Institutionalizing Press Relations at the Supreme Court: The Origins of the Public Information Office

Jonathan Peters, University of Missouri

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Institutionalizing Press Relations at the Supreme Court: The Origins of the Public Information Office

By Jonathan Peters
Frank Martin Fellow, Ph.D. Candidate
Missouri School of Journalism

Abstract

At the Supreme Court, the press is the primary link between the justices and the public, and the Public Information Office (PIO) is the primary link between the justices and the press. This paper explores the story of the PIO’s origins, providing the most complete account to date of its early history. That story is anchored by the major events of several eras—from the Great Depression policymaking of the 1930s to the social and political upheaval of the 1970s. It is also defined by the three men who built and shaped the office in the course of 40 years.
I. Introduction

Anna Nicole Smith drew a big crowd in 2006 when she arrived at the Supreme Court of the United States. The former Playboy model and reality-TV star was there to watch the oral argument in her own case, an effort to claim part of her late husband’s estate (Biskupic, 2006). Photographers swarmed her, one bystander shouted that she was a “goddess,” and the public line to attend the argument wrapped all the way around the Court’s plaza (Reinert, 2006). As the writer Jonathan Turley noted, Smith’s appearance generated more attention and news “coverage than it would if Chief Justice John Marshall returned from the dead for the argument” (Turley, 2006).

Once in the courtroom, however, where cameras are not allowed, Smith quickly blended in, “just one more face, barely perceptible amid about 300 visitors” (Biskupic, 2006). Indeed, it appeared that few in the “gallery even knew she was there, sitting halfway back in the public section, quietly wiping away tears” as Justice Stephen Breyer talked about Smith’s late husband, the billionaire oilman who married Smith when she was 26 and he was 89 (Reinert, 2006). At the end of the argument, Smith slipped out the Court’s side door, then negotiated through a throng of photographers. She made no statements and signed no autographs. She just smiled a few times before sliding into a dark sport-utility vehicle parked on the street (Lattman, 2006; Biskupic, 2006).

*Slate* writer Dahlia Lithwick wrote at the time, “I would love to tell you that [Smith] did something, anything, to distinguish herself from the thousands of appellants who have brought their cases into these marble walls. But the court has worked its magical spell of blandness, even upon [Smith], and she is just another litigant with a probate dispute today” (Lithwick, 2006). And yet she did distinguish herself, in dramatic fashion, if only because her
presence created a media frenzy. News outlets from around the country staked out the Court just to get photos of her arriving and leaving. Others requested extra seats in the courtroom, and still others, quite a few covering the place for the first time, asked Court officials for help and guidance (Arberg, 2011). They did not know where to begin.

At the center of the media frenzy was the Public Information Office (PIO), the institutional liaison between the Court and the public and news media. Its staff credentialed reporters to attend the argument, fielded requests from broadcasters to shoot video around the plaza, and answered questions about the Court’s traditions and procedures (Arberg, 2011). However, the staff did not hold a press conference about the case, did not distribute news releases, and did not offer any analysis or interpretation of the briefs or oral argument.

The next day, the PIO intern, a college student, asked one of his coworkers about the origins of the office (Arberg, 2011). He wanted to know where it came from and how it operated in the beginning. The coworker did not have concrete answers. Nor did others in the office. The general consensus was that in the 1930s an Associated Press reporter misinterpreted the opinion in the *Gold Clause Cases* and sent out a bulletin misstating the Court’s decision, an error that facilitated the hiring of a press liaison and the creation of the Public Information Office.

In reality, the story of the PIO’s origins is more complicated. This paper is the first to explore that story in depth, providing the most complete account to date of the PIO’s early history. It is worthy of such exploration because the interaction among elites, institutions and the public is of primary importance in a democratic society (Slotnick & Segal, 1998). At the Supreme Court, specifically, the press is the primary link between the justices and the public, and the PIO is the primary link between the justices and the press. To explore the PIO’s early
history, then, is to explore how the Court has attempted to influence the flow of information between elites and the public.

