

Now What? – Can Communicators Help Restore Confidence in Our Public Institutions? (On-Demand Video)

Free Virtual Event: On-Demand

Hosted by: The George Washington University

Graduate School of Political Management

[Master's in Strategic Public Relations](#)



Now What?
What's Ahead for
Government and Political
Communicators in 2021?

Two panels of practitioners and journalists will share experiences and recommendations to help restore confidence in our public institutions.

GW | **GSPM**

These two high profile panels will tackle the [communications](#)

challenges communicators and the media have faced this year, including the impact of Covid-19, the resulting economic upheaval, and the 2020 election.

Our panelists, consisting of both practitioners and journalists, share experiences and offer specific recommendations to adopt in the new year to help restore order and confidence amongst the public in our public institutions.

(Moderator: [Lawrence J. Parnell](#), Associate Professor & Program Director, Masters in Strategic Public Relations – [GSPM](#), Adjunct Professor – School of Business, The George Washington University)

Panel One – Lessons from Insiders

This panel includes communications professionals with government and association experience. They share their best practices and lessons learned as we focus on issues of transparency, accountability and a commitment to public service and association members.

Panelists:

- Scott Thomsen – President of National Association of Government Communicators
- Chelsea Ritchie, Head of Digital Advocacy at International Copper Association
- Anne Rancourt, Communications Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health
- Scott Widmeyer, Founding Managing Partner, Finn Partners and Chief Strategy Officer/Washington

Panel Two – The Media Perspective

This panel includes working members of the media, covering Washington DC from the White House to leading government

agencies. They discuss their relationships with communications professionals working within both the government and associations sectors.

Panelists:

- Joe Lockhart, White House Press Secretary under President Bill Clinton
- Margaret Talev, Axios' White House and Politics Editor
- Brian Karem, Senior White House correspondent for *Playboy*
- Rear Admiral John Kirby, USN (ret), CNN military and diplomatic analyst

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About Our Speakers

Panel One



Scott Thomsen – President of National Association of Government Communicators

Scott Thomsen is the director of communications and public affairs for the Ventura County Fire Department. He has more than a decade in government communications after working for news organizations around the country, including The Orange County Register and The Associated Press. He currently serves as president of the National Association of Government Communicators, which is dedicated to recognizing, developing and advocating for excellence in government communications.



Chelsea Ritchie, MPS, Head of Digital Advocacy at International Copper Association

Chelsea Ritchie keeps her thumb on the pulse of Washington politics. The native Southern Californian has spent the past eleven years in Washington, D.C., working with prominent public figures, associations, nonprofits, manufacturers, Am Law top 20 Law Firms, and Fortune 100 Firms. She has worked on some of the most notable Supreme Court decisions and Congressional issues, such as *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, the extradition of Chen Guangcheng to the United States, and

Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

As a consultant and federal lobbyist, Chelsea has elevated her client's success by specializing in public affairs to incorporate traditional government relations along with public relations, grassroots, and digital components. Currently, Chelsea works with the International Copper Association to influence copper's role in legislative and regulatory matters for global policymakers.



**Anne Rancourt,
Communications Director,
National Institute on Drug
Abuse, National Institutes
of Health**

Anne Rancourt is the communications director at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). Prior to joining the NIDA team in 2020, she worked at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases where she led communications on HIV, allergy, and immunology for Dr. Anthony S. Fauci. In her career at the National Institutes of Health, Ms. Rancourt has also served as the communications director for the Office of Research on Women's Health and at the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, where she led media for The Heart Truth campaign. Before coming to NIH, Ms. Rancourt was a Presidential Management Fellow in the Office of the Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services, where she directed communications strategies on the Department's \$167 billion Recovery Act investment. She has also worked in brand management, behavior-change campaigns, and marketing on behalf of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. She began her career as a journalist at The Washington Post and NBC

News. Ms. Rancourt has a bachelor's degree in English from Georgetown University and a master's degree in strategic public relations from George Washington University.



