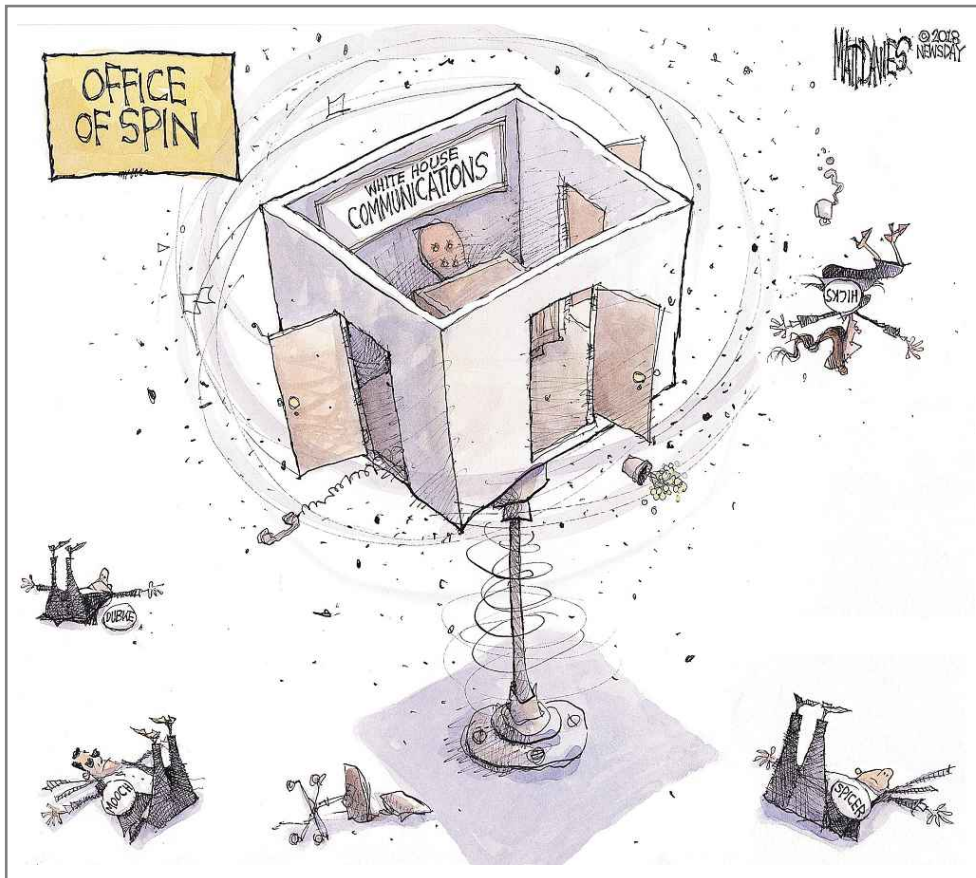


MATT DAVIES



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BOTTOM LINES

No one likes ad hominem attacks, at least in principle. But in the case of the attacks against students in Parkland, Florida, those attacks are even less constructive, and even more callous, than usual. That’s because they’re being leveled at a child, and because that child just saw 17 gunned down at his school.

— MOLLY ROBERTS, THE WASHINGTON POST

We can talk about providing calorie counts on menus, limiting people’s access to junk foods and strapping step-counters on kids to promote activity and reduce obesity. But until we fix a majority of the factors that contribute to childhood poverty, there’s no amount of positive nutritional advice or encouragement to exercise that will slow the rise of childhood obesity.

— ESTHER J. CEPEDA, THE WASHINGTON POST

The Labor Department has proposed a policy change that, if implemented, would designate restaurant employers as “owners” of tips paid by patrons. That’s a bad idea.

— DANNY MEYER, THE WASHINGTON POST

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Bottom lines under pressure

Big businesses are reacting in the democratic fashion while politicians hide



Michael Dobie

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Corporate pushback against the National Rifle Association has been a fascinating spectacle.

Since when does big business battle a group as entrenched in our politics as the NRA on an issue as intractable as guns? Actually, the fascination is not with the uniqueness of this development. It’s the way it fits into an evolving narrative of corporate America.

Our politics are noisy. They’ve been like that before. But business has joined the fray in a bigger way than ever.

The current movement was sparked by the slaughter of 17 people in the school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Dick’s Sporting Goods, Walmart, Kroger and L.L. Bean no longer sell guns to anyone under 21, among new restrictions. Companies like Delta, United, Hertz, and MetLife stopped offering discounts to NRA members.

Were they motivated by genuine concern for the cause or by genuine concern for their bottom lines? Did they act on their own or because of outside pressure?

Does it matter?

Yes, if it determines whether this activism perseveres or fades when there’s no clamor to provoke it. It doesn’t seem a purely cynical response. Because it’s been happening for a while, on a bunch of issues, among lots of companies.

Hundreds of corporations filed an amicus brief with the Supreme Court in 2015 to urge justices to legalize same-sex marriage, which they did. Companies like Apple and American Airlines joined the NCAA in forcing Indiana officials to change a religious freedom law that would have let businesses discriminate against gays. In 2016, the NCAA pulled basketball tournament games from North Carolina, and companies canceled expansion plans there to protest an anti-

transgender-friendly bathroom bill.

The pace picked up after Donald Trump’s inauguration. His travel ban, his decision to exit the Paris climate change agreement, his refusal to condemn white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, his move to let end protections for immigrants brought here as children, and his downsizing of two national monuments in Utah all led to a flurry of corporate action, from filing court briefs to writing letters of protest to withdrawing from White House advisory councils to relocating trade shows.

People now expect and spur corporations to act. One recent survey found that two-thirds of consumers say brands should speak out on issues like gun control. Another found that nearly twice as many millennials as Gen Xers or baby boomers think business leaders have a responsibility to take stands on important social issues.

That’s important, because millennials are companies’ customers and the largest share of the workforce, and are adept at using social media to apply pressure. The teens in Parkland have been particularly savvy (survivor Emma Gonzalez has more than 1.1 million Twitter followers). And businesses respond to social media (#BoycottNRA was Twitter’s No. 1 trending topic one recent day).

But then business has always been more nimble than government. A bad decision, or no decision, can quickly affect the bottom line. Politicians like to duck and wait for storms to blow over. It’s businesses that are reacting in the democratic fashion of doing the people’s bidding.

To be sure, there are plenty of Americans with plenty of reasons to distrust big business. But its decisiveness has been critical on the gun control issue, as Trump wavers on his views. One day he tells members of Congress that he backs strong gun control measures, the literal next day the NRA tweets that Trump is back in the gun-rights fold.

I hope teens and millennials continue their pressure, corporations continue to respond, and their combined heat finally melts the cold heart of Washington.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday’s editorial board.

OPINION

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