Studies of the Supreme Court and press activities, which focus mostly on news coverage of the Court, cross methodological lines, including historical methods (see, e.g., Davis, 1994; Davis, 2011), interviews (see, e.g., Davis, 1994; Davis, 2011), case studies (see, e.g., Grey, 1968; Davis, 1987), observation (see, e.g., Grey, 1968), quantitative methods (see, e.g., Gates, 1992; Marshall, 1989; Berkson, 1978; Rhode & Spaeth, 1976), and content analysis (see, e.g., Ericson, 1977; Solimine, 1980; Katsh, 1983).

This paper uses historical methods and interviews. First, it relies on a variety of primary sources: correspondence of the justices, memoranda among the justices and other Court officers, internal Court newsletters and bulletins, Court press releases and media advisories, and speeches. These were available through reporters who cover the Court and through (1) the Thurgood Marshall papers, housed at the Library of Congress, and (2) the Lewis F. Powell papers, housed at Washington and Lee University. Second, this paper relies on a variety of secondary sources: books, articles, treatises, monographs, and videos commenting on the Court’s relationship with the press. Third, it relies on interviews with six current or former members of the Supreme Court press corps and three current or former Court staffers. The average interview lasted 1 hour 30 minutes, and all but one was conducted in person.

II. The early days

In the 1930s, the Supreme Court found itself in the middle of Great Depression policymaking. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was lobbying Congress to pass a series of bills, collectively called the New Deal, to improve economic conditions across the country
(Alter, 2007). The bills focused on what historians today call the Three R’s: relief for the unemployed; recovery of the economy; and reform of the financial system (Koman, 1998, p. 39). Although many of the bills passed, with Roosevelt signing them into law, the Supreme Court found several of them unconstitutional.

Consider the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Supported by Roosevelt, who believed prosperous farms would lead to a prosperous America, the Act created the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) (Pub. L. 73-10). Its purpose was to raise the price of commodities through subsidies and scarcity. However, the AAA met an early demise when the Supreme Court ruled in 1936 that the Agricultural Adjustment Act was unconstitutional. Justice Owen J. Roberts, writing for the majority, said a “statutory plan to regulate and control agricultural production [is] a matter beyond the powers delegated to the federal government" (United States v. Butler, 1936). Just one year earlier, the Court had struck down Title I of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which created the National Recovery Administration, responsible in general for stabilizing wages and prices (Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States, 1935).

Frustrated and determined to get around the Supreme Court, Roosevelt used the Senate Majority Leader to propose and push the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937, often called the court-packing plan (Parrish, 2002, p. 24). Among other things, it would have granted the president the authority to appoint up to six additional justices to the Court, one new member for every sitting justice older than 70.5 years. Roosevelt thought that by expanding the size of the Court, he could create a pro-New Deal majority. Although the plan failed, the Court’s independence and image had been threatened, compelling the justices to fight back publicly (Davis, 1994, p. 32). Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, for example,
wrote a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee that challenged the president’s rationale for the court-packing plan. Newspapers republished the letter (“Chief Justice Hughes’s Letter,” 1937).

Amid that political drama, the Supreme Court quietly appointed a member of the clerk’s staff to “handle queries from hundreds of news writers seeking information on court moves that have captured public attention, especially since the New Deal controversies began pouring into the tribunal” (“Supreme Court Gets a ‘Press Contact Man,’” 1936). The idea came from a committee of reporters that pitched the idea to Hughes, and the job ultimately fell to Ned Potter, who had worked in the clerk’s office for eight years recording the Court’s formal minutes.

Potter had no experience in journalism or public relations, and that may have been the point. Court officials emphasized at the time that Potter was not a “press agent” or “public relations counselor.” He would issue no “handouts” or “press releases.” He would not comment on the Court’s opinions and orders, nor would he explain them (“Supreme Court Gets a ‘Press Contact Man,’” 1936). Rather, Potter would maintain a complete set of briefs, opinions and other records for the convenience of the press, he would credential reporters for seating in the courtroom, and he would supervise the press room (Wood, 1936).

