The description of America is all too familiar:

"The business class dominates government through its ability to fund political campaigns, purchase high-priced lobbyists, and reward former officials with lucrative jobs. Meanwhile, the working-class majority of the American people has felt its economic and political power diminish or disappear.... Many of the social institutions that should be the bulwark of grassroots democracy --stable neighborhoods, vigorous unions, independently-owned small farms and businesses--are rapidly disappearing. Fewer than half of eligible Americans even bother to vote, and those who do vote have little faith that good will come of it, telling pollsters they are often voting for the 'lesser of two evils.' Both major parties have become wholly dependent upon the same corporate dollars to pay a new professional class of PR consultants, marketers and social scientists who manage and promote causes and candidates in essentially the same manner that advertising campaigns sell cars, fashions, drugs, and other wares...."

"This degraded political environment has created a rich bed of business opportunity for the public relations industry. As citizens remove themselves in disgust from the political process, the PR industry is moving in to take their place, turning the definition of 'grassroots politics' upside down by using rapidly-evolving high-tech data and communications systems to custom-design 'grassroots citizen movements' that serve the interests of their elite clients."

This description of contemporary America, which probably rings true to nearly everyone who is paying attention, is taken from the recent book, TOXIC SLUDGE IS GOOD FOR YOU (subtitled, Lies, Damn Lies, and the Public Relations Industry) by John C. Stauber and Sheldon Rampton.[1] If you think you are already about as cynical as it is possible to be, this book will jolt you: the situation is worse than anything you could have imagined.

If you want to know how American-style "democracy" works in the late 20th century, you simply MUST read this short book. In recent years, Stauber and Rampton have made it their business to describe the PR industry, which manipulates the media, public opinion, and elections to control public debate and public policy. Since publishing their riveting little book, Stauber and Rampton have kept up a steady stream of eye-opening reports in their quarterly journal PR WATCH.

The current PR WATCH (available on the world wide web at http://users.aol.com/srampton/center.html) reveals a typical instance of democracy subverted by PR corporations who engineer consent for the Fortune 500 using "dirty tricks."

In this instance, PR WATCH reveals that the Philip Morris Company --the tobacco and food giant with 1991 earnings of $39.1 billion--has paid a PR firm to create a phony "public interest" organization called Contributions Watch which is masquerading as an "independent nonprofit" group, supposedly gathering unbiased data on campaign contributions in all 50 states.[2] In reality, Contributions Watch is doing something quite different. According to internal company documents leaked to Stauber and Rampton, Contributions Watch was created with bundles of Philip Morris money for the specific purpose of influencing the Presidential election, creating massive pressure on Congress for "tort reform," and tarnishing the reputations of legitimate consumer advocacy groups such as Consumers Union, publishers of CONSUMER REPORTS, and the public-interest law firm, Trial Lawyers for Public Justice.

Tort reform was a key piece of the Republican Party's "Contract With America" when Newt Gingrich became speaker of the House of Representatives in 1994. The goal of "tort reform" is to shield corporations by limiting the amount of money that juries can award to plaintiffs injured by medical malpractice or by harmful consumer products, such as cigarettes. Both the House and the Senate --for the first time in our history--passed tort reform legislation in March, 1996, but President Clinton vetoed it, saying such a law would encourage "misconduct" by "irresponsible companies willing to put profits above all else."[3]

Until PR WATCH blew the whistle on Contributions Watch, the Philip Morris plan was succeeding. Wittingly or not, newspapers like the WALL STREET JOURNAL were regurgitating stories served up by Contributions Watch.[4,5] Contributions Watch was creating support for "tort reform" using the argument that rich plaintiffs' lawyers are distorting the democratic process with their money, supporting Bill Clinton for President. This is in fact true, but the proper public policy to restore democracy would be far-reaching campaign finance reform, including full public financing of elections, not tort reform. (See REHW426 and REHW427.) Tort reform would merely shield corporations from liability while de-funding the Democratic Party, to the delight of Republicans. What Contributions Watch --and the WALL STREET JOURNAL--failed to mention is that Philip Morris itself is the largest single campaign contributor in America --having spent a total of $2.7 million during the past 18 months trying to influence elections--$2.1 million of it to elect Republicans.[6]

The PR industry and dirty tricks are not new. What's new is that they have grown out of control. The PR industry traces its roots to the work of Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud. Bernays frankly discussed his public relations discoveries--using science to manipulate the public from behind the scenes--in several books. For example, in PROPAGANDA in 1928, Bernays said, "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it." And: "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute a true ruling class of our country."[1,pgs.23-24] He proudly called his scientific techniques of opinion-molding "the engineering of consent."

