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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

2415 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6118

PHONE (202) 225-4952

THE HILL and KNOWLTON DOCUMENTS:
HOW THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY LAUNCHED ITS DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

A Staff Report, Majority Staff
Subcommittee on Health and the Environment
U.S. House of Representatives

May 26, 1994

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This majority staff report of the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment analyzes documents that describe in detail the formation and early years of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, a joint tobacco industry group now known as the Council for Tobacco Research.

The ostensible purpose of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee was to provide "aid and assistance to the research effort into all phases of tobacco use and health." In a full-page advertisement run in over 400 newspapers on January 4, 1954, the major tobacco companies explained that they formed the Research Committee because they "accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business."

The documents obtained by the Subcommittee were written by top officials at the Hill and Knowlton public relations firm, an advisor to the Tobacco Industry Research Committee during its formative years. The documents show that contrary to the industry's public assertions, the real purpose of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee was to "sponsor a public relations campaign which is ... entirely 'pro-cigarettes.'" The goal was "reassurance of the public" through "communication of ... the existence of weighty scientific views which hold there is no proof that cigarette smoking is a cause of lung cancer." The public relations campaign was so extensive that in 1955 the Tobacco Industry Research Council hired 35 staff members of Hill and Knowlton to conduct the campaign.

The documents describe in detail the massive campaign undertaken from 1954 through 1956 by the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to influence public opinion. They explain how during these early years the Tobacco Industry Research Committee:

- transformed obscure scientific reports favorable to the industry into headline news across the country;
- courted the editors of the nations' major news organizations, advising them in personal meetings of "the need for editorial responsibility in handling stories that rouse unwarranted fears";
- influenced the content of news reports in major newspapers, magazines, and television shows, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Edward R. Murrow Television Show;
- planned a 17-step public relations campaign to respond to one particularly unfavorable report;
- influenced medical opinion by sending hundreds of thousands of copies of booklets prepared by the

Tobacco Industry Research Committee to "all doctors" in the United States;

- established "personal liaisons" in organizations like the American Medical Association and American Cancer Society to secure "advance information ... concerning research" and "first-hand knowledge of the theories, methods, and personalities of those involved in research on tobacco and health"; and
- ultimately succeeded in shifting national opinion, so that by 1956 Hill and Knowlton could report that "neither the press nor the public seems to be reacting with any noticeable fear or alarm to the recent attacks."

As recounted by one Hill and Knowlton executive in 1953, the chief executive officers of the leading tobacco companies were "emphatic in saying that the entire activity is a long-term, continuing program, since they feel the problem is one of promoting cigarettes and protecting them from these and other attacks that may be expected in the future." Forty years later, the Council for Tobacco Research is still in operation and the campaign of disinformation continues.

Chronological Summary of Key Documents

December 1953. Dr. Earnest Wynder and his colleagues at the Sloan-Kettering Institute in New York City publish research showing that cigarette tar condensate causes fatal cancers when painted on the skin of mice. The research study, a copy of which is attached as exhibit 1, attracts massive media coverage.

Exhibit 1

December 15, 1953. The chief executive officers of the nation's largest tobacco companies meet on the morning of December 15, 1953, at the Plaza Hotel in New York City to discuss the implications of the new health research. Hill and Knowlton executives attend the meeting and, later in the day, write a memorandum summarizing the meeting. The memorandum is attached as exhibit 2.

The meeting is unprecedented: it is the first time the CEOs had met together outside of occasional dinners honoring an industry leader. In attendance were Paul M. Hahn, President, American Tobacco Company; Joseph F. Cullman, Jr., Chairman and President, Benson & Hedges; O. Parker McComas, President, Philip Morris & Co.; and J. Whitney Peterson, President, U.S. Tobacco Company.

At the meeting, the CEOs agree that the health criticisms are "extremely serious" and "worthy of drastic action" (p. 3). According to the memorandum, "the officials stated that salesmen in the industry are frantically alarmed and that the

decline in tobacco stocks on the stock market has caused grave concern" (p. 4).

