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“A Discussion of Truth and Credibility in an Era of Disbelief”

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This Institute has been exploring the problems of public relations for more than 40 years now, and you have asked me to say something about truth and credibility that you haven't heard before. So first, let me go strongly on record on some of the really controversial issues we face:

Unethical conduct in public relations? I'm against it.

Failure to disclose fully? I'm against it.

Immoral behavior in the White House? I'm against it.

Abuse of public power by the Special Prosecutor? I'm strongly against it.

Corrupt campaign financing? I'm against it.

I'm beginning to feel and sound like Groucho Marx: "Whatever it is, I'm against it."

So what is there left to say that you haven't already heard? Quite a bit. I want to talk not about marketing public relations (building product awareness and preference), where we know well that our work can be powerfully effective. Rather, I want to talk about some limitations of public relations.

In some situations, public relations programs may not be worth the effort or the expense, no matter how skillfully they're executed, simply because they can't and don't persuade. For example, when we try to influence attitudes that are based on deeply-held personal values.

Look at the abortion issue; perhaps the most divisive issue in our country since the slavery issue tore apart our Union a century and a half ago or since the Vietnam War divided the nation 30 years ago. Public relations people long ago labeled their causes: "right to life" versus "pro-choice." After years of impassioned arguments by both sides of the issue, have you seen any measurable change on public attitudes toward abortion? Do you know of one individual whose basic opinion has changed? There are few such.

Public attitudes on this issue are set in concrete. As on so many other significant questions, peoples' opinions were formed a generation ago when they absorbed attitudes from the culture that surrounded them as they grew up. But the campaigns go on. Never mind if they

are failing to influence anyone. Movement toward a consensus simply doesn't exist on many other major issues. There is no consensus on foreign policy, on labor policy, on tax policy, on almost anything. Public opinion, once crystallized, sticks for years afterwards. I believe that only reality -- real events, like war, personal job experiences and the like -- rather than words of persuasion and public relations campaigns can change basic opinions once formed.

For years and years, our good friends who work for profit-making corporations, for government or for associations have worked to enhance the reputation of those corporations or public agencies or advocacy groups they serve. A very large part of our public relations activity is devoted to advocacy of one kind or another -- changes in the tax laws, changes in environmental regulation, free trade versus high tariffs to protect jobs for American workers, support for Jesse Helms versus paying our dues to the United Nations. That's what many public relations people have been paid for, and that's what they have done. By and large, very well, most of us believe.

So it's fair to ask ourselves, if business, government and associations have such fine public relations programs, why does distrust of business and government permeate our national life? Why does almost any accusation of business or government wrongdoing, whether from a responsible or an irresponsible source, receive immediate and often sympathetic media coverage and public acceptance? When wild charges -- or serious charges -- are spread instantaneously on the Internet, why are so many people ready to believe them, almost automatically? Why do so many columnists, commentators, and wannabe experts immediately join the attack on "the establishment"? How can we reverse the tidal wave of Americans ready to believe the worst about our private corporations, our profit-making and our non-profit institutions and our government?

One clue may be found in events that happened a generation ago. Let me tell you a personal story.

A long time ago, on Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941 -- tonight, just one week short of 57 years ago -- I was working in the CBS News Room in New York. I was not yet 21 years old. I had a really important job that afternoon. Because I was the most recently employed Page Boy at CBS -- I had been hired only six months earlier -- I had to work Saturday and Sundays, when I would much rather have been at home. It was the least desirable shift. My job was to change the rolls of yellow paper on the Teletype machines that brought news from the Associated Press, United Press, and the now-long dead International News Service. If my memory is correct, there were some 11 Teletype printers, clicking away at all hours. They were placed along two of the walls of the CBS News Room, partly surrounding the editors and writers who prepared the radio news broadcasts. It was almost a full-time job to refill the rolls of paper on the printers. In between, my job was to bring coffee to the editors.

That Sunday afternoon of December 7, 1941 turned out unexpectedly to be one of the most memorable days of my life. I shall always remember the sound of the five bells ringing on the United Press machine to alert us to an incoming bulletin. There were a lot of bulletins in those days, and nobody paid particular attention to one more. I would tear off the bulletins and immediately bring them to the editors' desk. But this time -- in my memory, I can hear

the bell ringing as I am speaking with you tonight -- the bell kept ringing. It rang ten times signifying a "flash." I had never heard that before. Everyone jumped up and ran to the United Press teleprinter. It read: "FLASH - WHITE HOUSE ANNOUNCES ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR. 2:26 PM." Only 46 minutes after the news first reached President Roosevelt, he released the news to the nation.

