

OP-ED: PR Stunt Lessons From Trump University: Don't Use!!! (Unless You Believe That There Is No Such Thing As Bad Publicity)

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As a senior level PR practitioner for many years, I have managed or played key roles in many national and international flagship agency accounts. During that span, novice account people would excitedly run into my office early in the morning telling me about an event they heard on the radio or read in a newspaper that might affect accounts they were working on.

"Did you hear what happened? What can we do,"? I was often asked. And my reply was always the same. "Let's think things through before we suggest anything to the client. If the client calls before we have a plan, we should say we're working on a response and will suggest one that fits the situation, because rushing a response can make matters worse." And President Trump's photo op stunt showing him holding a Bible upside down, which received massive negative press coverage, illustrates the dangers of rushing without thinking.

All during his tenure it seems that the president's PR advisors learned their trade at Trump University before it was shut down as a scam. Insults, finger pointing, feeling sorry for the president, lies, blaming others and acting tough seem to be all they learned.

There are too many times that the president has insulted others to cite examples. There are too many times that the

president has pointed fingers at others to cite examples. There are too many times that the president has felt sorry for himself to cite examples. There are too many times that the president has lied to cite examples. There are too many times that the president has blamed others for poor results to cite examples. There are also too many times when the president has insisted he's right, when events show he's wrong, to cite examples. But the president's irrational less than PR 001 stunt is a prime example that deserves citing.

The president has always acted as the tough bully in the school yard. But on June 1 he bullied a peaceful group protesting the murder of [George Floyd in Minneapolis](#) and gathered all sorts of government forces, including active military ones, to do his fighting while he stayed in the safety of White House grounds.

The assorted forces used gas attacks, rubber bullets, and flash grenades against the peaceful protesters gathered in Lafayette Square so Mr. Trump could stage a photo op at St. John's Episcopal Church, during which he held a Bible up like a sports fan showing off an autograph.

The live televising of the event showed the world that force was used against peaceful protesters. On the following days, TV, print stories and even some of the president's strongest supporters – like Sen. Lindsey Graham – criticized the strong arm tactics of the bully in the White House. "I don't know what the purpose of the trip was," Graham said. "I do know that last night was a bad night and we need less bad nights."

When Graham criticizes the president you know something extraordinarily terrible happened. Graham's lukewarm displeasure of the president's actions was like a rain drop in the middle of an ocean, hardly making a splash. But it was soon followed by a loud downpour of criticism of the president by other Republicans, most notably Sens. Lisa Murkowski, who said she might not vote for Trump in November,

and Mitt Romney, who said, “From the news clips I have seen, the protesters across from the White House were orderly and nonviolent. They should not have been removed by force and without warning, particularly when the apparent purpose was to stage a photo op.”

Other Republicans joined the criticism of the president’s use of force. Sen. Ben Sasse, said in a statement. “There is a fundamental – a constitutional – right to [protest](#), and I’m against clearing out a peaceful protest for a photo op that treats the word of God as a political prop.” Sen. Susan Collins said she found it “painful” watching peaceful protesters subjected to gas attacks so he could go to a church he had visited just once before. Mr. Trump “came across as unsympathetic and as insensitive to the rights of people to peacefully protest,” she said.” Sen. Tim Scott, the only black Republican in the Senate, answered a question by saying, “Should you use tear gas to clear a path so the president can go have a photo op? The answer is no.”

But some congresspeople did more than give lip service. GOP Sen. Mitt Romney marched with protesters; Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden distributed water bottles to protesters, and Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attended a protest and handed out masks.

(All four former living presidents – Carter, Bush, Clinton and Obama. – issued statements condemning racism in American society, in contrast to the statements of our current president, who proudly said he was a Law and Order president. Other criticism of Trump was more direct.)

Retired and active military officers feared the use of active soldiers in clearing the way for a presidential photo op would destroy the high regard civilians now have for the military.

As of this writing on June 13, criticism of the president’s decision came from high ranking civilian and military

personal, including defense secretary Mark Esper and Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, even though they were among the senior administration officials who walked with Trump from the White House across Lafayette Square to St. John's Episcopal Church shortly after the president delivered remarks threatening military action against protesters. *(On June 11, Gen. Milley again apologized for participating in the photo with President Trump because, he said, it created a perception that the military is "involved in domestic politics."... "I should not have been there," Gen. Milley said in a pre-recorded speech for the National Defense University in Washington. As a commissioned uniformed officer, it was a mistake that I have learned from. And I sincerely hope we all can learn from it.)*

The first condemnation of the stunt by a ranking government official was the departure of a top policy Pentagon staffer, James Miller, who resigned from his role on the Defense Advisory Board for what he saw as Esper's violating his oath of office. Other criticisms of the president soon followed.