According to the memorandum, "the chief executive officers of all the leading tobacco companies -- R.J. Reynolds, PM, B&H, U.S. Tobacco Company, B&W -- have agreed to go along with a public relations program on the health issue" (p. 1).

Specifically, they agree that:

"They should sponsor a public relations campaign which is positive in nature and is entirely 'pro-cigarettes.' ... They are also emphatic in saying that the entire activity is a long-term, continuing program, since they feel the problem is one of promoting cigarettes and protecting them from these and other attacks that may be expected in the future. Each of the company presidents attending emphasized the fact that they consider the program to be a long-term one." (p. 2)

December 24, 1953. Less than two weeks later, on December 24, 1953, Hill and Knowlton writes a set of "Preliminary Recommendations for Cigarette Manufacturers." This document is attached as exhibit 3.

The paper observes:

Exhibit 3

"[T]he grave nature of a number of recently highly publicized research reports on the effects of cigarette smoking ... have confronted the industry with a serious problem of public relations. ... The situation is one of extreme delicacy. There is much at stake and the industry group, in moving into the field of public relations, needs to exercise great care not to add fuel to the flames." (pp. 1-2)

According to Hill and Knowlton:

"The recommended approach is conservative and long-range. ... There is no public relations nostrum, known to us at least, which will cure the ills of the industry with one swallow. The need is for a soundly conceived and effectively executed program based upon continuing research and factual information." (p. 2)

Hill and Knowlton recommended:

"The underlying purpose of any activity at this stage should be reassurance of the public through wider communication of facts to the public. It is important that the public recognize the existence of weighty scientific views which hold there is no proof that cigarette smoking is a cause of lung cancer." (p. 2)

In particular, Hill and Knowlton recommended that the tobacco manufacturers take "joint action" by establishing a "Tobacco Research Committee" headquartered in New York City (p. 3).

Hill and Knowlton recommended that:

"The first public statement of the Committee should be designed to clarify the problem and to reassure the public that: (a) the industry's first and foremost interest is the public health; (b) there is no proof of the claims which link smoking and lung cancer; and (c) the industry is inaugurating a joint plan to deal with the situation."
(p. 4)

This statement should be "placed as an advertisement in leading newspapers" (p. 4).

January 4, 1954. The CEOs followed the advice of Hill and Knowlton on January 4, 1954, running a full-page advertisement in newspapers across the country. This advertisement is attached as exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4

The advertisement is called "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers." It announces the formation of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to provide "aid and assistance to the research effort into all phases of tobacco use and health."

In the advertisement, the tobacco companies assert:

"We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business. ... We always have and always will cooperate closely with those whose task it is to safeguard the public health."

January 15, 1954. Hill and Knowlton writes a "Progress Report" of activities. This progress report is attached as exhibit 5.

The progress report states that the "Frank Statement" appeared in 448 newspapers, reaching a circulation of 43,245,000 in 258 cities. The advertisement was run in virtually all cities with a population above 50,000. The total cost was \$257,276.

May 3, 1954. Hill and Knowlton reports to the Tobacco Industry Research Committee on a booklet, "A Scientific Perspective on the Cigarette Controversy." The report is attached as exhibit 6.

According to the report, 205,000 copies of the booklet were printed. The booklet was sent to 176,000 doctors. The booklet and an accompanying press release were also sent to 15,000 editors and reporters.

June 21, 1954. Hill and Knowlton writes a "Public Relations Report and Recommendations for the Tobacco Industry Research Committee." The report is attached as exhibit 7.