Although this marked a significant step for the Court, appointing “an official for the mutual benefit of the press and the Court’s officers,” it did not merit an official announcement (Wood, 1936). No press release, no media advisory, no memo. Nothing. In fact, “[t]he

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1 In 1935, an Associated Press reporter misinterpreted the majority opinion in the Gold Clause Cases and sent out a bulletin misstating the Court’s decision. That error led to a policy change at the Court that allowed reporters to get opinion proofs as soon as the opinions were announced in the courtroom. It is also possible that for Court officials the error illustrated the need for a press liaison.
appointment became known when Potter moved his desk and file cases into the larger of two rooms assigned to the press in the basement of the new … building” (“Supreme Court Gets a ‘Press Contact Man,’” 1936). Those rooms, the Court’s first attempt to institutionalize its relationship with the press, were “remarkably good” for a place “long distinguished [by] its detached attitude” (Wood, 1936). They even included pneumatic tubes that linked the press room with the courtroom, enabling the reporters upstairs “to send copy swiftly down to telegraph and telephone instruments below” (Wood, 1936).

Still, the Court was a laggard in offering physical space to the press and in appointing a press liaison. When the Court moved into its current building and opened the press room, Congress and the White House years before had allocated space for the press (Davis, 1994, pp. 35-36). Likewise, when the Court appointed Potter to be the press liaison, Congress and the White House years before had hired their own press officers (Davis, 1994, pp. 35-36).

For the first few years, Potter basically shuffled paper and made sure the reporters had what they needed to do their jobs. But by the late 1930s, early 1940s, Potter and the Court began to accommodate the press “in ways both large and small” (Davis, 1994, pg. 36). One example involved the selection of cases for oral argument. Since the Judiciary Act of 1925, the Court’s jurisdiction had been primarily discretionary, which meant the justices could choose what cases they heard (Scalia, 1989, p. 850). Before the justices met to discuss the petitions, in a meeting called the “conference,” the chief justice prepared a list of cases that in his view should be considered. Historically, the Court did not distribute that list to reporters, but sometime during Potter’s tenure the Court began to do so (Davis, 1994, p. 36). That enabled the reporters to preview cases and even to write about ones that did not get a hearing.
In 1947, Banning Whittington, who covered the Court for United Press from 1941-1945, replaced Potter. He carried on the largely clerical and administrative tasks of maintaining briefs and opinions for the press, credentialing reporters, and supervising the physical space. But he also took on the role, in his 26-year tenure, of press counselor to the justices and advocate for the press corps. First, to keep the justices informed of news coverage of the Court, Whittington sent memos to chambers that included newspaper and magazine clippings. He also maintained a list of reporters covering the institution and notified the justices when someone joined the beat (Davis, 1994, p. 56). Second, Whittington produced an in-house newsletter, the *Docket Sheet*, which was distributed to all Court employees, including the justices. It featured all manner of personnel news and shoptalk, such as birth and death announcements and retirement stories (Keeffe, 1966). Third, in 1967, after Chief Justice Earl Warren gave a speech about crime control, Whittington conferred with Warren about the lack of news coverage of the speech, discussing with Warren the reasons the speech failed to generate much news (Davis, 1994, p. 57). Whittington did the same for other justices, too, conferring with them about the news coverage of their speeches and opinions.

Meanwhile, as an advocate for the press corps, Whittington recommended changes to Court practices to accommodate press needs.² One such practice was the release of opinions at the end of the term. Historically, the Court released them only on Mondays, and the controversial opinions tended to stack up as the term progressed. As a result, the justices often

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² This isn’t to say Whittington always supported the press or always supported practices designed to improve news coverage of the Court. For example, at one time law professors were available in the press room to answer questions and to help reporters understand the legal issues raised by opinions. They were there, in the fall of 1964, because of an Association of American Law Schools project. It was abandoned, however, just one year later. Reporters often were too rushed to consult the on-duty professor, and many people at the Court, including Warren and Whittington, did not like the project. Of course, whether that program actually would have helped the press is a separate question.
released a dozen opinions, totaling hundreds and hundreds of pages, on a single day in June. That frustrated reporters, who found it difficult to wade through the opinions and to report on them accurately, all with a deadline looming. In 1965, after a lobbying campaign by reporters and others, including Whittington, the Court changed its practice of releasing opinions only on Mondays (Davis, 1994, p. 36).

