

PM: Advertising for the Best Military and Government Money Can Buy

By Polly Mann

WAMM's name tells you that the organization is against militarism. True enough. But militarism is the undergirding for the force that WAMM is up against—an oppressive economic system with its mercenary arm—the military—standing in the wings. (That mercenary arm is not always called upon; its presence as an underlying threat is enough for the economic system to be able to exert its will in the world.)

Here, in the U.S.—and also as an export to other countries—corporations constantly deliver messages to influence public opinion in order to get people to buy whatever it is they are selling. These messages are marketed to the public through advertising.

Advertising, then, is a cost of doing business. According to Adbusters magazine, spending per person in the U.S. was \$276 in 1986; in 2011 it was \$498. (You may be curious about the magazine itself. It is published in Canada in large format—about 9"x12"—and is heavily illustrated in full color. It's rather expensive—\$8.95 per copy, but that's because it has no advertisers paying to run ads in it. Its content deconstructs ads and parodies advertising messages.) Adbusters asks the question: "What's the point of living in one of the most advanced, dynamic, and affluent nations on Earth if we're feeling stressed out and anxious all the time?" Oh yes, the average number of ads we're exposed to each day is 3,000!

I don't know if the amount spent on promoting the military or political campaigns was included in the figures, but advertising is used to market both.

Militarism is heavily marketed through advertising. It takes many forms, including ads encouraging the young to travel to exotic places and/or enjoy a \$20,000 bonus (seldom actually awarded at the time) through enlistment in the military. Then there's the promotion of weaponry—specialized, and rarely reaching the public's eye. But online, you can discover publications such as the National Defense Magazine with lots of names of munitions manufacturers and their products. One fascinating item bore the Orwellian title, "See How Companies Like Howe & Howe Technologies Achieve Peace with Solidarity."

You can hardly say that advertisers and marketers are directly responsible for war because they don't manufacture arms, but they can act as tools by the forces that receive direct economic benefit from war—many big corporations in this country, and they are part of the economic system upon which this country rests.



Original Adbusters magazine poster, calling for Occupy of Wall Street in 2011. (Incorporates the 3-dimensional work of Arturo Di Modica titled “Charging Bull.”)

Then, there are the political ideas, ideologies, and candidates’ campaigns that are sold, or “marketed” to the public through advertising. Here, in the U.S., where more and more checks on power have disappeared, we see private money from competing groups and super-wealthy individuals like Sheldon Adelson, the Koch Brothers, and George Soros working to dominate the message.

It’s estimated that as much as \$8 billion will be spent this election cycle compared with \$3 billion spent in the 2010 election and \$5.3 billion in 2008. Most observers agree that the reason for the increase is the 2010 Supreme Court ruling in the Citizens United case that allows what used to be considered “electioneering

communications. "Now corporations and unions can spend unlimited money for TV advertising for political candidates and causes (and guess who has the most money?)."*

More than ever the saying rings true: "We have the best government money can buy."

This, in spite of what the public thinks. A 2010 CBS News/New York Times poll found that 86 percent of respondents believed it important to limit campaign spending, but public opinion won't matter much because it's hard to believe that either major political party would support such a limitation.

Are we then hopelessly locked into a system where the money of giant corporations and billionaires can buy favoritism for continued militarism and their choice of political representation? Well, now we're back to the magazine Adbusters. It has done more than parody ads. It actually launched the Occupy Movement by encouraging people to challenge Wall Street.

*Some state laws, including those of Minnesota, have mitigating effects on electioneering because they require disclosure of spending. These states have been sued by corporate interests, but Minnesota has, so far, continued to enforce disclosure.

Polly Mann is a cofounder of WAMM. Her column appears regularly in this newsletter.