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### Who let the dogs out?

#### *Alpha Dogs*

*How political spin became a global business*

James Harding

London: Atlantic Books, 2008, £9.99

Reviewed by 'Consultant'

In early 2006, a Nepali citizen was kidnapped by Maoist rebels. He had been carrying out opinion surveys on behalf of (pollster) Stan Greenberg's US firm, to find out what the Nepali people believed about their country. In return for his release, the Maoists demanded not money, nor the release of political prisoners, but the polling data.<sup>1</sup>

The background to this story is told in *Alpha Dogs*, written by James Harding, a former reporter for the *FT*, and published just as he was promoted to editor of *The Times*. His is an important book on the underexplored global influence of US pollsters and 'political consultants'. Even if not the best possible book on the subject – more later – it is essential reading nonetheless for the light it shines into a shadowy world.

Over recent decades elections all around the world have been subject to international influence managers, known as 'political consultants', who are usually based in and share the

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<sup>1</sup> *Alpha Dogs*, p. 227

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collective assumptions of Washington. For example, a firm of political consultants (*PN & A*) once boasted of 'more than 300 political campaigns and public affairs projects in 40 states and in 33 countries' (which included South Africa, El Salvador, Poland, Nicaragua and Egypt).<sup>2</sup>

Harding's way into this largely unknown political activity is via one set of such practitioners and their war stories, from a formerly dominant firm called Sawyer-Miller, the remnants of which are now buried inside Weber Shandwick.<sup>3</sup> Minor Wasp film-maker David Sawyer and advertising man Scott Miller (one of the original 'Mad Men' responsible for '*Coke Is It*') met in the 1970s and began working together on local US election campaigns. Some of their initial success came by taking lessons learned from focus groups set up to market mouthwash, and applying these to electioneering. Then they took their tactics – primarily TV ads, non-stop polling and sound bite political messages - further afield, on the premise that 'The things that drive elections are the same in Nebraska as they are in Ghana.'<sup>4</sup>

By 1982 the Sawyer Miller Group (SMG) was formally launched with vaguely idealistic claims of using modern communications to create a new bond between rulers and ruled, even to topple dictatorships and autocratic governments. Soon SMG had clients around the world and this is where the book grows in importance.

Readers of *Lobster* have a special interest in US international influence, particularly where it is less than transparent. The international work of US political consultants – some of it under false names in obscure hotel suites booked under cover identities – lies somewhere on a spectrum which runs from, at one end, boasting loudly of your influence as a

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2 <<http://web.archive.org/web/20010202020200/www.pnoble.com>>

3 <[www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=BSMG\\_Worldwide](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=BSMG_Worldwide)>

4 Mark McKinnon, the Sawyer Miller alumnus responsible for George W Bush's 2000 and 2004 ad campaigns, quoted in *Alpha Dogs* p. 7.

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friend of the candidate;<sup>5</sup> to the activities of such organisations as George Soros' pro-democracy Open Society Institution; through the somewhat dubious *National Endowment for Democracy*;<sup>6</sup> to finally (and hardly referenced by Harding) the CIA's strategic tilt over the last 30 years from covert to overt, from 'Quiet Americans' to 'democracy-building' and other euphemisms.<sup>7</sup>

It is to the considerable discredit of the journalistic profession that far too little of this important activity has been discussed to date, except of course when consultants want it written about <sup>8</sup> (presumably in order to drum up new business). One might say that while perhaps too much has been written recently on 'spin',<sup>9</sup> with diminishing returns, far too little has come out in public about the deeper influence of these international consultancies, who hide behind the arras yet claim somehow to change the history of the world.

Harding's book is at least a first draft of some parapolitical narratives, filling in important detail and telling some important new stories. He writes, for instance, on various Israeli elections (including Shimon Peres against Begin, when SMG were brought in by the Bronfman family);<sup>10</sup> Peru

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5 Lord Gould – former (?) pollster Philip Gould – is a prime example in the UK.

6 The shadier activities of the NED are comprehensively discussed at e.g. <[www.iefd.org](http://www.iefd.org)>

7 See William Blum *Rogue State*, chapter 18, for a detailed account of what Blum calls US 'attempts to overthrow more than 50 foreign governments, most of which had been democratically elected' (listed at <<http://killinghope.org/bblum6/overthrow.htm>>).

8 In Mexico, rival candidates boast of the importance of 'their' US consultants whereas in France, for example, the presence of a US consultant is an election-losing secret.

9 Despite the subtitle of the book, possibly inserted by the publisher, Harding is not really interested in 'spin', which apart from anything else is first and foremost a British term (derived from cricket).

10 A short but useful academic overview has since been published – see 'Falafel and Apple Pie', Dahlia Scheindlin and Israel Waisman-Manor (in *Routledge Handbook of Political Management*, 2009)

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1990, where their novelist candidate Mario Vargas Llosa ignored their advice and an apparently impregnable lead evaporated;<sup>11</sup> Venezuela, where they were allowed to spend 10 times more per head than in the US (their candidate still lost); South Korea where they worked for Kim Dae-Jung (who they encouraged to leave politics for a few years before returning to campaigning with a nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize under his belt: he won the presidency in 1997); Chile, guiding the country to come out against the dictatorship of General Pinochet (with Soros again hovering in the background, SMG services never came cheap); Czech Republic (Vaclav Havel) and Poland (Lech Walesa).

