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Corporate Tactics in the Oval Office

It has been said many times, with ample evidence, that the Nixon administration has been skilled in the techniques of public relations. Nothing is new in that. What is new is that not until Watergate did it become grimly clear how much overlap and similarity actually existed between the public relations of the oval room and the board room. In its reaction to the original crime, the alleged coverup and now the Ellsberg connection, administration officials—many of them with ad agency or PR backgrounds—have used classic public relations tactics that countless corporations rely on when caught in a jam.

With startling similarity, the White House has now used five of the basic public relations tactics long perfected in the board rooms.

1. *Dismiss the problem as irrelevant.* On learning of the Watergate break-in, Ronald Ziegler called it "a third-rate burglary attempt" and not worthy of his attention. Dismissing problems in such a manner is a specialty of General Motors, the world's largest corporation. In 1969, it sent a vice president to Washington to put down a revolt by a customer who couldn't keep his GM school buses in safe condition. The official dismissed such potential dangers as flawed clutches, broken engine mounts and snapped tailpipe hangers as not being safety related defects. Eventually, the buses had to be recalled three times for safety problems. As for the vice president, rather than being reprimanded, GM eventually promoted him. In another case, in 1971, GM refused to bear the costs of defective heaters found in Corvairs, ones that gave off poisonous fumes. In language Mr. Ziegler would understand, GM said: "Should it be necessary to continue to drive your (Corvair) before inspection and necessary repairs can be made, the heater should be shut off and a window rolled down."

2. *Discredit and harass the critic.* Once the White House realized that a few reporters and editors would be sticking with Watergate, administration officials began discrediting them. Ronald Ziegler said that "certain elements may try to stretch this beyond what it is." Clark MacGregor said "The Post has sought to give the appearance of a direct connection between the White House and Watergate—a charge The Post knows—and a half dozen investigations have found — to be false." The most publicized business world discrediting and harassment came when General Motors hired a detective to "investigate" Ralph Nader. But other and more recent examples are easily found. In January, Barton A. Cummings, chairman of the American Advertising Federation went to the 15th annual AAF public affairs

conference; and put down the consumer movement as "the militant minority dedicated to overthrowing the free enterprise system . . . If we in business cannot put the brakes on this creeping socialism the free enterprise system will become a thing of the past. Donald Kendall, often a visitor from the board room of Pepsico to the oval room of his friend President Nixon, has said that the consumer movement "is taught . . . often and all-too-well by men whose intentions for our country are either curious or unknown to me . . . I believe that the ultimate target is free enterprise itself."

3. *Send rabbits to guard the lettuce patch.* When neither dismissing the problem nor discrediting the press worked, the President ordered his own counsel to investigate. "I can state categorically that his investigation," said the President, indicates that no one either in the White House or the administration was involved. Captains of industry are fond of in-house investigations, too. In 1970, when saving the environment became a national issue, some of the nation's worst industrial polluters became members of the National Industrial Pollution Control Council. The council's purpose was to investigate pollution problems and advise the President accordingly. In three years, the council has proven irrelevant, weak and about as illuminating as John Dean's investigation for his former boss. The first chief of the council was Bert Cross, board chairman of 3M. While supposedly investigating ways for the government to pass new anti-pollution laws, his own corporation was cited by the government as a prime offender to getting rid of billboard pollution.

4. *National security is at stake.* When Egil Krogh Jr., called it quits, he wrote to the President that he took full responsibility for the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office. In owning up, though, Krogh added: "I believed that my decision was dictated inescapably by the vital, national security interests of the United States." National security has the ring of patriotism, as such industrial patriots as the petroleum lobby and coal companies know. A justification for digging a pipeline down the center of Alaska is that we must not be dependent on those shifty Arabs who would love to see us rendered nationally insecure with no oil to run our cars or lawnmowers. In "Alaska Industry," a business publication (quoted in "Oil On Ice" by Tom Brown), an oil official states that we had better let the companies develop the North Slope because interruptions in the supply of Mideast oil could possibly "pass from inconvenience and hardship to the deeply disturbing character of a

threat to the security of the Western World . . ." Carl Bagge, head of the National Coal Association, also fears Mideast dependency and concludes that "coal whether deep mined or strip mined, is the only assurance we have of protecting our national security and the integrity of our domestic energy base."

5. *Agree to a consent decree.* When all other devices fail, when the base camp to some mountain of untruth must finally be abandoned, the corporation caught in a jam has the final option of the consent decree. This is the cease-and-desist device by which a company does not admit guilt but promises to stop those acts that the FTC or the FDA accuses it of doing. The consent order fools only the naive. If you are not guilty of something, why stop doing it? Ronald Ziegler's famous "inoperative" statement was essentially a consent decree; while not admitting that anything he previously said was false, he agreed not to say it anymore.

Many now see the Watergate as a crisis in government but before that it is first a breakdown in public relations. Private enterprise can get away with PR buccaneering but the public is not yet used to it from its President. From him, it still demands public service, not public relations. That what we have seen these past months is the crudest form of PR gives, truth once again to what C. S. Lewis wrote in his preface to "The Screwtape Letters": "The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid 'dens of crime' that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered — moved, seconded, carried and minuted — in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices."

As in the best PR operations from Madison Avenue, lowered voices—what the President called for in his first inaugural—have been conducting the public relations effort of the Watergate.