

Defending a Controversial Agency: Edward C. Banfield As Farm Security Agency Public Relations Officer, 1941–1946

Kevin R. Kosar and Mordecai Lee

Edward C. Banfield (1916–1999) was one of the most prominent political scientists and urbanologists in the second half of the 20th century. A long-time professor at Harvard (1959–1999), he was the George D. Markham Professor of Government and was associated with the MIT-Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies (now Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing Studies). Banfield’s prolific scholarship expressed a general skepticism of government’s ability to address major social problems, such as poverty and educational underachievement. That put him in a contrarian position compared to most of his peers, and his work was viewed as validating and contributing to President Richard Nixon’s desire to undo President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Banfield contributed to the intellectual foundations of what later came to be called the neoconservative movement in domestic politics.



Edward C. Banfield, FSA, San Francisco, 1945.

His first book, *Government Project* (1951), investigated the rise and fall of one of the most controversial New Deal projects, the Casa Grande Valley Farms, Inc. (1937–44).¹ This cooperative farm in Arizona was established and overseen by the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Banfield’s book, less known today than his later writings, utilized voluminous FSA office files to provide a detailed assessment of the Casa Grande’s operations.²

Kevin R. Kosar is an analyst in American National Government at the Library of Congress’s Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC. Mordecai Lee is a professor of governmental affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The authors thank John Holmes, Ph.D. (University of California, Berkeley, 2008), now teaching at California State University East Bay, for his research assistance.

¹ Edward C. Banfield, *Government Project* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951).

² Kevin R. Kosar, “A Nearly Forgotten Classic Study in Public Administration: Edward C. Banfield’s *Government Project*,” *Public Administration Review* 69, no. 5 (Sept./Oct., 2009): 993–97.

But how did a future urbanologist and professor, who had grown up, studied, and been employed in New England from birth until 1942, fall upon this interesting public administration topic and gain access to such valuable archival records? The answer is that before his graduate studies, Banfield was a public information officer (PIO) for the FSA, with most of his service as a field information specialist at the agency's Western regional office in San Francisco (1943–46). That four-year posting to California provided him with a unique insider's familiarity with the project and access to office files that were on the verge of being discarded because Congress voted to abolish the FSA in 1946. In part, Banfield was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, when few recognized the importance of some of the FSA's old project files and before the increased formalization of National Archives guidelines for disposition of old agency files. But Banfield researched and wrote about it because he was deeply affected by his FSA experience. He worked for the agency for half of a decade and had defended it against many critics.

The purposes of this article are twofold.³ First, it provides insight into the practice and history of government public relations (or PR), a subject not much studied by historians.⁴ In particular, it provides a ground-level exploration of how the field office of a controversial civilian agency sought to promote and defend its programs. Second, this review of a previously unexplored early chapter in Banfield's life contributes biographical information that helps explain the intellectual basis for his later beliefs and scholarship.⁵ As a young man, Banfield was personally and intellectually drawn to the notion of harnessing federal power to improve the lives of the poor. During his time at the FSA, however, he saw firsthand how difficult that can be to achieve. Politics, with its competing stakeholder interests and beliefs, is often hostile to rational problem analysis and implementation. Additionally, federal officials charged with implementing policies frequently can be at odds with one another and are not always

³ Research methodology for the study entailed mainstream historical techniques. David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2010); Suzanne J. Piotrowski, "Obtaining Archival and Other Existing Records," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Public Administration*, 2nd ed., Kaifeng Yang and Gerald J. Miller, eds., (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2008), 279–90. The major source of documentation came from archival records located at the National Archives at San Francisco. The collection included Banfield's office files from October 15, 1943, to June 26, 1945. To reduce redundancy in the references, all documents cited here were located in the series of files titled General Correspondence, 1943–1945, in Record Group (RG) 96, Records of the Farmers Home Administration.

⁴ Mordecai Lee, "The Return of Public Relations to the Public Administration Curriculum?" *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 515–33.

⁵ Banfield's early career as a federal PIO was routinely listed in his biographies, but up to now it has not been explored in detail.

sufficiently aware of local circumstances. Thus, Banfield's time with the FSA imbued him with a skepticism about what government could do to address social problems, a perspective he developed over his lengthy academic career.

Early Career in Federal Public Relations, 1938–1943

Banfield graduated from Connecticut State College in 1938. Having been a reporter and editor for the student newspaper, he began his professional career at age 22 as a federal public information officer in the USDA's Division of Information and Education of the Northeast Timber Salvage Administration, a unit within the Forest Service. The unit was a short-lived federal program to stabilize lumber prices by acquiring, processing, and only gradually releasing to the market the trees felled by a 1938 hurricane. He was the Division's field representative for four Northeastern states. Banfield's media and publicity responsibilities included furnishing feature articles for publication, which were welcomed by, for example, the Sunday magazine of the *Hartford [CT] Courant*.⁶ After 18 months, he resigned in mid-1940 to briefly become the secretary of the Farm Bureau of New Hampshire.⁷