By June 21, 1954, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee had selected a scientific advisor (Dr. Clarence Cook Little, a former director of the American Cancer Society) and a scientific advisory board. According to Hill and Knowlton, with these steps in place:

"The Committee now has the basis needed for carrying on a long-range plan of public relations activities. ... These activities will endeavor to keep the following facts before the Public:

1. That there is no proof that smoking is a cause of lung cancer;
2. That an impartial and independent Board of scientists, doctors and educators is advising the TIRC, as a public service, on all aspects of tobacco use and health;
3. That the TIRC is determined, through a long-range program, to make every possible effort to help get the facts through laboratory and statistical research." (p. 2)

August 17, 1954. Hill and Knowlton sends T.V. Harnett, the Chairman of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, a "Confidential Report of Activities through July 31, 1954." The confidential report, and an accompanying cover letter, are attached as exhibit 8.

The cover letter to Harnett calls the report "highly confidential" and "request[s] that you retain it only for your personal consideration." The letter warns that "no additional copies be made and that this copy not be placed in files."

The report itself is 24 pages long and describes many details of the public relations campaign being run by the Tobacco Industry Research Committee.

The report makes it clear that Hill and Knowlton -- not the independent scientists -- actually ran the Tobacco Industry Research Committee. According to the report:

"Since the Committee had no headquarters and no staff, Hill and Knowlton, Inc. was asked to provide a working staff and temporary office space. As a first organizational step, public relations counsel assigned one of its experienced executives, W.T. Hoyt, to serve as account executive and handle as one of his functions the duties of executive secretary for the Tobacco Industry Research Council." (p. 3)

The report further states that Hill and Knowlton "provided

assistance in selecting" the Scientific Advisory Board (p. 3), "proposed" Dr. Little for the Scientific Director (p. 3), and "handled liaison, agendas, organizational plans, business affairs, reports, and materials for meetings of the TIRC [and] the Scientific Advisory Board, ... in addition to developing operating procedures for the research program" (p. 5).

The report provides a "case history" that describes how the Tobacco Industry Research Committee would transform an obscure scientific report favorable to the industry into national headline news (pp. 7-9). According to the case history, "advance checking" by TIRC revealed that Dr. Hueper was scheduled to give an unpublicized report "concerning the lack of a proven link between lung cancer and smoking" in July in Sao Paulo, Brazil. TIRC reproduced the report and two pages of highlights and established a "special liaison" in Sao Paulo "to give word of Dr. Hueper's delivery as quickly as possible, so as to enable distribution of the talk while it was still newsworthy." As soon as the talk was given, "personal delivery of the Hueper release was made to important newspapers and services as well as distribution to science writers, editorial writers and feature writers." In the end:

"Although many of the writers covering the Sao Paulo meeting failed to mention the Hueper talk in their dispatches, it is significant that, as a result of the distribution in the U.S.A., stories questioning a link between smoking and cancer were given wide attention, both in headlines and stories. In some press accounts, the Hueper story took precedence over the reports of Drs. Hammond and Wynder, even though the latter were made available to the press in advance of their delivery on a hold-for-release basis."

The report describes many other efforts of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to influence media, including "special personal contacts" with Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, and Business Week (p. 9); preparation of editorials entitled "The Same Old Culprit" and "Truth Makes a Slow Crop" that were "widely used in 'home town' dailies and weeklies throughout the country" (p. 10); and "assistance ... provided to the New York Times for a Sunday Magazine piece ... on "Why People Smoke," which discussed some of the now-abandoned old charges against cigarettes" (p. 12).

In many instances, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee worked behind the scenes to influence the content of individual articles. In one case, the intervention of TIRC resulted in "seven revisions and five qualifying additions" to a story in Cosmopolitan magazine that "was already in type" (p. 10).

In other cases, it was quicker and more effective simply to hire free-lance authors to write favorable articles for the Tobacco Industry Research Committee:

"Especially-written articles are being developed that can be used or adopted for use in various media receptive to or seeking material relating to the subject. ... To achieve this objective more quickly and effectively, the free lance services of qualified science writers are being used." (p. 23)

Another important function of the Tobacco Industry Research Council was to infiltrate anti-smoking organizations to obtain "advance information." According to the report:

"Personal contacts are advantageous not only in disseminating and gathering information but for enlisting support and advice on problems. ... Personal liaison has been established in such cancer, research, and medical organizations and associations as the American Medical Association, American College of Chest Physicians, American Cancer Society, Sloan-Kettering Foundation, New York University School of Industrial Medicine, National Cancer Institute, International Cancer Congress' Cancer Prevention Committee, as well as with individual doctors and scientists. These continue to make possible obtaining advance information or papers concerning research being done in this and related fields." (pp. 17-18)

Moreover, "individual coverage of medical and scientific meetings such as the AMA meeting in San Francisco have resulted in first-hand knowledge of the theories, methods, and personalities of those involved in the research on tobacco and smoking" (p. 19).