Among the many high ranking retired and active military officers who criticized Trump's actions directly or indirectly were Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Adm. Mike Mullen, another former chairman, (who said on Chris Wallace's June 7 Fox TV show that he was "sickened by the forceful removal of protesters, especially when the constitution gives them the right to protest"), and James Mattis, who resigned as Secretary of Defense in 2018 to protest Trump's Syria policy. In an extraordinary statement, Gen. Mattis called Trump a threat to the Constitution and said that he has deliberately attempted to divide people. Also finding fault with the president's actions were Generals John Allen and David Berger, current Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, Marines; Barry McCaffery, Raymond Thomas, Paul Eaton, Wesley Clark, Vincent Brooks, Loree Sutton, Joseph Votel, Dana Petard, Mark Hertling, James Pillsbury, Douglas

Lute, and current Army Chief of Staff James McConville, Army; Richard Myers, also a Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Mike Hayden, Air Force, (who also directed the National Security Agency and the C.I.A.); Adms. James Stavridis, William McRaven (who said, "President Trump has shown he doesn't have the qualities necessary to be a good commander in chief." "...The country needs to move forward without him at the helm."), Joseph Maguire, Sandy Winnefeld, Mike Franken and current Navy Chief of Operations Michael Gilday; current National Guard Bureau Chief Joseph Lengyel, plus William Perry and Ash Carter, both former secretaries of defense. Gen. David Goldfein, Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, was the first senior serving military officer to speak out.

After Mattis released his statement, Trump, in his default lying mode, said he fired the former defense secretary, causing his second chief of staff, former Marine General John Kelly to say, "The president has clearly forgotten how it happened." And a day later, on June 5, Kelly said, "I agree with Mattis," and added, "I think we really need to step back. I think we need to look harder at who we elect." Maj. General Thomas Cardin of the Georgia National Guard said, "We in America should not get used to or accept uniformed service members of any variety having to be put in a position where they are having to secure people inside the United States of America.

(This wasn't the first time retired generals and admirals have criticized Trump. They have spoken out in the past about his admiration for totalitarian leaders like Putin.)

FBI Director Christopher Wray also defended the right of nonviolent protests saying, "They are signs of a healthy democracy, not an ailing one." And Colin Powell, who served as secretary of state under former President George W. Bush and was previously chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told CNN's "State of the Union" on June 7 that Trump is a liar, a danger to the country and he will vote for Biden.

In addition, CNN reported that more than 280 former national security officials criticized Trump's aggressive approach to [peaceful protesters](#), and expressed concern about the presence of military assets at demonstrations across the country.

Perhaps the most damning comments against the president for using a religious backdrop while threatening military style action against peaceful protesters were the comments on television by Bishop Mariann E. Budde of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. She said that she had not been informed of Mr. Trump's using St. John's as a prop for his get tough rhetoric. "He did not pray," she said. "We need a president who can unify and heal. He has done the opposite of that, and we are left to pick up the pieces."

The day after his initial stunt backfired, the always so sure of himself president visited Saint John Paul II National Shrine, doubling down on his PR mistake. That visit drew scorn from Washington Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, who said he was "baffled" by Trump's visit to the shrine, calling it "reprehensible that any Catholic facility would allow itself to be so egregiously misused and manipulated in a fashion that violates our religious principles, which call us to defend the rights of all people even those with whom we might disagree." Pope John certainly would not condone the use of tear gas and other deterrents to silence scatter or intimidate protesters for a photo opportunity in front of a place of worship, Gregory said in a statement.

Even [Pat Robertson](#), the televangelist who once ran for the Republican nomination for president, criticized Trump on his long-running television show The 700 Club. "It seems like now is the time to say, "I understand your pain, I want to comfort you, I think it's time we love each other.".... "But the president took a different course. He said, 'I am the president of law and order,'" said Robertson.

But Attorney-General Barr, the lackey, denied that the photo-op was a stunt, which shows his lack of PR knowledge. But he did demonstrate his historical memory by using tactics honed by Sen. Joe McCarthy and President Trump, when the A.G., as the president often does when he makes inflammatory statements without providing facts, accused foreign actors of exacerbating the violence without providing details.

The president and A.G. also employed lessons from Putin's play book. When the Russians annexed Crimea in 2014, soldiers wearing a variety of uniforms and civilians clothes, as well as camouflage without insignia, were used in the take over. At Lafayette Square, a combination of police without identifying insignia was ordered to clear the way for Trump's walk to St. John's. *(Putin must have been flattered that the A.G. and the president thought so highly of the Russian dictator's strategy that they copied it.)* The A.G. told the A.P. that he didn't give the tactical order to assault the protesters, although he supported it. But CNN reported that a Department of Justice official said Barr did give the order. President Trump went a step further than Barr, saying he had not ordered peaceful protesters forcibly removed so he could walk to St. John's Church. *(Seems no one wants to take responsibility; any volunteers among you readers?)*

Trump's bad stunt judgment was again on display when he insisted that the graduating class of second lieutenants reassemble from throughout the country at West Point so he could deliver a speech on June 13, despite the coronavirus outbreak increasing and deaths from Covid-19 mounting. It was another instance of the "me first" behavior that Trump has demonstrated throughout his life. But this time it put the newly commissioned Army officer's lives at risk. The cadets were sent home in March because of the virus scare and were ordered back when the president insisted he wanted to address them, coronavirus be damned.