In mid-1941, Banfield resumed his career as a federal PIO, this time for the FSA.⁸ Like the Forest Service, the FSA was a relatively autonomous agency within the USDA. It had started in 1935 as the Resettlement Administration (RA) with an original mission of resettling refugees from the dust bowl. However, those actions upset many stakeholders. Some citizens expressed alarm when the RA settled "Okies" near them; and large-scale farmers feared resettlement would deprive them of low-wage migrant work. The agency's promotion of change for the betterment of farmers triggered sharp criticisms from the conservative coalition in Congress. The gradual expansion of its mission to include helping poor farmers own a farm (including some African Americans in the South) and promoting the establishment of new cooperative farming settlements gave it something of a leftist reputation. The Liberty League, which was anti-New Deal, claimed the agency's policies "amounted to a 'Russianization' of agriculture that would create 'a government-sustained peasantry.'"⁹ Attacks also came from

⁶ Edward C. Banfield, Jr., in the *Hartford [CT] Courant's* Sunday magazine: "In Wake of Splinter Cats," Feb. 26, 1939: 1, 15; "Connecticut Faces the 'Firing Line,'" Mar. 12, 1939: 3; "Advance Weather Reports Helps Fight Forest Fires," Apr. 21, 1940: 15.

⁷ "Named as Secretary Of N. H. Farm Bureau," *Hartford [CT] Courant*, Sept. 6, 1940: 13.

⁸ Banfield was not drafted due to his 4F status, caused by several physical conditions and limitations. James Q. Wilson, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: A Biography," in *Edward C. Banfield: An Appreciation* (Claremont, CA: Henry Salvatori Center, 2002), 39.

⁹ Jeff Shesol, *Supreme Power: Franklin Roosevelt vs. the Supreme Court* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 113.



Farm Security Administration official reporting expenditures of the Casa Grande Valley Farms, Pinal County, Arizona, at a board meeting, April 1940.

Capitol Hill. Conservative legislators depicted it as a communistic, eggheaded agency that supported collectivist, even socialist, policies such as helping found and fund agricultural co-ops, and establishing new “greenbelt” settlements.¹⁰ The agency’s name changed in 1937 to Farm Security Administration, but bringing it under the umbrella of the USDA did little to quiet the partisan, ideological, parochial, and sometimes racist attacks upon it.¹¹ When the House

of Representatives investigated the FSA’s activities in 1943, special committee chairman Representative Harold D. Cooley (D-NC) criticized the agency for turning farmers into “wards of the state.”¹² Three years later, the FSA was no more.¹³

The RA and later FSA were also both famous and infamous for innovative public relations. Its staff photographers fanned out throughout the country to provide visual documentation of rural poverty.¹⁴ The iconic 1936 photo of a mother of a migrant farming family was taken by Dorothea Lange, an agency photographer.¹⁵ In parallel, the agency funded and produced two film documentaries by Pare Lorentz about farm conditions, *The Plow That Broke the*

¹⁰ Kristin L. Perkins, “Roosevelt and Rexford: Resettlement and its Results,” *Berkeley Planning Journal* 20, no. 1 (2007): 25–42; Cathy D. Knepper, *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

¹¹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Transferring Functions, Funds, Property, etc., of the Resettlement Administration to the Secretary of Agriculture,” Executive Order 7530, December 31, 1936; Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

¹² U.S. Congress, House Select Committee of the House Committee on Agriculture, *Hearings to Investigate the Activities of the Farm Security Administration*, Part 1, H. Rept. 1430, 78th Cong., 1st sess., May 11, 1943: 2.

¹³ President Harry S. Truman signed legislation replacing the FSA with the Farmers’ Home Administration (FmHA) on Aug. 14, 1946 (60 Stat. 1062).

¹⁴ Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2009); Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006).

¹⁵ On Lange’s use of photography for advocacy, see Linda Gordon, “Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Socialist,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (Dec. 2006): 698–727. For the photograph, accessed July 18, 2012, see: <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516/>

Plains and *The River*. The former was about conditions in the dust bowl and the latter about soil erosion by the Mississippi.¹⁶ Those powerful visual media had the desired effect of tilting public opinion to aiding the victims. Conservative politicians on Capitol Hill were incensed at being pressured by those PR tactics, and for many years they advocated cutting or abolishing the FSA's PR budget.¹⁷



An image from the Resettlement Administration film *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936.

Banfield's initial FSA posting in 1941 was to the regional information office for the Northeastern states, located near Philadelphia, in Upper Darby.¹⁸ Occasionally, when the office was short-handed, he was pressed into other line duties, such as an acting transport supervisor for 100 African American migrant farmworkers moved from Virginia to Buffalo to help with the peach harvest.¹⁹

Banfield worked in the Pennsylvania office until 1942, and then transferred to the FSA's Midwest regional information office in Indianapolis. There, one of his PR responsibilities was to write localized human interest stories for farmer-oriented radio programs on Midwestern stations.²⁰ However, he was in the Indiana office only briefly and was then reassigned for a few months to the Information Division's headquarters office in Washington, DC.²¹ In the capital, his major assignment was to sit in on congressional hearings on the FSA's funding and

¹⁶ Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings, 1973).

¹⁷ Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 399.

¹⁸ "Hartford Man Gets Position with FSA," *Hartford [CT] Courant*, July 10, 1941, 22.

¹⁹ Associated Press, "100 Negro Farmer Workers Brought From Virginia," *Salamanca [NY] Republican-Press*, Sept. 5, 1942, 1.

²⁰ John C. Baker and Herb Plambeck, "Agricultural Broadcasts," in I. Keith Tyler and Nancy Mason Dasher, eds., *Education on the Air: Sixteenth Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1946), 472.

