

IN THE MATTER OF
THE STOP & SHOP COMPANIES, INC., ET AL.

MODIFYING ORDER IN REGARD TO ALLEGED VIOLATION OF
SEC. 7 OF THE CLAYTON ACT AND SEC. 5 OF THE
FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION ACT

Docket C-3649. Consent Order, April 2, 1996--Modifying Order, June 20, 1997

This order reopens a 1996 consent order -- that required the respondents to divest specific supermarkets -- and this order modifies the consent order by terminating the requirement that Stop & Shop divest, among other stores, two Purity Supreme supermarkets in Massachusetts, in part, because increased competition from other entrants has made it extremely unlikely that the stores can be divested.

ORDER REOPENING AND MODIFYING ORDER

On January 6, 1997, respondent The Stop & Shop Companies, Inc. ("Stop & Shop")¹ filed a Petition To Reopen and Modify Consent Order (Purity Supreme) ("Petition"). In its Petition, Stop & Shop requests that the Commission reopen the order in Docket No. C-3649 ("order") to set aside paragraphs II.A.3.a and II.A.6.a, which require Stop & Shop to divest Purity Supreme Store number 41 located at 630 American Legion Highway, Roslindale, Massachusetts ("the Roslindale store") and Purity Supreme store number 20 located at 525 Harvard Street, Brookline, Massachusetts ("the Brookline store"). The Petition addresses the remaining 2 of 17 supermarket divestitures required by the order. The Commission previously approved Stop & Shop's applications for divestiture of the other 15 supermarkets.

For the reasons discussed below, the Commission has determined that Stop & Shop has demonstrated that it is in the public interest to reopen and modify the order to set aside these divestiture obligations.

I. THE COMPLAINT AND ORDER

This matter arose out of the 1995 acquisition by Stop & Shop of all of the supermarkets and related assets owned and operated by Purity Supreme, Inc. ("Purity"). The complaint in this matter charged that Stop & Shop's acquisition of Purity violated Section 7 of the Clayton Act, 15 U.S.C. 18, and Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act, 15 U.S.C. 45. Specifically, the complaint alleged

¹ On July 21, 1996, Koninklijke Ahold N.V., a Netherlands corporation, acquired substantially all of the outstanding voting shares of Stop & Shop.

that the effects of the acquisition may be substantially to lessen competition "in the retail sale of food and grocery products in supermarkets, and narrower markets contained therein"² in, among other markets, "Brookline [and] the Roslindale neighborhood in Boston"³ At the time of Stop & Shop's acquisition of Purity, Stop & Shop and Purity directly competed in Brookline and Roslindale. The concern thus arose that Stop & Shop would likely be able unilaterally to raise prices in the Brookline and Roslindale markets.

The Commission accepted a consent agreement with Stop & Shop on October 18, 1995, and the resulting consent order became final on April 2, 1996.⁴ Under the terms of the order, Stop & Shop is required to divest, among other stores, "absolutely and in good faith," the Roslindale and Brookline, Massachusetts supermarkets.⁵ The purpose of these divestitures, as of the others, is to ensure the continuation of the Roslindale and Brookline stores as ongoing, viable enterprises engaged in the supermarket business and to remedy the lessening of competition resulting from the acquisition as alleged in the Commission's complaint.⁶

II. THE PETITION

In its Petition,⁷ Stop & Shop requests that the Commission modify the order to eliminate the remaining required divestitures under the order, the Roslindale and Brookline stores.⁸ Stop & Shop bases its Petition on changed conditions of fact and public interest considerations.⁹

² Complaint ¶ 9.

³ *Id.* ¶ 12.c.

⁴ Stop & Shop also entered into a separate consent agreement with the Massachusetts Attorney General. Generally, this agreement mirrors the terms of the Commission's consent agreement. See *Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. SSC Associates, L.P. and Stop & Shop Companies, Inc.*, No. 95-12377NG (D. Mass. Oct. 18, 1995) (Consent Decree).

⁵ Order ¶ II.A.

⁶ *Id.* ¶ II.B.

⁷ In support of its Petition, Stop & Shop provided the affidavits of Brian Hotarek, Vice President in charge of Real Estate and Development for the Stop & Shop Companies, Inc. ("Hotarek Affidavit"), and William C. Hamlin, Vice President, Chief Financial Officer and Secretary of C&S Wholesale Grocers, Inc. ("Hamlin Affidavit").

⁸ Order ¶¶ II.A.3.a. and II.A.6.a.

⁹ Stop & Shop does not assert that any change of law requires reopening the order.