One year later, the Court reversed its practice of not announcing which decision days would see opinions. Just because it was a decision day did not mean a decision would be released that day. This made it difficult for reporters to plan ahead to be at the Court, so they complained to Warren, who authorized Whittington to “notify reporters in advance of days when decisions would be announced” (Davis, 1994, p. 37). Then, in 1969, amid an effort to deny reporters access to the conference list, Whittington supported the press corps. He wrote to Warren that “it would be a very big handicap for all of them to work without [the list]” (Davis, 1994, p. 60). Whittington and the reporters prevailed.

Around the same time, Whittington was lobbying Warren to release headnotes (i.e., summaries of the ruling and reasoning) with the body of every opinion. Some justices already were doing so, but most were not. Clerks simply prepared the headnotes when the opinions were on their way to the United States Reports, well after they had been released (Davis, 1994, p. 38). That changed when NBC News reporter Carl Stern raised the issue with Chief Justice Warren Burger, in the late 1960s, early 1970s.

“I told Burger the sad story of how I reported a case wrong on a day when the justices dumped a dozen opinions on us,” Stern said. “I told him it would be wonderful if the Court would release headnotes at the same time they released opinions. Then I wouldn’t face some
kind of trauma every time the Court released multiple opinions. Burger agreed … and instructed the Reporter of Decisions to do it” (Stern, 2011).

Whittington also worked with Burger to enlarge the press section in the courtroom. For many years, the reporters sat at tables directly in front of the justices, but that set-up accommodated only half a dozen reporters. Moving the press section to the left side of the room quadrupled that number, and allowed the Court to seat reporters in an overflow area behind the section (Davis, 1994, p. 37). This was a needed change because the number of legal reporters was on the rise. Not everyone, however, liked the move. “One of the effects … was that reporters could no longer eavesdrop on the justice’s whispers to each other while sitting on the bench. Some … complained that due to the poor acoustics … they could not even hear the justices or counsel from the new press section” (Davis, 1994, p. 37).

Finally, in the most noted story involving Whittington, he was neither a press counselor to the justices nor an advocate for the press corps. Instead, he was a minor player in a major event: the release of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Reporters first heard that May 17, 1954, would be a “quiet day” (Kluger, 1975, p. 700). They were working in the press room as the justices conducted business upstairs, releasing opinions on monopolistic practices in milk sales, on collecting indemnity from negligent employees, and on the rights of union workers to picket retail stores (Kluger, 1975, p. 702). It looked like a quiet day, indeed.

But before the Court adjourned, clerk Harold Willey dispatched a pneumatic message to Whittington, who slipped on his coat in the press room, announcing to the reporters, “Reading of the segregation decisions is about to begin in the courtroom. You will get the opinions up there” (Kluger, 1975, p. 702; Huston, 1954). At first he moved so nonchalantly
that Louis Lautier, of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association, later said, “I thought [Whittington] was going to say he was going to lunch” (Bennett, 1985, p. 112). He picked up speed, though, once he got in the hallway. The courtroom was “one floor up, reached [only] by a long flight of marble steps” (Huston, 1954). Whittington ran with the reporters down the hall, up the steps and around the corner, and they arrived just in time to hear Warren begin reading (Huston, 1954).

“I have for announcement,” Warren said, “the judgment and opinion of the Court in No. 1 – Oliver Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka.” It was 12:52 p.m. Downstairs, the Associated Press “carried the first word to the country: ‘Chief Justice Warren today began reading the Supreme Court’s decision in the public school segregation cases. The court’s ruling could not be determined immediately.’ The bells went off in every newsroom in America. The nation was listening” (Kluger, 1975, p. 702). Shortly after Warren announced in full the Court’s ruling and summarized the reasoning, Whittington gathered and distributed copies of the opinion to reporters, before returning to his office and essentially getting out of the reporters’ way. Consistent with Potter’s job description, Whittington did not interpret or otherwise comment on the opinion.

III. The modern era

By the early 1970s, America was at war abroad and with itself. Fighting raged in Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers ignited a debate about the balance between national security and free speech, reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began unraveling the lies of President Richard Nixon, and abortion restrictions divided the country, carving out new socio-religious fault lines. These and many other issues reached the Supreme Court, where Warren Burger had been chief justice since 1969. An energetic and physically imposing man, he
presided over a Court that was, in its own way, as activist as Earl Warren’s, “creating new constitutional doctrine in areas like the right to privacy, due process and sexual equality” (Greenhouse, 1995).

