

KEEP AMERICA BEAUTIFUL, INC.

"My thoughts on the weeping Indian ad are that it's the single most obnoxious commercial ever produced, even eclipsing 'Ring Around the Collar.' It strikes me as the ultimate exploitation of Native Americans: First we kicked them off their land, then we trashed it, and now we've got them whoring for the trashmakers. I should think that someone would complain."

-- Ted Williams, contributing editor, *Audubon Magazine*, on the famous Keep America Beautiful television commercial¹

"I just want you to understand that industry will fund you if you respond to its needs."

-- Keep America Beautiful president Roger Powers, addressing the affiliates of KAB's Clean Community System program²

When John Dowlin, a director of the League of American Wheelmen heard that Rick Hoffman and Louis Fettig would be touring the U.S. on bicycles as publicity for Keep America Beautiful, Inc., (KAB) he wrote them a letter. "May we assume," he asked, "that you'll want to collect signatures in support of the national 'bottle bill' (HR 586 & S 932)?"³ Dowlin enclosed the petition in the letter.

He must have been taken aback when he received news from KAB that the cyclists would not circulate the petition. The attitude of the organization must have surprised him even more:

"While we share the same goal of ridding our roadsides of unsightly and hazardous litter, the KAB approach is to change individual attitudes and habits to prevent littering in the first place. After three years of research into the origin of litter, KAB learned that litter is a behavioral problem. It is not the product's fault that it is misplaced in the environment -- it is the carelessness of the user of that product."⁴

It is clear that this attitude stems from the fact that KAB is funded almost entirely by members of industries which create waste, as well as by some companies which are paid to dispose of it, most of whom would not benefit from a national law placing a five cent deposit on beverage containers. The list of KAB supporters includes Anheuser-Busch Companies, The Coca-Cola Company, Continental Can Company, GLAD Wrap and Bags, Waste Management, Inc., The Proctor & Gamble Company, PepsiCo, the Aluminum Can Company of America, and a front group for the plastics industry, the Council for Solid Waste Solutions.⁵

Fifteen years ago, that list also included the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Wildlife Federation, The Audubon Society and The Sierra Club. But that was before the bottle bill issue came up. In 1976, "while environmentalists were pulling KAB to become active in waste reduction strategies such as bottle bills. . .its industry backers were pulling in the opposite direction."⁶ Then, at a July Board of Directors' meeting, American Can Company chairperson William F. May branded bottle bill proponents "Communists" and

Nevada (20)

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called for strong KAB action against bills which were then pending in four states. Fifteen members of the KAB Advisory Committee immediately resigned.

Since then, "Keep America Beautiful" has spent millions of dollars (its budget in 1990 was \$1.3 million)⁷ in an attempt to place the blame for America's litter problem on the litterbug.⁸ The most famous of its campaigns is the "crying Indian ad," which emotionally conveys the message that Americans should clean up after themselves. Keep America Beautiful is extremely proud of its "KAB System" which consists of litter education programs in 430 "certified" communities in 40 states. But CalPIRG, in a 1981 report, *Can and Bottle Bills*, charged that KAB "exaggerates the effectiveness or frequency of these activities in its own self-interest."⁹ (At that time the program was known as "The Clean Community System.")

It's most recent campaign, "Let's not waste the 90's," has been geared toward presenting five solutions for the solid waste problem: "source reduction, composting, waste-to-energy, and sanitary landfilling".¹⁰ But if one looks at exactly what the organization recommends, a largely skewed viewpoint of the best way to implement these solutions becomes apparent.

KAB recommends composting, but then gives an ominous warning about the possible effects of careless composting (e.g., bacteria and rats). Ted Williams, contributing editor to *Audubon* magazine, in an article entitled "The Metamorphosis of Keep America Beautiful," attributes this to the fact that composting takes earnings away from such trash-hauling KAB members as Browning Ferris and Waste Management, Inc. And as ways of accomplishing source reduction, KAB recommends using two sides of a sheet of paper and buying products packaged in large containers. "Not a word did I find about what industry needs to do, if anything," says Williams.¹¹

In general, environmentalists resent the whole idea of placing the blame on the consumer, and the obvious industry bias of KAB. "The point of view of environmentalists, governments and industries must be equally represented in order to implement long term solutions [to environmental problems]," Walt Childress, Solid Waste Program Director of the Tennessee Environmental Council, told KAB president Roger Powers in January of 1990. "Otherwise, the public will most assuredly smell a vested interest and an incomplete plan."¹²

Pat Franklin of the National Container Recycling Institute is blunt about the problem:

