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Crisis Management 2026

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USA – Washington, DC: Trends and Developments

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USA – WASHINGTON, DC



Trends and Developments

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Kekst CNC is a global strategic communications consultancy with deep local roots in 14 of the world's key corporate and financial centres across the U.S., Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. A team of more than 300 experienced professionals provide communications advisory services across high-stakes corporate, crisis, financial, and political matters of strategic import to clients. This team brings its judgment and expertise to bear in supporting clients on diagnosing and managing risk, navigating high-profile issues and crises, and countering perceptions

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The logo for Kekst CNC, featuring the word 'KEKST' in a large, bold, sans-serif font above the word 'CNC' in a similar but slightly smaller font.

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Introduction: Crisis in the Age of Permanent Scrutiny

In 2026, corporate crises are no longer defined by discrete incidents; they are a convergence of speed, visibility, and multiple audiences reacting at once. For many companies, Washington is the epicentre of this multi-vector risk.

A problem that begins in DC rarely stays confined to one group of stakeholders for long. A congressional inquiry can trigger a regulator's interest, a regulatory action can prompt activist pressure or a class action filing, a media report can produce employee unrest – and all of it can feed a cycle of online commentary. Companies are therefore no longer managing singular crisis events; they are confronting multi-front scrutiny campaigns featuring parallel investigations and narrative attacks that intersect with policy, politics, communications, reputation, legal strategy, investor relations, and human resources simultaneously.

Washington-driven crises are also differentiated from many other forms of corporate crises in that they are often highly performative and structured to stimulate public reaction while building a record for future policy, regulatory or legal activity. The actors driving a controversy do not merely gather facts. They shape narratives, signal priorities, and invite interpretation by journalists, investors, employees and advocates in real time.

As a result, crisis management in Washington has evolved into something materially different from traditional corporate response. These trends and developments have effectively collapsed any meaningful distinction between reputational, regulatory and political crises.

The defining feature of crisis management in Washington in 2026 is therefore not speed alone, but simultaneity.

Successfully navigating these matters thus requires a cross-functional crisis architecture, led by senior executives and experienced advisors who understand the latest strategic undercurrents shaping both the origins and evolution of a crisis.

Structural Shifts: The New Anatomy of a DC Crisis

The permanent investigations environment

In Washington, scrutiny is no longer episodic. It is a standing condition of operating in DC's politically salient and highly regulated spaces. Even in the absence of any specific allegation of wrongdoing, perceived misalignment with the interests of a centre of power may become grounds for inquiry.

Congress, for example, has grown notably more comfortable using hearings, letters, and document requests not only to investigate specific facts but also to frame wider debates about corporate conduct, industry structures, and political influence. That is true whether individual members or committees find themselves in the majority or the minority; formal power still matters, but members do not need subpoena authority to:

- exert pressure;
- generate headlines; or
- trigger interest from other actors.

These trends mean that congressional oversight is occurring on a continuous, not just occasional basis.

The results of the 2026 midterm elections may intensify that dynamic. Should there be a change in control of either chamber of Congress, Democratic members have already publicly stated that they intend to pursue an aggressive corporate investigations agenda, likely to focus in part on companies and industries perceived to have “made deals” or curried favour with the Trump administration. Other investigatory themes are expected to include affordability across multiple sectors, uses of AI and other algorithms, antitrust concerns, healthcare, cryptocurrencies and other financial market issues, to name a few.

Similarly, scrutiny from regulatory agencies such as the Department of Justice (DOJ), Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and Federal Communications Commission (FCC), either in parallel with Congress or independently, can quickly raise the stakes. Whether in the form of enforcement actions, investigative subpoenas, informal regulatory inquiries or even vague public comments speculating about interest in a particular

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matter, regulators can quickly generate political attention and activate a vicious multi-cycle event.

Action by state attorneys general can further complicate the landscape. In particular, coordinated multi-state inquiries can amplify risk, extend timelines, and create perceptions of broad institutional concern even before any findings are reached.

Investigative media reporting often kickstarts policy-level scrutiny or, alternatively, feeds off it and helps keep it alive. Such reporting does not come only from legacy outlets but also from new digital-first publications and independent voices who publish on Substack or similar platforms.

Each risk vector reinforces the others, producing the simultaneity that now defines a Washington crisis. The result is a cycle of ever-present scrutiny in which companies are challenged not by one event, but by a sequence of mutually reinforcing events that can be difficult to arrest once underway.