Stop & Shop claims that there is no serious interest by potential acquirers in either store to be divested because of the increased competition surrounding each store and because of the decreased sales volume of the two stores. Stop & Shop claims that new entry has made it difficult for the Roslindale and Brookline stores to compete effectively in their respective markets.¹⁰ The record shows that a new Sav-A-Lot supermarket was opened immediately adjacent to the Roslindale store on January 20, 1996. Likewise, a new Star Markets superstore was opened less than one mile north of the Brookline store approximately 5 months before the order was issued by the Commission. In addition, a Trader Joe's store has opened less than one mile south of the Brookline store. There has been a significant decline in sales at both stores to be divested, which is likely to continue.¹¹

Stop & Shop asserts that operating the Roslindale and Brookline stores has caused significant losses to Stop & Shop and that it needs to end the losses being sustained by the Roslindale and Brookline stores to maintain Stop & Shop's competitive vigor in the relevant markets. Removing the divestiture requirement would enable Stop & Shop to close the stores, halting any further losses.¹²

III. STANDARD FOR REOPENING AND MODIFYING FINAL ORDERS

Section 5(b) of the Federal Trade Commission Act, 15 U.S.C. 45(b), provides that the Commission shall reopen an order to consider whether it should be modified if the respondent "makes a satisfactory showing that changed conditions of law or fact" so require. A satisfactory showing sufficient to require reopening is made when a request to reopen identifies significant changes in circumstances and shows that the changes eliminate the need for the order or make continued application of it inequitable or harmful to competition. S. Rep. No. 96-500, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. 9 (1979) (significant changes or changes causing unfair disadvantage); *Louisiana-Pacific Corp.*, Docket No. C-2956, Letter to John C. Hart (June 5, 1986), at 4 (unpublished) ("Hart Letter").¹³

¹⁰ Petition at 7-10.

¹¹ Petition at 12-14.

¹² Petition at 17. *See also* Hotarek Affidavit, ¶¶ 16 and 18.

¹³ *See also United States v. Louisiana-Pacific Corp.*, 967 F.2d 1372, 1376-77 (9th Cir. 1992) ("A decision to reopen does not necessarily entail a decision to modify the order. Reopening may occur even where the petition itself does not plead facts requiring modification.").

Section 5(b) also provides that the Commission may modify an order when, although changed circumstances would not require reopening, the Commission determines that the public interest so requires. Respondents are therefore invited in petitions to reopen to show how the public interest warrants the requested modification. Hart Letter at 5; 16 CFR 2.51. In such a case, the respondent must demonstrate as a threshold matter some affirmative need to modify the order. *Damon Corp.*, Docket No. C-2916, Letter to Joel E. Hoffman, Esq. (March 29, 1983), 1979-83 Transfer Binder, FTC complaints and orders (CCH) ¶22,007 at 22,585 ("Damon Letter"), at 2. For example, it may be in the public interest to modify an order "to relieve any impediment to effective competition that may result from the order." *Damon Corp.*, Docket No. C-2916, 101 FTC 689, 692 (1983). Once such a showing of need is made, the Commission will balance the reasons favoring the requested modification against any reasons not to make the modification. Damon Letter at 2. The Commission also will consider whether the particular modification sought is appropriate to remedy the identified harm. Damon Letter at 4.

The language of Section 5(b) plainly anticipates that the burden is on the petitioner to make a "satisfactory showing" of changed conditions to obtain reopening of the order. The legislative history also makes clear that the petitioner has the burden of showing, other than by conclusory statements, why an order should be modified. The Commission "may properly decline to reopen an order if a request is merely conclusory or otherwise fails to set forth specific facts demonstrating in detail the nature of the changed conditions and the reasons why these changed conditions require the requested modification of the order." S. Rep. No. 96-500, 96th Cong., 1st Sess. 9-10 (1979); *see also* Rule 2.51(b) (requiring affidavits in support of petitions to reopen and modify). If the Commission determines that the petitioner has made the necessary showing, the Commission must reopen the order to consider whether modification is required and, if so, the nature and extent of the modification. The Commission is not required to reopen the order, however, if the petitioner fails to meet its burden of making the satisfactory showing required by the statute. The petitioner's burden is not a light one in view of the public interest in repose and the finality of Commission orders. *See Federated Department Stores, Inc. v. Moitie*, 425 U.S. 394 (1981) (strong public interest considerations support repose and finality).

IV. REOPENING AND MODIFYING THE ORDER IS IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Based on the record in this matter, Stop & Shop has not demonstrated changes of fact that justify eliminating the remaining divestiture requirement. However, public interest considerations warrant ending the requirement to divest the Roslindale and Brookline supermarkets. Stop & Shop has demonstrated an affirmative need for the change, and the reasons to modify the order outweigh the reasons to retain the divestiture requirement as written.

A. Stop & Shop Has Not Demonstrated Changes of Fact

Reopening is not required for changes in circumstances that were reasonably foreseeable at the time the consent order was entered. *See* Pay Less Drug Stores Northwest, Inc., Docket No. C-3309, Letter to H.B. Hummelt (Jan. 22, 1982) (changed conditions must be unforeseeable, create severe competitive hardship, and eliminate the dangers that the order sought to remedy). With respect to the Roslindale market, the record shows that Sav-A-Lot's entry¹⁴ took place shortly before the order was issued by the Commission. Consequently, Sav-A-Lot's entry, as a factual matter, does not constitute the requisite significant change in circumstances that requires reopening of the order. Likewise, with respect to the Brookline market, Star's entry took place approximately five months before the order in this matter was issued by the Commission. Thus, as a factual matter, Star's entry does not constitute a changed fact that would warrant modification of the order with respect to the Brookline store.

