

Q & A

Ludlow's Legacy

Kirk Hallahan discusses the role of a "massacre" in shaping public relations.



JAMES THOMPSON

Ninety years ago on April 20, 1914, the Ludlow Massacre took place just outside Trinidad, Colorado. National Guardsmen had been sent to confront striking coal miners living in a tent colony set up by the United Mineworkers of America after the miners were evicted from the camps of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I). After a protracted gun battle and a fire in the tent village, approximately 20 people, including two women and twelve children, had died at Ludlow.

A great public outcry—helped along by unions and the press—ensued. A wave of violence erupted in the mining districts, killing more people, and the federal government sent in approximately 1,700 troops to quell the violence. Unions subsequently held New York industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., a director and part owner of CF&I, responsible. Rockefeller then launched a campaign to vindicate his and other Colorado mining companies.

Kirk Hallahan, an associate journalism professor at Colorado State University specializing in public relations and advertising, is writing a book on Rockefeller's response to the coal strike. He spoke with the *Bullhorn* about the public's perception of the massacre and about Rockefeller's public relations campaign, an early example of how PR functions today.

Rocky Mountain Bullhorn: Even though the name Ludlow Massacre is widely accepted, even by the state legislature, you say the term "massacre" is a misnomer.

Kirk Hallahan: In reality there was a gun battle in which seven men and an 11-year-old boy were killed; [there were fatalities] on both sides, the strikers and the militia people. No one really knows who fired the first shot; it depends on who tells the story. So to characterize it as a massacre by the state militia of strikers can be misleading.

The real tragedy, and what galvanized public opinion so much at the time, was the fact that there were two women and eleven children who suffocated. They had hid out in an earthen pit below the tent colony, to avoid the crossfire, and they—everybody thinks—suffocated because they had pulled a mattress over the top of it and the tent colony was set on fire.

RMB: But isn't setting the tent city ablaze with kerosene—which investigators later found out—or spraying the village with machine guns an aggressive act of violence?

KH: Well, there's a dispute about who set the fire, just as there is a dispute over who fired the first shots. One union organizer, Mother Jones, tells about how the militia rode in with torches and started to torch the tents. Other people argue it was a bullet that hit a kerosene or some other container. Yet a third explanation is that a lantern turned over.

RMB: You seem to accept, then, Rockefeller's comment, "There was no Ludlow massacre."
KH: There is no question that eight people were killed, but it was a two-sided gun battle. Is that a massacre?

But clearly in history, we remember the event because it was labeled a massacre in the newspapers, and the unions did a very good job of promoting it as such.

RMB: Why were the coal companies initially publicly silent about what had occurred, and did that play a major role in defining how history looked upon the events?

KH: I think they were silent because they weren't very astute at dealing with public opinion...and at least two of the three companies were adamant in their opposition to the unions. They were opposed to union representation at any cost. So they took a hardball approach that didn't try to reconcile differences, look at alternative points of view, find the common ground.

RMB: And that's where Rockefeller comes in.

KH: Yes, that's where it really fell upon Rockefeller. ... But on the other hand, the unions were quite astute. They had their own publicity director, Walter Fink, who had been publicizing the union position during the strike for seven months...

So the unions just outstepped the business owners in terms of telling their side of the story, and that's why so much of the story of Ludlow is from a pro-labor standpoint.

RMB: You portray Rockefeller as an unlikely target. You don't think that the high-profile Rockefeller, who misled Congress, who refused to intercede to stop the standoff, and whose family financed the National Guard

units involved in the massacre, you don't think he was responsible in any way?

KH: Rockefeller had a very hands-off approach. ... This was sort of the stance that the Rockefellers had followed with all of their investments. They were not micromanagers.

RMB: But you don't think he was just telling the public that he had a hands-off approach?

KH: There's little evidence, if you look at the correspondence, that he directly told the managers in Colorado what to do. What he did do was send them letters of encouragement and, as they gave him reports, sort of said to use their best judgment, follow their guidance, but he did not physically direct them in any way.

Now, was he implicated? Sure, because clearly, he probably should have interceded, if he had understood the scope of the problem.

RMB: Publicist Ivy Lee and labor-relations specialist William Lyon Mackenzie King were enlisted to help Rockefeller and CF&I's public image: Was this the precursor to modern-day public relations?

KH: Many people see the work that Ivy Lee did for the Rockefellers as one of the seminal events that established modern-day public relations. It certainly created a high level of visibility for the field.

Now, both Rockefeller and Ivy Lee personally were chastised for Ivy's work. There were inaccuracies, for instance, in the bulletins he distributed.