In the UK?

As well as working across the world from Colombia to Nigeria, did SMG come to the UK? Yes, though the little Harding tells us is not as revealing as it might be: a leading US consultant has said he was working for the Labour party, courtesy of Patricia Hewitt, long before the well-known 1990s assistance from the Clintonites (this is still supposed to be a secret<sup>12</sup>). This influence has continued: after the Iraq war Labour paid £530,372 to Mark Penn, a Washington-based adviser to Hillary Clinton. During the run-up to the 2005 election Penn ran secret polling of British voters from his company's call centre in Denver while he stayed at the Waldorf Hotel in London and advised Tony Blair.<sup>13</sup>

Harding tells us a lot which is new about the toppling of President Marcos by former convent girl Corazon Aquino in

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<sup>11</sup> Already told by Vargas Llosa himself in his wonderful memoir *A Fish in the Water* (1994), as well as by his son Alvaro in *Granta* in 1991.

<sup>12</sup> See however Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> After the election, Blair sent Penn a signed photograph declaring: 'Mark, you were brilliant. Thank you.' In 'The Price of Spin', David Charter and Sam Coates, *The Times*, 25 April 2006.

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1986. Aquino ran when her husband – Marcos' political rival – was murdered at Manila airport on his return to challenge the president.<sup>14</sup> SMG sent Mark Malloch Brown, a journalist with a South African background who had worked for *The Economist*.<sup>15</sup> Malloch Brown developed what SMG called a 'backboard shot': if one can't feed a story to state-controlled media, play it off the international media, knowing the local press will feel honour bound to report the coverage. 'Our one access to daylight was the US media and its knock on to the Filipino media...It was a huge, huge stitch-up.'<sup>16</sup>

### Iran 2009

Harding's description of the events of Manila 1986 may shed some light on the still under-explored Iranian elections of 2009 and on the uncertainty in the days and weeks which followed.<sup>17</sup> The re-elected Iranian President ('no gays in Iran') Ahmadinejad<sup>18</sup> has – since his success in holding power in disputedly 'democratic' elections<sup>19</sup> – claimed there was international interference in the election process, by which he probably means by the US. But just because the Iranian government claims interference – and indeed hosts 'show trials' of suspected perpetrators – this does not automatically

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14 Marcos had himself been assisted by a US consultant, Joseph Napolitan, when running for President in 1969. See *Alpha Dogs* p. 120.

15 Former Cabinet Minister Baron Malloch-Brown, recently UN Deputy Secretary General and then at the FCO, who stopped working for Gordon Brown's Labour government earlier this year.

16 Malloch-Brown, quoted in *Alpha Dogs* p. 130.

17 Just as the Shah's Persia was perhaps the only state ever brought down by cassette, the present Iranian government will go down in history for playing 'The Lord of the Rings' on state television to coax potential street protestors into staying at home.

18 This is true in the sense that once discovered Iranian homosexuals are executed or forced to undergo a sex change.

19 A somewhat curious designation: Freedom House places Iran in the company of China, Russia, Zimbabwe, Cuba and Libya when it comes to political freedoms and civil liberties (democracy is famously not only about voting).

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mean there was *no* US interference (which would probably have to be run through the British embassy, as the US have no official base in Tehran).<sup>20</sup>

Consider two less-discussed events around the June 12 election: first, there has been much talk about the ‘spontaneous’ Twittering by dissidents and the impact on Iranian voters, but research shows the facts to have been more – let’s call them – complicated<sup>21</sup> (or indeed ‘just none of them appear any longer to be true’).<sup>22</sup> And in an eerie echo of some SMG campaigns from the past, a major story appeared in the turmoil immediately after this election: it was claimed documents had just emerged (good timing) directly implicating Ahmadinejad in the assassination of a Kurdish opposition leader in Vienna,<sup>23</sup> as one member of an Iranian terror commando unit who were responsible for the 1989 execution-style slayings.

Within a fortnight of the election Iran said it had caught the ring-leaders, including Hossein Rassam, an Iranian employed by the British embassy as their chief political analyst; it said those arrested had ‘confessed’ to ‘provoking people, causing tension and creating media chaos.’<sup>24</sup> At his trial Rassam said ‘the embassy had allocated a budget of

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20 By way of background, see the recent AP report, quoted at <[www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/20/kian-tajbakhsh-iranianame\\_n\\_326933.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/10/20/kian-tajbakhsh-iranianame_n_326933.html)>, and an interesting overview at <<http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/banking-on-a-velvet-revolution-1.500985>>

21 <[www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/weekinreview/21cohenweb.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/21/weekinreview/21cohenweb.html)>

22 <<http://trueslant.com/joshuakucera/2009/06/15/what-if-we-are-all-wrong-about-iran/>>

23 Widely reported in German-language media – e.g. <[www.krone.at/krone/S25/object\\_id\\_\\_149526/hxcms/index.html](http://www.krone.at/krone/S25/object_id__149526/hxcms/index.html)> – and glossed in English at <[www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2009/6/irankurdistan473.htm](http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2009/6/irankurdistan473.htm)>. See also <[www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=1212](http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=1212)>.