Trader Joe's entry in Brookline also does not constitute a changed fact that eliminates the need for the divestiture of the Brookline store. Trader Joe's potential entry into the relevant market was not an unforeseen event; the record indicates that Trader Joe's was actively looking for sites for stores in the relevant Boston metropolitan area market, which includes Roslindale and Brookline, considerably before the order was issued by the Commission. More important, however, the Commission does not consider the Trader Joe's store to be a "supermarket" as that term is defined in the order and its entry

¹⁴ Although Sav-A-Lot offers many items sold through supermarkets, Stop & Shop has not demonstrated that the Sav-A-Lot carries all relevant product categories identified in paragraph I.E of the order. Nor has it demonstrated that the Sav-A-Lot carries the variety of brands and sizes within a category that would be found in Stop & Shop's comparable supermarkets. Nonetheless, it is evident that the Sav-A-Lot is attracting business away from Stop & Shop's supermarkets.

into the Brookline market thus does not remedy the competitive harm resulting from Stop & Shop's acquisition of the Purity supermarket in Brookline. *See* order ¶ I.E.

B. Public Interest Considerations

Stop & Shop has demonstrated an affirmative need to modify the order. The record in this case shows that Stop & Shop has made good faith efforts to locate purchasers for both the Roslindale and Brookline stores, but has been unable to divest the two stores. Stop & Shop engaged the services of a well-known investment banking firm to prepare offering packages to potential acquirers. Subsequently, Stop & Shop contacted numerous potential buyers regarding these supermarkets including, among others, parties who ultimately acquired other stores Stop & Shop was required to divest under the order. Stop & Shop offered the Roslindale and Brookline stores as part of larger packages, but the potential acquirers desired only the other assets. Stop & Shop also offered to divest the stores' equipment and fixtures for \$1 and to subsidize the rent, but again no acquirers expressed interest. In sum, none of the parties contacted was interested in acquiring either the Roslindale or the Brookline store.

When the order was entered, the Commission believed that the Roslindale and Brookline stores were divestable, and there is no indication that Stop & Shop has not properly maintained and operated these stores since entry of the order. The declining sales and losses experienced by the Roslindale and Brookline supermarkets thus do not appear to be caused by any failure of Stop & Shop to maintain them. Rather, the declining sales and losses appear to be primarily related to the recent entry by Star and Sav-A-Lot. Although the entries occurred prior to the order becoming final, neither Commission staff nor Stop & Shop anticipated the extent of competitive impact these two entrants have had on the Roslindale and the Brookline store, respectively.

The increased competition in Roslindale and Brookline has adversely affected the Roslindale and Brookline supermarkets' viability and marketability, and it appears that the two stores will continue to sustain significant losses. Consequently, continuation of the requirement to divest and the requirement to maintain the viability and marketability of the stores, which are steadily losing sales, imposes unanticipated costs on Stop & Shop that it asserts impede its ability to compete in the relevant markets. *See* Promodes, S.A., et al.,

Order Granting Request to Reopen and Modify Order Issued May 17, 1990 (January 28, 1994). This constitutes the affirmative need showing under the public interest test.

The remedial purpose of the order was to restore and increase competition in, among other markets, the Boston metropolitan area through the sale of a specified number of supermarkets, including the Roslindale and Brookline stores. Stop & Shop was able to divest all of the specified stores except the stores located in Roslindale and Brookline. These two stores could not be divested in more than fifteen months¹⁵ of serious efforts by Stop & Shop and the investment banker it retained to assist it in its divestiture efforts. Given Stop & Shop's efforts to divest, and the limited time remaining on the Brookline store's lease, it is extremely unlikely that the stores can be divested consistent with the terms of the order.

Stop & Shop asserts that it is suffering continuing losses due to the operation of the Roslindale and Brookline stores, which are competitively harming Stop & Shop. Because it is extremely unlikely that the stores can be divested, whether by Stop & Shop or by a trustee appointed by the Commission, the remedial purpose of the order will not be achieved. Accordingly, on balance, the need to achieve the marginal benefit of divesting two non-competitive supermarkets is outweighed by the continuing costs that the divestiture obligation is imposing on Stop & Shop.

Therefore, *It is ordered*, That this matter be, and it hereby is, reopened and that the Commission's order be, and it hereby is, modified to set aside paragraph II.A.3.a and paragraph II.A.6.a, as of the effective date of this order.

Commissioner Azcuenaga dissenting, and Commissioner Starek concurring in the result only.

DISSENTING STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MARY L. AZCUENAGA

The Commission today permits Stop and Shop to avoid its obligation under the order to divest two stores in the Boston, Massachusetts, area, because Stop and Shop has failed to divest the stores and the continuing effort to do so is costly. Although I did not agree that these two stores should be required to be divested,¹ the

¹⁵ Stop & Shop began its divestiture efforts immediately after signing the consent agreement in October 1995.