Scott Widmeyer, Founding Managing Partner, Finn Partners and Chief Strategy Officer/Washington

Scott Widmeyer has a 35-year record in providing strategic counsel to scores of decision-makers, from presidents to governors to chief executive officers to union leaders. From working as a newspaper reporter to running major media operations for national campaigns, Widmeyer knows how to get results for his clients. His track record of successes in education, health care, politics, campaign finance, LGBTQ issues, technology, trade and other public policy matters illustrate his impact as a “change agent” in things that matter most to America.

Clients regularly turn to Widmeyer for advice on economic development issues, marketing strategies, coalition building and crisis management. He founded Widmeyer Communications in 1988, building on a career in newspaper reporting and serving in major communications positions for five highly respected leaders – former President Jimmy Carter, former Vice President Walter Mondale, U.S. Senator Jay Rockefeller, the late Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro and the late American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker. In 2013, Widmeyer Communications became a Finn Partners company.

Scott is active in many civic and philanthropic causes. He

currently serves on the Boards of the New York City Leadership Academy and the Contemporary American Theater Festival. In addition, he chairs the George Washington University National Council for Media and Public Affairs and is vice president of the Education Writers Association. Until 2016, Scott served on the board of the LGBT Community Center of New York.

And, for three years in the early 2000s, he chaired the LGBTQ Victory Fund, the leading political action committee and training organization in the US for gay candidates. Scott also was a member of the GLAAD board for several years. In 2007, he was named a David Rockefeller Fellow, a highly coveted one-year program of the New York City Partnership. As a corporate member of the Partnership, Scott and his firm are involved in a number of top priorities related to education, diversity and technology.



(Moderator) Lawrence J. Parnell, M.B.A.

Lawrence J. Parnell, M.B.A. is an award winning Public Relations professional and academic who is an Associate Professor and director of the George Washington University Master's in Strategic Public Relations program. He has served in this role for 12 years and has built the GW Master's program into one of the best known and admired programs in the US. Professor Parnell also serves as an Adjunct Professor of Strategic Communications at the GW School of Business.

He also operates *Parnell Communications*, a strategic

communications and leadership training advisory firm. In this role he advises government, corporate and non-profit organizations on executive development and strategic communications.

Prior to coming to GW, he had a successful 32-year career in the private and public sector. He has worked in government, corporate and agency settings and in national, state and local political campaigns. He was recognized as PR Professional of the Year (2003) by *PR Week* and was named to the *PR News* Hall of Fame in 2009. The GW Master's program was named the "Best PR Education Program" for 2015 by *PR Week*.

He is a frequent author and speaker on communications strategy, crisis and issues management, leadership skills and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at industry conferences and universities around the world. He is quoted often on communications management and crisis communications by the national, business and trade media.

He is the co-author of a leading public relations textbook – *"Introduction to Strategic Public Relations – Communicating Effectively in a Socially Responsible World"* from Sage Publishing. In its first year, (2018) the text was adopted by over 30 leading undergrad PR programs across the country. The second edition of the text, titled: *"Introduction to Public Relations"* was published in October 2020 by Sage Publishing. He also contributed as a co-author of a chapter on CSR in the book *"Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy"* (Peter Lang Publishing) published in 2017. He is active on Twitter at @gwprmasters and on Face Book and Linked-In under his name.

Panel Two



Joe Lockhart, White House Press Secretary under President Bill Clinton

Joe Lockhart is perhaps best known for his service as White House Press Secretary under President Bill Clinton from 1998 to 2000, during which time he managed daily press briefings, provided senior counsel to the President, and managed communications through the President's impeachment proceedings. Long-time White House correspondent Helen Thomas called him "a straight shooter," and "one of the best it's been my honor to work with;" Susan Page at USA Today found Lockhart "direct, well-informed and trusted;" and former CBS White House correspondent Peter Maer said "if Joe Lockhart knows anything, it's how to control a narrative."

Lockhart developed his knack for steering the conversation during his early career as an award-winning journalist, political strategist and public-relations consultant. Lockhart held posts as Assignment Editor at ABC News, Deputy Assignment Manager for CNN, and foreign producer reporting on the Gulf War for Skye News. He served as a press secretary for the presidential campaigns of Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, an aide to Senator Paul Simon, a senior advisor to the John Kerry campaign, and an Executive Vice President at Bozell Sawyer Miller, where he advised a range of high-profile corporations and institutions on media relations and political strategy.