October 7, 1954. Hill and Knowlton writes a "confidential memorandum" describing "Tobacco Industry Research Committee Information Activities" in August and September 1954. The memorandum is attached as exhibit 9.

The memorandum describes "recent major public relations projects" from August through September 1954. According to the memorandum, the Scientific Director and Chairman of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee met with the following publishers to "explain the industry's long-range intention to support a research program devoted primarily to the public interest": Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the president and publisher of the New York Times; Helen Rogers Reid, chairman of the board of the New York Herald Tribune; Jack Howard, president of Scripps-Howard Newspapers; William Randolph Hearst, Jr., president and publisher of the Hearst Consolidated Publications; and Roy E. Larsen, president of Luce Publications (p. 1).

The memorandum describes how the Tobacco Industry Research Council influenced the content of the Edward R. Murrow Television Show:

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The memorandum describes how the Tobacco Industry Research Council influenced the content of the Edward R. Murrow Television Show:

"A conference was held with Edward R. Murrow, Fred Friendly, his producer, ... at the Tobacco Industry Research Committee offices in the Empire State Building. ... The Murrow staff emphasized the intention to present a coldly objective program with every effort made to tell the story as it stands today, with special effort toward balanced perspective and concrete steps to show that the facts still are not established and must be sought by scientific means such as the research activities the Tobacco Industry Research Committee will support. Mr. Murrow was assured of continued cooperation from the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to the extent possible under the scope of the TIRC program." (p. 2)

The memorandum describes how an article being prepared by Leonard Engle for Harper's magazine "use[s] TIRC as a source of information" and "should lend weight to the industry's contention that there is no proof of the charges and that there are many other factors that enter strongly into the increasing incidence of lung cancer" (pp. 2-3). It also reports that in the Washington Post "a feature story by Nate Haseltine us[es] long excerpts from paper by Dr. Hueper, which was supplied him in personal contact through Hill and Knowlton, Inc., Washington office" (p. 3).

Finally, the memorandum describes the tactic of hiring free-lance authors to write ostensibly independent articles favorable to the industry, reporting that "C.B. Colby, free lance popularizer of science, was retained for research and possible writing of article concerning all the hazards of modern life which people are cautioned against and leading to the conclusion that in spite of all the death scares, "You Still Live Longer" (p. 4).

November 26, 1954. John W. Hill, the founder of Hill and Knowlton, writes a memorandum to Hartnett, the chairman of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, on "Proposed Budget for 1955." The memorandum is attached as exhibit 10.

According to the memorandum, "the budget for staff operations provides for the use of all or part of the time of 35 different staff members of Hill and Knowlton, Inc." (p. 1). This compares with 23 Hill and Knowlton staff who were hired in 1954.

The memorandum also explains that the budget includes \$70,000 to print 200,000 copies of a booklet describing the Tobacco Industry Research Council for distribution to "all doctors" and \$250,000 for "one nationwide advertisement reporting to the public at the end of TIRC's first year."

All told, in 1954 the Tobacco Industry Research Committee spent \$477,955 on payments to Hill and Knowlton and on advertising -- slightly over 50% of the organization's entire

budget. In 1955, the public relations and advertising expenditures were budgeted to increase by 13% to \$539,400. In 1994 dollars, this would represent an expenditure of over \$2.5 million.

April 28, 1955. Hill and Knowlton writes a confidential "Public Relations Report" to the Tobacco Industry Research Council. The report is attached as exhibit 11.