Burger did all he could to preserve the secrecy of the Court's internal operations, and quite frequently he was hostile to the press. Asked by a lawyer at a symposium what he thought of the reporters covering the Court, Burger replied, as he often did: "I admire those who do a good job, and I have sympathy for the rest, who are in the majority" (Greenhouse, 1995). In 1970, a Washington publisher chided Burger for requiring permission before his “State of the Judiciary” speech could be printed (Graham, 1970). Burger reserved special scorn for TV, which he regarded as intrusive (Greenhouse, 1995). He said in 1979 that his constitutional right to privacy allowed him to ban broadcast equipment from his public appearances (Witt, 1979, p. 722), and one time he pushed away a TV cameraman trying to follow him into an elevator (Greenhouse, 1995).

Ironically, though, Burger was a former newspaper freelancer and wrote several of the Court’s most important opinions interpreting the First Amendment and its free-expression guarantees. He also held regular meetings with the press, called “wages-and-hours sessions,” where Burger talked with reporters in the permanent press corps about working conditions and press policies at the Court. Those sessions were informal and generally off-the-record. At one of them, when the Court was renovating a number of rooms, a reporter asked the chief, “Would you like for us to pay rent?” Burger paused before responding, “No, because renters have rights.” Joking or not, Lyle Denniston, who has covered the Court for 61 years, said, “I think that was reflective of his basic attitude” (Denniston, 2011).
In any case, Burger’s “imprint was distinct in the area to which he gave his most sustained attention, judicial administration” (Greenhouse, 1995). He created a number of offices and institutions whose common purpose was to “improve the education and training of participants in nearly all phases of the judicial process,” because he believed “judges could be helped to be more efficient if professional management techniques were imported to the courts” (Greenhouse, 1995). At the Supreme Court, one of the areas that got Burger’s attention was press and public affairs. Whittington retired in 1973, and rather than simply appoint someone to replace him, Burger created a whole new office: the Public Information Office (PIO), led by a Public Information Officer (McGurn, 1997, p. 8).

For the new position, Burger wanted a reporter who understood the news world, and not one trained in the law. A lawyer might be tempted to comment on Court opinions, and those comments might be taken as controlling law. Additionally, Burger wanted someone who had worked for at least five years as a government spokesperson, “someone who understood what State Department spokesman Bob McCloskey once said: ‘Reporters and spokesmen have the same task, to explain what the government is trying to do. The spokesman has an additional job, to help the government succeed’” (McGurn, 1997, p. 47).

Barrett McGurn got that job, beating out 140 other applicants to become the Court’s first Public Information Officer (McGurn, 1997, p. 84). He had three decades of journalism experience—as an Army reporter for *Yank* magazine and as former chief of the Rome, Paris and Moscow bureaus for the *New York Herald Tribune*. After leaving journalism, McGurn was press attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, from 1966 to 1968; embassy counselor for press affairs in Saigon, from 1968 to 1969; and deputy spokesman for the Department of State, from 1969 to 1972. And right before he joined the Court’s staff, for a short time in
1972, he wrote commentaries for the world file of the U.S. Information Agency (Keefe, 1974, p. 1582; Smith, 2010).

McGurn, a “formal man with an impish smile and eyebrows that had a life of their own,” conceived of the PIO, the physical space unchanged from the Whittington era, as a place where reporters could get documentary materials and courtroom seating but not much else. “He was useless and contemptuous of the press corps,” said Stephen Wermiel, who covered the Court for the Wall Street Journal. “He thought the beat was all about handing out the opinions and providing the orders list” (Wermiel, 2011). Others in the press corps felt the same way. Denniston said, “You’d have to break Barrett’s arm to get him to do anything, because he didn’t care about the press” (Denniston, 2011). Tony Mauro, of the National Law Journal, said, “His office wasn’t helpful at all … He was really tough to work with” (Mauro, 2011). And Dick Carrelli, formerly of the Associated Press, described McGurn as “the palace guard” (Carrelli, 2011).