Everyone in the CBS News Room was shocked. Astonished. Believing yet unbelieving. Suddenly, we were at war. Where was "Pearl Harbor"? Oh yes, Hawaii, of course. We were at war with Japan. It seemed incredible. I remember someone saying, "Let's wait a few minutes to confirm before we go with it."

Well, 57 years later, we must ask ourselves, why were we so astonished? Historians point out that in December 1941, it was obvious that war with Japan was imminent. Hadn't tension been growing? Hadn't our government taken actions that could be interpreted only that, it expected war with Japan at any time? Within the first few days of that December, hadn't Japan begun a major military campaign in Southeast Asia? Why were we so surprised?

Only now does the answer to that question seem to me obvious: we were a generation that had grown to adulthood in the aftermath of World War I. (Woodrow Wilson was still President of the United States when I was born.) We had all been taught in our school books how World War I had started. It had been the last major war before December 1941. So quite unconsciously, we simply assumed that Japan would begin war against the United States just as World War I had erupted: with the exchange of diplomatic notes, the recall of ambassadors, formal declarations of war. Two years earlier, in September 1939, in exactly that way, Britain had gone to war against Hitler Germany. So we had unconsciously assumed that's the way it would be once again. Well, it wasn't.

We were looking backward instead of ahead. We were applying to December 1941 criteria that applied to 1914 and 1917 and even 1939. But not to 1941.

Doesn't that describe United States public opinion today? It is stating only the obvious to point out that the editors and intellectuals of 1998 are those who had come to their maturity during the Vietnam War and Watergate. If those in senior positions in the media and the universities today range in age from their mid 40s to early 50s, then at the time of Vietnam and Watergate, they were still in college or recently graduated. It is during college years that social and political ideas crystallize in our heads, based on our observations of the world around us at the time. And those were the years when President Johnson and the American "establishment," "the best and the brightest," were telling us that "there is light at the end of the tunnel," that we were winning the war against the Viet Cong. (That one was believed until the helicopters lifted the last escapees off the Saigon Embassy roof.) And in those years, President Nixon was sitting in the White House, plotting a burglary of a physician's patient records. (Incidentally, it's interesting to note that President Nixon formed his White House Plumbers to do the break-in after the FBI and the CIA had refused to break the law and do his dirty work.)

Of course, young people growing up in that era were right in distrusting and disbelieving their government and all the "establishment figures" of the time. They were right and much

of the business community and the government were wrong. The young people's response then was rational, correct and courageous. But the question we must ask in 1998 is, "Is their judgment of the 1970s still valid and applicable in 1998?" Are they looking at today's world through the outdated and distorted lenses of an earlier generation, I must add, with apologies, just as we at CBS did 57 years ago this month?

Alas, today's public distrust of our corporate messages arises only in part because of the past. It comes from more than things that were done and things that were said a generation ago. Equally bad things are being done today by some of our leaders. By some of our corporate leaders. Our government leaders. Our advocacy groups. I won't even try to specify whom I mean. It is sickening. You know them. I can't find appropriate language to characterize some of the happenings in Washington or Wall Street today. The public disgust is spilling over onto every aspect of our national life and discourse. It is eroding public trust in all the institutions of our society. The daily news report is shaping public disgust and cynicism much faster than public relations professionals can build trust in the honor and the integrity of our institutions, public and private. Our big problem today isn't getting noticed; it's getting believed and trusted.

The best public relations campaign in the world can't build trust while reality is destroying it. Reality limits what public relations can accomplish. Today's events are severely damaging not only the President, the Congress, and the judiciary, but inescapably are damaging the fiber of trust and integrity that is essential to binding together a democratic nation. Today's events are making less credible not only Bill Clinton, Kenneth Starr, Newt Gingrich and Henry Hyde but every institution in America. And to those who sanctimoniously tell us they are protecting our Constitution, I say, "You have the right to do what you are doing. But just because you have the right to do it, doesn't say it is right to do it. You are destroying public trust in our institutions."

Perhaps too many of our corporate messages are being framed in exactly the same way they were presented a quarter-century ago. We seem to pretend that the cynicism and changed values of a new generation don't exist. Perhaps our business messages lack credibility. Like the annual letter from the Chairman promising a glorious corporate tomorrow although today's earnings are falling. Wouldn't he be more believable if he honestly spoke of the competitive problems his corporation faces? Or announcements that emphasize increased percentages of female and minority employees - this at the same time that the employees themselves are asking us to judge them as individuals and not by race or gender. Or messages that have switched from last year's plea for free enterprise and less government interference to this year's plea for Congressional tariff protection against low-cost Asian imports. Like the "Chainsaw Al's" who walk away with tens of millions of dollars after wrecking not only human lives but the companies they supposedly saved.

