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## 'You're the guy that handled the Bob Knight firing, right?'

### Christopher Simpson, IU's spokesman under Myles Brand, talks about controversial firing of famous coach in new book

By Steve Hinnefeld

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Christopher Simpson has dealt with adverse publicity for several decades as a newspaper reporter, university administrator and marketing consultant.

But nothing compares with managing the public-relations firestorm that erupted when Indiana University fired Bob Knight in September 2000.

"It's very common for me to get a call, and one of the first things they say is, 'You're the guy that handled the Bob Knight firing, right?'" he said.

Simpson, IU's chief media spokesman for the Knight firing, tells about the experience in a new book, "Weathering the Storm: Protecting Your Brand in the Worst of Times." He left IU in July 2001 and is CEO of SimpsonScarborough, a Washington, D.C., communications and marketing consulting firm.

"When you say 'Bob Knight,' that still gets a very visceral reaction from people," he said Monday.

The book, published by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, also draws lessons from other college PR catastrophes, including the 1999 Texas A&M bonfire tragedy and University of Colorado sports scandals.

Simpson says he expected trouble with Knight when Myles Brand, his boss at the University of Oregon, decided in 1994 to take the position of IU president. His first question, Simpson writes, was: "How are you going to handle Bob Knight?"

He accompanied Brand to Indiana, eventually becoming vice president of public affairs and government relations. He said he was frustrated that Knight was synonymous with Indiana University, his reputation overshadowing more than 100 highly ranked academic programs.

But Simpson found himself liking Knight and enjoying his company. And by doing so, he says, he "was writing my own IU obituary." He writes that he played golf with Knight and considered him a friend, even after Brand imposed "zero tolerance" rules on the coach in early 2000.

"My fatal misstep was to become buddies and swap stories and inside information about the president, trustees and other administrators," he writes.

When Brand fired Knight, it was Simpson's job to handle the media. Knight reacted angrily, portraying Simpson and Brand as ventriloquist and dummy and calling Simpson, in an interview, "the most treacherous and dangerous guy I've ever been around."

### Book excerpts

From Christopher Simpson's book "Weathering the Storm: Protecting Your Brand in the Worst of Times":

-- On Bob Knight: "Coach Knight is an amazing person in many respects. He has traveled the world extensively and can count as friends former presidents, Supreme Court justices and anyone in recent or modern day sports. He is well-read, very bright and has a sharp PR/marketing mind ... He publicly skewered me soon after the firing, but I had grown to know the man and understand his positive side."

-- On Knight's public-relations talent: "I lay awake many nights contemplating Bob Knight's amazing power over the media and appreciating how well he manipulated reporters. A more formidable PR foe I couldn't imagine."

-- On IU President Myles Brand's first meeting with Knight, at a Bloomington restaurant: "Brand was sweating and tense. Apparently, I had violated one of the principal rules of crisis planning: Don't overprep the subject."

-- On his thoughts when former player Neil Reed accused Knight of choking him in practice: "Instantly I realized the magnitude of the crisis that was about to ignite — the screaming headlines in USA Today, the follow-ups from hundreds of sports reporters, the calls for firing the coach, the contrary pleas from his most zealous fans — 'the Kool-Aid drinkers,' we called them."

-- On having IU trustees John Walda and Fred Eichhorn investigate Reed's claims: "We knew we would get hammered short term for investigating ourselves, but at least we would retain control of the investigation which we couldn't do if we had brought in an entirely objective outsider."

-- On Knight's post-firing TV interview with Jeremy Schaap: "Amazingly, Bob Knight completely blew the ESPN interview that could have shaken IU to its very core. Throughout the interview he badgered the reporter, raised his voice, and visibly expressed anger ... To this day, when we show that videoclip in media training, audiences gasp out loud."

-- On the introduction of Mike Davis as Knight's successor: "I had never seen a man more frightened to face the media."

Simpson said Knight saw his role as "some kind of disloyalty to him personally." And Knight's supporters were outraged. Simpson said he got 3,500 e-mail messages, most of them angry, in the day after the firing. Brand got twice that many, he said. "About half were profane," he said, and some included threats and were turned over to police.

He said a survey that IU commissioned in November 2000 validated Brand's decision. Sixty-one percent of respondents, he said, approved of the firing; 19 percent said Knight deserved to be fired but didn't like the way it was handled. "The bottom line was, eight in 10 Hoosiers agreed it was time for him to go," he said.

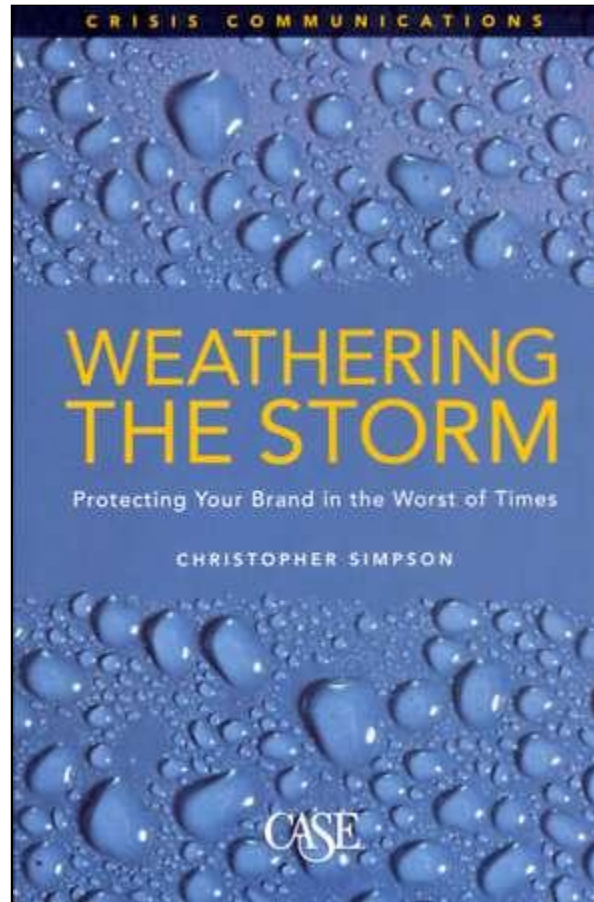
Even so, Simpson had become a lightning rod for controversy, undercutting his effectiveness. He left IU in July 2001 but continued for a time to be paid \$10,000 a month in consulting fees.

Simpson said he has no regrets about Knight's firing or the way it was handled. Knight re-established himself as a coach and has done well at Texas Tech, he said. IU is no longer identified primarily as a school with a controversial basketball coach.

"I think everybody came out pretty well," he said.



Courtesy photo Christopher Simpson



"Weathering the Storm: Protecting Your Brand in the Worst of Times," by Christopher Simpson, retails for \$55.95. Courtesy photo

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