Often, it seemed McGurn was there to preserve secrecy and to insulate the justices, rather than to help the press.³ First, when a reporter would request an interview with a justice, McGurn often did not send the request to the justice. Other times, when he would send the request, he would attach a memo to it that presumed the justice would not do the interview. The vast majority of them included the question, “Shall I tell the reporter you decline?” He might have done so because of the individual press practices of the justices (some generally did not do interviews), but in any case McGurn’s presumption made it easy for the justices to decline. Wermiel summed up the problem this way: “His memos were designed to fend off

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³ One exception was the Court’s in-house newsletter. Late in his tenure, Whittington discontinued the Docket Sheet, and early in his tenure McGurn revived it, much improved and filled with lively articles, some of which made it into the popular press.
reporters, in this sense: ‘I have some obligation to tell you that a reporter has asked a question, but that’s all you need to know; you don’t need to worry about it’ (Wermiel, 2011).

Second, when a reporter asked McGurn for information related to the Court, he rarely provided the information, this despite the “PIO theory” that “there was no such thing as an indiscreet question, only indiscreet answers (McGurn, 1997, p. 41). The columnist Jack Anderson wrote in 1978 that McGurn “is a faithful reflection of his master’s view that the press should be given only what Burger wants them to have, not what they ask for” (Anderson, 1978). He went on to explain the way McGurn deflected questions he did not want to answer:

[It] is a form of Nixonian stonewall: instead of refusing comment, he answers a different question, as if he hadn’t understood the real one. One reporter, thinking McGurn might not have heard him correctly, kept repeating his question. The press officer, like the telephone-answering tape recording, just kept repeating his irrelevant, unresponsive reply. As another victim of McGurn’s non sequiturs put it: ‘Your first impression is that they’re putting you on. Your second impression is that they’re insulting your intelligence’ (Anderson, 1978).

Linda Greenhouse, who covered the Court for 30 years for the New York Times, said McGurn sometimes did more than deflect—he plainly refused to answer questions, and for no apparent reason. In the late 1970s, early 1980s, she was standing in the PIO’s outer office when the phone rang. On the other end was a person asking about the status of a case. McGurn said that was a question for the clerk’s office, so the caller asked for the phone number, only to be told it was a non-public number. “Well, it was no such thing; it was a public number,” Greenhouse said. “You could look in the D.C. phonebook and there it was. McGurn just had the hard-wired instinct not to tell anybody anything” (Greenhouse, 2011).

When he did answer a question, McGurn’s information was not always reliable (Anderson, 1978). For example, he regularly downplayed the seriousness of injuries and
illnesses that befell the justices, exaggerating the bright side. Denniston said in 1978, “I can’t remember a single illness in the last three years where at least one fact was not given in a faulty manner” (Anderson, 1978). Of course, it was not uncommon for the justices to keep the PIO and others in the dark about their injuries and illnesses, but that would explain any absence of information from the PIO, rather than any bad information from the PIO.

In general, too, reporters felt they had to be circumspect around McGurn because he was to Burger what wiretaps were to Nixon. For many years, the press corps suspected that McGurn was spying on them—eavesdropping on their conversations and relaying what he heard to the chief justice. The suspicion was so strong that reporters warned newcomers to the beat that whatever they said in McGurn’s presence could be passed on. “You really had to be careful,” Carrelli said. “You could never rely on [McGurn] to keep comments that you made, in jest or in passing, to himself. That strained our relationship with him” (Carrelli, 2011). In fact, the papers of Justice Thurgood Marshall, released in 1993, do include memos from McGurn to Burger that reported on conversations he overheard among reporters in the press room.

McGurn worked hard to monitor the press corps and to keep the Court’s secrets, but even on his watch did secrets spill out of the Court. In 1978, it became clear that reporters Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong were working on an investigative project about the Court, beginning what McGurn later called “history’s most massive penetration of Supreme Court privacy” (McGurn, 1997, p. 19). That project turned out to be *The Brethren*, published

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4 For his part, McGurn said the Court was not secretive at all. Rather, it operated in a “goldfish bowl.” That was the case, he said, because the briefs were publicly available, the oral arguments were conducted in public, and the justices set out their rulings and reasoning in opinions, also publicly available. Whether or not that makes the Court an open place is up for debate. But for a while, when reporters retired or otherwise left the Court beat, they received goldfish bowls from their colleagues.
in 1979, a sprawling behind-the-scenes account of life at the Court. Woodward and Armstrong enjoyed unparalleled access, according to the book’s introduction:

Most of the information in this book is based on interviews with more than two hundred people, including several Justices, more than 170 former law clerks, and several dozen former employees of the Court. Chief Justice Warren E. Burger declined to assist us in any way ... We obtained internal memoranda between Justices, letters, notes taken at conference, case assignment sheets, diaries, unpublished drafts of opinions and, in several instances, drafts that were never circulated even to the other Justices. By the time we had concluded our research, we had filled eight file drawers with thousands of pages of documents from the chambers of eleven of the twelve Justices who served during the period 1969 to 1976.