Expanding risk of AI-accelerated crises

These dynamics are further intensified by the rise of artificial intelligence, which is accelerating the formation, spread and hardening of narratives, especially in Washington-centred crises. Deepfakes and manipulated audio or video can be used to create confusion around executive statements, public appearances, or private conversations. Synthetic document leaks can be constructed to appear credible long enough to trigger:

- questions from journalists;
- social media amplification;
- market reaction; or
- attention from policymakers.

AI-generated misinformation campaigns can scale quickly and cheaply, allowing adversaries or activists to manufacture the appearance of broader controversy than actually exists.

That environment raises the importance of monitoring and verification protocols. For many companies, traditional crisis planning still emphasises message drafting, reactive media response, and stakeholder

outreach. But the ability to identify and authenticate (mis)information is rapidly becoming a core crisis-management necessity, not a niche cyber or IT function. A company may need to determine within minutes whether a recording is real, whether a memo is authentic, or whether a circulating screenshot has been altered – and then act quickly to correct the record as needed.

Relatedly, generative engines like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Grok are increasingly used as frontline information sources by the public and stakeholders. When asked to summarise developing controversies, these AI tools may flatten nuance; rely on incomplete, non-authoritative or inaccurate sourcing; or elevate narratives promoted by bots or adverse parties. Because AI systems aim to provide immediate answers, even before reliable information is available or companies have spoken for themselves, they can negatively shape early perceptions in ways that are difficult to reverse.

Crisis management, therefore, requires ongoing monitoring of how AI systems are interpreting emerging narratives and, where possible, active engagement to influence that process by publishing clear, authoritative material across credible channels early and often.

On the other side, AI has constructive roles to play internally during crises. Monitoring tools can help identify narrative shifts, detect new lines of attack, and surface early indicators from fringe sources before they migrate into mainstream discourse. Drafting and modelling tools can help test language, prepare variants for different audiences and think through how a position may be received by reporters, employees, investors, or Hill staff. Static crisis playbooks that used to sit in three-ring binders are also being replaced by custom-developed, AI-enabled crisis facilitator engines that help companies move faster and adapt to unforeseen scenario permutations, while retaining their own brand voice and other organisational styles and response preferences.

Paired with human judgment, these tools can enhance a company's ability to see the full landscape and respond quickly and coherently in an environment that demands it.

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The erosion of corporate confidentiality

The traditional assumption that internal documents and deliberations can remain private (unless a formal legal process requires otherwise) no longer holds. Companies must now operate under the expectation that internal materials may eventually be published, excerpted or politicised. Particularly when dealing with a crisis anchored in Washington, the route from internal document to public exhibit has become far shorter and less predictable.

Congressional hearings and enforcement actions increasingly present internal materials in ways designed to reinforce their preferred narrative. A board presentation, an executive email, or a Slack exchange is used not simply for evidentiary purposes but as a storytelling device. The most provocative line from a long chain or the most awkward shorthand in a text exchange, stripped of any relevant context, can become the centrepiece of a media story or committee hearing.

Regulatory investigations and litigation discovery also frequently become media events, with selected excerpts driving headlines long before legal questions are resolved. That reality has been intensified by leak culture, data breaches and the willingness of internal actors to circulate screenshots.

Effective crisis management in this environment requires disciplined governance practices in the first instance, as well as sharp communication protocols and scenario planning that account for potential public disclosure of sensitive materials. To be clear, this does not suggest internal communications should abandon candour. It does mean reinforcing a culture that is deliberate about what is committed to writing, how sensitive discussions are documented, and how teams are trained to balance speed, convenience and sound judgment.

Political Polarisation and Corporate Risk

ESG and DEI retrenchment in a split enforcement environment

It is no secret that political polarisation has made it harder for companies to treat contested social, governance and workforce issues as routine policy matters. But that dynamic has continued to evolve. Cor-

porate neutrality is no longer widely viewed as neutral. In many cases, a choice not to speak is interpreted as a statement in itself, while a choice to speak invites attack from different audiences.

That is particularly true in the context of ESG and DEI, where the same programme or disclosure can be framed as responsible business practice in one jurisdiction and ideological overreach in another. The resulting split enforcement environment creates unusual complexity.

In red states, ESG backlash can take the form of state-level fiduciary legislation affecting asset managers, pension fund pressure, procurement restrictions, and broader political campaigns against perceived “woke capital.” In blue states, the pressure may run in the other direction, with continued or heightened expectations around disclosure, diversity commitments and governance accountability. Companies operating across multiple markets, therefore, face a landscape in which they may be criticised at the same time for doing too much and for doing too little.

That tension has direct implications for crisis management in Washington, where the same dynamics can surface whenever federal levers of power change hands. Corporate speech risks now extend well beyond headline-grabbing national events; they arise in:

- earnings calls;
- employee communications;
- sustainability reports;
- DEI updates;
- trade group memberships; and
- executive appearances.

