

***A Brief History of Public Service Advertising***  
**(Aired on National Public Radio's All Things Considered)**

ROBERT SIEGEL, Host: This is All Things Considered. I'm Robert Siegel.

LINDA WERTHEIMER, Host: And I'm Linda Wertheimer.

If there were an encyclopedia of the American conscience it could be found in our public service announcements. The non-commercial messages began with posters featuring silent film star Mary Pickford, posters used to mobilize the nation for war in 1917. Since then, PSAs have prodded the nation to buy war bonds, buckle up for safety, take a bite out of crime and just say no.

As NPR's Brooke Gladstone reports, the history of PSAs amounts to a sort of chronology of our national obsessions.

BROOKE GLADSTONE, Reporter:

When ad makers want to sell a political issue they don't make an ad that looks like an ad. Who would believe it? Usually they make it look like a public service announcement. Take this clip from a Coalition to Defend America commercial, which resounded through New Hampshire just before the primary.

EXCERPT FROM COMMERCIAL

1ST ANNOUNCER: Mr. President, we have a national emergency. We've detected a ballistic missile launched at the U.S. from the Middle East. Mr. President, I can't shoot it down. We have no defense against missile attack.

2ND ANNOUNCER: What you just saw could happen.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

In a bid for credibility, the coalition dramatizes its position with the urgency of a classic PSA. PSAs worked so well for the first world war that the government convened a War Advertising Counsel to sell the second. Radio's Fibber McGee was enlisted.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

1ST MAN: As I was saying, McGee, we are putting on a drive to sell defense bonds and stamps.

FIBBER MCGEE: Oh, swell. I got a great slogan for you.

1ST MAN: You have? What is it?

FIBBER MCGEE: Every time you buy a bond, you slap a Jap across the pond.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

The war advertisers sold hatred of the enemy along with war bonds and rationing.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

3RD ANNOUNCER: America's fighting men need meat, the best meat, plenty of it.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

Victory showed the power of American might abroad and American advertising at home. Americans planted 50 million victory gardens. They offered up millions of pounds of scrap rubber, tin and steel. They spent \$35 billion on war bonds.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

2ND MAN: [singing] Could call 'em keep me free bonds/or better times to be bonds/Get out and buy those E-bonds / It's the all American way.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

In the '50s, danger loomed again. Russia had the bomb.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

1ST GROUP: [singing] There was a turtle by the name of Bert-

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

And again the strategists in Washington saw the need to mobilize America. They came up with new PSAs for the classroom featuring Bert the turtle who, in the event of nuclear holocaust knew just what to do - duck and cover.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

2ND GROUP: [singing] Duck and cover\He did what we all must learn to do you and you and you and you, duck and cover.

MARCUS RASKIN, National Security Staffer:

The question was how do you deal with fear.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

Marcus Raskin was on the staff of the national security council in 1961. He recalls that the government administered civil defense messages to the American people as a will-stiffener, in the popular phrase of the day, and not just for domestic consumption. The message was meant every bit as much for the Russians.

MARCUS RASKIN:

If you had will-stiffening, what you were able to do was show an enemy that you were capable of emptying out a city - imagine emptying out a city like New York – which would show the strength of the American people. And their negotiators prepare to take and ride out a nuclear attack. The whole thing was insane, in my view, just crazy and sad.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

3RD MAN: Here's Tony going to his Cub Scout meeting. Tony knows the bomb can explode any time of the year, day or night. He is ready for it. Duck and cover. Atta boy, Tony, that flash means act fast.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

In the end, President Kennedy backed off on civil defense. The public was growing skeptical that protection against the bomb was possible at all. By the early '60s, the public needed problems it could solve.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

4TH MAN: Say, aren't you Smokey the forest fire prevention' bear? Boy- or bear, you've got a great place here. I'm nuts about it.

SMOKEY THE BEAR: Then why burn it down?

4TH MAN: Me?

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

3RD GROUP: [singing] Buckle up for safety, buckle up\Buckle for safety, always buckle up\Put your mind at ease, tell your rider please\Get your seat belt buckled, everybody buckle up.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

GIRL: [singing] Please, please don't be a litter bug\cause every litter bit hurts.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: By the mid-60s, the country was suddenly less accessible to cure by catchy jingle. Ruth Wooden is president of the privately funded Advertising Council, the successor to the War Advertising Council which continued to tug on the national conscience after the war.

RUTH WOODEN, President, Advertising Council:

When we had our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary a couple of years ago we did a retrospective and what I observed was that, in fact, it was a snapshot of not only how we looked but the issues we cared about, decade by decade.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

5TH MAN: The mind is a terrible thing to waste. Send a check to the United Negro College Fund.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

As problems like littering gave way to poverty and racial inequality, they naturally became harder to solve through advertising. The War Advertising Council's propaganda campaign had managed to forge a national identity from the country's disparate regions but consensus was breaking down. Wide swathes of the nation felt little commitment to racial equality, for example, and mixed messages were coming from Washington, as well. How do you take on a health hazard like smoking when the tobacco industry is subsidized by the government? Very gently.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

6TH MAN: Dr. William M. Christopherson, University of Louisville, gave up smoking cigarettes.

