

Richard Levick on The Fifth Estate: A Business Guide for Surviving “The Troubles”



For years, one of the things you noticed about the streets of London was the absence of trash receptacles. It wasn't because Londoners had deeper empty pockets to haul their personal refuse; instead, it stood as a safety feature, a remnant of *The Troubles* – the three-decade conflict between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. Trash cans on every street corner were just too rich a target for incendiary devices. It's how a world capital adjusts to guerrilla war.

We've had no shortage of tense moments in our lifetimes – the tumultuous moments during the Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam War and #BLM movements, to name a few. But the events of January 6th are different. The nation's citadel – aided and abetted by the President of the United States with complicity by more than a few Members of Congress – has been attacked, like Sherman's march on Atlanta in reverse. And this time, the Confederate flag flew.

The aftermath looks like Camelot when, with all but four of his 100 knights of the roundtable perished or disappeared, King Arthur wonders aloud if the pursuit of the Holy Grail was worth it. There was, of course, nothing holy in the acts of the past months, despite the fact that more than a few Members of Congress and some members of the **media** tried to normalize them.

George Washington insisted on many things, not the least of which were uniforms for his troops when he was general of the Continental Army and a self-imposed limitation of years in office when he was President, because he adroitly understood the importance of soft power. Norms matter.

I've often thought that President Washington, with his years of active military service, concern for others, belief in democracy not monarchy, humility and extraordinary financial and personal sacrifice – he only got three years in retirement on his beloved Mount Vernon estate with Martha after serving two full terms – was the polar opposite of Donald Trump.

What happens after the bright line of January 6th? How do companies handle their political contributions, CSR, ESG, DEI, advertising and other branding concerns at a time when they have increasingly become the "fifth estate" – a governor on the government?

There is, of course, an historic fissure in the Republican Party akin to the 1850s with the dissolution of the Whigs,

with traditional conservatives trying to win back control of the party. It makes for a fluid situation but one where corporations have and are stepping into the lurch, trying to provide much needed stability. In speaking with corporate executives, intelligence operatives, journalists, Republican veterans and other thought leaders, this is how we read the tea leaves.

The insurgency of January 6th will move to guerrilla tactics. Conduct a vulnerability assessment. Where are you geographically exposed? What politicians has the company contributed to? Where are you advertising? What have your supply-chain providers done in the political arena?

Anticipate more violence. We may be at the nadir, but we are not past the disruption of the insurgency. Even if isolated, plan for more shocking events and make your hard business decisions accordingly.

Plan for transparency. The question is not if but when critics will discover your political spending (even formally opaque 527 contributions), private events and even, possibly, your private conversations. Eliminate wishful thinking about opacity and plan for transparency.

Look *forward* to what you do next. In speaking with NGOs who will be engaging in critical advertising and public relations campaigns against corporate PACs right after the inauguration, they expressed that they are focusing on what companies *do next*, not nearly as much as what companies have done in the past. That's almost as good as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Now is the time to make changes – consider freezing or disbanding your PAC; claw back **donations** or limit or end funding to anyone who opposes the peaceful transition of power, as 20 of the 30 largest corporate contributors have already **done**. At the very least, announce a pause to give the company time to decide how to move forward.

Draw the line between PAC funding and other activities your company engages in and commit the differences to messaging now. Some companies fear criticism even if they have little or no exposed PAC funding. It might be a supplier, a partner, the personal political contributions of an executive or other activity. If a journalist or NGO calls, you won't have much time to distinguish the difference if you haven't given it considerable thought now. A great example is how **Charles Schwab** handled this.

Take a second look at past funding. While most criticism will be about political contributions going forward, there is one caveat. If your PAC funded one or more of the 147 Republican members of Congress who refused to certify the election or the 16 Republican Attorneys General who wrote amicus curiae briefs in opposition to the certification, watch what they are doing now. If they remain outspoken in refusing to support the democratic process, you will need to do more to separate yourself. Powerful social critics can't go after every company; they will choose to focus on the companies that empower the most outspoken critics of democracy.

Companies don't need to be the first out with powerful statements, but they can't be the last. Not every company has to act with the speed, courage and clarity of Marriott, Blue Cross Blue Shield or Hallmark, but they do need to act at some point to minimize themselves as a target.

You can no longer separate your DEI commitments from your PAC support. The insurgency was made up of large numbers of white supremacists – a modern-day KKK. You cannot talk about your diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and still fund certification deniers (a synonym for minority disenfranchisement). It is now a bright line.

Support for the insurgency is shrinking. While there will be talk of 74 million people voting for Donald Trump and by extension, thereby supporting all that has been done in his

name, support has dramatically waned since January 6th. You are now talking about approximately 30% job approval for Donald Trump, or about 10% of the country. It is no small number, but it puts things in context, especially when you are trying to read the future.

Leave the First Amendment – speech, assembly and religion – and Second Amendment – the right to bear arms – arguments up to the courts. This wasn't a protest that broke into a riot but an insurrection that cleverly used a protest to execute a violent attack in broad daylight.

Review the platforms you use including social media and advertising. It is not a leap to think that, in the near future, muscular social critics will go after major advertisers on Fox, Sinclair, Newsmax and OAN – if those media don't distinguish themselves from support for the insurrection. Already, an effort by Open MIC is using shareholder resolutions to call on Home Depot and Omnicom Group to investigate whether their advertising is funding platforms that spread inappropriate content. **Expect this to expand.**

Track social media and look at rising trends to see if you are becoming a target. It's not just big data but the human intelligence that looks at social media trends. Have people who understand business, politics and social movements study your daily tracking to predict the future.

Over-communicate to employees. Employees need your leadership now more than ever. There will also be more employee activism in the coming years than any time since the days of powerful unions. The more you lay out a vision and communicate with authenticity the more you invest in a peaceful future.

And what about us, the individual? What do we do?

Maimonides, a renown 12th century Jewish scholar wrote that

the world was perfectly balanced between good and evil and that each person should consider themselves perfectly balanced between the two. The next action we do, however trivial, can tilt us and the whole world toward one or the other.

One of my favorite examples of this is listening to any conversations with **Peggy Wallace Kennedy**, the daughter of notorious former Alabama governor and segregationist George Wallace. She has dedicated her life to fighting for civil rights and talks about her friendships with civil rights leaders, such as Rep. John Lewis, who helped her find her voice and set her free.

Nineteenth century author Anne Brontë – an early advocate for women’s authorship and what today we would call a bestseller, was dying of tuberculosis at age 29 – the third of her siblings to die of the dreaded disease. Quite literally, with her dying breath, she turned to her remaining sister Charlotte, and whispered, “Take courage.” It’s the best advice I can give.

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