²¹ After Pearl Harbor, to make room for war-related offices in the crowded capital, many central offices of civilian agencies were moved inland. The FSA was relocated to Cincinnati, leaving in Washington only personnel who needed to be there.

then write summaries of the discussions for his superiors.²² Banfield's reports on congressional developments helped convey the political trouble the agency was in regarding future funding.²³

In mid-1943, Banfield was appointed as the senior PR person for the FSA's Region IX, covering the Western states of California, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah.²⁴ The headquarters office was in San Francisco. Banfield's title at the beginning of his posting was Regional Information Advisor, and later he was called the Regional Information Specialist. (By then, one of the agency's central thrusts in California had shifted from resettling immigrants from the dust bowl to addressing the war-driven shortage of farmworkers, leading to increased employment of Mexicans.)²⁵

Media Relations at a Regional Information Office, 1943–1946

As would be expected, a central duty of a PIO was press relations. Banfield spent a great portion of his time doing this. For example, he assisted an Associated Press reporter who was writing a story about the forced evacuation of Japanese residents after Pearl Harbor.²⁶ (The FSA had had the responsibility to locate substitute farmers to till the lands of Japanese farmers.) He supplied photos of FSA projects that were taken by FSA photographers to a new magazine oriented to farmers.²⁷ He issued generic press releases prepared by the central office in Washington, DC, and then filled in the blanks to localize the story.²⁸ A critical editorial in a Nevada newspaper prompted him to send its editor "material describing the activities" of the FSA to indirectly and gently rebut the criticism he felt was inaccurate.²⁹ Banfield also spent time developing personal relationships with reporters, visiting them in their offices and learning more about their specific interests. In particular,

²² Based on 1977 oral history interview with Stephen Smith. Accessed July 18, 2012, at <http://www.kevinrkosar.com/Edward-C-Banfield/Edward-C-Banfield-Recording-1.mp3>

²³ It is unclear which bill(s) he covered, but they likely included the hearings of the Senate Appropriations Committee's Agriculture Subcommittee (chaired by Richard Russell [D-GA]) on FY1944 funding for the FSA, held in May 1943. Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics*, 391–93.

²⁴ The region also included Hawaii, which was not a state at the time.

²⁵ Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1973), 279–82.

²⁶ Letter from Banfield to Bonnie Wiley, Feature Editor, Associated Press, San Francisco, Jan. 20, 1944. File: Public Relations and Information [hereinafter P.R. & Inf.] 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

²⁷ Letter from Kenneth M. Gapen, Radio Advisor & Program Director, Radio Service, Office of Information, USDA, San Francisco, to Banfield, June 26, 1945. File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45], box 5. The name of the magazine was *The KFPY Farmer*.

²⁸ Semi-monthly activities report (for Jan. 15–31, 1944) from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Feb. 4, 1944, p. 1. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

²⁹ Letter from Banfield to Graham Dean, Editor, *Reno Evening Gazette*, NV, Apr. 28, 1945. File: 34 Newspapers 7-1-44, box 6.

he reached out to the specialized press, such as those oriented to farmers and to organized labor, as alternative channels for reaching the public and bypassing the daily press that often had a negative slant on the FSA.³⁰

Banfield's most intense and sustained involvement in press relations (and overlapping with related public relations activities) was his effort to put a human face on the news. Then, as now, human interest stories were a much more effective way to communicate about governmental activities than dry statistics and generic program descriptions. Banfield was constantly on the hunt for concrete examples of farmers who benefited from FSA assistance, which he referred to as a "good before and after story."³¹ In general, he was looking for success stories to help counter the drum of criticism from the conservative congressional coalition that the FSA was a waste of money and a failure. He had a form titled "Case History Outline" that he used to keep files on examples submitted by the FSA's field staff.³² He complimented one submission as "swell—just what the doctor ordered and one of the best of its kind that has come to us. Especially appreciate your pains in giving necessary details. You'll get a copy of our story, and a leather medal."³³

Accuracy was vital in these cases because the press and agency opponents would pounce on any misrepresentation of the facts as false and misleading agency propaganda. In one case, Banfield had to submit serially several drafts of his case summary before the local FSA staffer would agree that it was wholly accurate.³⁴ Before releasing a human interest story, he often double-checked with the district staff to be sure that no material changes had occurred with the family since the case history had first been prepared.³⁵

During World War II, Banfield was especially interested in potential news releases about FSA-assisted farmers contributing to the war effort to maximize food

³⁰ Letter from Banfield to John Pickett, Editor, *Pacific Rural Press*, San Francisco, Jan. 28, 1944; Letter from Banfield to Herbert Klein, South California Bureau Manager, [*CIO*] *Labor Herald*, Los Angeles, Apr. 11, 1944. Both in File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

³¹ Letter from Banfield to Marjorie Springer, Supervisor, FSA, Bakersfield, CA, May 13, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (1), box 5.

³² Letter from Banfield to Jamie Robertson, Supervisor, FSA, Visalia, CA, May 19, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (1), box 5.

³³ Letter from Banfield to Rolland Romo, Supervisor, FSA, Auburn, CA, June 6, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (1), box 5.

³⁴ Correspondence between Banfield and Oscar Dennis, Supervisor, FSA, Willows, CA, Feb. 8, 16 and 20, 1945. File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45], box 5.

