

Psychic Defenses Against High Fear Appeals: A Key Marketing Variable

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Why does the cigarette smoker continue to smoke in face of torrents of data indicating the potential dangers of his habit? Conversely, why did the mere whisper of danger cause cranberry sales to plummet? The magic defenses consumers employ to insulate their favorite vices from unwanted fearful data are examined in this article.

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APPEALS to fear are widely used as a method of social control; such appeals are also frequently used in marketing situations. Evidence suggests fear appeals vary dramatically in their effectiveness. A psychodynamic explanation of the different results of fear appeals is presented which offers an insight into those situations where fear is effective and into situations where it is ineffective. Finally, it suggests how consumers cancel unwelcome high fear appeals.

Our society offers abundant evidence of the strongly entrenched notion that fear is an excellent—perhaps the best—way to modify undesirable human behavior. A popularly-held view is that a perfectly linear relationship exists; i.e., the greater the fear, the greater the deterrence. For example, 20 years ago, one could see photo studies in mass media publications such as *Life* showing a defiant criminal being strapped to the electric chair. Earlier, executions were public events. Presumably, this was all in the service of deterrence. Only a few behavioral scientists saw that the fascination with public or nearly-public executions really expressed a displaced hostility.¹ Such spectacles can also provide an *enormously reassuring sight for the onlookers*. This is a key to the understanding of how consumers handle extreme fear appeals which clash with their treasured habits.

Advocates of the "deterrence-by-horrible-example" theory have kept apace with increasing public sophistication. Some astute public prosecutors, who may have an unconscious need to seal their courtroom victories with the ultimate prize, are now arguing that abolition of the death penalty will lead to more robbers killing their victims so as to eliminate witnesses. According to this view, capital punishment accounts for the fact that many robbers carry unloaded guns so as to avoid a shooting which might result in subsequent imposition of the death penalty. Public sentiment has recently strengthened in favor of the death penalty. George Gallup reports that in 1969, 51% of the public favored the extreme penalty, compared to only 42% in earlier years.²

Two other aspects of society will attest to the prevalence of belief in the deterrence-by-horrible-example theory—highway safety campaigns and anti-cigarette crusades. Most safe-driving campaigns stress horrible examples. A practice of long standing is to show high school students terrifying motion pictures depicting the po-

¹ See Karl Menninger, *The Crime of Punishment* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968).

² The Gallup Poll, *The Los Angeles Times* (February 16, 1969).

tential fate of careless drivers. Upon seeing such presentations one wonders if the best course of action might be to abandon driving altogether!

Anti-cigarette forces have also stressed horrible examples and grim statistics. Even the American Cancer Society, whose recent anti-smoking literature is more in keeping with findings from the behavioral sciences, see fit to close their otherwise astute commercials with a note of fear. After the social disadvantages of smoking are shown (a young man burns a hole in the dress of a girl he is trying to impress), a voice of doom intones, "Is there any other reason you should quit smoking?"

The Use of Fear as a Motivator in Marketing

Fear appeals are also used in marketing. A New England life insurance company is currently featuring a humorous series of ads usually showing a rich old gentleman in dire jeopardy of losing his life. As the scene is unfolding, the man answers a mildly concerned onlooker, "My insurance company? . . . of New England, of course. Why?" Fear or fear-inspired personal care product advertising has also been very successful. An example is the case of a pedicare product that features the headline "What's the ugliest part of your body?"

The success of other fear-inspired marketing campaigns is more open to question. The following are examples of such campaigns. A major oil company attempts to sell its products by winning consumer approval with its commercials featuring wrecked automobiles and other consequences of careless driving. A sizable number of expensive fallout shelters were sold during the period of the missile confrontation with the Soviet Union in 1962, but almost none since. A smallish west coast air carrier ran a very controversial campaign centered around the fear of flying. The campaign featured such openers as "Hey you with the sweaty palms!" Passengers were given reassurance kits, including a security blanket and a copy of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

If the use of fear as a motivator is controversial in the social sector, it is even more so in marketing. The New England insurance company campaign caused a disturbance in the industry, and angry comments from major airline executives were widely printed in trade press criticizing the airline. The airline's incumbent advertising agency even resigned the account rather than be associated with the campaign.

