

VITAL SPEECHES OF THE DAY

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Address by Dr. BOB DEUTSCH, Cognitive Anthropologist, Senior Associate for International Communications in the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, and president of Brain Sells, a strategic communications consultancy

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Imagining “The Other”

A NEW PARADIGM FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Address by DR. BOB DEUTSCH, Cognitive Anthropologist, Senior Associate for International Communications in the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress, and president of Brain Sells, a strategic communications consultancy.

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The world has changed. The possibility of a superpower “High Noon” has receded. The currency of power has shifted to things less explicit than ‘throw weight’. Nations and nation-states are no longer the only unit of political concern. Simultaneous with such alterations, a digital world has emerged creating an expectation of voice and a provision for interconnectedness. Modernity and globalization, though, have also opened a Pandora’s Box of long-dormant grievances and frustrations. Competition over narratives, histories, resources and identity are now occurring around the globe—leading to fear, humiliation and degradation of social bonds.

This moment in history also features an American president whose multi-cultural story and cognitive style re-integrates many disparate facets of human experience. This president is not only courageously addressing the major global problems of our time, but he is also actively changing the way the United States represents itself to the world, both in the ways the administration behaves and thinks.

For all these reasons, we are now at a tic of the clock when geopolitical issues can be explored through a new lens. We can now ask questions such as, What is it to be human? What does it mean to engage with the world? What drives anger, violence and human insecurity? What role is played by a leader who exerts power while understanding that even fleeting exclusions can lead to distrust that has no half-life?

Consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, we are now all interconnected—in hope *and* in hate. As a result, now, more than ever, we must “Imagine The Other.” This takes imagination; a way of thinking and feeling that goes beyond the old paradigm of politics and

policies, with its assumption of rational actors, its disembodied institutions and reifications, and its limited lexicon of interests, compromises and concessions.

The fact is—whether the venue is international relations or interpersonal relations—people are now exposed to a great number of channels and messages, including hearsay and propaganda. All inputs that get through the initial gatekeeper of “personal relevancy” are put through a Cuisinart-like cognitive process wherein ingredients are modified by the receiver’s preexisting beliefs and current emotions.

The problem is: Information and rationality are puny in the face of belief. People are not objective, linear or logical. The mind evolved to act, not to think. And in peoples’ need for action—particularly when under perceived threat—they sculpt input to confirm their preexisting beliefs and can compartment one thought from another such that self-contradictions are not a problem.

So at a time when U.S. public diplomacy faces unprecedented challenges and when understanding and communicating with ‘The Other’ is a vital part of national security, we must update our rationalist paradigm of strategic communications.

Under a new, cognitive paradigm, it would be recognized that the core task for U.S. public diplomacy is not persuasion, but evoking the bond of identification in the service of people’s sense of self-expansion. People—all people—possess a story about themselves that they tell to themselves, involving aspects of their lives that are latent and not fully constituted. If we can show that we understand them and the stories they have about themselves, peoples’ attachment to and regard for us will grow. This kind of connection can only be achieved if Americans relate to foreign publics in terms of the paradoxes, existential dilemmas, core narratives, and self-images that are the most important aspects in all our lives.

If practitioners of U.S. public diplomacy are ever going to understand how we have come to our current impasse with much of the world and move beyond it, we must first listen and comprehend the *emotional-logic* of people’s subjective experience. In our current situation, we lack the mutual sense of connectivity and trust with the rest of the world necessary to achieve that. Instead, a different focus and bold shift in orientation are needed.

The United States needs a better way to understand foreign states of mind.

Pay Attention to the Mind

A large part of the problem is that current models of persuasion—in government, as well as the corporate world—date from the 1950s. They have not incorporated the latest insights from modern research about what causes people to embrace ideas. What we need is a new paradigm for U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy that draws on the latest discoveries about human nature and the nature of mind.

The “push-down” theories of persuasion—public diplomacy strategies that rely on logic and facts, and even the concept of “winning hearts and minds”—are all obsolete models of communications. People cannot be persuaded of something that they do not instinctively believe.

Modern research shows that people reason “emotionally,” often see the world in the contradictory terms of paradox, and crave the respect and satisfaction that only comes when they feel their *identities*—more than their interests—are understood and valued. In turn, the power to influence others emanates from displaying understanding, insightful empathy, and inclusive leadership—not a recitation of the merits of one’s position or reasons why others should be grateful, which often generate resistance and resentment.

Indeed, U.S. public diplomacy must develop better ways to understand, listen, and talk to The Other. This will be difficult because America has never been inclined to know The Other; it never had to.