McGurn chalked up the security and secrecy breach to two things. One, originally Woodward told McGurn and others that the book would focus on decision-making in Washington, with the Court as a minor player. “The talk of government rather than specific Supreme Court decision making, plus assurances that no one would be asked to betray confidences,” McGurn said, “gave the [investigative] team an entrée to many former law clerks” (McGurn, 1997, p. 20). Two, Woodward’s celebrity helped his project. “Many of the scores of persons approached by Woodward could not resist seeing him,” McGurn said. “Thanks to his presidential expose, he was himself a personality portrayed glamorously in the movies by the ruggedly handsome Robert Redford” (McGurn, 1997, p. 21).

In any case, The Brethren soon sold more than 600,000 copies, earning a spot on the New York Times bestseller list. Hundreds of newspapers ran excerpts, and the press deluged McGurn for comment, all to no avail (McGurn, 1997, p. 22). He had kept the justices aware of the news coverage, but the justices kept their silence. If nothing else, for McGurn the book proved that “with sufficient resources, energy, nerve and guile, the Supreme Court’s security could be breached” (McGurn, 1997, p. 23).
To be sure, that was not the first breach, nor would it be the last. News leaks, in most areas of government, are regarded as regrettable but inescapable. They are a part of doing business in Washington. But at the Court, they are regarded as violations of a sacred trust, based partly on the fear that an unscrupulous investor could profit at the expense of the innocent if he had advance knowledge of case outcomes (Witt, 1979). ABC reporter Tim O’Brien violated that trust multiple times in the late 1970s.⁵ He reported in advance (generally correctly) the votes or delays or outcomes of cases in a variety of areas, including media law, prisoner rights, and affirmative action. McGurn said later that “justices and reporters alike were astonished. How was Tim doing it? What should be done?” (McGurn, 1997, p. 27).

For their part, the reporters were divided. Some said O’Brien was simply doing as reporters do, while others said he was acting irresponsibly. Morton Mintz, of the Washington Post, told McGurn at the time, “Protect your secrets. We have all we can do to study five thousand cases a year and to report on two hundred decisions. If the leaks keep up, we will have to try to match them. Our job is already all but impossible and will be twice as difficult” (McGurn, 1997, p. 27). The justices, naturally, were more upset. Burger estimated that O’Brien’s enterprises cost him “not less than twenty hours on [his] personal schedule” (McGurn, 1997, p. 28). Eventually, after Burger reassigned a Government Printing Office linotyper, who worked in in the Court’s printing unit, the leaks stopped.

One of O’Brien’s leaks involved Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, a 1978 case that took on a life of its own in the press corps and in the PIO. The legal question

⁵ ABC was not the only outlet to break the Court’s sacred trust. In 1973, Time magazine predicted the gist of Roe v. Wade, and in 1977 the National Public Radio reported that the justices had voted 5-3 against reviewing the convictions of three defendants in the Watergate cover-up case. Those votes were supposed to be secret.
was: Did the University of California violate the Equal Protection Clause, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by using an affirmative action policy that resulted in the repeated rejection of a white man’s application to attend medical school? In other words, Bakke was a big case, one that promised to make big headlines and that illustrated to some degree the disconnect among the Court, the PIO and the press.

Because the Court refused to announce when a particular opinion would come down, the press had to stake out the Court, day after day, waiting for Bakke. For weeks news outlets sent multiple reporters to the Court, for weeks NBC and ABC had full camera crews outside, and for weeks editors were on standby. Those days McGurn began at 9 a.m. to field phone calls about Bakke, people asking if the case had come down. He simply told each caller to wait until 10:30 a.m., when the Court customarily released opinions (Trescott, 1978).