Evidences of the Failures and Successes of Fear-based Propaganda

In the early 1950s, Janis and Feshbach reported the results of a study whose aim was to see what amount of fear best led to adoption of proper dental

hygiene.³ In their experiment, matched groups of Connecticut high school freshmen were exposed to dental hygiene messages incorporating varying amounts of fearfulness. The experiment indicated that the least amount of fearfulness resulted in the greatest degree of adoption of the advocated oral hygiene techniques.

Furthermore, the group exposed to the least fear proved to be highly resistant to later counter-propaganda. Counter-propaganda statements were made to subjects in the follow-up research. The high fear group was easily switched to counter-propaganda claims that the original fear message was false. On the other hand, the low fear group proved surprisingly resistant to the same counter-propaganda.

The Janis and Feshbach experiment created a major controversy in the community of experimental psychologists. Soon apparent disconfirmations were received; however, these involved subtly different research conditions. Thus, in one widely quoted study, Leventhal and his colleagues were more successful in persuading Yale seniors to take free tetanus shots when they used high fear appeals, than when they used a more moderate approach.⁴

Insko and his colleagues also found that high fear appeals were more effective than low fear ap-

³ Irving L. Janis and Seymour Feshbach, "Effects of Fear-Arousing Communications," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 48 (January, 1953), pp. 78-92. This study was successfully replicated a number of times, except that in one study experimenters were unable to produce different degrees of fear aroused with dental hygiene among Air Force recruits. See Seymour Feshbach, "The Consequences of Fear-Arousal in Public Education," *Proceedings of the XIV International Congress of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 4 (Copenhagen: Munksgarrd, 1962), pp. 99-112. Also see, H. Maltz and D. L. Thistlewaite, "Attitude Modification and Anxiety Reduction," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 50 (March, 1955), pp. 231-237.

⁴ Howard Leventhal, Robert Singer, and Susan Jones, "Effects of Fear and Specificity of Recommendation Upon Attitudes and Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 2 (July, 1965), pp. 20-29.

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peals in convincing seventh graders never to smoke.⁵ In another study, Niles found that fear appeals were effective in changing the attitudes of smokers, *except* of those smokers who saw themselves vulnerable to the diseases which were featured in the fear appeals.⁶

McGuire presented a mathematical model which attempted to resolve the controversy. It predicted that at low levels of initial concern fear would be effective; however, if a person were already concerned, more fear would impede opinion change.⁷

Ray and Wilkie reviewed these and other experimental data in some detail and suggested a non-monotonic reconciliation in which high fear appeals work best with people who exhibit low anxiety, high self-esteem, a high level of coping behavior and find the topic of low personal relevance.⁸ Ray and Wilkie suggest possibilities for segmenting markets in such a manner as to successfully use fear appeals in some market situations.

When Fear Works

The above data suggest that fear might be highly effective as a motivator if the person subjected to it had a weak tie to the behavior being propagandized against, *or* if the person could extinguish the source of danger in a single act so that it would not upset entrenched or treasured habits. Thus, high fear might be an excellent motivator for people to get a free tetanus shot available two blocks away, and fear might also persuade *nonsmokers* to decide never to smoke. But when fear is presented to a person with an entrenched habit such as cigarette smoking, or when fearful consequences are shown to a person who *must* continue to engage in a dangerous activity (drivers or fighter pilots), a different outcome is likely. Furthermore, when the fear message contradicts reality, rejection is a probable outcome. High school students, for example, know that improper dental hygiene *rarely* leads to the consequences depicted in the Janis and Feshbach experiment.⁹

A final marketing circumstance may exist in which fear works effectively. The heavy and continuous reliance on fear appeals in the sale of personal products such as deodorants, pedicare prod-

ucts, and feminine hygiene aids suggests that fear may be employed with success in these situations. The reasons for fear's success in these cases are threefold: (1) The feared condition is avoided quickly and almost magically by application of the sponsor's product. (2) There is no psychological investment in *not* using the product. In such cases fear does not challenge a cherished habit. (3) What is feared is damage to the *social image* of the self rather than to the physical self. In promoting safe driving the slogan, "Watch out for that child!" is more effective than the slogan, "Watch out or you'll be killed!" People can more easily entertain possible danger to *others* than to themselves. Damage to the social self may also be more easily entertained by an individual than possible danger to the more elemental physical self.

