

# *Publishing to Influence:* Regnery and the Role of Books

By Marji Ross



**D**o books reflect a zeitgeist—or create one? People certainly like to *talk* about books. And authors, naturally, *love* to talk about books—mostly their own. (Publishers, too, I must admit.) In fact, there is an entire cable station devoted to books (C-Span's Book-TV), where you can listen to people talking about books 24 hours a day. And all across America, hundreds of thousands of people meet each month (or so) in reading groups to talk about books.

But does all this talk really mean anything? Yes, it probably (but not always) reflects strong sales. It often leads authors to write, and publishers

to publish, more books in the same vein. But how much effect do books actually have on public policy?

The simple answer is: more than you might think.

Take, for instance, the most recent Regnery book to hit #1 on the *New York Times* list: *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry*. That book, and the resulting media tidal wave, dominated the public debate during the final three months of the 2004 presidential election campaign. John Kerry had nowhere to turn without facing the questions and criticisms raised by this book. Matt Drudge blazed the accusations across the Internet. Conservative talk radio reverberated with the Swift Boat Vets' stories about John Kerry's service in Vietnam and his actions when he returned home. Mainstream media vilified the Swift Boat Vets, Regnery, John O'Neill, and anyone else they could think of who might sully John Kerry's reputation.

And everyone was talking about the book.

Correction: Everyone was talking about what was *in* the book. And this is an important distinction, I believe, for publishers who wish to influence the debate. At Regnery, we have a rule: Our publicity campaigns focus on *the news in the book*, not the news of the book.

Clearly, *Unfit for Command* influenced the public debate. Many people believe it influenced the outcome of the election. In fact, the best thing that the *New York Times* has probably ever said about Regnery Publishing was in their belated (reluctant, I assume) review of *Unfit for Command*: "If John Kerry loses the presidential election, *Unfit for Command*, by John O'Neill and Jerome Corsi, will go down as a chief reason."

Seminal books like this become embedded in popular culture. Today, you hear the media talk about a politician being "swift-boated." Similarly, people have adopted Malcolm Gladwell's paradigm-shifting concept when they refer to the "tipping point" in an issue or a movement. And how many of us have seen the bumper stickers calling for a presidential ticket of "Cheney-Voldemort"?

Most books, we must acknowledge, suffer the fate of the proverbial tree falling in the forest. Good, bad, or indifferent, most books are never heard of, because it's not enough just to write a good book. It's not enough, usually, even to write a *great* book. The publisher must also understand how to turn

a book into a megaphone through which the author's ideas are shouted and broadcast and spread throughout the land.

This is not so easy, for a variety of reasons. First, there are more than 175,000 new books published every year. Sadly, as the number of titles increases, the number of book buyers seems to decrease. According to the most recent Census Bureau statistics, bookstore sales have fallen every month this year and were down 4.3 percent for the first third of 2007. You'd probably be surprised to discover how small the book industry actually is, as a business. The total sum of all book sales in 2006 was about \$20 billion. Well, as they say, "a billion here, a billion there, pretty soon we're talking about real money." But when you consider that in a *single quarter* of the last fiscal year, GE sales were \$40 billion, you realize that book sales are a drop in the GDP ocean.

And yet, the power of a book can be enormous. As we have seen, a book can change the course of a presidential election. It can change the course of history. In 1987, Regnery published

*The publisher must also understand how to turn a book into a megaphone through which the author's ideas are shouted and broadcast and spread throughout the land.*



a book called *Red Horizons*, written by Romania's former head of foreign intelligence, Ion Mihai Pacepa. The book exposed the shocking truth about Communist Romania—and, when it was picked up and broadcast into Romania on Radio Free Europe, was credited with inspiring the popular counterrevolution that brought down the regime.

Best-selling books can also push a debate onto the national stage. Take Bernard Goldberg's category-killer book, *Bias*, which finally forced the issue of liberal bias within the media into the national spotlight. Or Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*, which ignited a nationwide debate on the role of race in academic achievement.

So, how can publishers orchestrate certain books, in this industry with too few buyers and far too many products to sell, so that they actually influence the public debate?

Our motto at Regnery has always been to publish "books that challenge the status quo." So we are looking specifically and deliberately for books that provoke, books that will stir controversy, books that people will not just want to talk about but will want to fight about.

And yet, I should rush to point out, Regnery is not the Jerry Springer of the book publishing business. (I think that title was held by Judith Reagan, until she died by that particular sword, at least professionally.) Regnery is both a for-profit business and a mission-based company. We are publicly and personally dedicated to furthering the principles of democracy, freedom, limited government, and respect for the rights of the individual upon which our country was founded and which our soldiers today serve to protect.

In this way we are unique in the publishing

business. We target the best-seller list as most of our New York competitors do (though we hit that list at a far higher rate than they do), but we target the list for its megaphone effect as much as its monetary effect.

Sometimes we take on a book even when we know that the media attention will far outpace the sales potential. There are some

books and some topics (and even some authors) who will attract hundreds of radio and television interviews—and still not drive people to the bookstores. Book sales are virtually impossible to predict in the best of circumstances. When you know a book won't sell, why publish it? At Regnery, our answer is simple: We want to get people talking. And if the issue

is truly important, perhaps the achievement of driving the debate, even without the accompanying sales, is reward enough.

At this point, I hear my boss sighing, worried about the flood of proposals for "important" books I have just encouraged. So let me add this one last point: Regnery has built its reputation for the past 60 years on publishing the nation's most important and influential books in current affairs and public policy, from a conservative point of view. Over the past 10 years, we have also developed a reputation for selling more copies, per title, of our current affairs and public policy books than any other publisher in the country.

Our books, in the end, are both the causes and the echoes of the political and social thunderclaps reverberating throughout the country. With the proper megaphone, a great book can and should be both.

*Ms. Ross is President and Publisher of Regnery Publishing, Inc.*

---

*Best-selling books can push a debate onto the national stage. Take Bernard Goldberg's category-killer book, Bias, which finally forced the issue of liberal bias within the media into the national spotlight.*