

# BRANDED

By Tom Engelhardt

**A**T THE FRONTIER OF ADVERTISING and publicity, the search for the unique product plug marches steadily forward. The annual April award ceremonies of the National Product Placement Association at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City offered its most prestigious symbol—the Molly—to three recent breakthroughs in the field.

In a statement issued to the press, retiring association President Harlan Simpson claimed each represented "a new vista in the placement of products, product trademarks or product slogans in non-ad environments" and hailed them as embodiments of the "creative energy with which our growing field renews and supports American life."

These advances in three newly developing areas of product placement seemed so revolutionary that *In These Times* put a research team to work exploring their ramifications in our lives.

**The political plug:** In a March 13 news conference, President George Bush, asked to confirm that he had returned a call to Iranian President Rafsanjani about American hostages in the Mideast, replied, "What's wrong with reaching out and touching someone when the hostages are at stake?"<sup>TMF</sup>

While the press focused on the original Rafsanjani call—it was a hoax—the president's seemingly off-the-cuff reference to an AT&T ad slogan went unnoticed, except by Product Placement Agencies around the country. There, as Bush's signal to the ad community sank in, champagne corks began to pop.

Bush's first presidential product plug

was, it turns out, unpaid for. But a high-ranking Treasury Department official, involved in planning this nation's still-unannounced Office of Product Placement, said: "That's the last freebie the government's offering private industry. This time we tossed a jingle into the air to see if it would fly, but we're convinced product plugging's a viable non-tax method for raising funds."

"Look," he added, "the president's popularity's sky-high, and he's got to find new, Republican ways to put some money where his lips are. So what could be more perfect?" Placement rates will evidently range from \$1 million for "ordinary presidential display" to \$2 million-plus for DASE ("display at special events").

For the upcoming May summit, the ultimate "Presidential PlugOp," the going price will be \$5 million—if Gorbachov agrees to join in. (The Soviets would receive a 15 percent agenting fee.)

"Presidential spousal display" starts at \$500,000 and so on down through Cabinet ranks to William Bennett, the drug czar, who will reportedly have to do public service placements for next to nothing. "ITT, GM, all the acronyms, they're practically pounding down our doors," says our source. "But the bywords here are 'dignity' and 'taste.' No Japanese autos, no sanitary napkins, no kitty litter. I'm giving away no secrets if I tell you that next month the president will be handing out hamburgers and talking to minority kids in a Nashville

school cafeteria on the theme 'You deserve a break today.'"

Seventy-seven-year-old doyen of the plug industry James McMannus, director of A.C. Boyd Placement Co., Weehawken, N.J., bubbled with enthusiasm when reached by *In These Times*: "I thought I'd seen it all, but I haven't been off the phone in a week. No one, and I mean *no one*, wants to be left out. By the time we're done, they'll have to hold their next news conference in a football stadium to contain all the product!"

**The scientific plug:** "IBM announced yesterday," reported the April 5 *New York Times*, "that its scientists had spelled out the company's initials by dragging single atoms into the desired pattern on the surface of a crystal of nickel." The IBM atomic emblem was, the *Times* added, 660 billionths of an inch long and, in an accompanying photo, had been magnified about 6 million times.<sup>TMF</sup> This image was, though the *Times* did not mention it, the smallest product plug ever to appear free on the cover of a magazine—the British scientific journal *Nature*.<sup>TMF</sup>

Far more important, it is but one indication of unparalleled scientific advances to come based on the concept of corporate-image plugging. Already Dr. Gerald Franz, heading a team of scientists at General Electric's Edison Laboratories in Muskegon, Mich., is racing to drag individual electrons onto a silver surface to create a pattern 10 trillionths of an inch long that will flash

out "GE, 90 YEARS OF SERVICE."

Such plugs are by no means restricted to microscience. According to Nina Lamb, publisher of *BioPlacement Engineering*, a new industry newsletter due out this month, "When you combine recent transgenic work on skin pigmentation with the 1987 Patent Office ruling on the patentability of altered life, you have a potentially explosive placement phenomenon we've been calling 'BillBeasts.' I've put product everywhere, but I've never seen anything quite like this—the biggest European and American companies making deals with tiny biotech firms just to get a foot in the barn door. You see, animals may be the last empty message spaces left. Imagine, for instance, that you're out driving with the family. Suddenly you pass a farm and there's an army of genetically altered pigs lined up by the side of the road, their skin pigmentation spelling out 'Xerox!' Talk about impact! If this works, it could mean the revival of the family farm, because whatever corporations corner the patented-animal plug market will want to turn choice land, even major mall areas, back into farmland to get their messages across."