The Failure of Fear as a Method of Social Control

Alarming safe driving campaigns seem to be less than effective. Certain groups have erected crosses at the site of fatal accidents only to find an increase in accidents at the very same sites. A serious question exists concerning the effectiveness of traditional and fear-based driver education courses. Frederick McGuire, a medical psychologist at the University of California at Irvine states, "The outrageous fact is that there is not one shred of acceptable evidence that indicates high school driver education reduces highway or street accidents or lessens the seriousness of the ones that occur."¹⁰ There is an apparent positive relationship between such courses and reduced accidents, but extraneous variables enter. Such courses are typically taken by middle class, conforming, mature students, and by more girls than boys. When these variables were statistically removed and when comparable groups were studied, the relationship between driver education courses and safety collapsed. McGuire states, "Family background, sex, age, emotional maturity, and the degree of social conformity all affect the accident rate. Driver education, however, does not."¹¹

Failure of Alarming Anti-smoking Campaigns

The Surgeon General's report in 1964 was followed by a brief, temporary decline in cigarette shipments, which was soon replaced by a strong upward trend. This same sequence of events was observed in Great Britain with the publication of a similar report. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that domestic cigarette shipments fell 2.4% in 1964, but rose 2.8% in 1965, and another 2.5% in the first 10 months of 1966. U.S. cigarette con-

⁵ C. A. Insko, A. Arkoff, and V. M. Insko, "Effects on High and Low Fear-Arousing Communication Upon Opinions Towards Smoking," *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology*, Vol. 1 (August, 1965) pp. 256-266.

⁶ P. Niles, *The Relationship of Susceptibility and Anxiety to Acceptance of Fear-Arousing Communications*, doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1964.

⁷ W. J. McGuire, *Effectiveness of Fear Appeals in Advertising* (Advertising Research Foundation, August, 1963).

⁸ Michael L. Ray and William L. Wilkie, "Fear: The Potential of an Appeal Neglected by Marketing," *JOURNAL OF MARKETING*, Vol. 34 (January, 1970), pp. 54-62.

⁹ Janis and Feshbach, same reference as footnote 3.

¹⁰ Frederick McGuire, Interview in *The Los Angeles Times*, Part II (October 30, 1968), p. 1.

¹¹ Same reference as footnote 10.

sumption was at record levels in 1966, although per capita use was below the record of 1963.¹² Apparently *fewer* people were smoking *more*. Since September, 1967 (when the first anti-cigarette TV commercials appeared), a persisting decline in cigarette consumption has taken place. The 1964 decline was over in a few months, but the current decline seems to be secular. The falling consumption may largely be due to fewer people taking up the habit. Although the evidence is not conclusive, it appears that a far smaller percentage of teen-aged boys are smoking cigarettes as compared with twenty years ago. Nonetheless, the decline in per capita consumption of cigarettes of all people aged 18 and over is only 1.7% (from 4,287 cigarettes to 4,213 cigarettes).¹³

The relatively clinical but nonetheless alarming data in the Surgeon General's report were accompanied by an increase in high fear anti-cigarette propaganda. On a busy parkway in Connecticut a prominent sign read, "Are you dying for a smoke?" One prankster even ripped down an advertising sign reading "This is Marlborough Country" and placed it over the gates of a cemetery. Nonetheless, millions of Americans continue to smoke. The overall cigarette consumption did drop by 1.3 billion cigarettes during 1968. This figure loses its significance when it is compared to the volume of cigarettes smoked that year . . . 526.5 billion. The drop was approximately *two tenths of one percent*. Truly, if men were "rational," consumption would have dropped far more dramatically or perhaps would have disappeared altogether.

Sometimes scare data result in significant declines in consumption of some products. In the early 1960s, two women died after eating a can of spoiled tuna. Almost immediately tuna consumption dropped to extremely low levels. Thousands of tuna fishermen and canners were laid off. Ironically, the objective danger of eating spoiled tuna was small in comparison to the risk entertained by the cigarette smoker. The famous cancer-cranberry scare of the late 1950s almost destroyed the cranberry industry, to cite another example.