³⁵ Letter from Banfield to Benjamin Hulme, Supervisor, FSA, Manti, UT, May 13, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (1), box 5.

production, sometimes called the “food front.” The subtext of these stories was that small farmers—the FSA’s constituency—had a greater ability to increase production than large farms. Similarly, he sought out stories for the press about “the accomplishments of young people from families,” such as those who had sons in the service.³⁶ Toward the end of the war, he was hunting for examples he could release of returning veterans who started their own farms with the help of FSA loans.³⁷ He was pleased when he was able to supply the headquarters office in Washington with “a story about a one-legged veteran” who received FSA assistance, along with pictures of the vet and his family.³⁸ Another time, Banfield urged a field representative in Los Angeles to seek out a veteran to help. “I hope very much that it is possible for us to make a loan to a veteran in your area in the not distant future.”³⁹ At least in that case, the PR needs of the agency were influencing the agenda and priorities of the field staff who were the frontline service providers.⁴⁰

Other PR Activities at a Regional Information Office, 1943–1946

Government information work encompasses more than press relations. The wide variety of activities that Banfield engaged in reflected the many public relations responsibilities a PIO had. For example, he helped prepare speeches for senior FSA regional officials,⁴¹ responded to requests for information from an academic researcher,⁴² handled requests to loan FSA films for showings to school and civic groups,⁴³ made arrangements for public displays of FSA travelling

³⁶ Letter from Banfield to Mary Davis, Associate District Supervisor (Home), FSA, Los Angeles, May 2, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (1), box 5.

³⁷ Letter from Banfield to Robert Pontius, District Supervisor, FSA, Fresno, CA, Jan. 22, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

³⁸ Letter from Banfield to Ralph Picard, Acting Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Nov. 13, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

³⁹ Letter from Banfield to Milton Howard, Southern California State Director, FSA, Los Angeles, Jan. 10, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-45 (2), box 5.

⁴⁰ Sometimes he permitted his sense of humor to surface, even in official pronouncements. In 1944, he poked fun at the volume of releases he was issuing with a press release about wartime paper shortages, stating that “To save paper we will mimeograph our (infrequent) releases on the back sides of obsolete forms henceforth.” “Late Statewide Agricultural News,” *Pacific Rural Press* 147:7 [Apr. 1, 1944], p. 200 (emphasis added).

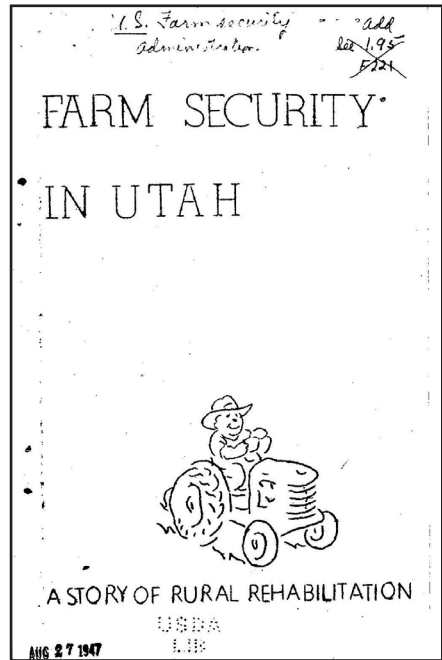
⁴¹ Letter from Banfield to Robert Pontius, District Supervisor, FSA, Fresno, CA, Apr. 14, 1944, File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2); Memo from Banfield to Eleanor Smith, Associate FSA Supervisor, St. George, UT, Apr. 6, 1945, File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45]. Both in box 5.

⁴² Letter from Banfield to Suzanne Shapleigh, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY, Mar. 2, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁴³ Memo from Banfield to D. Ivo Eames, District Supervisor, [Utah], FSA, Aug. 16, 1944, Subject: 34 - E 24 - Strip Films and Slides. File: Organization & Administration 7-1-44 to [11-11-44], box 3.

exhibits,⁴⁴ supervised preparation of short (five-minute) scripts for FSA field personnel to use when appearing on farm programs on local radio stations,⁴⁵ and co-wrote a longer one for national use.⁴⁶ Banfield also spent much time out of his office so as to get a ground's-eye view of the FSA's operations and clients.

In 1946, Banfield helped prepare some new agency brochures. Rather than one bland and generic version for the region, his office prepared a version for every state based on localized statistics. Each listed how many farmers had been helped in the state since the agency had been created, how much had been repaid, and the average farm size and net worth of FSA families. Banfield calculated, probably correctly, that most citizens identify with their home state and want people in their state to succeed. Hence, versions of "Farm Security in ___ (name of state): A Story of Rural Rehabilitation" likely resonated with readers in much more tangible and positive ways than the typical eye-glazing government report. They were written in a breezy style, easy-to-read and very short (a single landscape sheet, printed on both sides, with one fold).⁴⁷



Banfield also understood that good PR was more than pushing information

Cover of a Farm Security Administration pamphlet for Utah, 1946.

