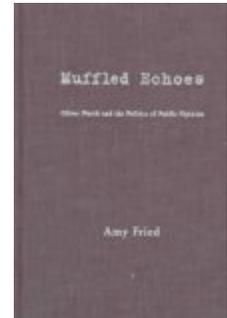




Amy Fried. *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xii + 308 pp. \$83.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-10820-1.



Reviewed by Fred Monardi

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The main argument of *Muffled Echoes: Oliver North and the Politics of Public Opinion*, as stated by author Amy Fried is that public opinion is a political resource. This, in itself, is not very revealing or interesting. What is more interesting is how the book demonstrates that some segments of public opinion are heard and other segments are not heard or are misunderstood. Hence, political elites, the media, and the public may misinterpret the actual state of public opinion.

Fried chose to study public opinion during the Iran-Contra Scandal for several reasons. Most importantly, she wanted to explore the contextual nature of public opinion. Because of the intense media attention and group mobilization, the Iran-Contra hearings make an interesting case study for examining the context in which public opinion develops. She utilized both public opinion polls that were taken at the time of the Iran-Contra hearings and the contributions of focus groups which she conducted to grasp various nuances of public opinion.

The theoretical rationale for her study draws upon the work of V.O. Key and Jurgen Habermas.

Key made the analogy of public opinion as an "echo chamber." In the political system (or echo chamber), there are many different voices--interest groups, activists, elected officials--which attempt to influence and/or understand mass opinion. As Key argues, "Mass opinion is not self generating; in the main, it is a response to the cues, the proposals and the visions propagated by the political activists" (p. 14). Habermas argues that over the course of history, the state of public opinion has shifted from people actively influencing political dialogue to people reacting to how issues are presented to them by elites. This is why Fried does not want to solely depend on public opinion surveys to study the Oliver North phenomenon.

Fried provides an in-depth analysis of public opinion during the Iran-Contra hearings in 1987. She meticulously describes how issues were framed and how personalities were portrayed. The media and political elites (particularly members of Congress) believed that public opinion was in North's favor. However, Fried points out that public opinion surveys that were conducted at the time, and focus groups that she conducted, devel-

oped a different picture of North. According to the author, public opinion was ambivalent toward North. While most people considered North a patriotic American, they did not confer hero status on him.

However, during the hearings, the media provided a portrayal of "Olliemia." Even members of Congress behaved differently because of their perception that North had attained hero status. North was able to convey a sense of patriotism and invoke cultural symbols that made him appear heroic to those watching on television. What is interesting is that this heroic image was not apparent to those in attendance in the hearing room!

Fried does a thorough job of describing how the various actors behaved during the hearings. In Chapter Three, she meticulously describes how North and North's lawyer diverted attention away from constitutional questions and who was responsible for the Iran-Contra dealings by framing the issues as ones of loyalty and patriotism. Fried also describes how public opinion was actually ambivalent toward North. Chapter Four describes the media's interpretation of the North phenomenon. The media did not thoroughly examine the actual state of public opinion but instead focused on the drama of the hearings. Fried raises some normative questions about the ability of the media to adequately report public opinion. Chapter Five focuses on how various interest groups mobilized to try to influence public perceptions of North. Both conservative and liberal groups mobilized in favor of or against North. However, conservative groups were able to mobilize more rapidly and more dramatically. Thus, the media spent more time covering conservative group activity and interpreting that activity as an indicator of public opinion.

Chapter Six examines the members of Congress. It is often difficult for members of Congress to know what their constituents think, and the Iran-Contra hearings were no exception. Fried's

interviews with several members of Congress provide some interesting insights into legislative behavior. These legislators would react in one of three ways: withholding criticism, praising North, or responding to the North phenomenon with criticisms of North's behavior.

Fried provides substantial evidence for the hypotheses derived from the works of Key and Habermas. She adequately discusses Key's and Habermas' theories in Chapters One and Two. However, after Chapter Two, they are infrequently mentioned. She also discusses other theories and concepts relating to public opinion, communication and conversation. The relevance of these additional theories and concepts appears remote or needs more clarification. Other than this questionable assortment of omissions and additions, Fried successfully utilizes a variety of data and information to compose a chronicle on the construction of public opinion.

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