Public relations can't do much too calm social conflict. The openness and dialogue of a free society can't dose the mouths of demagogues. An agitator of great skill can inflame public opinion against governments and corporations. Let me read to you a letter that a very influential American sent to the President of the United States

"Elevated to the Presidency, you assumed the merit of everything to yourself, and the natural ingratitude of your constitution began to appear. You commenced your Presidential career by encouraging and swallowing the greatest adulation, and you traveled America from one end to the other to put yourself in the way of receiving it. ... As to what were your views, for if you are not great enough to have ambition, you are little enough to have vanity, they cannot be directly inferred from expressions of your own.... As to you, sir ... a hypocrite in public life, the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned principles or whether you ever had any?"

That letter was sent not to President Bill Clinton but to President George Washington. The man who wrote it was perhaps one of the best of all the agitators or communicators in our nation's history -- "best" in this context meaning most persuasive and for a good cause -- Tom Paine. Paul Johnson, the British historian, in his new book, "A History of the American People," reveals that Paine had begun his career in England as a trade union leader, demanding an increase in the pay of England's tax collectors. When his fight cost Tom Paine his job, he came to America to find an outlet for his seething anger. He found it in the cause of American independence. With his great book, "Common Sense," he spoke of the "times that try men's souls," of "summer soldiers and sunshine patriots." He aroused public opinion to fight for independence from Great Britain. The term "United States" is certainly his. President John Adams said of Tom Paine, "I do not know whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine." But after our independence had been won, Tom Paine remained an angry man. The success of American independence failed to satisfy his inner raging self. Now he needed a new outlet for his anger. So he turned his fury on President George Washington. On July 30, 1796, he wrote that abusive letter to President Washington.

Well, we have the Tom Paines, the ideologists of our time, angry people who seek to convince us that their anger comes from pure righteousness, and that they possess wisdom that we lack. Tom Paine -- fortunately for us -- had turned his rage against the right enemy at the right time. Today, in our social climate, anger can and does usually result in 30-second spots on the evening's television news. But it rarely results in lasting change.

To change things, to solve social ills, I much prefer the civility exemplified by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the great Americans of my lifetime. Dr. King appealed to the best in us, our consciences, our decency, our faith, our heart, our dream for a better society, and in the process, he changed America fundamentally. Yes, Dr. King confronted evil -- militantly. He demonstrated and picketed and organized. But always, the means he used never contradicted the ends he sought. His anger at social injustice appealed to the best instinct within us, not the worst. That's what made Martin King an enduring leader and truly an American hero.

Not all the attacks that corporate America faces come from angry demagogues. Some come from "respectable" sources and receive dutiful acceptance from some intellectual circles. I quote from an article by Victor Keegan, in the highly respected GUARDIAN of London:

"The rich will always be with us. But never in the history of the world have they been present in such quantities and in such flamboyant contrast with the poor ... All the digital billionaires do is rearrange the 1s and 0s of computer code into software packages selling for hundreds of dollars each. At least Microsoft had the decency to put programs on plastic disks complete with fat manuals to create the illusion of value for money."

Now, there's wisdom for you. All Bill Gates does is "rearrange the 1s and 0s of computer code into software packages selling for hundreds of dollars each." Well, fools and demagogues will always be with us. But don't waste your time trying to persuade them or urge their followers to moderation.

If public relations advocacy is to be effective and persuasive, our messages should be quiet and civil, not angry and adversarial. And, in the instant age of the World Wide Web, we must be prepared to respond instantly. But you and I can't control what the fools or demagogues do or say, or what fools or uninformed and uncaring people will believe. There remains a place for civility, for decency, for fairness, for moderation, in our public relations activities. I believe that soft speech usually is more clearly heard and more persuasive than angry shouting. I believe that the whole truth is better than the half truth. I believe that honest admission of error is more acceptable to public opinion than legalistic denial. And all of that applies to the current Washington situation. It seems to be both essential and unavoidable for public relations professionals to have faith in the basic decency and moderation of our fellow citizens, even though the pendulum of public opinion sometimes swings to the left or the right.

So the lesson for us is to remember that just because we, or our clients or employers, have the right to do something doesn't say it is right to do it. If we have anything to contribute to those whose bread we eat, isn't it our judgment, our integrity, our honesty, our ability to do right as we see the right? Isn't that the real future of public relations, and not our cleverness, our expediency, our skill at creating the 30-second sound bite, our skill at making a sick situation look healthy? In the long run, isn't that the only enduring way to save our jobs, our profession, and our honor?