⁴⁴ Memo from Banfield to Ralph Picard, Acting Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Sept. 15, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

⁴⁵ Monthly activities report, Jan. 5, 1944, p. 2; semi-monthly activities report (Jan. 15–31, 1944), Feb. 4, 1944, p. 3. Both from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC. Both in File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁴⁶ Letter from Banfield to Harry Behn, Radio Administrator, University of Arizona, Tucson, Sept. 22, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

⁴⁷ "Farm Security in Arizona," "Farm Security in California," "Farm Security in Nevada," and "Farm Security in Utah." All located in USDA's National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, MD. They were accessioned by the library in Aug. 1947, after Banfield had left the FSA. However, the text of each referred to the FSA's "inception 11 years ago," putting the pamphlets' issuance year as 1946, when Banfield was the senior PIO in the regional office. Using a slightly different template, in 1946 Banfield's office also released "Farm Security in Palo Verde Valley [CA]." It, too, was located in the collection of the USDA library.

from his office out the front door. For example, he wrote internal newsletters for FSA field staff to keep them apprised of developments in Washington. This helped local staff have accurate information when asked by clients and local media.⁴⁸ Banfield also realized good communication is a two-way process that includes listening. In one instance, he shared his assessment of public opinion with a senior regional official. Regarding the FSA's role in the forced expulsion of Japanese from California, he observed that "it is next to impossible for us to make people understand that the program was not conducted for the purpose of assisting the Japanese—a thing that is not very popular in these parts at these times."⁴⁹ On another occasion, he sought to subscribe to the major daily newspapers of Utah and Arizona so that he could have a better sense of important developments in public opinion there, even if not directly related to the FSA.⁵⁰

Government PR as Politics by Another Name: Defending an Agency Under Attack

While civil servants are normatively obliged to be nonpolitical in their work, what if an agency is being attacked politically with—what it considers—inaccurate, incomplete, or out-of-context facts? These could be threats to the inherent bureaucratic imperative for survival and autonomy.⁵¹ At the same time as Banfield was at the FSA, another controversial federal agency, the Office of Price Administration (OPA), developed a principle that it had the right to protect itself by responding publicly to political attacks. According to the agency's official WWII history, "It was OPA policy to react vigorously, however, to criticism believed to be unjustified, and to misstatements of fact; and the agency defended its right to keep the record straight."⁵²

Based on the record of Banfield's behind-the-scenes PR work, the FSA had a somewhat similar (if unofficial) approach. The archival record shows Banfield

⁴⁸ Memo from Banfield to All County Office Employees, FSA Region IX, May 28, 1945. File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45], box 5.

⁴⁹ Letter from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, Jan. 10, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁵⁰ Letter from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Mar. 10, 1944. File: 34-N8 Newspapers 7-1-43, box 6.

⁵¹ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Herbert A. Simon, Donald W. Smithburg, and Victor A. Thompson, *Public Administration* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991 [1950]), 415–21.

⁵² Harvey C. Mansfield and Associates, *A Short History of OPA*, General Publication No. 15, Historical Reports on War Administration (Washington, DC: Office of Temporary Controls, Office of Price Administration, 1948), 317.

vigorously trying to document the falsity of some charges that were widely circulated against the agency. For example, in 1943 the American Bankers' Association (ABA) adopted a resolution criticizing the FSA for unfair competition with the private sector (i.e., its members) by providing credit to farmers. Banfield promptly asked all field directors to meet with their local banks and obtain statements from them that they disagreed with the ABA position, and that the FSA was *not* competing with them.⁵³ As a result of the meetings, local bankers were largely friendly towards the FSA and did not consider it to be competing with them (in contradistinction to their views on the Production Credit Association). However, they were reluctant to provide the kinds of letters Banfield hoped for "probably because they feel it is New Dealism."⁵⁴ On another occasion, the Chamber of Commerce in Sacramento (the California state capital) spoke out against the FSA, partly on the grounds that CIO labor organizations liked the FSA, which, to the Chamber, made the FSA communist-leaning.⁵⁵ Banfield recommended to the CIO's Sacramento-based Northern California state director that he contact the Chamber for an informal meeting, but warned him to avoid making any formal statement or taking a defensive position as if being put on trial.⁵⁶ In the meantime, Banfield also tried to obtain a copy of some positive comments about the FSA that he believed had been made by the Chamber of Commerce in Springfield, Missouri.⁵⁷

Knocking down false rumors was difficult, especially when trying to avoid looking defensive or overtly political. At one point, the FSA was criticized by the California State Grange (relatively conservative in the ideological spectrum of farmer organizations) for allegedly funding a new creamery co-op in Minnesota that was in direct competition with an already existing (private) dairy co-op. He asked his counterpart in Milwaukee, WI, to track down the facts and, ideally, obtain a letter from the Minnesota Grange, stating that the claim was untrue.⁵⁸ He kept the

⁵³ Form letter from Banfield to all 46 FSA county supervisors in Region IX, Dec. 3, 1943. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁵⁴ Letter from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Dec. 31, 1943, p. 1. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁵⁵ Red-baiting national columnist Westbrook Pegler named Banfield as one (of dozens) of FSA staff whose telephone records showed contacts with the CIO's Political Action Committee. For reasons that are unclear, Pegler listed Banfield as stationed at the Denver regional office. "Fair Enough" [syndicated column], *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1944, p. A4.