¹ See Separate Statement of Commissioner Mary L. Azcuenaga, Concurring in Part and Dissenting in Part, in *The Stop and Shop Companies, Inc.*, Docket C-3649 (April 8, 1996).

respondent's obligation under a final order of the Commission should not be so readily excused. The Commission's action opens the door for all respondents to postpone divestiture, claim that the effort is costly, and avoid the obligation under the order.

The order in this matter provides for the appointment of an independent trustee to accomplish divestiture if Stop and Shop fails to do so in a timely manner, but no trustee has been appointed. In *Promodes, S.A.*,² cited as precedent for modifying this order, the obligation to divest was set aside only after a trustee had been appointed and had failed to locate an acquirer for the stores required to be divested. The inability of the trustee to find an acquirer was cited in *Promodes* as "evidence that divestiture of the two stores [was] extremely unlikely." I concurred in *Promodes*,³ on the ground that "[i]f the trustee cannot identify potential buyers, continued imposition of the divestiture requirement no longer serves the public interest." Comparable evidence of the public interest is not available here, because no independent trustee has been appointed. We have instead allegations of burden resulting from costs that surely were anticipated at the time the order was signed. See *Louisiana-Pacific Corporation*, 112 FTC 547 (1989).

I dissent.

CONCURRING STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER MARY L. AZCUENAGA

I concur in the decision to reopen and modify the order, relieving the respondents of the obligation to divest certain supermarkets in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The Commission-appointed trustee, during a 21-month period, has not accomplished the required divestitures. In classic understatement, the Commission concludes that the trustee's lack of success is "evidence that divestiture of the two stores is extremely unlikely."

A Commission-appointed trustee serves as a neutral arbiter to establish whether the divestiture required by the order can be accomplished (assuming the trustee's good faith and diligence and the absence of evidence that the respondent has frustrated the trustee's efforts). If the trustee cannot identify potential buyers, continued imposition of the divestiture requirement no longer serves the public

² *Promodes, S.A.*, Order Granting Request To Reopen and Modify Order Issued May 17, 1990 (Jan. 28, 1994), reprinted in 5 Trade Reg. Rep. (CCH) ¶ 23,540.

³ A copy of my concurring statement in *Promodes* is attached.

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Concurring Statement

interest. In these circumstances, the requirement imposes costs, and the respondent need not make a particularized showing of those costs.

The Commission has in the past recognized that an obligation to divest particular assets may be modified in the public interest when the respondent "has been unable to find an acquirer [for those assets] at any price." *RSR Corporation*, 98 FTC 872 (1981); compare *Louisiana-Pacific Corporation*, 112 FTC 547, 561 (1989) (asserted financial disadvantage distinguished from impossibility). The trustee having failed to effect divestiture, the requirement now should be lifted.

Response to Petition

123 F.T.C.

**Re: Altmeyer Home Stores, Inc. Petition to Quash or Limit
Civil Investigative Demands. File No. 962-3063.**

February 12, 1997

Dear Mr. Farnan:

This is to advise you of the Federal Trade Commission's ruling on the Petition to Quash Civil Investigative Demands ("Petition") that you filed on behalf of your client, Altmeyer Home Stores, Inc. ("Altmeyer" or "Petitioner"), in the above-referenced matter.

The ruling set forth below has been made by Commissioner Roscoe B. Starek, III, pursuant to authority delegated under Commission Rule of Practice 2.7(d)(4), 16 CFR 2.7(d)(4). Pursuant to Rule 2.7(f), 16 CFR 2.7(f), within three days after service of this decision, Petitioner may file with the Secretary of the Commission a request for full Commission review. The timely filing of such request shall not stay the return date in this ruling unless the Commission otherwise specifies.

Commissioner Starek has carefully reviewed the petition and the accompanying materials. He has also considered the oral presentation on the Petition conducted on January 21, 1997. The Petition is granted in part and denied in part for the reasons discussed below.

I. BACKGROUND

The Civil Investigative Demands ("CIDs") in this matter arise in the context of a Commission investigation to determine whether Altmeyer may have engaged in acts or practices in violation of Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act, 15 U.S.C. 45, as amended, and the Fair Credit Reporting Act ("FCRA") provisions regarding the use of credit reports for employment purposes.¹ On March 22, 1995, staff of the FTC's Chicago Regional Office sent a letter to Altmeyer requesting that the company voluntarily provide certain information and documents regarding its policies and procedures for the FCRA in connection with Altmeyer's use of consumer reports for employment purposes. By letter dated May 2, 1995, you, as counsel for Altmeyer, agreed to permit FTC staff to

¹ The relevant provision of the FCRA is Section 615(a), 15 U.S.C. 1681m(a), which requires users of consumer credit reports, who deny employment applications based in whole or in part on those reports, to provide consumers with the name and address of the consumer reporting agency from which they obtained the report.

inspect the requested information and documentation at your Pittsburgh law office between May 8, and May 25, 1995. Letter from Thomas J. Farnan to John Hallerud, FTC Chicago Regional Office (May 2, 1995). According to FTC staff, you then indicated in a conversation with John Hallerud, the FTC attorney responsible for the investigation at the time, that Altmeyer lacked the necessary policies and procedures for complying with the FCRA. Based on the information from this purported conversation, FTC staff decided to forgo inspecting Altmeyer's documents. Instead, FTC staff offered Altmeyer the opportunity to enter into a consent agreement resolving the investigation without further expense to the company. You have strongly denied that you ever made such a statement to FTC staff, and maintain that Altmeyer is and was in compliance with the law. Letter from Thomas Farnan to Commissioner Roscoe B. Starek, III (Jan. 23, 1997). *See also* Letter from Thomas Farnan to C. Steven Baker, FTC Chicago Regional Office (November 6, 1996).