Knowing the Other

Perhaps the central misguided assumption in public diplomacy is the notion that people are rational actors, who, if they can just be pragmatic, basically think as Americans do—that the world is a mirror image of us. This is a *dangerous failure* of imagination.

In actuality, people are guided by an emotional-logic composed of symbolic associations, images, narratives, metaphors, and mythologies. Yet, despite the fact that logic and rational arguments barely influence actual decision- and perception-making processes, they are the mainstay in the present paradigm of public diplomacy. This must change. People are not moved by “top of mind” rationalistic arguments. Instead, strategic communication campaigns require a more complex approach that must include the following implicit messages:

First, The Other must feel he or she has something in common with the U.S., that they are in some way like we are, that there is something about us that is familiar and comfortable. Audiences must be approached in terms of this familiar, as we create communications that evoke their core narratives and metaphors about the world and themselves. Novel ideas are off-putting; they are dislocating and require too much effort.

Secondly, The Other must feel that America understands them, that we can be trusted, and that they can participate with us in evolving the world. By showing we understand The Other, we make them feel safe. In response, they will not feel threatened. If they feel threatened by us, or by our advocacy of what is novel and unaccustomed, they will reject the messages we send.

Lastly, in The Other's recognition that regardless of what we share and can participate in together, the U.S. and they are, in fact, different; however, in this recognition also lies the realization that these differences can help each of us expand our self-identities. Here, we must make the audience's familiar, novel. This can be accomplished by outlining a 'grand narrative' in which we offer a way in which, working together, both we and the target audience renew and expand our sense of self. We must communicate the sense that we have the power, through our insights and capabilities, to help the target audience become more authentically itself.

Thus, for example, a "war on terror" or a "war on al Qaeda" narratives do not communicate to foreign audiences that we understand and value these audiences and can help them become more authentically themselves.

Research over the past decade shows that audiences from every part of the globe—including the United States—feel that the third millennium is the world of "too"—"too fast, too complex, and too competitive." A participant in one focus group articulated what is perhaps modernization's core paradox: "Things are always advancing and getting better—sometimes for the worst." There is great power in being able to demonstrate that U.S. leaders understand and share this core feeling.

In addition, U.S. leaders must articulate a vision or grand narrative that demonstrates how America can lead the way forward to a world that preserves the best of the past, respects and values differences, and embraces and manages the challenges of the inevitable, fast approaching future.

To begin to know The Other in his or her full human authenticity—paradoxes, ironies, illogicalities included—is the urgent necessity for U.S. public diplomacy. To achieve this, research on foreign attitudes must go beyond traditional polls with their premasticated answers. Instead, we must utilize in-depth, one-on-one interviews and group discussions in which the core narratives and stories of self, of others, and of how the world “works”, can be heard and explored. People from different tribes, religious affiliations, and levels of activism *must* be listened to. This upfront work is absolutely required before strategic communications can be designed effectively.

Knowing Ourselves

To regain the world’s trust, the United States must do a better job of understanding its instinctual biases in how it perceives the world and creates narratives about it. Writing 57 years ago, Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued in *The Irony of American History*, that “a weakness of our foreign policy” is that:

we move inconsistently from policies which would overcome animosities toward us by the offer of economic assistance to policies which would destroy resistance by the use of pure military might. We can understand the neat logic of either economic reciprocity or the show of pure power. But we are mystified by the endless complexities of human motives and the varied compounds of ethnic loyalties, cultural traditions, social hopes, envies and fears which enter into the policies of nations, and which lie at the foundation of their political cohesion.

The sobering accounts of the missteps of the occupation authorities in Iraq illustrate the dangers that occur when Western paradigms of behavior and attitude are presumed to operate in very different cultures.

In the wake of the Iraq misadventure, one of the first steps in the way ahead for the United States lies in showing the world that we are coming to grips with our blind spots as a culture and that we have a dawning sense of the unconscious assumptions that have historically led us into blind geopolitical alleys. In short, it is time for us as a nation to face our shortcomings, without succumbing to sentimentality or excessive self-flagellation.

President Barack Obama has demonstrated a superb capability, in Cairo and elsewhere, to speak to foreign audiences about their dreams and aspirations and how they intersect with American values. But the role of a

“tribune of the world’s people” is too large for any one man, no matter how talented.

This is why we need public diplomacy professionals who, operating under a new paradigmatic framework, can elicit, understand and give voice to the stories of how people’s identities around the world are being riven by the challenges of modernization and globalization.

The task is immense. **We must transcend our identity without negating our identity.** A bold endeavor, but we have no choice. Attention must be paid.