⁵⁶ Letter from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, Dec. 16, 1943. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁵⁷ Letter from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, Jan. 10, 1944, p. 2. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

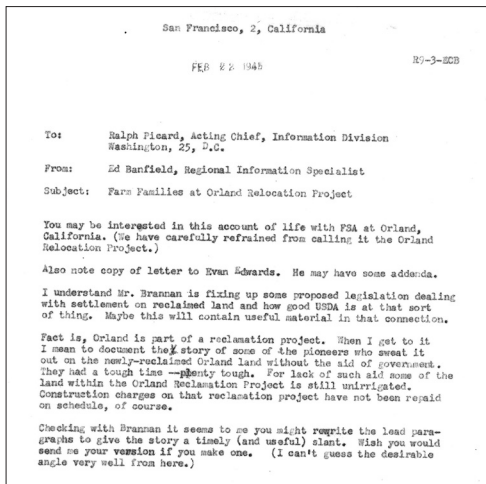
⁵⁸ Letter from Banfield to T. P. Shreve, Regional Information Specialist, FSA, Milwaukee, WI, Dec. 17, 1943. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

appropriate FSA regional officials updated on his efforts.⁵⁹ His effort was wildly successful. The next year, the California State Grange passed a resolution at its annual convention supporting the work of the FSA. In an in-house communication, Banfield tried to divine the reasons for his victory. It “is partly the result of a triple play” in documenting no competition from FSA dairy co-ops with private co-ops in Minnesota. “Otherwise, I expect, the ghosts and hobgoblins would still be haunting us.”⁶⁰

The Farm Bureau, another conservative farmer group, was a consistent critic of the FSA on the national level. When Ralph Hollenberg was named the new FSA regional director, the California Farm Bureau reacted positively. Banfield was delighted, but cautious: “The Farm Bureau is anxious to collaborate with us, particularly in the development of cooperatives (!). I believe there is no danger that Hollenberg will play along too closely with them. He recognizes fully that the FB can’t be trusted—the state outfit is bound to

the AFBF [American Farm Bureau Federation] and its leaders here are Hoover Republicans.”⁶¹

Banfield’s efforts to develop good relations with local groups were not limited to critics and adversaries. For example, when he had opportunities to expand and deepen the FSA’s support from relatively liberal clergy and denominations, he enthusiastically approached them, even attending the annual state conference of one of the Protestant dominations.⁶²



Edward Banfield wrote to Ralph Picard of the Information Division in Washington, DC, on February 22, 1945, on the reclamation project at Orland, California.

⁵⁹ Letter from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, Feb. 4, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁶⁰ Memo from Banfield to Ralph Picard, Acting Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Oct. 25, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

⁶¹ Monthly activities report from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Jan. 5, 1944, p. 1. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5. The parenthetical exclamation point is in the original. It was prompted by the Farm Bureau’s reflexive criticism of any farming programs that did not promote the one-farmer-one-farm model. Hollenberg was initially named acting regional director, later received a permanent appointment to that post.

⁶² Letter from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Jan. 15, 1944; semi-monthly activities report (Jan. 15–31, 1944) from Banfield to Bryan, Feb. 4, 1944, pp. 1–2. Both in File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

He was also finely attuned to the political criticisms aimed at the FSA occurring publicly on a national level. He carefully calibrated the regional office's external communications to avoid stepping on any political mines. For example, *internally* he kept senior field officials informed on Washington developments.⁶³ But, he deemed an in-house report on FSA's future too political and too speculative, deciding it should not be released publicly.⁶⁴ On another occasion, he made sure that all press materials about the FSA's Orland Project not use the politically controversial term of "relocation," and instead he called it a "reclamation" project, a more inoffensive term.⁶⁵ Still, the agency's history continued to haunt it. Earlier, it had been responsible for migrant labor programs, which gave the agency something of a leftist and bleeding-heart image. After significant political controversy about that involvement, by late in the war, the FSA was wholly out of that business.⁶⁶ So when the agency was invited to participate in a social work conference that would include a focus on migrant laborers, Banfield strongly recommended declining, so as not to revive the old controversies.⁶⁷ He also declined to participate in planning Vice President Henry A. Wallace's visit to California in early 1944, and he did not submit any proposed text for Wallace's speeches. Praise by Wallace of the FSA "wouldn't help us here anyway. Everybody who loves HAW [Henry A. Wallace] loves FSA, but not vice-versa."⁶⁸ There was no political benefit to be gained, and there was potential peril from associating the agency with a campaign event. The goal was to expand the FSA's external support, not to keep talking to its base or even reminding potential new supporters of the FSA's traditional base. That could frighten off anyone on the fence.

The Hard Lessons of FSA PR Work

Banfield graduated from college with a degree in journalism. As a federal PIO, Banfield gained the experiences and personal contacts that led him to pursue a Ph.D. in government at the University of Chicago. It also planted within him the seeds of his later thinking about government and the limitations on its capabilities.

⁶³ Memo from Banfield to Region IX State Directors, Feb. 2, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁶⁴ Memo from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, June 1, 1945, Subject: Distribution of article, "Shall FSA Be Reorganized" to Editors. File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45], box 5.

⁶⁵ The Orland Project settled 20 migrant farmer families in Orland, California. Robert Autobee, "Orland Project," U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 1993, p. 18; Memo from Banfield to Ralph Picard, Acting Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Feb. 22, 1945, emphasis added. File: P.R. & Inf. 2-1-45 to [6-29-45], box 5.