Later FTC staff renewed its request for access to Altmeyer's documents and information regarding compliance with the FCRA and, once again, you (acting on behalf of the company) agreed to cooperate voluntarily with the request. Instead of providing FTC staff with access to the requested materials from the entire period under investigation (January 1994 to the present), however, Altmeyer submitted only materials from the months of October 1995, March 1996, and September 1996. FTC staff considered this response unsatisfactory because it provided information about Altmeyer's practices and procedures that occurred after the company learned that a Commission investigation was underway. At this point, you withdrew Altmeyer's offer to produce the requested materials voluntarily.

When the prospects for further cooperation between Altmeyer and FTC staff in the investigation appeared remote, the Commission issued two CIDs on December 2, 1996. The CIDs were authorized by the Commission's resolution of June 27, 1990, directing the use of compulsory process in FTC investigations to determine whether unnamed consumer reporting agencies or others are engaged in unfair or deceptive acts or practices in violation of Section 5 of the FTC Act and in violation of the FCRA. One of the CIDs required the

production of 16 categories of documents. The other CID required the oral testimony of Altmeyer's Vice President, Judy Altmeyer.²

On December 18, 1996, the Secretary of the Commission received the Petition from Altmeyer objecting to the CIDs. Pursuant to the Commission's Rules of Practice, a petition to quash or limit a CID must be filed within 20 days after service of the CID (or, if a return date is less than 20 days after service, before the return date). 16 CFR 2.7(d)(1). Because the return date for the CID requesting the production of documents was December 16, the instant Petition (received by the Commission on December 18) was not timely as to this CID. Petitioner neither requested additional time to file a response to that CID nor advanced any explanation for the late filing. The Petition, however, was timely with respect to the CID requesting oral testimony. Despite Petitioner's failure to comply fully with the Commission's procedural requirements for submitting a timely petition to quash, the Commission has determined that it will not dismiss the petition on this basis and will consider each of Petitioner's objections.

II. SPECIFIC OBJECTIONS

A. Petitioner alleges that before it must produce the requested documents and testimony, the Commission is required to present evidence that Altmeyer violated the law.

At the oral presentation, you stated that FTC's demand for access to information relating to Altmeyer's practices for complying with the FCRA amounted to a "fishing expedition." Oral Presentation Transcript at 5 (Jan. 21, 1997). You asserted that it is improper for the Commission to order production of the information covered by the CIDs without first advising Altmeyer of the evidence already in the Commission's possession that Altmeyer has engaged in unlawful activity. You also asserted a right to conduct discovery depositions relating to the bases for the Commission's investigation of Altmeyer. Oral Presentation Transcript at 6. Your argument is incorrect and does not take into account the broad scope of the Commission's investigatory powers and the procedural safeguards that are applicable to this agency's pre-complaint investigations.

² The CID requesting production of documents indicated a return date of December 16, 1996, and the CID for oral testimony specified a return date of December 27, 1996.

The Commission has broad investigatory powers to secure relevant information in order to determine whether a law violation has occurred. *United States v. Morton Salt Co.*, 338 U.S. 632, 642 (1950) (analogizing FTC's compulsory process powers to those of a grand jury). As the Supreme Court stated, the FTC "does not depend on a case or controversy for power to get evidence but can investigate merely on suspicion that the law is being violated, or even just because it wants assurance that it is not." *Morton Salt*, 338 U.S. at 642-43. *Accord*, *FTC v. Carter*, 636 F.2d 781, 786 (D.C. Cir. 1980); *FTC v. Texaco, Inc.*, 555 F.2d 862, 873, n.23 (D.C. Cir.)(*en banc*), *cert. denied*, 431 U.S. 974 (1977). The Commission's power to compel the production of documents and testimony from the target of an investigation through a subpoena is not conditioned on the possession of a specific quantum of evidence or a showing of probable cause to believe that the law has been violated. *United States v. Powell*, 379 U.S. 48, 57 (1964) (rejecting a probable cause requirement); *Oklahoma Press Publishing Co. v. Walling*, 327 U.S. 186, 216 (1946) (same).³ Indeed, it is well established that the Commission may compel the production of information provided that it is sought for a legitimate purpose and is "reasonably relevant" or not "plainly irrelevant" to that purpose, and that the inquiry is not too indefinite or unduly burdensome. *Morton Salt*, 338 U.S. at 652-53, *FTC v. Anderson*, 631 F.2d 741, 744-45 (D.C. Cir. 1979). Finally, with respect to the issue of relevance, courts have ruled that these standards are far less rigid in the context of an agency investigation than in an adjudicative matter, *FTC v. Green*, 252 F. Supp. 153 (S.D.N.Y. 1966), and have generally deferred to an agency's appraisal of relevance which "must be accepted so long as it is not obviously wrong." *FTC v. Invention Submission Corp.*, 965 F.2d 1086, 1089 (D.C. Cir. 1992), *cert. denied*, 113 S. Ct. 1255 (1993).⁴

