



My first job in public relations was with a political agency, where I worked on local, statewide and presidential campaigns. There were many lessons from my campaign days that I have been using on none political accounts ever since. Today, because of the continuous coverage of political news on cable TV, those lessons are available to anyone who pays attention, and I have always told people who reported to me that valuable PR lessons can be learned from the political scenes.

As in the past, the 2020 political scene offered a master class in do's and don'ts that can be applied to agency life. As we approach the inauguration of a new president, here are some of the most important lessons from the campaign (and a few from previous campaigns) that elected Joe Biden.

- For years, President Trump disparaged the U.S. intelligence services and NATO. But during his speech explaining why he ordered the killing of Iran General Qasem Soleimani the president said he based the attack on intelligence reports and also asked NATO to help in the mid-East. **Lesson to Remember:** Ours is a business where individuals vie for the same promotions and jealousies regarding others advancements are not uncommon. Nevertheless, never bad mouth your competitors. As the Trump speech showed, you never now when you will need their help.
- For the media trainers reading this, a suggestion: Use President Trump's prepared statements and q and a sessions with the media as examples of what a client should not do in press sessions. Because of his record of lying, immediately after the president has concluded his remarks, reporters point out his latest falsehoods. **Lesson to Remember:** No matter how significant a client's title, lies will be called out. And in the future, whatever is said will be greeted by the media with skepticism.
- Client relationships are the most important aspect of

account handling. An important lesson used by Rep. Nancy Pelosi, during her standoff with GOP Sen. Mitch McConnell, about when to deliver the impeachment charges to the Senate, is easily transferred to every type of account. If a client suggests doing something that you believe is wrong, don't automatically agree with the suggestion. Tell the client why you feel it is wrong. Of course, if the client insists you have no choice but to comply, as long as it is not illegal and will not destroy your reputation with the media by disseminating false information. **Lesson to Remember: When disagreeing with a client's suggestion, always do so with alternative suggestions that meets the client's wants.**

- The New York Times, in its January 6 edition, printed a tweet from Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the House Republican leader, saying, "While Democrats are trying to remove President Trump from office, the President is focused on removing terrorists from the face of the earth." The Democrats responded by saying the matters were not related and that the impeachment process could continue during a debate on Trump's foreign policy. **Lesson to Remember:** If you are defending a client with a PR crisis, always expect negative tweets. The savvy PR practitioner should have crafted a series of responses as soon as the crisis developed that can be used as a retort.
- Be flexible. Despite saying that an impeachment must have bipartisan support, Democrats said the situation had changed and went ahead with their inquiries. **Lesson to Remember:** Even approved client programs should always be considered an interim draft. If situations change, tactics and elements of the program should be revised.
- After saying he was too busy to watch the impeachment hearings, President Trump continuously tweeted and commented about them. **Lesson to Remember:** Contradictory changing of positions makes the media not to believe what is said.

- During the impeachment hearings, Congressmen would yield their speaking time to others who could better deliver the message, **Lesson to Remember:** During a press conference always make sure that there is more than one person to answer questions.
- During the impeachment hearings, the Democrats used constitutional experts to make their case for impeachment. **Lesson to Remember:** When planning a media tour, or during a press conference, third party experts have more credibility than company spokespeople.
- During the impeachment hearings, every Republican kept repeating the same message points. **Lesson to Remember:** Message points must be stressed during every media opportunity. A story or TV interview without message points is worthless to the client.
- When questioned during the impeachment hearings, some members of the committees replied, "I don't have that information. I'll get back to you." **Lesson to Remember:** A person being interviewed should never wing it. There is nothing wrong with saying, "I'll provide the information after checking."
- During the impeachment hearings, the Democrats displayed a savvy command of how to gain continuous positive media coverage by staggering the release of transcripts instead of releasing them all at once. **Lesson to Remember:** Copy that tactic whenever possible when releasing positive important news. If the news is negative to your client, release it all at once. Positive news should be spaced to gain coverage over a long period of time.
- When representing a client with a PR problem, consider House Speaker Pelosi's strategy of delaying delivering the impeachment papers to the Senate. **Lesson to Remember:** Do not rush to immediately answer media questions after a PR crisis occurs. Information helpful to your client might emerge by waiting for a couple of days. A statement like, "We're investigating the

situation and will provide more details as we learn them," is my go-to media response immediately after a crisis happens.