The point is that easy substitutions exist for tuna or cranberries. More importantly, one does not find the addiction to either product that characterizes many smokers' commitment to cigarettes. Had only *one* brand of cigarettes been suspected of being carcinogenic, it can be assumed that its demand would drop to zero as its former buyers quickly switched to other brands. However, as cigarettes were indicted as a class, no such easy substitution was available.

The Failure of Fear in Marketing Situations

The present use of fear appeals in marketing appears to be less than in former years. Life insurance ads of the 1920s featured a weeping child being led to an orphanage under the caption, "Her Daddy didn't have enough Life Insurance!"

The California airline campaign described above was a total failure; the carrier actually lost revenues. It seemed that advertising urged people *not* to fly the line. Many copywriters avoid fear appeals out of empirical experience. The legendary Claude Hopkins offers a case in point in his discussion of the introduction of Pepsodent toothpaste in the early years of the century.¹⁴ Hopkins was under heavy pressure to feature the fearful results of neglect and decay; however, he chose to be guided only by the empirical data generated by couponed ads keyed to a variety of appeals. Fear proved to be a poor appeal; beauty an excellent appeal.

The Psychodynamics of Dealing with Extreme Fear

All proceeds well enough until the arrival of unwelcome news concerning the dangers attending a cherished or necessary habit. Presented with such data, the individual experiences cognitive dissonance; i.e., an internal state of tension is created which is intensely uncomfortable. The individual must resolve this tension. All too often resolution of the conflict becomes a matter of either *rejecting the cherished habit or rejecting the unwelcome information*. This suggests that those smokers who did not give up the smoking habit rejected the unwelcome information, or at least rendered it impotent by some magical device to restore their psychological equilibrium.

Of concern are the *techniques* consumers employ in resolving dissonance crises that arise when a cherished habit is challenged by fear. The techniques described are hypothetical, and as in the case of psychoanalytic theory, they are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove or disprove. The "proof" of the following psychodynamics must be in observations of what people actually do or refrain from doing. At this time, observations appear to be consonant with the suggested psychodynamics.

Three psychodynamic techniques are frequently observed. The first is a process wherein the validity of the unwelcome information is denied or is attenuated. A second technique involves an unconscious and deeply magical process which shall be called, "I am the exception to the rule." The third is one in which danger is defused by sym-

¹² *Wall Street Journal* (January 9, 1967), p. 1.

¹³ *Wall Street Journal* (March 27, 1969), p. 1.

¹⁴ Claude Hopkins, *My Life in Advertising* (Chicago, Ill.: Advertising Publications, 1966), pp. 155-159.

bolically rendering it impotent. This often involves *laughing* at the danger. The three processes often operate together. Let us consider the three processes more closely:

Denial of Validity Mechanisms

Denying the validity of dissonance-producing information proceeds on the format "It may not be so . . ." Recent events in the cigarette field offer excellent exhibits of this behavior. In the January, 1968 issue of *True*, a major article appeared, entitled "To Smoke or Not to Smoke—That is Still the Question!" Appreciating the enormous attractiveness of the article to confirmed cigarette smokers, the Tobacco Institute, through retained public relations counsel, ordered 600,000 reprints of the article. These reprints were mailed to doctors, teachers, lawyers, and other professional people who are likely to be influence leaders. Two months later another article appeared in a widely circulated weekly tabloid with the even more reassuring title, "Cigarette Cancer Link is Bunk."¹⁵

To make an issue controversial enormously weakens it. When one out of ten assembled experts disagrees with his colleagues, the matter remains an open issue, especially if one wishes to side with the dissent. Significantly, the tobacco industry has always referred to the cancer data as *the cigarette controversy*.

I Am the Exception to the Rule

The "I-am-the-exception-to-the-rule" psychodynamics are far more subtle and offer greater challenges to those who wish to propagandize against destructive addictions. The dimensions of these dynamics can be explored by examining a commonly misunderstood episode of behavior fascination with accidents and misfortunes of others.

Nothing is so fascinating to motorists as the sight of a serious accident on the expressway. Traffic slows to a crawl as motorists rivet their attention to the scene of the accident. Sometimes such scenes are so spell-binding that other accidents occur. In like manner, crowds quickly gather to observe a suicide about to take place, especially one that involves a dramatic leap from some precipice.