Consumer boycotts can emerge from either side of the political spectrum. The practical challenge is to articulate a coherent, defensible rationale for a company’s positions and to understand how those positions will travel across different political and regulatory environments.

Crisis as a market event

In 2026, investor reaction cycles are often tightly linked to Washington events. A DC-centred controver-

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sy is not simply a reputational problem with potential downstream financial implications; it is often a market event from the outset. Market reaction cycles are now measured in minutes, especially for public companies already operating under political or regulatory scrutiny. This leaves little margin for missteps, accelerates the need for coordination among crisis, legal and investor-relations teams and makes half-formed messaging particularly risky.

Congressional letters, policymaker speeches and even loose signalling in an offhand social media post can move stock prices by shifting expectations about future action or regulatory treatment, or raising questions about management judgment.

Analysts routinely interpret such signals before companies have issued formal statements, and once a narrative has been translated into financial risk language, it becomes harder to regain narrative control. The question is not simply what the market believes to be true, but what the market believes other relevant actors may do next.

Beyond mere signalling, concrete oversight or enforcement actions can also trigger rapid follow-on private litigation or class actions, creating an almost immediate bridge between public criticism and formal legal exposure. Short sellers may amplify investigative narratives or selectively damaging facts to accelerate negative sentiment for their own gain. All of this means that companies cannot afford to treat Washington issues as separate from capital market planning. To be effective, a crisis team must understand how a Hill letter, regulator comment or activist campaign may register with investors.

Corporate speech and stakeholder activism

In many crises, employees and other internal stakeholders are no longer a secondary constituency to be addressed after external messaging is settled; they are a primary audience from the outset. Employees are often the first amplifiers of concern, the first source of leaks and the first group asked by friends, family, customers or reporters what the company “really believes.” In unionised or organising environments, those dynamics can become even more consequential.

Internal dissatisfaction may not remain internal for long, and employees who feel misaligned with or ignored by leadership can quickly become validators of outside criticism. This is particularly true for younger generations, many of whom view social media as an always-on diary.

At the other end of the organisational chart, CEO commentary is more accessible to stakeholders than ever before. In Washington, high-visibility occasions such as appearances before Congress are no longer only legal or policy moments; they are brand events. A single hostile exchange, clipped and distributed widely, can become the defining image of a company’s posture even if the underlying issues are infinitely more complex.

Between those poles lies a myriad of other ways corporate speech intersects with Washington. Corporate PAC contributions, trade association memberships, decisions to host elected officials for facility tours, and many other similar activities all feed into these same dynamics. Stakeholders increasingly evaluate companies not just on operational performance or formal statements, but also on broader indicators of who they support, where they show up, which institutions they join and how their leaders respond under pressure.

Operational Implications for Corporate Leaders

Be proactive before a crisis strikes

The most sophisticated companies are no longer asking, “How will we respond?” They are asking, “How do we shape the environment before scrutiny emerges?”

In Washington, proactive positioning is not just about reputation building in the abstract. It is about defining the context in which future allegations, questions, or attacks will be understood. Companies that have not told their own story or built up any reservoir of credibility are then forced to do so for the first time under hostile conditions.

Driving a proactive narrative in Washington early and often can reduce that vulnerability. Simply trying to stay under the radar is a high-risk approach that only works until it does not – and when it fails, it does so abruptly and with limited opportunities to catch up.

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Thoughtfully publishing relevant content across owned and earned channels that reach DC stakeholders (and, when appropriate, paying to promote it in a targeted manner) can shape the framing of priority issues or potential investigative themes. Other tactics for narrative building can include quietly briefing reporters before hearings or other milestone moments, seeding third-party validator commentary on known vulnerabilities and filing pre-emptive disclosures to control the timing and context in which news becomes public.

Being successful in controlling your own narrative does not require constant, broad-based commentary. But it does require thoughtful, sustained engagement (in both public and closed-door settings) targeted to reach the audiences that matter most.

Executive-level relationship building is also part of that work. C-suite leaders should have peer-level contacts in Washington circles they can call on to gut-check potential issues, understand how a situation is being read, and, where appropriate, serve as behind-the-scenes validators. Those relationships cannot be conjured or improvised in the middle of a crisis.

Adopt a cross-functional crisis architecture for response

Modern crises now converge across corporate communications, legal, investor relations, public affairs, government relations, HR, IT, and other functions. Companies that silo these functions lose narrative control because they lose strategic decision-making coherence.