⁶⁶ Letter from Banfield to John Pickett, Editor, *Pacific Rural Press*, San Francisco, Mar. 6, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁶⁷ Letter from Banfield to Leif Wahlberg, Northern California State Director, FSA, Sacramento, Apr. 20, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁶⁸ Semi-monthly activities report (Jan. 15–31, 1944) from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Feb. 4, 1944, p. 2. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

At the FSA, Banfield initially had expressed belief in the agency's work and was comfortable with its left-of-center organizational culture and ideology. He praised an FSA fact sheet because it included "examples of what stability on the land has done to improve the living standards of former migrants and seasonal workers."⁶⁹ He sarcastically criticized the conservative California medical establishment for its campaign against "federal medicine." He mocked the work conducted by a PR firm hired by California doctors: "The public relations firm, apparently, found their patient in a very critical position—a position requiring their own expert, professional and expensive treatment. They promised a successful cure—at a price."⁷⁰

The FSA imbued in Banfield a deep interest in antipoverty policy, a belief in centralized government planning.⁷¹ Although he held no policy responsibilities as a PIO, he proposed establishing an FSA program for assisting returning veterans. He called it a "post-war-brave-new world idea" that "promises to have considerable value if it takes hold."⁷² On another occasion, he characterized it as "a draft board in reverse."⁷³ He wrote his boss, the chief of FSA's Information Division in Washington,

[The plan] is to have neighborhood study groups (of which Region IX has a good many, having pioneered in this direction) make community veteran resettlement plans. The group of borrowers lists the names of community farm boys in service and Ma's and Pa's [who will] tell as well as they can what Sonny will want to do when he comes marching home—whether he means to go back to family farm or run a gas station or what not.

⁶⁹ Letter from Banfield to Mary Montgomery, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Berkeley, CA, Apr. 24, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁷⁰ Memo from Banfield to Regional Director Ralph Hollenberg, Dec. 6, 1944, Subject: Public Relations Survey – California Medical Assn., p. 1. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

⁷¹ Based on 1977 oral history interview with Stephen Smith. Accessed July 18, 2012: <http://www.kevinrkosar.com/Edward-C-Banfield/Edward-C-Banfield-Recording-1.mp3>. Banfield corresponded with Paul Taylor, a progressive rural economist at the University of California, Berkeley, who was married to Dorothea Lange. Wilson, "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," 40. Their letters discussed mutual intellectual interests, particularly farm economics and rural poverty. Two letters in the Dorothea Lange Archive, Oakland Museum of California, indicate that this correspondence continued until at least 1953. Letters from Banfield to Paul Taylor, July 24, 1953, and Sept. 24, 1953.

⁷² Monthly activities report from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Jan. 5, 1944, p. 2. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

⁷³ Letter from Banfield to Weil McCullough Clark, Cedar Crest, NM, Feb. 15, 1944, p. 4. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5.

Then the group canvasses community resources to see if the farms (or the gas stations) really exist, and where. They accumulate on paper “a stockpile of distressed farms.” They figure out what buildings or other improvements (such as irrigation) will be needed on those farms. And, of course, they figure out what services FSA must provide to put the plans into operation when D-day arrives. All this planning they do along with local Farm Bureaus, draft boards and—of course—American Legion Posts. I think you’ll be hearing a good deal more about this as it ripens.⁷⁴

He impishly predicted to his boss in Washington, “I guarantee you’ll like living in the post-war world we dream up.”⁷⁵

However, around the time the FSA was being abolished in August 1946, Banfield was becoming disillusioned. He thought that certain FSA programs, such as the cooperative farms, were doing more harm than good to poor farmers. He pondered quitting, and began going through the FSA’s files and working on a magazine story on cooperative farms. Banfield shared his initial write-up with Paul Taylor, who was impressed and told Rexford Tugwell about it. A prominent New Dealer and the former head of the FSA’s predecessor, the Resettlement Agency, Tugwell had recently landed at the University of Chicago. Tugwell contacted Banfield and invited him to come to the university to be both a graduate student and an instructor. Banfield did so with financial assistance from a friend he had met through Taylor.

As a graduate student, Banfield, still a New Dealer at heart, was heavily influenced by the works of progressive political theorists and economists. He became interested in what he called “the sociology of efficiency,” that is, the conditions under which

⁷⁴ Monthly activities report from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Jan. 5, 1944, pp. 2–3. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5. The stockpile reference is in quotes, but no source is provided.

⁷⁵ Semi-monthly activities report (Jan. 15–31, 1944) from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Feb. 4, 1944, p. 2. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5. Though optimistic, Banfield did not take himself too seriously. He often showed his sense of humor when trying to promote the agency’s and his views. The regional director’s son was told by his grade school teacher (in San Francisco) that the federal government still paid farmers not to grow crops and even penalized them if they did. This may have been correct during the New Deal in the 1930s, but it was no longer accurate for the wartime effort to maximize food production. Banfield suggested that the FSA’s mission would be enhanced by developing new outreach materials to urban teachers throughout the United States. He characterized the need for such a PR program for educators as “a struggle being waged between the forces of light and the forces of darkness” (Letter from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Nov. 25, 1943. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-43 [1], box 6).

resources are used rationally,⁷⁶ and wrote articles in favor of government economic planning.⁷⁷ His 1949 article “Congress and the Budget: A Planner’s Criticism” was his most full-throated expression of his belief in centralized government planning and policymaking.⁷⁸ Banfield savaged Congress’s approach to allocating federal spending as parochial and incoherent. He thought the government should employ “a method of allocating funds among competing interests in a manner calculated to achieve the optimum result.” To that end, he proposed shifting much of the authority away from the hopelessly political Congress and to the executive branch. He favored establishing a Central Planning Agency in the executive branch to produce a holistic, rational multiyear plan for federal spending. Spending would be prioritized based upon executive agencies’ detailed plans for achieving various social goals. Congress’s role in budgeting would be reduced to choosing the social goals, annually appropriating funds, and considering the agencies’ progress in achieving the goals. As proof that federal agencies could rationally manage the nation’s resources, Banfield cited the work of his former employer, the Forest Service. He also pointed to progressive reforms in America’s cities, where government had “become an undramatic technical matter which can safely be left to the experts.”