- The way House Speaker Pelosi handled the press conference, on January 15, after announcing the impeachment managers who will act as prosecutors in Trump's Senate trial, should be a template that PR people should follow during their press conferences. Instead of answering every question herself she deferred to others who were more involved in the specifics of the questions. **Lesson to Remember:** Providing specific answers, rather than generalizations, makes for a successful press conference. Don't let one speaker act as a Renaissance person.
- It's impossible to derail the coverage of bad news by announcing a new initiative. On January 15, 2020, shortly after House Speaker Pelosi's press conference announcing the managers who will prosecute Trump in his Senate trial, the president held his own presser regarding a trade deal with China, obviously timed to upstage Pelosi's announcement. Of course, what he hoped for didn't occur. (*That tactic hasn't worked for decades, if ever.*) After the president's announcement concluded, the big news on TV reverted to the impeachment. The three major cable networks, even Trump ally Fox, provided live coverage of the House vote to approve the impeachment resolutions and send them to the Senate. That coverage continued throughout the day. The lead story on the following days was also about the impeachment of the president. **Lesson to Remember:** PR people should remember there is enough media to cover more than one story at a time.
- When selecting celebrity spokespeople, make certain that they are squeaky clean or their past might become part of any news stories or interviews you arrange, as happened when lawyers Ken Starr and Alan Dershowitz were named part of President Trump's defense team for his

Senate impeachment trial. Radio, TV and print media mentioned that both lawyers were involved with negotiating lenient plea deals for sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and that Dershowitz was accused of having sex with an under age girl, which he denied. Stories also mentioned a list of seedy clients that Dershowitz defended. A New York Times story said that Starr was pushed out as the Baylor University president because of his handling of sexual misconduct by the football team.

**Lesson to Remember:** The news reporting prior to the beginning of the clash between prosecutors and defense attorneys in the Senate chamber once again confirmed what I've said for decades: Once an entity or individual has been involved with a PR crisis, it becomes embedded in its DNA and can be revived anytime. That's what happened to Starr and Dershowitz.

- Nancy Pelosi gave a lesson that all PR practitioners should remember when having a press conference: Despite being the leader of the Democrats, once the Senate trial began she deferred to those involved in the trial to hold press briefings. Too often during press conferences, the ceo, president or other high corporate executives are featured, instead of individuals who really know the details of the subject being discussed.

**Lesson to Remember:** That leads to an unhappy press and sometime disgruntled reporters who says the PR people wasted their time. *(Not good for cementing relations with journalists.)*

- For the better part of a year, maybe longer, Ari Melber (MSNBC) and Brian Stelter (CNN) lionized Stormy Daniels' lawyer Michael Avenatti (who was convicted for financial extortion) without doing their due diligence, before promoting him as the greatest thing since the invention of the light bulb. **Lesson to Remember:** Before you engage any spokesperson, make certain that complete due diligence is conducted Never accept the assurances of an agent.