³ You have stated that you are unaware of any legal decision in which a court has required a corporation to open its private files to a government agency without articulating a reason to believe that the law is being violated. Oral Presentation Transcript at 14. As support for this view, you cited (*id.* at 15) to *Micro Motion, Inc. v. Kane Steel Co., Inc.*, 894 F.2d 1318, 1327 (Fed. Cir. 1990), a patent infringement case involving two private parties engaged in a discovery dispute. In that case, the appellate court ruled that one of the private parties to the lawsuit could not obtain discovery of certain information held by a non-party based on only "a bare allegation of wrongdoing." That private discovery decision case is not relevant to the FTC matter at hand, which involves the exercise of the agency's power to gather evidence in an investigation by subpoena.

⁴ The relevance of a CID is measured against the scope and purpose of an agency's investigation, which in this instance are set forth in the Commission's Resolution authorizing issuance of compulsory process, attached to the CIDs. *FTC v. Texaco*, 555 F.2d at 874. Moreover, it is respondent's burden to show that the information sought by the investigative demand is irrelevant. *FTC v. Invention Submission Corp.*, 965 F.2d at 1090.

It is clear that the target of a Commission investigation such as Petitioner does not have the rights accorded to a litigant in an adjudicative proceeding. In carrying out its investigative functions, the Commission may proceed on a non-public, *ex parte* basis against targets without according adjudicative procedures such as discovery of any evidence that may have been gathered or the right to confront witnesses called by the agency. *Hannah v. Larche*, 363 U.S. 420, 440-41, 446 (1960); *Genuine Parts Co. v. FTC*, 445 F.2d 1382, 1387-88 (5th Cir. 1971); see *SEC v. Jerry T. O'Brien, Inc.*, 467 U.S. 735, 742 (1984). Due process rights do not apply in this context because the agency's investigation does not involve an allegation of wrongdoing or an adjudication of legal rights. *SEC v. Jerry T. O'Brien*, 467 U.S. at 742. Such procedural rights will attach only if and when the Commission determines to issue a complaint against Altmeyer. See *Hannah v. Larche*, 363 U.S. at 446.

The CIDs at issue in this matter seek production of relevant information to help the Commission to determine whether Altmeyer may have engaged in conduct that violates the FTC Act and the FCRA. Accordingly, at the pre-complaint phase of the investigation, Altmeyer is not entitled to the procedural rights that would apply to an adjudication. No formal charges against Altmeyer need be formulated in order to secure information relevant to the Commission's investigation. Further, the Commission is under no obligation to divulge to Altmeyer any evidence of wrongdoing that it might have in its possession as a prerequisite to demanding the information from Altmeyer covered by the CID. Accordingly, Petitioner's objection to the CIDs on this basis is denied.

B. Petitioner argues that the CIDs violate the Fourth Amendment.

Petitioner also seeks to quash the CIDs on the ground that they violate the Fourth Amendment prohibition against unreasonable search and seizure. Petitioner argues that the Federal Government is held to a higher standard when it seeks to enter the premises of a private citizen and gain access to private documents. Petition at 2. Petitioner further contends that, in defining the Federal Government's right to enter the private property of a citizen to conduct an investigation, courts have required that the government have "some kind of probable cause or even reasonable suspicion that a violation is taking place." *Id.* See also Oral Hearing Transcript at 8-10.

In raising this objection, Petitioner has overlooked the critical distinction between an actual search and an agency subpoena, as well as the difference between rights of privacy for a corporation and an individual. The Fourth Amendment standards applicable to a search are more stringent than those governing an agency subpoena. *Donovan v. Lone Star, Inc.*, 464 U.S. 408, 413-15 (1984); *FTC v. Carter*, 636 F.2d at 787. As the Supreme Court explained in *Oklahoma Press Publishing Co. v. Walling*, 327 U.S. at 195, agency subpoenas "present no question of actual search and seizure, but raise only the question whether orders of the court for production of specified records have been validly made ***." *Accord, FTC v. Carter*, 636 F.2d at 787-88. It is thus clear that when the Commission investigates by subpoena, the Fourth Amendment simply is not implicated.

The CID requiring Altmeyer to produce specified documents does not require the company to submit to anything resembling a search within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment. Furthermore, Instruction 10 of the CID requesting production of documents permits Altmeyer to avoid the presence of FTC staff on its premises simply by sending the responsive materials to the Commission.⁵ In fact, the instructions to this CID state that Altmeyer may comply with the demand by producing documents and information by mail if it prefers that Commission staff not enter its business premises. Altmeyer declined to pursue either of these options with Commission staff, choosing instead to file this Petition.

