raising tool. The major exception in purchasing air time came when a wealthy supporter of the McGovern campaign gave CALC \$100,000 to spend on Unsell TV advertising during the 1972 presidential race. This influx of money permitted CALC to target key cities and avoid the random appearance of ads based

<sup>40</sup> "New Anti Air War Ad Campaign Launched," press release, 22 March 1972, CALC Records, series 4, box 31; "Ad Makers Unite to Unsell the War," 12.

<sup>41</sup> "An Escalated Effort to Turn Off the War," *Broadcasting*, 19 June 1972, 20, 22; "Unsell the War' Ads Are Unveiled," 123; "Ad Makers Unite to Unsell the War," 12; Hickey interview; Greer interview; The Unsell Staff to Dear Friends, 4 February 1972, CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

<sup>42</sup> "Public Service Announcements for Television," transcript, n.d., CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

on the response of local media. Efforts to convince the National Council of Churches to sponsor ads failed over the reluctance of denominational officials.<sup>43</sup>

The 1972 presidential election and the erratic interpretations of FCC regulations governing public service announcements combined to limit the number of stations that were willing to run Unsell spots by late summer. Nixon's reelection blunted the campaign's urgency. The competition for financial resources caused by the election also made it more difficult to raise money for Unsell. CALC's overspending on the project added to its own financial problems. Although Unsell remained valuable as antiwar publicity, its value as an organizing tool had generally been expended. CALC ended the campaign in November 1972, shifting its emphasis to other programs, phasing out the staff, and allowing Unsell to fade away.<sup>44</sup>

CALC considered the project a success, and many participants felt that in small but detectable ways they contributed to bringing an end to the war. It is clear, however, that antiwar advertising faced significant limitations. Regardless of the quality of their effort, the peace forces never had access to the financial resources that permit the massive ad campaigns frequently run by the Pentagon or American corporations.

Measuring the impact of a publicity campaign such as Unsell the War is difficult given the lack of scientifically reliable indicators, but certain conclusions are reasonable. Unsell clearly increased the size of the antiwar forces by shifting hundreds of people in the advertising industry from passive observation into political activism. Having produced millions of protesters by 1971, the antiwar movement constantly sought new ways of transmitting its message. Unsell indicated that the antiwar movement continued to grow in both size and sophistication into the 1970s, a time when many felt it was dying. "You had to keep providing new avenues of direction and attack for the movement," claimed Rogers, "and this was a very useful one." Advertising industry professionals, angered by the war but unsure how to express their anger in suitable ways, responded to what McCall called the "optimistic outrage" of idealistic students.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> "An Escalated Effort to Turn Off the War," 20, 22; Hickey interview; "Unsell," [1972], CALC Records, series 4, box 31; Rogers interview; "Clergy and Laity Concerned, Communications Committee Meeting," 3 November 1972, CALC Records, series 1, box 1; "Minutes of Steering Committee," 23 May 1972, CALC Records, series 1, box 1.

<sup>44</sup> "Unsell," [1972], CALC Records, series 4, box 31; Karen Ohmans, interview by author, tape recording, 27 July 1992; Rogers interview; "Minutes of Communications Committee," 3 November 1972, CALC Records, series 1, box 1.

<sup>45</sup> Rogers interview; McCall interview.



Although the ads merely confirmed the antiwar attitudes of those who worked on the campaign and most of the media that ran them, there are indications that the campaign accomplished more. Unsell never claimed to have indisputable proof that its advertising effort had a major impact on public opinion, but research testing indicated that Unsell ads were highly memorable. One research firm ranked Henry Fonda's Citizen ad in the top 7 percent of all commercials ever tested for day-after recall. Among those who remembered the ad, favorable responses outnumbered negative by 43 percent to 21 percent.<sup>46</sup>

The antiwar demand that Congress set a date for complete withdrawal from Vietnam, in which Unsell took part, produced a significant stream of supporting letters to the nation's elected leaders, and favorable public opinion on this issue remained high throughout 1971-72. Years later, Unsell workers encountered people who still recalled the impact of the provocative ads. Still, one can only estimate how many people saw the ads or changed their minds because of them.<sup>47</sup>

Unsell challenged individuals to reassess their attitudes toward the unending war. The campaign penetrated areas of the country where antiwar activity had been minimal. Responses from such people as the executives of Taft Broadcasting and Standard Oil indicate that Unsell received a respectful corporate hearing. Criticism from a sophisticated, highly visible industry captured the attention of a public grown immune to earlier protests. Combined with organized groups of students, business leaders, mothers, clergy, veterans, educators, journalists, and others who had earlier expressed their disapproval of the war, the advertising community added one more layer of dissent that challenged the national consensus.<sup>48</sup>

The Unsell campaign revealed that the antiwar movement comprised far more than a fringe element of society. Unsell also educated antiwar activists about more sophisticated ways to reach the public through the media. With clear goals and a limited time span, Unsell proved to be a valuable organizing tool for local antiwar efforts. As one participant recalled, "I don't

<sup>46</sup> "Minutes of Steering Committee," September 11, 1972, CALC Records, series 1, box 1; "Unsell," [1972], CALC Records, series 4, box 31.

<sup>47</sup> Papers of Senator Robert P. Griffin, Clarke Historical Library, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, boxes 455, 525, 532, 603; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, vol. 3 (New York, 1972), 2285, 2301; George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1972-1977*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, Del., 1978), 30, 56.

<sup>48</sup> For how public opinion influences foreign policy see Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1988).

know if there was anything that we did that . . . got more positive feedback" from around the country.<sup>49</sup>

Despite a variety of obstacles, Unsell the War achieved measurable success. The granting of a Clio Award, the advertising industry's equivalent of the Oscar, to the Apple Pie television spot exemplified the campaign's high quality. The roar of approval the ad received at the 1972 award ceremony revealed the depth of antiwar sentiment within the industry.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Fernandez interview.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Berkvist, "Commercials Instead of Shows? Well . . ." *New York Times*, 18 June 1972, D17; "Unsell TV Spot Wins Ad Award," *American Report*, 7 July 1972, 2.