

AN ATTACK ON U.S. DEMOCRACY

Today ends an extraordinary week in the nation's politics and our democratic institutions, in which the most turbulent political transition in the nation's history was scarred by violence. Thousands of Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol building, resulting in violent confrontations with law enforcement, threatening members of Congress and staffs, leading to at least five deaths and numerous injuries, and interfering with the Constitutional process to certify the 2020 presidential and vice-presidential election.

America's global reputation as a bulwark of democracy is harmed. There are widespread calls from elected officials, major U.S. news outlets, and others for the president to resign or that he be removed from office by invoking the 25th Amendment to the Constitution or through a congressional impeachment process. Many companies, institutions and associations have decried the violence in Washington. And noting the improbability of such events, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial is today calling for the president to take personal responsibility and resign.

Our public institutions have proven remarkably resilient through a divisive election year, a devastating pandemic and a harsh economic downturn. Amidst the turmoil taking place in Washington, voters in Georgia elected two Democratic senators that will shift political power in the United States Senate.

Weber Shandwick's tracking surveys over several months show that the public's trust in corporations has improved as many have demonstrated empathy and responsible action in these unprecedented times. But in a time when trust in our institutions is fragile, companies must continue to earn the public's confidence that the business sector is acting responsibly and advancing our collective national values.

While the situation in Washington appears to be calming down, there could still be surprises during the 12 days remaining in the Trump administration. Companies should be looking ahead to other unforeseen events that could occur between now and 12:00 p.m. ET on January 20; and to some very likely questions that will be asked about their political and marketing strategies once the immediate crisis is passed.

Here are some guidelines for corporate communicators to consider:

- + **THIS IS A TIME FOR CEOs AND OTHER SENIOR BUSINESS LEADERS TO REINFORCE THE STRENGTH OF OUR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND PROCESSES, AND THE RULE OF LAW**, with their workforces, as well as in any public statements or conversations with media. Post-election legal claims were adjudicated in the courts. The states met and performed their Electoral College obligation. And in the aftermath of Thursday's storming of the Capitol building, Congress immediately returned to work and completed its constitutional duty. As part of internal communications, companies might want to review or disseminate employee social media guidelines.

- + THERE IS A SIGNIFICANT GAP BETWEEN WHAT IS BEING REPORTED BY RESPECTED MAINSTREAM MEDIA OUTLETS AND WHAT IS APPEARING ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS** on a variety of current events, from the election outcome and this week's events in Washington D.C., to COVID issues and vaccine distribution. Without extra vigilance on misinformation tactics and campaigns, citizens risk being pulled into false and divisive narratives. Companies should be especially cautious about inadvertently spreading misinformation, either by sharing posts or purchasing advertising on platforms that advances the agenda of groups or individuals seeking to disrupt our democratic governance or pervert our political discourse.
- + ACCORDING TO MEDIA REPORTS, RIOTERS INSIDE THE CAPITOL USED TECHNIQUES COMMONLY ASSOCIATED WITH TERRORIST GROUPS**, communicating with each other and documenting their actions across [online platforms](#). This demonstrates the challenge of combating online extremism in real time and during fast-evolving events.
- + CORPORATIONS WHO HAVE MADE POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS** who supported President Trump's effort to prevent the certification of the Electoral College vote may be targeted for criticism or boycotts by advocacy groups. Companies can expect heightened scrutiny of both their past and future campaign contributions and their political action committees and should prepare to be able to explain their support of political parties, movements and candidates.
- + COMPANIES SHOULD REVIEW THEIR MARKETING STRATEGIES TO ENSURE THEY ARE SENSITIVE TO THE CURRENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.** In the near term, all marketers should continue to evaluate whether paid campaigns and pitches should be paused given current events. In addition, companies that advertise across the conservative spectrum – from One America News Network, Newsmax, to FOX News – or are prominent on Twitter and Facebook, could be targeted by activist groups. We are witnessing an era of tribal media consumption, anger algorithms and clickbait. Corporate marketers need to be especially vigilant in ensuring their media buying power is supporting responsible organizations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

MICHO SPRING

Chair, Global Corporate Practice
President, Weber Shandwick New England
mspring@webershandwick.com

PAM JENKINS

President, Global Public Affairs
and Weber Shandwick South
pjenkins@webershandwick.com

PAUL MASSEY

President, Powell Tate and
Global Lead, Social Impact, Weber Shandwick
pmassey@webershandwick.com