The instant case also does not implicate the privacy concerns that might arise if the agency were seeking to compel the production of private personal financial records from an individual who was not the target of the investigation. *In re McVane*, 44 F.3d 1127, 1136 (2d Cir. 1995). Here, the Commission is seeking corporate records and the testimony of a corporate officer in order to determine whether Altmeyer has complied and is complying with federal statutes that the agency is charged by Congress with enforcing. Thus, any assertion of personal privacy interests is misplaced. *See id.* at 1137. It has long been established that so long as a federal agency's demand for information issued to a corporation (or its agents) is not unreasonable, it will be enforced. *Morton Salt*, 338 U.S. at 652. The CID requiring Judy Altmeyer to present oral testimony seeks information regarding

⁵ Section 20(c)(3)(B) of the FTC Act requires the recipients of a CID only to make documents "available for inspection and copying or reproduction." 15 U.S.C. 57b-1(c)(3)(B).

matters within the scope of her official position as an owner of Altmeyer. This information is clearly relevant to the FTC's inquiry to determine whether Altmeyer is in compliance with the law and does not implicate a Fourth Amendment privacy concern. Similarly, no Fourth Amendment concerns is implicated by the CID requesting production of corporate document. Petitioner's challenge to the CIDs based on Fourth Amendment protection is thus denied.

C. Petitioner asserts that the CIDs are unduly burdensome and overbroad.

Petitioner also argues that Altmeyer has already made the documents covered by the CIDs available to the Commission voluntarily. The Petition states that requiring the company to produce the same materials again, for a second time, is "patently harassing, oppressive and vexatious."⁶ Petition at 2. In raising this objection, Petitioner appears to assert that FTC staff's decision not to follow up on Altmeyer's initial offer to inspect the documents on a voluntary basis precludes the Commission from seeking them on a compulsory basis later. In addition, Petitioner argues that the CID requesting production of materials seeks access to documents and categories of documents that exceed the scope of the FTC staff's investigation of Altmeyer. *See* Petition at 3. You also raised these arguments on behalf of your client at the oral presentation.

Petitioner has not met the heavy burden to sustain either of these allegations, which the Commission construes as objections to the reasonableness of the CIDs. As the court stated in *FTC v. Texaco Inc.*, "... the question is whether the demand is unduly burdensome or unreasonably broad." 555 F.2d at 882 (emphasis in original). The court said:

Some burden on subpoenaed parties is to be expected and is necessary in furtherance of the agency's legitimate inquiry and the public interest. The burden of showing that the request is unreasonable is on the subpoenaed party. Further, the burden is not easily met where . . . the agency inquiry is pursuant to a lawful purpose and the requested documents are relevant to that purpose ***. Thus, courts have refused to modify investigative subpoenas unless compliance threatens to disrupt or seriously hinder normal operations of a business.

Id. (footnotes omitted).

⁶ Because the holiday season is over, Petitioner's argument regarding the burden of complying with the CIDs during Christmas has become moot.

Petitioner simply asserts, without either factual or legal support, that Altmeyer will be harmed by having to undertake the task of producing documents for the Commission a second time and presenting Judy Altmeyer for testimony. You stated at the oral presentation that it had been burdensome and costly for the company to gather the records the first time because "there are hundreds and thousands of them," and that it would be similarly burdensome to do so again. Oral Presentation Transcript at 11-12. You also stated that requiring Judy Altmeyer to appear to give testimony would be burdensome because "you are asking a woman to take a day off" (*Id.* at 12) and that "[a]ny endeavor that takes Judy Altmeyer or anyone else at Altmeyers out of their normal management duties is oppressive." *Id.* at 9.

Neither of these objections, however, even comes close to the standard articulated in *Texaco* -- that the burden of compliance must "threaten[] to disrupt or seriously hinder normal operations." More significantly, there is no indication that at any time you told FTC staff that complying with the CID timetables would cause great hardship to Altmeyer or Ms. Altmeyer. You never asked FTC staff for an extension of time to respond to the CIDs in order to lessen the alleged burden of production.

It should be noted that Altmeyer's initial agreement to make the requested corporate documents available to FTC staff voluntarily, and its production of a portion of these materials, do not make clear why complying with the CIDs at this time would be unduly burdensome for the company. In fact, the previous willingness of the company to produce these documents voluntarily suggests that collecting and providing them to staff at the present time is not unduly time-consuming.⁷

Petitioner has also failed to demonstrate that the CID seeking access to documents is unreasonably broad in light of the Commission's need for such materials. The Petition did not indicate which specific aspect of the CID is alleged to be overbroad. At the oral presentation, you objected only to Specification 1's requirement to produce articles of incorporation, bylaws, minutes, and annual reports for Altmeyer as examples of excessively broad requests. Oral

⁷ In rendering a decision on Petitioner's assertion of undue burden, the Commission need not resolve the factual dispute between Petitioner and the FTC staff regarding the circumstances surrounding the staff decision not to review Altmeyer's documents when voluntarily offered for inspection in May 1995. Oral Presentation Transcript at 6, 19-25. This dispute raises the issue of Altmeyer's substantive compliance with the law, which is not ripe for determination at this stage of the investigation.