It appears McGurn did not make the justices aware of the expense for the press of each day sending multiple reporters, maintaining full camera crews, and so forth. “He probably didn’t view that as his job,” said Carl Stern, formerly of NBC News. “Or he figured it wouldn’t have done much good” (Stern, 2011). McGurn just waved off the hype, saying that every term “there's a big case, the death penalty cases, the tapes of President Nixon. But we all have to wait” (Trescott, 1978).

At the time, the only other case in recent memory that had produced as much anticipation was the Nixon tapes case, United States v. Nixon, a relative bright spot in McGurn’s tenure (Trescott, 1978). The president’s fate hanging in the balance, every

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6 One other bright spot was the press conference McGurn arranged for Justice William O. Douglas, in 1973, to mark his longevity on the Court. A successful event, it drew extensive TV coverage because justices never called press conferences. Two years later, Douglas was back in front of the cameras, with McGurn’s blessing, but it did not go so well. Douglas had suffered a stroke and was struggling to stay on the Court. From his and McGurn’s point of
reporter in D.C. wanted a seat at the oral argument. William H. Rehnquist, the newest member of the Court and a former assistant attorney general in the Nixon administration, recused himself and took no part in the case. As a result, the job fell to him to decide who got into the oral argument—politicians, reporters and citizens alike. Rehnquist, in turn, delegated to the PIO the job of deciding which reporters got in, saying he would take care of the others. McGurn initially suggested that all 300-some seats should go to the press, on the theory that each reporter served a broad audience (McGurn, 1997, p. 8). Rehnquist disagreed and gave McGurn more seats than usual, 92 in total, but not enough to meet demand.

McGurn decided that only one seat would go to each news outlet, a rule that immediately called for exceptions. For example, the two American news wires needed two reporters in the room, one for overall coverage and the other for progress reports as the argument unfolded. So the wires got two seats each. McGurn then moved through a minefield of related issues, addressing each one on the fly: Who would get front-row seats? What is the importance of a news magazine compared with a newspaper compared with a TV network? What about foreign correspondents who cover the U.S.? Reporters from England, France, Germany, Italy and Japan wanted seats (McGurn, 1983, p. 42-43). Finally, playing the role of advocate for the press corps, McGurn arranged for the price of oral-argument transcripts to be reduced (normally, they were $400) and arranged for the transcripts to be expedited so they would be ready 30 minutes after the argument (normally, they took three or four hours to prepare).

view, the justice needed to reassure the country of his competence. One TV interview could do that. But it turned out to be a disaster, as Douglas peered at his questioners and labored to form words.
All in all, McGurn was as inclusive as possible and received only a few complaints out of the hundreds of requests he handled (McGurn, 1983, p. 45). Notably, one of the complaints came from a gossip columnist, whose paper had a seat in the courtroom. It was filled, however, by a legal correspondent. McGurn understood that the columnist, to get color for his copy, needed to be in the courtroom. So he bent his “one seat per outlet” rule, admitting the columnist to the argument. The next day, his column reported that in assigning seats McGurn played favorites with those he knew (McGurn, 1983, p. 45).

IV. Conclusion

The story of the PIO’s origins is anchored by the major events of several eras—from the Great Depression policymaking of the 1930s to the social and political upheaval of the 1970s. It is also defined by the three men who built and shaped the office in the course of 40 years. First, Ned Potter was a glorified clerk. He maintained briefs and opinions for the press, credentialed reporters, and supervised the press room. Court officials emphasized that he was not a “press agent” or “public relations counselor.” Second, Banning Whittington carried on those clerical tasks but also adopted the roles of press counselor to the justices and advocate for the press corps. He sent memos to chambers with newspaper clippings, produced an in-house newsletter, and proposed changes to Court practices to accommodate the press. Third, Barrett McGurn was the first to hold the title Public Information Officer, in charge of an office larger in physical size and resources than Potter’s and Whittington’s. He was a clerk, counselor and advocate, like Whittington, but often it seemed McGurn was there to preserve secrecy and insulate the justices, rather than to help the press. Together, those men—and the events that encouraged the Court to institutionalize its relationship with the press—show that
the story of the PIO’s origins is the story of connecting justices and journalists, in service of
influencing the flow of information about the Court.

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