Everyone in our business knows, or should know, the

president's photo op was a stunt and so was his West Point address. Stunts can be a valuable PR tool if thought through and executed in a manner that lessen the possibility of negative media coverage. Stunts should be orchestrated only by PR practitioners who have the creative ability to make them mediable. Do-it-by-the-books staffers should ask for help from colleagues who think out-of-the-box to manage a stunt.

Stunts should not be used in an attempt to change the topic, as Trump does. They are like eating an ice cream cone under a 90 degree sun. It will soon melt away. Even a well executed stunt will resonate with people for only two or three days, if that long. *(I know. I've orchestrated many successful publicity stunts that made the evening news or next day's papers. Only one had a long shelve life, "Math Baseball," but that was because we crafted it knowing that we would transition it into a year-long program.)*

Stunts are mainly a "for the moment" attention-grabbing publicity tool. The flawed march to the church Trump stunt did not divert attention from topics that concern many Americans: the killing of George Floyd, peaceful protesters being attacked, racial injustice, the use of military personnel against civilians, over aggressive actions by some policemen and the threat still caused by coronavirius, which is trending up in parts of the U.S. *(As of the writing on June 13 at 6 pm, John Hopkins University reported, "The first case of COVID-19 in US was reported on 1/22/2020. Since then, the country has reported 2,048,986 cases, and 114,699 deaths," and trending up.)* Those are all facts. But what is not known is how elderly Americans view the protests. Few joined the protesters, TV showed. Most stayed inside. Was it the fear of being infected by a virus that is most harmful to seniors that kept them from marching, or were they opposed to the protests and looting? Did it make a difference to seniors that the looters were a small minority of the protesters? The November election will give us the answers to those questions. But elderly voters are

among Trump's most loyal supporters. So their negative reaction to the protests might not help the president when the votes are counted.

Trump's West Point stunt also did not divert media attention from the criticism of his actions by many three and four star generals and admirals. Their comments certainly will carry more weight in the presidential election than West Point cadets tossing their hats in the air.

Obviously, the president and his PR staffers, like so many people in our business, are so assured of themselves that they never considered that their church stunt might be received negatively by religious leaders and the media. (*They broke a rule that I have always told people reporting to me: Don't assume that you are the smartest person in the room. And if you are, don't act like it.*)

I created many stunts during the days when media outlets had enough reporters to cover them. A few examples:

- *During my political PR days, a U.S. Senator campaigned on the Staten Island Ferry. I also had a candidate for the New York State Assembly do whistle stop campaigning on the city's then BMT line. He would get off at each station, greet people, board the next train and repeat the process.*
- *To introduce a new line of athletic wear, I arranged that a portable tennis court be set up in Broadway's Shubert Alley, where passers by could attempt to return the serve of a professional tennis player. If they could they would receive merchandise. (Not much merchandise was given away.)*
- *For a client who sold educational material to schools, I arranged for Hall of Fame baseball player, Monte Irvin, to be named "Math Baseball Commissioner.". A portable infield of cloth with bases was created. According to the difficulty of the math question the youngsters would*

be awarded a single, double, etc. Major League teams participated, using Math Baseball as a community event in their areas.

- *For a Broadway show featuring a belly dancer, I arranged for the performer to give free belly dance lessons.*

All of these stunts, and others, had one thing in common. They were orchestrated so that the results of a media backlash were minimal, and there was none. *(With reduced staffs, today it's more difficult to get coverage for stunts unless they are tied to a specific newsworthy happening. I rarely advise stand-alone stunts.)*

Trump's use of religion when using incendiary tactics and rhetoric is a perfect example of what I've seen many times when account people are under pressure from their clients because of poor results – shooting from the hip instead of carefully evaluating why things aren't working out and making mid-course corrections to previously approved plans, Trump's actions showed a lack of thinking things through. It showed the necessity of crossing the T's and dotting the I's before embarking on any [PR](#) plan. Because of trying to immediately react to the moment, instead of considering how his march to the church plan might be received by the media and by religious leaders, it resulted in extensive negative press coverage. It's too early to know how his putting West Point graduates in danger of being infected by the coronavirus will play out. But there's a bigger downside than upside.

There's an old proverb "haste makes waste." The Trump fiasco proves it. PR practitioner should heed it.

In addition to showing a lack of PR know-how, Trump's inept photo op stunt again exposed his admiration of the strongman tactics of Russia's Putin, Xi Jinping of China, Kim Jong-un North Korea, Duterte of the Philippines and other dictators. In using gas, rubber bullets and flash grenades against peaceful protesters he now has gained official membership in

their club by putting his totalitarian instincts into action. And that's more important for Americans to remember than a flawed PR stunt.



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@juno.com or artsolomon4pr@optimum.net.