One example where this risk comes to life is when companies seek to end-run traditional regulatory and legal processes by bypassing line-level staff and appealing directly to the most senior political decision makers. Doing so can be an effective way to achieve rapid resolution of a potential crisis. But, without coordination across all relevant functions, it risks failing due to mixed messages. If a lobbying team is pushing one theory of the case, legal counsel another, and communications a third, decision-making stakeholders will notice.

Having an empowered cross-functional crisis team also protects against any tendencies to default to a

singular, “silver bullet” approach. For example, while direct lobbying is often necessary in a Washington crisis, it is rarely sufficient on its own. After all, adverse parties can hire “connected” lobbyists of their own to push competing narratives. Even in the absence of that, a surround-sound campaign across earned media, social and digital networks, grasstop allies and other communications channels is essential to shaping the broader environment in which reputational, legal, policy and political arguments can succeed.

Crisis preparedness as a board-level issue

Crisis preparedness is a board-level issue now more than ever. Directors are increasingly expected to understand not only operational resilience and cybersecurity exposure, but also the governance implications of politically charged, high-velocity crises. Board oversight expectations now extend to how companies escalate sensitive issues, how management evaluates disclosure obligations, and how leadership balances legal, regulatory and reputational considerations under pressure.

That matters in part because shareholder litigation exposure can turn on how a company handled a crisis, not merely on the underlying facts that triggered it. Statements made too aggressively, too narrowly or too late may become fodder for claims about disclosure, controls, or management oversight. Generally, boards do not need to manage the response themselves; however, they do need confidence that the company has a:

- credible process;
- realistic understanding of the external environment; and
- clear path forward.

Insurance and indemnification pressures further underscore the point. D&O coverage, cyber insurance and emerging-reputation-risk riders each have their own requirements and assumptions. Taken together, these trends push crisis preparedness firmly into the realm of enterprise governance at the board level, rather than merely a specialist communications exercise.

Practical Recommendations for 2026 and Beyond

The practical implications of the crisis management landscape in Washington are not mysterious but require discipline.

First, companies should pre-map how potential political and electoral changes could shift their policy, reputational, and license-to-operate risk exposure. The 2026 midterm elections represent perhaps the most obvious upcoming milestone to scenario plan for. The period around midterm elections is also a common time for turnover within the administration at the cabinet and sub-cabinet levels, potentially leading to significant shifts in executive branch priorities.

Other planning should include thinking creatively about how adverse actors could stir trouble, including through non-traditional methods and channels. Internal self-vetting and risk assessments in the style of “opposition research” can feel uncomfortable, but they are increasingly necessary. Companies are better served by identifying their own vulnerabilities in advance than by discovering them through investigative media reporting or a committee hearing.

Second, organisations should conduct integrated crisis simulation exercises across communications, public affairs, legal, HR and other relevant leadership teams. A tabletop exercise that assumes a clean factual problem and a rational information flow is no longer enough; companies should test how they would respond if:

- Hill letter lands at the same time as a leak;
- regulator comment sparks market reaction before facts are confirmed; or
- if a board document becomes public in the middle of an investigation.

They should also test decision rights, escalation protocols, factual verification, internal employee communications, investor messaging and the trade-offs among legal, reputational and political considerations. The goal is not to predict every scenario; it is to build the muscle memory required to operate coherently when multiple pressures arrive at once.

Third, companies should develop or revisit and pressure-test their protocols for rapid review of potential synthetic media. In an environment shaped by manipulated audio, deepfakes and synthetic leaks, organisations need a repeatable, scalable process for assessing authenticity, elevating technical expertise and determining when and how to respond.

Finally, companies should assess whether their C-level relationships in Washington are sufficient before any urgent need to tap into such a valuable resource arises. That may take the form of convening a handful of private salon-style dinners with their executives, joining local philanthropic boards or working with advisors to secure invitations to marquee social and civic events where relationships are formed. The point is not social climbing for its own sake; it is to ensure that when an issue arises, the company and its leadership are not entering Washington as strangers to the ecosystem that will interpret them.

Final Takeaways

Washington crisis management is no longer episodic. It is an ongoing condition of operating at scale in a polarised regulatory and political environment where oversight, enforcement, and political signalling can unfold simultaneously. Companies are judged not only on what happened, but on:

- how quickly they recognised the stakes;
- how coherently they acted across functions; and
- how well they navigated the broader backdrop of the relevant issues.

The organisations best positioned to navigate this environment will be those that accept the premise of simultaneity and build accordingly. They will assume that scrutiny can come from several directions at once, that internal materials may become public and that political controversy can become market moving. None of this eliminates the possibility of a crisis. But it does improve the odds that if Washington pressure comes, the company can meet it with discipline, credibility and a strategy equal to the environment.

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