What does this mean? Is man a savage, sadistic animal that relishes the pain or death of others for sheer thrill value? Or is this too easy an explanation? Perhaps fascination with the misfortune of anonymous strangers really *makes one's own life more secure*.

To develop this idea, let us look at one other phenomenon, a fairly common battlefield neurosis that has the following theme: two buddies fight

side by side, and over a period of months develop a strong mutual dependence and friendship. Then one day one is killed whereupon a curious thing happens—the survivor is immediately *elated*. However, shortly the elation fades to depression and to feelings of intense grief. Superego inspired guilt is punishing the survivor for taking forbidden pleasure over a close friend's death. But why does this take place?

The best explanation seems to be that the survivor has the unconscious belief that *he has been spared*. Either man could have been killed; but the friend "got it," and somehow the force of the danger was spent. Indeed, at the level of unconscious magical thinking, the survivor is now actually safer.

Not all heavy smokers develop cancer of the lung or heart disease; not all careless drivers are immediately killed; and faulty dental hygiene does not invariably lead to disaster. Because of such instances, it is easy for the addict to believe that he will be spared. It is possible that he may actually seek out data concerning disaster befalling others as a way to reinforce his own safety.

In some situations people cannot, or will not, remove themselves from exposure to risk. Drivers and addicted smokers are cases in point. In these instances, it may well be that people go further than to gain reassurance over the misfortune of their fellow indulgers.

No data exist on "sealing-victory-over-death" behavior of motorists, but some anecdotal material may be suggestive. When actor James Dean was killed in a car accident, a speeding ticket issued only minutes before was found. The arresting officer explicitly or implicitly may have given Dean a stern lecture on the dangers of speeding. From time to time comparable instances are reported in the press.

From a normative point of view "sealing victory over death" by greater indulgence in a dangerous activity is most unwise and most unrealistic. Yet, from the psychodynamic point of view of preserving the self from disturbing dissonance, such magical behavior is healthy.

Magical Defusing Processes: A Final Defense

In defusing processes, the information is not denied, rather it is robbed of its true significance and is thereby rendered ineffective. The largest percentage of cigarette smokers buy filter cigarettes. When the FTC recently announced that Marvel cigarettes were lowest in tars and nicotine, that brand enjoyed a several hundred percent increase in demand.

At a recent luncheon, the author observed an instance of the nearly magical belief in filters. The group was discussing the recent death of a colleague

¹⁵ See, "The Truth About True's Article on Smoking," *Consumer Reports* (June, 1968), pp. 336-339.

who had been known for his heavy cigarette consumption. A luncheon guest squirmed uncomfortably as he lit another cigarette and listened to a young nonsmoker discuss the possible linkage between smoking and cardiovascular disease. "Well," the nervous guest said, "I play it safe. I always smoke filters!" Like controversy, filters interpose themselves in such a way as to rob the cigarette of its monolithic danger.

The power of the unwelcome information can be rendered ineffective by symbolic means such as subtle advertising campaigns that unconsciously reassure smokers. One of the most successful of recent cigarette commercials shows the smoker of an extra long cigarette backing into a crowded elevator only to have his cigarette snapped off by the elevator's closing doors. In other ads in this campaign, the extra long cigarettes are shown burning holes in a friend's beard, and accidentally popping balloons. The campaign makes the subtle but unmistakable point that the product is laughable and ineffective and not a thing to fear.

The loss of business sustained by the small California airline as a result of its humorous treatment of fear raises a seeming contradiction. Apparently this line lost much business from the fact that it was a feeder line and angry trunk lines boycotted it. However, some of the loss seems to have arisen from consumer avoidance of the line. But was not this making fun of death? Should not this be enormously attractive to the man who must fly? The question ignores the fact that fear of flying is a *submerged* issue; it has not yet come into such prominence that travelers must cope with it as cigarette smokers must cope with the Surgeon General's report. In this case, the campaign merely served to make a latent fear an overt one.

Often people in great but unavoidable subjective danger, joke and make light of their predicament. Fighter pilots facing dangerous missions characterize this almost flippant disdain of the perils ahead.