The report finds that after a year of intensive public relations activities, "progress has been made" (p. 1). Specifically:

"The first "big scare" continues on the wane. There is much general awareness of the big IP factors involved. ... Treatment of the cigarette-health issue in public media continues to improve from the Tobacco Industry Research Committee point of view. Even adverse stories now tend to carry modifying statements. Positive stories are on the ascendency." (pp. 1-2)

However, the report also warned that "the next major public problem" will be a report by Drs. Hammond and Horn, scheduled for release at a conference of the American Medical Association in June in Atlantic City:

"There is no reason to hope that the .. report will be in any way better than the one last year. There is no reason to hope that it will not result in widespread attention in the press. The A.M.A. meeting this year is closer to the major news centers than it was last year in San Francisco."

May 25, 1955. One month after warning about the upcoming Hammond-Horn report, Hill and Knowlton sends the Tobacco Industry Research Committee a "rundown of the status of certain steps being taken in anticipation of the June 6 presentation of the second Hammond-Horn report." The rundown is attached as exhibit 12.

The report from Hill and Knowlton details a 17-step program for anticipating and responding to the Hammond-Horn report. Among the steps outlined in the report are harvesting the results of the Tobacco Industry Research Council's earlier contacts with the Edward R. Murrow television show. Step 8 calls for "provid[ing] all the assistance possible in making the two Murrow shows, scheduled for May 31 and June 7, as timely and positive as possible" (p. 2). Step 9 is "transcribing pertinent sections of the Murrow show immediately after its presentation, and providing copies of these transcripts to major news outlets in New York early in the morning following the show" (p. 2).

February 14, 1956. Hill and Knowlton writes another

confidential "Public Relations Report" to the Tobacco Industry Research Committee. A copy of the report is attached as exhibit 13.

The report finds that the activities of the Tobacco Industry Research Council have shifted public opinion in favor of the tobacco industry and succeeded in isolating many of the industry's critics. According to the report:

"A large proportion of the attacks against smoking made recently, and expected to continue in the next few months, originate with the same small group of critics who have led the anti-tobacco moves of the past two or three years. Neither the press nor the public seems to be reacting with any noticeable fear or alarm to the recent attacks." (p. 1)

The report also notes the success of the program to influence medical opinion:

"A factor that has become more noticeable ... is that, more and more, doctors and scientists are voluntarily speaking up at medical meetings to express disagreement with the flat charges made against tobacco. They do not exonerate tobacco but say that the case against smoking has not been proved and that much more evidence is needed." (p. 2)

Furthermore:

"Another aspect that also is becoming more apparent is the great emphasis being placed by scientists in this country and abroad on the role of air pollution as the major cause of lung cancer. Two recent scientific reports on air pollution and health received national newspaper attention. The subject is being treated by the press as a new, interesting and important phase of the overall situation." (p. 2)

Despite these important successes, the memorandum warns against "any attitude of complacency in our public relations approach, especially when we consider ... it is not possible at this time to assess fully the probable impact of federal government reports and activities that are indicated in the months ahead" (p. 1).

July 19, 1956. Hill and Knowlton writes a confidential memorandum to Hartnett, the chairman of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, regarding "Conferences with Life and Reader's Digest. The memorandum is attached as exhibit 14.

According to the memorandum, Dr. Little of TIRC met with the Deputy Managing Editor of Life, Robert T. Elson, on July 17. At the meeting:

"Dr. Little ... pointed out the importance to the public of receiving a balanced presentation of all the facts and underscored the need for editorial responsibility in handling stories that rouse unwarranted fears." (p. 1)

The next day, on July 18, Dr. Little met with DeWitt Wallace, the editor of Reader's Digest. At this meeting:

"Dr. Little stressed the importance of the public not being stampeded into undue fears and the great responsibility held by major publications to keep the public adequately informed so that they would not tend to over-simplify the problem and expect a "push-button answer" to problems so complex as cancer and heart disease." (p. 2)

EXHIBITS