- Joe Biden achieved his Super Tuesday success with minimal advertising support or a break-the-bank PR budget. Nevertheless, he blanketed the country with earned media. That's what everyone in our business should remember: A savvy publicity program without marketing support can achieve as much, and often greater, media coverage than a program supported by millions of dollars. **Lesson to Remember:** The size of a budget will not determine whether a story will be used (with the exception of marketing and trade book writers.) What's important is the uniqueness and newsworthiness of your program and pitch. That will determine whether it results in earned media.
- The biggest PR blunder since seven Southern states seceded from the union in 1860-61 occurred on February 28, 2020, when during a campaign speech President Trump said that the criticism by Democrats over his handling of the coronavirus was "their new hoax." Even though he did not call the coronavirus itself a "hoax," his remarks were reconstructed and were brought up during the campaign as if he called the coronavirus a "hoax."
- **Lesson to Remember:** When preparing remarks, PR people should never use words that can be reworked by opponents.)
- As the tobacco industry, BP and the National Football League learned years ago, and Boeing, Wells Fargo and President Trump learned more recently, it's almost impossible to lie during a PR crisis and not be proved a liar by investigative journalists. During the coronavirus epidemic, the Wall Street Journal, a friendly Trump paper, published a lengthy article in the March 13 edition detailing Trump's mishandling of the coronavirus crises. The story also cited instances in which both Trump and Vice-President Pence lied to the public about the situation. And on March 18, the New York Times ran an article detailing day-by-day all the

untruths that the president said about the virus. **Lesson to Remember:** Reporters, whistle blowers and government agencies are watching. Don't lie during to the media; especially be extra careful of remarks made during a PR crisis.

- The lesson of President Trump should be required teaching in every PR 101 class: Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, fact checkers tallied around 16,000 lies by Trump since he took office, (which is now estimated at more than 22,000). He continued lying during the early days of the coronavirus epidemic in the U.S .and has not discussed it with reporters for weeks. As a result, even when he spoke truthfully, what he said was not accepted at face value by many people in and out of the media, His remarks regarding the coronavirus were immediately fact checked. **Lesson to Remember:** Once you're caught lying to the media (and in all aspects of life), even when you speak the truth it's difficult and sometime impossible, to regain trust.
- For decades I've advised clients that announcing bad news on a Friday night or holiday weekend will not prevent the news from receiving major coverage. Obviously, those who advise President Trump don't agree with me. In an attempt to hide news that they think will receive negative coverage the White House announces it on Friday nights. Not only does that not lessen news coverage but journalists have coined the name "Friday Night Massacres." **Lesson to Remember:** Attempting to hide bad news on a Friday night or holiday weekend doesn't work. What it does is get journalists to investigate and report on the reason behind the timing of the news.
- For months President Trump made statements regarding to Joe Biden's supposed memory lapses. But beginning with Biden's Democratic Convention speech and continuing thereafter, Biden showed that he had not lost a step and said he was in better physical condition than Trump (who is clinically medically obese.) **Lesson to Remember:** PR



people should always remind clients never to make a statement that can be refuted.

- Let's face it. CEO's think they are always the smartest persons in the room. Many, including President Trump, believe they can convince others to agree to their positions. Not so, as Bob Woodward's book exposing Trump's hiding the truth about the coronavirus from the public, because the president didn't want to "cause a panic," which was the president's defense, is a valuable lesson learned teaching tool. " **Lesson to Remember:** One of the most important jobs of a PR person is to attempt to convince a CEO from engaging in media matters that might have a downside. Use the Trump/Woodward example as a template.
- A very important lesson from the political goings-on that should be remembered is how easy it is for a client or PR person to lose the respect of the media. Rudy Giuliani is the template for this situation. For years he was known as "Americas' Mayor," for demonstrating skillful leadership after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that collapsed New York City's Twin Towers. But while he was slowly losing respect because of his lying statements in defense of President Trump since 2016, he lost what was remaining of his reputation because of his complete fabrications of why Trump lost the 2020 election. **Lesson to Remember:** Always be truthful when engaging with the press. It's difficult for PR people to be trusted and get a good reputation with the media; easy to lose it.

Ever since my political PR days (my first PR job was with a political firm, where I worked on local, state and presidential; campaigns), I have been advising PR practitioners to closely watch the workings of political campaigns, because, I believe, many tactics used in those campaigns can be transferred to non-political agency clients. The 2020 presidential campaign again confirmed to me that I am

right to do so. So pay attention to the political scene in 2021. There will be new lessons that can transfer to your agency clients.

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**About the Author:** Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr \(at\) juno.com](mailto:arthursolomon4pr@juno.com) or [artsolomon4pr@optimum.net](mailto:artsolomon4pr@optimum.net).