Out of the Back Rooms.

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Abstract:
Physician Virginia Apgar joined the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, the forerunner of today's March of Dimes, in 1959, a pivotal time in the non-profit's history. When the Salk polio vaccine proved to be effective in 1955, the organization created by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1938 to eradicate polio struggled to maintain the interest of donors and volunteers. In 1958, executives redirected the foundation's mission to focus on birth defects and arthritis. Apgar, already well known in medical circles for having created an effective method to assess a newborn's health, was hired to help manage a $6.1 million research agenda. The smart, charismatic physician soon became the organization's popular spokesperson. This article uses archival records, newspaper accounts, and primary interviews to show how a physician-turned-publicist popularized the cause of birth defects and helped a national organization successfully rebrand itself in the second half of the twentieth century.

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