Lockhart is the founding partner and managing director of the Glover Park Group (GPG), a Washington, D.C. communications strategy firm. Under Lockhart's leadership, GPG earned a reputation for providing its wide range of corporate and non-

profit clients (including Microsoft, Visa and the National Football League) with agile crisis management, astute public affairs, policy, advertising and marketing counsel, and cutting-edge opinion research.

In 2011 Lockhart was named Vice President of Global Communications at Facebook, just as the rapidly-expanding enterprise was preparing to go public. Lockhart helped the company mitigate initial public backlash to its IPO, take ownership of its story, and refortify its brand.

In 2013, Lockhart returned to GPG, where that vision payed immediate dividends, in the form of a major expansion and move to a new headquarters. At GPG, he spearheaded the National Football League's response to a series of public challenges. In 2016 the NFL named Lockhart Executive Vice President overseeing Communications, Government Affairs, Social Responsibility and Philanthropy. A graduate of Georgetown University, Joe is a native of New York City, New York. Find Joe on Twitter: [@joelockhart](https://twitter.com/joelockhart)



Margaret Talev, Axios' White House and Politics Editor

Margaret Talev is Axios' White House and Politics Editor. She oversaw 2020 election coverage. She is a CNN analyst and contributor to "Axios on HBO." She is the former senior White House correspondent for Bloomberg News, covered Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump and is a past president of the White House Correspondents' Association.



Brian Karem, Senior White House correspondent for *Playboy*

Brian J. Karem is an award-winning journalist, author, speaker and recognized defender of the First Amendment. Karem currently serves as the senior White House correspondent for *Playboy*. He is also the host of [Just Ask the Question](#), a podcast featuring conversations with informed individuals about politics, current events and pop culture. He is also a frequent guest on CNN and other networks.

Karem has worked in both newspaper and television as an investigative journalist covering politics, crime, refugee issues, and state and local news. His work experience includes America's Most Wanted (producer and correspondent); *People* magazine; Fox News; NBC News; and the *Courier-Journal*, among others.

Karem has received multiple awards for his work, including the prestigious [Pieringer Award](#) and the [Freedom of the Press Award](#), and was recently nominated as "Journalist of the Year" by the [Los Angeles Press Club](#).

Throughout his career, Karem has been a champion of free speech and vocal advocate for freedom of the press. He has testified in support of a [federal shield law](#) numerous times before state legislatures and is the founder of the "[First](#)

Jailbird's Club," a group of 13 reporters who went to jail to defend a confidential source and who have toured the nation to rally for a federal shield law.

Most recently, Karem successfully filed a lawsuit against the Trump White House for suspending his credentials for a month, citing First Amendment and Fifth Amendment violations. The suit named President Donald Trump and White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham as defendants. He won the suit and has also successfully defended against two appeals.

Karem is a member of the White House Press Corps Association and the National Press Club and serves as immediate past president of the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association.



Rear Admiral John Kirby, USN (ret), CNN military and diplomatic analyst

Rear Admiral John Kirby, USN (ret), is a CNN military and diplomatic analyst and most recently served as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs. Kirby appears regularly on The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer and across all of CNN's programming providing analysis on issues related to the U.S. military, defense, foreign affairs and diplomacy.

Prior to joining CNN, Kirby had a 29-year career with the United States Navy, joining after college and eventually retiring as Rear Admiral in 2015. In 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta appointed Kirby to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Media Operations. Two years later, after serving as the U.S. Navy's Chief of Information, Kirby

was chosen as Pentagon Press Secretary and became the first uniformed officer to hold the position. Following his military career, Kirby returned to government to serve as the Spokesperson for the U.S. State Department. Soon after, he was appointed by then-President Obama to take on the role of Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Public Affairs, a title he held until the end of the Obama administration.

Kirby is from St. Petersburg, Florida, and holds a B.A. in History from the University of South Florida, as well as an M.S. in International Relations from Troy State University and an M.A. in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College.