Industries are scrambling to project a pro-environment, pro-recycling image to the public and decision makers through their 'feel-good-about-buying-our-product, we're-protecting-the-environment' advertising campaigns. The public and our policy makers must look beyond the rhetoric and public relations ploys, and focus on workable, effective and successful recycling alternatives.¹³

Franklin is also distressed about KAB's lack of support for a national bottle bill, but she realizes that most KAB supporters are afraid such a bill would cost them money. Ted Williams found this to be no justification for America's lack of concern for its environment:

Only in America could custom dispel the discarding of a perfectly good

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vessel simply because someone had quaffed the contents, but that's what we do with 50 billion cans and bottles every year. An additional 50 billion or so are 'recycled,' a uniquely American interpretation of the word because they too are discarded, then crushed melted and remade, rather than simply washed and refilled. It's as if we were a nation of dukes and earls, pitching our brandy snifters at the hearth.¹⁴

Nonetheless, with groups like KAB in existence, and with a powerful anti-bottle bill lobbying effort being made by many of its supporters, our nation's waste problem seems destined to increase.

CLEAN CAPITAL CITIES COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., along with 40 other states in America, does not have a bottle deposit law. The District voted on a bottle bill in 1987, but due to a concentrated effort on the part of the beverage industry, bottling companies and grocery stores, it failed. Those industries feared that a bottle bill would end up costing them money, since they would be forced to pay for the costs of accepting used bottles and would be able to produce fewer new bottles. So they created the "Clean Capital Cities Committee," (CCCC) and hired Reese Communications Companies (RCC), a Washington public relations firm which had previously led the campaign for the passage of the Massachusetts bottle bill, to campaign against the bill.¹⁵ (As Pat Franklin put it, "Money is still green.")¹⁶

After assessing the situation, RCC decided to create a campaign based on the assumption that the bottle bill would discriminate against the lower classes. Because it would make beverages cost five cents more, poorer people would less easily be able to afford their drinks, they reasoned. However, as Richard Blow pointed out in a *New Republic* article, CCCC did not take into account the fact that many low-income and homeless people could actually make money returning cans they had not purchased themselves, and that they could possibly get jobs in the newly-created recycling industry.¹⁷

Hiding behind the "Clean Capital Cities Committee," the industry spent three million dollars to publicize their point of view. And they used whatever tactics necessary in order to win. The most extreme part of the campaign involved the fabrication of a racial issue. Since Washington has such a large black population, and since those black people generally have lower incomes than whites, the bottle bill was a means of discriminating against blacks, CCCC claimed. The group hired prominent members of the black community to publicize the viewpoint, and donated money to black philanthropic organizations.

At the same time, many of the companies supporting CCCC were doing business in South Africa, and were later banned from doing business with D.C. because of it. But no one knew who was financing CCCC, so the hypocrisy never surfaced.¹⁸ When election day rolled around, the bill lost, 55 to 45 percent, despite the fact that polls had shown 72 percent in favor of the bill in January.

Notes

1. "The Metamorphosis of Keep America Beautiful," by Ted Williams. *Audubon Magazine*, March 1990, p. 133.
2. Quoted in "The Metamorphosis of KAB," by Williams, *Audubon*, p. 129.
3. Letter from John Dowlin to Rick Hoffman and Louis Fettig c/o Keep America Beautiful, Inc., September 5, 1989.
4. Letter from Marjorie G. Forbes, Manager, Community Training Services (KAB) to John Dowlin, October 12, 1989.
5. *Keep America Beautiful, Inc: 1990 Annual Review*, p. 29.
6. *Can and Bottle Bills*, by CalPIRG (Bill Shireman, principal author), 1981, p. 130.
7. "The Metamorphosis of Keep America Beautiful," by Williams, p. 124.
8. Paraphrase of a statement made by Roger Powers in 1978, quoted in *Cans and Bottle Bills*, by CalPIRG, p. 131.
9. *Can and Bottle Bills*, by CalPIRG, p. 130.
10. From KAB literature cited in "The Metamorphosis of KAB," by Williams, p. 126.
11. "The Metamorphosis of KAB," by Williams, p. 128.
12. Letter from Walt Childress to Roger Powers, dated January 29, 1990, on file with the authors.
13. "'Recycling'; Industry's Public Relations Buzzword of the 90's," by Pat Franklin, Container Recycling Institute. Unpublished paper, on file with author.
14. "The Metamorphosis of KAB," by Williams, p. 129.
15. Pat Franklin, personal communication, August 12, 1991.
16. Ibid.

Kentucky (3)

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