6TH MAN: I'm the professor of pathology and we have a large number of patients in our university hospitals and I realized that we had gone a period of some 13 years without seeing a squamous carcinoma, which is the common type of lung cancer, in a person that was not a smoker. That convinced me that perhaps one would be well advised not to smoke cigarettes or if you were smoking, to give them up.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

Not exactly the hard-hitting approach likely to persuade the public to snuff out its butts. It took more than 20 years of consensus building to allow the portrayal of a villain that the whole nation could despise.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

7TH MAN: We need more cigarette smokers, pure and simple. Every day 2,000 smokers stop smoking. Another 1,100 also quit. Actually, technically they die. That means that this business needs 3,000 fresh new volunteers every day. So forget about cancer, heart disease, emphyzema, stroke stuff. Gentlemen, we're not in this business for our health. [laughter]

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

The American Cancer Society found that TV-savvy teens responded to warnings that they are being manipulated. Pregnant women responded to the message that smoking can hurt the babies they carry. Other addicted adults may respond to health messages or they may not. PSA makers spend most of their time puzzling out not one, but many approaches. By the late '80s, you could no longer sell with a single song. You had to hammer away from all sides.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

8TH MAN: This is your brain. This is drugs. [sound of egg frying] This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

Jenna Morrison helped to found Partnership for a Drug Free America in 1987. She says the fried egg commercial, though it prompted snickers from some older teens, worked effectively on 12-year-olds, its intended audience.

JENNA MORRISON, Founder, Partnership for a Drug Free America: With cocaine, for instance, that was very, very appropriate because cocaine is something that could send you to an emergency room that night. With marijuana it's much subtler. The effects are harmful but in a much different way.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

9TH MAN: This is a real story.

10TH MAN: Marijuana, you know, cost me a lot of things. I always liked my old neighbors, you know, never really caused any trouble. I was always a good kid. It's just crazy to think what really happened to me. I was a good kid, straight A student. Next thing I know, I'm gettin' thrown out my house and it's like, you know, I just became a total loser.

JENNA MORRISON:

You have to bear in mind there are no- no single ad is intended to say everything to everybody. They are very precise so sometimes people will single one out and act as if the strategy is to change the whole public with that message and that's not the way it works.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

The PSA industry was born at a time when the goal was to save American lives and the message was easy to deliver. Now the goal is the same but the message is a lot harder to hear.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

11TH MAN: There, I'm naked, see? And what I have here is a condom, a latex condom. I wear one whenever I have sex, not whenever it's convenient or whenever my partner thinks of it - every time. Look there, is very easy to open and it's a breeze to put on. Just think of this helpful demonstration and remember you can be naked without being exposed.

FRED KROGER, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.:

There is essentially no middle course available on AIDS. Almost any message that we might want to put out about AIDS is going to find folks who are opposed to that message and the opposition does come from every side. Fred Kroger [sp], who works for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said that it took the CDC years to convince the networks that their refusal to run ads that mentioned condoms interfered with public health. But in the history of PSAs, never has consensus been harder to forge than in the campaign against AIDS. Gay rights groups felt that their voices should be seen and heard in the forefront in the fight against AIDS, while others argued about the timing. And other groups said the case should be made for abstinence.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

1ST WOMAN: I don't look back and regret ever not sleeping with someone. I know in the long run I'm going to be much better off.

2ND WOMAN: Respect yourself, protect yourself.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

The argument over AIDS education illustrates how far the country has fractured again into separate communities with contradictory concerns. Ruth Wooden, of the Advertising Counsel, said that now most public service advertising occurs on the local level because national drives don't seem to work like they used to. For one thing, local TV and radio stations prefer to run their own good will campaigns. For another, the campaigns that originate from Washington almost always sound like politicking. When Nancy Reagan told us to just say no, many saw that as her husband's answer to drug treatment centers. When President Bush referred to a thousand points of light, many heard a call to end government funded social services. When a president makes a pitch - any pitch - what the public hears is politics.

EXCERPT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

3RD WOMAN: The shots fired and he was killed. It really hurt. Why did this have to happen?

PRES. BILL CLINTON:

Unfortunately, Alicia's story is all too common, children with their childhood taken from them. Fear of violence is robbing our children of their future. We must take away that fear and give them hope.

ANNOUNCER: Do something now. Call 1-800-

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

President Clinton's call for calm in the streets may present an appealing portrait of compassionate leadership, but as a PSA it's a flop, according to the lessons learned by the Advertising Council over five decades. It is completely lacking in what the Council calls 'the ask.' The public is offered no clear cut solution, only an impression of hopelessness and despair. People don't respond to a pitch like that.

MARCUS RASKIN: Society itself is on a constant roller coaster ride of fears and insecurities.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

Again, Marc Raskin, co-founder of the Institute of Policy Studies, formerly on the staff of the National Security Council.

MARCUS RASKIN: I find it amazing that a nation as rich as the United States is as fearful as we are.

BROOKE GLADSTONE:

In an era when the country is not engaged in a foreign war but fighting on a thousand fronts at home, battle orders cannot dispensed with a single voice. The American Cancer Society says it is running far fewer national PSAs because the evidence shows that slogans alone don't work. The public has already heard everything and they respond better to local PSAs backed by local programs.

If McGruff wants to take a bite out of crime, he'd better come to town and organize. This is Brooke Gladstone in New York.