

ALEXANDER HAMILTON MEDAL ACCEPTANCE REMARKS

by Steven J. Harris
Yale Club, New York City
November 5, 2008

Good evening.

Let me begin by apologizing for not being able to join you in person to accept this incredible honor – the Alexander Hamilton Medal.

I wouldn't have blamed Frank Ovaitt and the Institute board if they had felt my inability to be there was a ground to withhold this recognition from me. Thankfully, they did not.

I can only say that I am sincerely honored and humbled by the company in which you have placed me. Only the extreme circumstances in which we find ourselves at this moment in the U.S. auto industry and at General Motors could have kept me away. If the Hamilton Medal is presented to someone who has made contributions to the "practice" of public relations, then let me assure you that as you are watching this I am literally and figuratively *practicing* public relations.

I also want to apologize to Sir Martin Sorrell for being "absent from class" for what I know will be a fascinating and instructive lecture. And I want to congratulate the first class of Institute for Public Relations Research Fellows, but in particular GM's own – until five days ago at least -- Kathy Collins. Congratulations, Kathy and to all the inductees.

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Over the last week or so, I was struck by a couple of comments I've heard.

Someone shared a quote from a speaker at the Conference Board meeting in Chicago on Crisis and Reputation Management. That person said, "You get the PR you deserve."

Oh yeah? Well not from where I'm sitting today. For the last month or so virtually every newspaper in America, as well as countless TV commentators and bloggers, have weighed in on whether the U.S. auto industry in general and GM in particular, are worth saving and deserve Federal assistance. And for most of them the answer is "no."

Do we deserve that kind of PR? Some may think so but my perspective is that those writers and commentators have an incomplete and inaccurate view of the importance and impact of the U.S. auto industry on this nation's health.

In fact, if we let the U.S. auto industry fail, and that is no longer unimaginable, then the devastation that Katrina brought to New Orleans would be duplicated in man-made ways not only in Detroit, but across America.

For example, the U.S. auto industry directly employs nearly 250,000 people, provides healthcare to 2 million Americans and pension benefits to 800,000 retirees and spouses.

It has invested \$250 billion in the U.S. over the last two decades. Spent \$12 billion on R&D last year. Represents nearly 4 percent of the U.S. GDP supporting jobs in all 50 states. In addition, the more than 20,000 auto dealers in the U.S. have more than a million employees and payrolls above \$50 billion. You get the idea.

It's just hard for me to believe that anyone thinks it would be a good thing for our country if this industry were allowed to collapse. GM and the other auto companies can help lead the way out of this mess. We *build* things of value and we are all about the reinvention of the automobile and our company and to my mind that is good for our country.

The other comment that spun me around was a question from a student attending the PRSA Conference in Detroit last week. I was on a panel and the student asked why working in the field of public relations is an honorable thing to do and if PR is an honorable profession.

Wow! That set me back.

I, of course, told the students that what makes anything honorable is the person and how they conduct themselves, their ethics, their morals, and their integrity. Any profession can be honorable or dishonorable – it really depends on the individual.

As that question stayed with me throughout the day and as I thought about the impact the current global economic crisis is having on all us and the companies, institutions and organizations we work for, I came away convinced that the public relations industry has been handed an opportunity to do our most honorable, our most noble work ever. We and what we do are needed now, more than ever.

Our management teams need our counsel. Our employees are depending on us to get them what they need to know to do their jobs and to reduce the anxiety from all this chaos. The media needs us, even if they don't always recognize it, to provide context and factual information and to help them from going off course even when they have the best of intentions. And there are a number of other constituencies who are looking to us for help, perspective and reassurance.

So yes, what we do is honorable and even more importantly it is absolutely critical as we work our way through the biggest economic, credit and confidence crisis any of us has ever experienced.

I've always found public relations to be challenging, fun, fascinating and rewarding – but in recent months I've been reminded just how important it can be. I feel I am helping America, and one of its most important companies, fight to right their collective ships.

Dealing with the challenges that GM faces is why I love this profession and the people I get to work with.

Your recognition of what I do – and what all of us are doing – makes the Alexander Hamilton Medal all the more special to me.

Thank you so much.