Bernays in his later years claimed to be morally motivated. He had spent a good part of his life nefariously promoting tobacco products, yet he said, "No reputable public relations organization would today accept a cigarette account, since their cancer-causing effects have been proven." However, in a 1994 survey of 38 PR firms, 29 said they would accept a tobacco account if they had the chance.[1,pg.32]

Even in the early days, it should have been obvious to anyone who thought about it that a group of corporations with large budgets dedicated to subverting democracy would succeed. Computers, fax machines, and overflowing corporate treasuries have simply made it much easier. Now in the U.S., there are more than 150,000 individuals employed as "PR specialists." To put this number into perspective, there are only 130,000 journalists in America and the number is shrinking steadily as news organizations jettison reporters and rely more and more on "news" manufactured by PR firms. (In 1991, 38% OF 2432 JOURNALISTS SURVEYED SAID THEY GET HALF THEIR STORIES FROM PR FLACKS; 31% said they relied on PR people for 5 to 10 stories a week; 15% said they relied on them "more than 10 stories; 17 PERCENT SAID THEY USED PR PEOPLE FOR EVERY STORY. Local news reporters said they get only 15% of their stories from PR people; editors of lifestyle pages put the figure at 60%, and among entertainment editors, the figure is 75%. REPORTERS CREDITED PR PEOPLE AS THE SOURCE FOR 90% OF ALL STORIES ON HEALTH. The environment, of course, is part of the "health" Beat.[7]

As Mark Dowie observes, "A single public relations professional with access to media, a basic understanding of mass psychology, and a fistful of dollars can unleash in society forces that make permanent winners out of otherwise-evident losers--whether they
be products, politicians, corporations or ideas.”[1,pg.4]

Stauber and Rampton document the dirty tricks that are routinely used by the PR industry, such as:

** Spying on legitimate citizen groups to learn their strategies, and in some instances publishing phony documents on the letterhead of legitimate groups to discredit them;

** Manufacturing phony “grass-roots” groups to create the impression that there is a groundswell of “real people” supporting a particular corporate agenda. Michael Dunn of the Washington PR firm Michael E. Dunn says, “The purpose of the grass-roots program is NOT to get more Americans involved in the political system. The purpose of a grassroots program is one purpose period, and that is to influence legislative policy.”[1,pg.88]

** Conducting smear campaigns against books before they are published to intimidate editors into not reviewing them;

** Manufacturing gobs of phony news for TV and newspapers;

** Infiltrating groups to urge activists to resort to violence, even including murder.[1,pgs.61-64]

** Calling every registered voter in a particular district to find out what issue they care about most, then writing a letter to each one saying that Candidate X is the champion of their favorite issue (whether it is true or not).

Such “grass-roots” campaigns are only possible for those with immense budgets. The NEW YORK TIMES reports that some phony grass-roots campaigns cost upwards of $3 million per month -- pocket change for a corporation that nets billions each year.[8]

What is the larger meaning of these realities for the republic? Here is Lewis Lapham, editor of HARPER’S MAGAZINE: "The permanent government, a secular oligarchy... comprises the Fortune 500 companies and their attendant lobbyists, the big media and entertainment syndicates, the civil and military services, the larger research universities and law firms. It is this government that hires the country’s politicians and sets the terms and conditions under which the country’s citizens can exercise their right --God-given but increasingly expensive --to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Obedient to the rule of men, not laws, the permanent government oversees the production of wealth, builds cities, manufactures goods, raises capital, fixes prices, shapes the landscape, and reserves the right to assume debt, poison rivers, cheat the customers, receive the gifts of federal subsidy, and speak to the American people in the language of low motive and base emotion.”[9]

Such descriptions of our homeland have become troublingly familiar. For people who care about America, it is time to bring back outrage. Time to remember our history; it hasn't always been this way. Time once again for the people to define what corporations can be, can become, and can do.[10]

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


Descriptor terms: pr industry; public relations industry; elections; campaign finance reform; corporations; philip morris; astroturf; shelton rampton; john stauber; mark dowie; consumers union; trial lawyers for public justice; tlpj; contract with america; toxic sludge is good for you; pr watch; contributions watch; tort reform; bill clinton; wall street journal; edward bernays;