Yet, Banfield’s time in the field as a PIO left him an empiricist at heart. He felt the truth, whatever it may be, was to be found through field research and data collection. He developed his FSA manuscript into his dissertation, and then his first book—*Government Project*. It is a devastating critique of the FSA cooperative farm effort, one that finds it well-intended but ultimately wrongheaded. The success of the farms was predicated on the assumption that the farmers could and would cooperate with one another. They did not, and the FSA planners might have foreseen this had they taken the time to understand the farmers’ beliefs and wants.

Conclusion

In its short life, the FSA was consistently in political crosshairs. As a PIO at the agency, Banfield could not help learning that different stakeholders inevitably held different views and different interests. Bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, poor farmers, scholars, and others had a stake and an interest in the FSA’s works. They

⁷⁶ Based on 1977 oral history interview with Stephen Smith. Accessed July 18, 2012: <http://www.kevinrkosar.com/Edward-C-Banfield/Edward-C-Banfield-Recording-1.mp3>

⁷⁷ Edward C. Banfield, “Planning Under the Research and Marketing Act of 1946: A Study in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 31, no. 3 (Aug. 1949): 469–86.

⁷⁸ Edward C. Banfield, “Congress and the Budget: A Planner’s Criticism,” *American Political Science Review* 43, no. 6 (Dec. 1949): 1217–28.

came from many walks of life, and Banfield listened to their diverse demands and opinions.

From his FSA public relations work, then, Banfield learned firsthand about the centrality of pluralistic politics. In a representative democracy of diverse and colliding interests, the job of the politician is to manage this conflict and broker amongst the combatants. Politics involves horse-trading and persuasion through argument. And politics involves power—different stakeholders have differing amounts of it. When, as a PIO, Banfield complained to FSA headquarters about getting too many copies of printed information and useless PR materials, he was put in his place. “I got an indignant reply to my letter (sounded as if it had been written by Donald Duck) which said Washington reserves the right to send a region what it damn well pleases.”⁷⁹ The kinds of experiences and insights that Banfield gained as a federal PIO led him to the dispiriting conclusion that politics and the inefficiency of bureaucratic procedures and structures make it very difficult to enact rational policies that empower expert planners to act in the public interest.

Banfield’s experience as a PIO highlights the importance of communications to the work of the federal government. Successful implementation of programs requires both government employees and the public to understand what is being done and why. Different stakeholders, be they local citizens, regional federal officials, or Members of Congress, have different informational needs; and they often may hear the same communications differently. As a matter of course, then, federal agencies must communicate frequently and in diverse formats to reach diverse audiences.⁸⁰

A conservative has sometimes been jokingly described as a liberal who got mugged. Edward C. Banfield entered government public relations as an ardent New Dealer. He aggressively promoted the work of the FSA through diverse media relations and external communications. He defused and countered criticisms of the agency

⁷⁹ Letter from Banfield to Jack Bryan, Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Feb. 3, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 12-1-43 (2), box 5; Memo from Banfield to Ralph Picard, Acting Chief, Information Division, FSA, Washington, DC, Sept. 25, 1944. File: P.R. & Inf. 7-1-44, box 6.

⁸⁰ Banfield’s PIO work taught him to communicate persuasively to both expert and general audiences, which contributed to his subsequent renown as a professor. Nearly anyone could pick up his books and follow what he was saying. And he knew how to capture others’ attention—the first line of his popular *The Unheavenly City* states, “This book will probably strike readers as the work of an ill-tempered and mean-spirited fellow.” This book was so influential and controversial that Banfield published a revision in 1974 that incorporated responses to criticisms. See Edward C. Banfield, *The Unheavenly City Revisited* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974).

and sought to foster support for the FSA amongst locals, stakeholders, attentive publics, and political supporters. Ultimately, Banfield and others at the FSA could not stave off the political forces that brought the agency to its demise.

Shortly after publishing his critical study of Casa Grande farm, Banfield's disaffection with government planning became more general, and found full expression in *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*.⁸¹ In this instance, it was those who planned housing developments in Chicago who saw their public interest dreams dashed by political and social factors. Government planning presupposes that individuals are willing and able to cooperate with one another. The FSA's experience with Casa Grande farm was a dispiriting spectacle of hardscrabble farmers feuding to their own collective detriment. In his classic 1958 study of poverty, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, Banfield demonstrated that citizens' inability to cooperate could negatively affect economic and social development.⁸² Over the next three decades, Banfield produced a steady stream of highly regarded and often widely read studies that further developed the hard lessons he had learned at the FSA.⁸³

Thus, although Banfield clearly enjoyed his PIO work, ironically it transformed him to question both the FSA and government intervention in social issues more generally, and put him on a path to a place far from the progressive FSA.

⁸¹ Edward C. Banfield and Martin Meyerson, *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1955).

⁸² Edward C. Banfield (with Laura Fasano), *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958).

⁸³ E.g., Edward C. Banfield, *Political Influence: A New Theory of Urban Politics* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961); and Edward C. Banfield (with James Q. Wilson), *City Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Photo credits: Edward C. Banfield, 1945, photograph by John Collier; FSA official, Library of Congress; Farmer, Record Group (RG) 69, National Archives; FSA pamphlet, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, MD; FSA document, Records of the Farmers Home Administration, RG 96, National Archives at San Francisco.