All this behavior bears a striking resemblance to current cigarette advertising. A sizable number of national brands have jumped on the fun and humor bandwagon (e.g., "I'd rather fight than switch."). One cigarette company led the way with a campaign featuring situations in which their new brand of extra-long cigarettes proved laughably ineffective. By such cleverly reassuring advertising, sales of this brand rose from nothing in 1966 to \$125,000,000 in 1968, a sizable factor in the current success of the manufacturer. This firm saw a 9% rise in sales during 1968, while the whole industry rose only 1%. Spokesmen for the firm readily admit to advertising's role in this success.¹⁶

¹⁶ *The Los Angeles Times*, Part III (December 4, 1968), p. 11.

The psychodynamics of this behavior suggest a primitive but powerful system of magical belief—to laugh at death is to rob it of its power. Likewise, the cigarette fighter with his black eye and big grin *really* is saying, "I'm not switching from smoking to nonsmoking." And like a small boy sporting a black eye, he glories in the relatively minor ill-effects suffered as a consequence of his innocent bravado.

This suggests that advertising agencies have learned that selling cigarettes today is really a race to magically allay the fears of the dedicated smoker. One wonders if this is a consciously or even intuitively recognized strategem. Early users of this strategy increased their clients' sales dramatically, so everyone else blindly followed suit, most of them probably ignorant of the profound psychodynamics they were stirring. Nonetheless, the message is as much a lie as an outright statement that cigarettes are *harmless*, for indeed this is the psychological effect of such advertising. One wonders if current Federal Trade Commission guides against fraudulent and misleading advertising are sufficiently sophisticated to deal with such subtleties.

Conclusion

Statistical fear has been identified as a situation where evil consequences may result from pursuing a treasured habit which is easily weakened by the subtle devices of the psyche or the conscious or unconscious cunning of the advertising copywriter. Unwelcome scare propaganda is easily defused by a variety of mechanisms, some of which have been examined in this paper. Indeed, the scare propagandist may be less than ineffectual—his efforts may lead to an actual *increase* in indulgence in a dangerous habit.

Fear can be weakened by a joke, by a hint of controversy, or by one's need to believe in immortality. In any case fear appeals may persuade only the weakly addicted or the nonuser; the highly addicted maintain their internal psychic constancy by defusing the fear.

Those who would propagandize for safe driving or against cigarette smoking are well advised to augment fear approaches with other approaches aimed at the highly addicted. However, fear *can* be effectively used if the fear involves someone else. Thus, a persuasive anti-smoking ad only touches a father's capacity for fear if his son should follow his example. Similarly, the slogan "watch out for that child" transfers the fear of bad driving from the self to a third party. We cannot comfortably contemplate danger to our elemental, physical selves, but our psyches permit us to see dangerous consequences for others.

A promising approach is to make the dangerous activity offensive to small group norms. Thus, smoking can be shown as vile rather than dangerous; poor driving as the mark of a boor, not a potential cemetery lot tenant, and so on.

It is encouraging to see that the implications of behavioral theory in this area are beginning to be

appreciated by the communications industry and the marketing community. But progress is slow. Sophisticated, well-intentioned marketing and communications executives are still expending large sums based on the public's theory that one can be frightened out of a favorite pleasure or a harmful habit.

MARKETING MEMO

Corporate Leadership and Corporate Responsibility . . .

What is the role of corporate leadership today? We need to do still better what we are already doing that is good. We need to discover the true functions of management and establish appropriate standards of justice for all with whom we deal inside the corporation. We need to comply with the law, and to learn to live with government regulation without letting it crush or paralyze our motive forces. Far more, we must sense and be responsive to social demands of the public as well as the marketplace and recognize the social consequences of economic decision making.

Whether he bases this responsiveness upon the conscience of the corporation or upon the more compelling reason that the corporation cannot survive unless it satisfies certain basic business needs, the manager must today mesh the two types of standards into his daily conduct.

He must, of course, comply with the requirements of the law; at the same time, he must sense and be responsive to the social demands upon the conscience of his company.

—Laurence I. Wood, "Sail With the Winds of Change," *Nation's Business* (December, 1969), pages 58-62 at page 62.