Presentation Transcript at 10. On its face, this CID calls only for minimal information on Altmeyer's corporate organization and management (Specifications 1-6). The remaining specifications (7-16) call for information specifically directed to Altmeyer's policies and procedures for complying with the FCRA. For example, it is certainly necessary for the Commission to seek information on related entities (Specification 3) to determine what entities might possess information relevant to the investigation and who is legally responsible for any violations that may be uncovered. Similarly, information on corporate management and compliance with the FCRA (Specifications 6 and 12) is essential for obtaining relevant testimony and information on compliance and for assessing personal responsibility for any violations that might be uncovered. Each of the specifications is narrowly tailored to obtain information germane to the Commission's investigative purpose as set forth in the Resolution.

Further, the CID seeking document production is itself self-limiting in significant respects and provides Altmeyer with various options for minimizing its scope. For instance, Instruction 6 of the CID permits substitution of written statements in lieu of documents for certain specifications. In addition, Instruction 11 specifically permits Altmeyer to submit a negotiated sample of applicant files if the required response to Specification 16 involves more than 500 files. Instruction 11 also provides that, if Altmeyer believes the scope of the demand can be narrowed consistent with the FTC's need for information, the company is encouraged to discuss possible modifications with FTC staff. Finally, Instruction 12 provides that documents that have previously been provided to the Commission need not be produced again.

However, in recognition of the fact that Altmeyer has incurred some expense in providing documents to the Commission, Specification 1 of the CID requiring production of documents is modified to delete the requirement to produce corporate "by-laws." Specification 1 is also modified to require the production of corporate "minutes" only insofar as the minutes discuss the FCRA, "Altmeyer['s]" (as this term is defined in the CID) compliance with that statute, or any change in corporate policy or policies relating to the FCRA.

D. Petitioner asserts that a cease and desist order is unnecessary.

Petitioner also argues that because Altmeyer has supplied documents to the Commission that allegedly demonstrate its current compliance with the FCRA, there is no need for a cease and desist order, and presumably there is no basis for the CIDs to be upheld. Petition at 3. It is premature for Altmeyer to raise the defense of subsequent compliance with the law at this stage, when the Commission has yet to consider whether a law violation has occurred. Once the Commission has gathered the necessary information, the agency can turn to the task of assessing whether the company violated or has ceased violating the FCRA and what the appropriate remedy for such practices might be.

In addition, in raising this argument, Petitioner overlooks the fact even if Altmeyer did bring itself into compliance with the FCRA upon learning of the Commission's investigation, neither is that a defense to liability for violating the FCRA nor does it relieve the company of its responsibility to comply with a validly issued subpoena. "Voluntary cessation of allegedly illegal conduct does not deprive the tribunal of power to hear and determine the cases, *i.e.*, does not make the case moot," unless the defendant meets the heavy burden of demonstrating that "there is no reasonable expectation that the wrong will be repeated." *SCM Corp. v. FTC*, 565 F.2d 807, 812 (2d Cir. 1977) (quoting *United States v. W.T. Grant Co.*, 345 U.S. 629, 632 (1953)). Accordingly, Petitioner's argument that a cease and desist order is unnecessary because Altmeyer is in compliance with the FCRA does not provide a basis for quashing the CIDs.

III. CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Petition is granted in part and denied in part. Pursuant to Rule 2.7(e), Petitioner is directed to comply with the CID for documentary evidence (except as modified *supra* at 8) on or before February 26, 1997 and with the CID for oral testimony on or before March 12, 1997.

Pursuant to Rule 2.7(f), 16 CFR 2.7(f), within three days after service of this decision, Petitioner may file with the Secretary of the Commission a request for full Commission review. The timely filing of such request shall not stay the return date in this ruling unless the Commission otherwise specifies.

**Re: Altmeyer Home Stores, Inc. Petition for Review by
Full Commission Pursuant to Rule 2.7(f).
File No. 962-3063.**

February 21, 1997

Dear Mr. Farnan:

The Commission has considered (a) the Petition to Quash the Civil Investigative Demands ("CID") that you filed on behalf of Altmeyer Home Stores, Inc. ("Petition"); (b) the transcript of the oral presentation on the Petition, held on January 21, 1997; (c) the February 12, 1997 letter ruling by Commissioner Roscoe B. Starek, III, granting in part and denying in part the Petition; (d) your request, filed on February 14, 1997, for full Commission review of that letter ruling; and (e) the CIDs at issue.

The Commission has determined that your request for full Commission review does not raise any new issues regarding the Petition, and that the Petition was properly denied in part and granted in part for the reasons stated in the February 12, 1997 ruling. Accordingly, the full Commission concurs with, and hereby adopts, the February 12 letter ruling in this matter.

The February 12 letter ruling specified a February 26, 1997 return date for the CID for documentary evidence and a return date of March 12, 1997 for the CID for oral testimony. Your request for full Commission review did not stay those return dates. Altmeyer Home Stores, Inc. is thus directed to comply with the CIDs by those dates.