24 Michael Slackman, ‘Top Reformers Admitted Plot, Iran Declares’, *New York Times*, 4 July 2009.

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£300,000 to set up links with political groups, individuals and activists.<sup>25</sup>

The willingness of Iran to detain hundreds of people at a time and use torture on them is one side of this story. For the other perhaps Baron Malloch-Brown will comment on the similarities or otherwise with the 'provocations and media chaos' generated by the 'backboard shots' he orchestrated against Marcos in 1986.

### Weaknesses

Harding's book suffers from one major difficulty: the stories told by political consultants are almost inevitably self-serving and are not (so far) backed up by documents accessible to scholars. The book is essentially drawn from what consultants say – Harding says it is based on 'about two hundred interviews'<sup>26</sup> – and uses far too little in the form of primary source material (such as background briefing notes for candidates and parties written by the consultants, many of whom came to prominence as academics or journalists and are comfortable with communicating at length on paper). This is not history.

To take one specific example, Harding repeats the claim that the 1996 Russian election was won for Yeltsin by US consultants, who said they had a back channel to Clinton. This is one tale we have heard before: the consultants involved spread their story across the cover of *Time* magazine.<sup>27</sup> Harding in turn writes that Yeltsin won with 'the help of

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<sup>25</sup> <[www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article6788611.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6788611.ece)> It has since been widely reported that Hossein Rassam was sentenced to four years in jail at the end of October 2009.

<sup>26</sup> *Alpha Dogs* p. 233

<sup>27</sup> M. Kramer, 'Rescuing Boris', *Time*, 15 July 1996.

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(pollster Dick) Dresner and his colleagues from California.’<sup>28</sup>

But this is only the consultants’ version, albeit published on the front cover of *Time* with the line ‘Yanks to the rescue’. In reality there is a confusion of accounts as to whether Yeltsin benefited from the work of the consultants, e.g. *The New York Times* (‘when all the real decisions were made, they – the Americans – were not present’<sup>29</sup>) and a White House insider account which refers to the consultants’ ‘minuscule influence’.<sup>30</sup> Another respected commentator doesn’t even mention political consultants, American or not;<sup>31</sup> yet another writes that the 1996-1999 period was the ‘era of unlimited flights of fantasy’<sup>32</sup> for consultants. This confusion has been summarised as ‘No doubt all have strong motives for telling a partial version of what happened, for reasons of commercial advantage, pique, or local or national pride.’<sup>33</sup> We will need to wait for documents to surface, so that some history can be written, rather than just anecdotes gathered into a book.

Another weakness stems from Harding relying mostly on the more talkative consultants. We know there are Republicans who are effective political consultants, but hear little about them from Harding (most of the few books in the area have been written by those best known for advising Democrat candidates so Harding missed an opportunity to balance the picture). And what of those firms – one prominent UK PR company comes to mind – with a history of working for

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28 *Alpha Dogs* p. 219

29 *New York Times* 9 July 1996

30 Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (New York: Random House, 2002)

31 Y. Brudny, ‘In Pursuit of the Russian Presidency: Why and How Yeltsin Won the 1996 Presidential Election’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 255-275, 1997.

32 Aleksei Sanaev, ‘Vybory V Rossii: Kak eto Delaetsia’, Os’-89, 2005, p. 8, quoted in ‘Russia: Electoral Campaigning in a “Managed Democracy”’, Derek S. Hutcheson (in *Routledge Handbook of Political Management*, 2009).

33 Review by Sebastian Cody, *Journal of Political Marketing*, vol.2/2, 2003.

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dictatorships, in Africa and elsewhere? Being led by SMG consultants means Harding shows us only one kind of client and one kind of work.

There is a further problem, deeper than just the unreliable evidence on which Harding relies. Some academic accounts suggest the US may in fact have had less influence – there may be less ‘Americanization’ of politics – than Harding assumes.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps local – e.g. national – politics is more resilient and resistant to outside influence than SMG would claim.

Nonetheless David Sawyer and Scott Miller were among the first to understand the power of television to influence elections,<sup>35</sup> which they called ‘electronic democracy’. Even if there has been a concomitant growth in ‘democratisation’ some of us – Harding included – are sceptical of where this and other aspects of the ‘permanent campaign’ have led us.

This book is about how the world really works and so needs to be read, if only as an inspiration for more research. It closes with another quote from former SMG player Mark Malloch Brown: ‘I am appalled by our legacy’.<sup>36</sup>

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34 See e.g. the extended discussion in Fritz Plasser with Gunda Plasser, *Global Political Campaigning*, (Westport Conn., Praeger Publishers, 2002).

35 TV is no longer at the cutting edge: database manipulation is where it’s at these days, computerised segmentation derived from direct mail and technically known as ‘propensity modelling’.

36 *Alpha Dogs*, p. 224