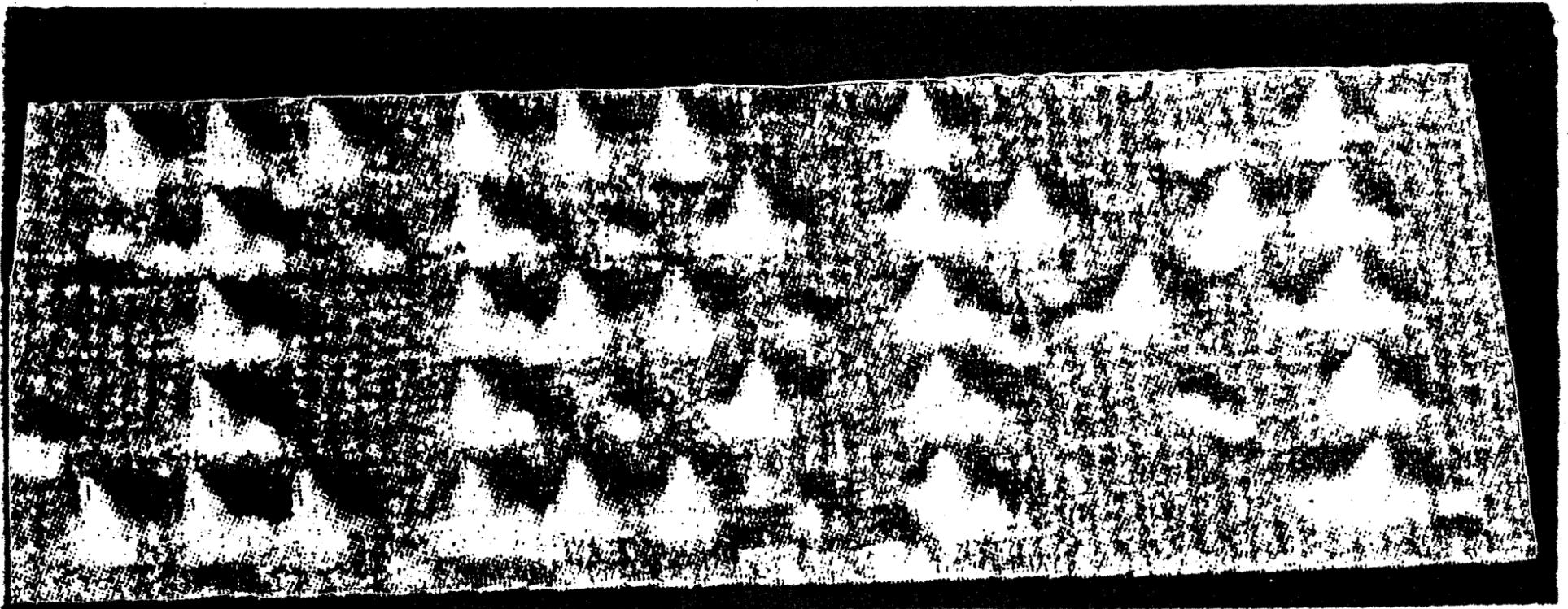
**The domestic plug:** A new toy recently displayed at New York's Toy Fair may represent product placement's most revolutionary advance. "Computer Warriors," an action-figure line for boys soon to be marketed by toy giant Mattel, includes 2½-inch Gridd, described in the Mattel catalogue as a "heroic mechanic specialist who is always thirsty for adventure ... [and] is concealed inside a realistic-looking Pepsi can that transforms into a battle base complete with his hyper hoverjet!"<sup>TMF</sup>

According to Jay ("Bigfoot") Mathews, toy analyst for the Wall Street investment firm of Kidder, Cutter & Weiskopf, "This is the sort of thing that gets you into the Placement Hall of Fame because it goes far beyond even the free-plug concept. They're actually going to make parents pay to put a product plug in their own kid's room! Pay to install a Pepsi can permanently on their kid's desk! If this works, the sky's the limit in the domestic placement field. And, believe me, we're already sending out advisories to our customers to plug in their venture capital before the area gets too hot." ■

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## Scientists and politicians enter a brave new world of "plug opportunities."



When scientists at IBM's Almaden Research Center discovered how to position individual atoms, the first thing they did was create the world's smallest ad.