

Also see:[AOL/Microsoft-Hotmail Preventing Delivery of Truthout Communications](#) •**Also see:**[Sara Robinson | Part I: Messing With Their Minds](#) •[Go to Original](#)**Learning From the Cultural Conservatives, Part II: Talking Up the Worldview**By Sara Robinson
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This is Part II of a series on the strategies used by the conservatives to promote their worldview, and the lessons progressives can learn from them to promote our own.

As we saw in the previous post, the entire conservative movement was organized around the single goal of changing the country's dominant worldview, weaning it away from liberal assumptions about how the world works, and teaching Americans to assign meaning to the world using conservative values instead. They firmly (and rightly) believed that that once the rest of the country evaluated and prioritized reality the same way they did, the rest of the conservative political, economic, and social agenda could be implemented with strong popular support, and no meaningful resistance.

But the early architects of this plan, including Paul Weyrich, also realized that having strong ideas wasn't enough. To succeed, they would also have to master the arts of persuasion.

"Ideas do not immediately have consequences," wrote Eric Huebeck in his 2001 update of Weyrich's long-followed plan. "They do not have an impact in direct proportion to the truth they contain. They have an impact only insofar as adherents of those ideas are willing to take measures to propagate those ideas."

Or, as a more cynical conservative once put it: You gotta catapult the propaganda.

This may seem like heresy to liberals. We like to believe that the progressive worldview is so patently superior that intelligent people will readily see the logic of it, and then sensibly adopt it as the best way to think and live. If people resist it, it's only because they don't completely understand it (yet). Fixing that is simply a matter of education: we just need explain our vision more clearly. Our own resolute faith in the power of reason convinces us that reasonable people will be reasonably persuaded by reasonable discussion of reasonable ideas.

It's time to consider the reasonable possibility that we may be wrong.

To our enduring detriment, movement conservatives never bought into that idea. They understood from the start that their ideas (which, frankly, don't stand up nearly as well in the face of clear rationality) would need to be aggressively promoted and sold, using emotional appeals that went to the heart of human beings' deepest desires and motivations. People don't commit their time, energy, and fortunes to a movement because it's all so logical and sensible. They join up because they've taken the movement's worldview deep into their hindbrains as their basic model of reality, and made an emotional connection to the ineffable feelings the movement deliberately stimulated - in this case, fear, hate, and xenophobia as well as solidarity, reverence, hope, and security. In this model, the ideas only exist to provide a way to rationalize and express the deeper feelings the movement has already activated through other appeals.

Liberals operate from a position of strength on the battlefield of ideas - and this may be why we consistently overvalue reason and undervalue emotional appeals. Our ideas do have a strong intellectual appeal. But we tend to forget that they also have a far healthier emotional appeal, since we don't have to resort to stimulating fear and hate to get people to buy into them. Still, we've been notoriously terrible at stirring people's more positive and hopeful emotions, and getting them to resonate on a soul-deep level with the values that define our worldview. Clearly, we could stand to learn a thing or two from the conservatives about how they did this.

In this second part, we'll look at some of the essential communications rules Huebeck gleaned from Weyrich's original plans - and see how these rules might be adapted to make us more effective at winning people's hearts and souls as well as their minds.

Don't Be Afraid to Set 'Em on Fire

The hard, cold fact is that words and logic will never get us down to the deep, pre-rational places where people's

foundational worldviews are shaped. If we want to create change at that foundational level, we need to engage them emotionally, in the pre-verbal places where images, poetry, myths, and ritual reside.

The first thing we need to do is lighten way up on the long recitations of facts and figures and programs and policies. Most non-wonks don't care about this stuff - the details just make them yawn. They're bored by promises of new programs: most Americans are pretty well convinced by now that whatever the program is or how well-funded it may be, they probably won't see any personal benefit from it, so it comes across as an empty promise. Yet Democratic candidates all the way back to Walter Mondale have been running and losing on just this kind of dispassionate, uninspiring wonk-talk. And then we wonder why the conservatives keep whipping our asses.

You'll seldom catch conservatives talking wonky. They're told from their very first candidate trainings to steer clear of anything that dwells on abstract facts or figures. People want viscerally engaging stories - emotional stories about people like them, inspiring mythic tales taken from history that express their highest ideals, vivid invocations outlining the shining details of a better future to come. They want clear-cut portrayals of good guys and bad guys that reverberate with the promise that justice will be done, and that they will be honored in the end as agents for good. We may grow up, but we never lose our childhood taste for an illustrative tale well-told. The conservatives knew this from the beginning, and turned this knowledge into a potent political strategy.

Mitt was singularly bad at it, which explains much of his failure. (McCain's not much of an inspirational speaker, either.) On the other hand, Obama is singularly good at it, which is why he's doing so well - even though the emotional outpouring he inspired by hitting these buttons makes a lot of more reason-based liberals squirm and reach for words like "cult" and "mass hysteria." It's potent proof of just how very uncomfortable we are with this - and also that we need to get serious about getting ourselves over it. Because Obama is doing exactly what every great progressive icon of the past did - and every modern progressive needs to learn to do - if we're going to inspire the nation and get people to commit themselves, body and soul, to our worldview.

We've got a different message; but we've also got a long tradition of progressive speakers (Jefferson, TR, FDR, JFK, MLK) who knew how to tell our story in ways that grabbed people's imaginations and set them on fire. It's a proud liberal tradition that we are way past due to reclaim - and the conservatives are going to keep beating us until we do.

Talk in Tangibles, Not Abstractions

Offer clear examples wherever possible. Use real people in real situations. Tie values statements to everyday experiences. Listeners need to understand how your message ties directly into the way they live their daily lives, so bring it down to ground level.

When we do use numbers, it should be in ways that are direct and personal. This war is costing your family \$XXXX per year. Cancer rates in your neighborhood are up X% due to lax oversight of the plant. This program will enable XXX more kids from this county to afford college. If it can't be expressed in terms of direct, concrete benefits to the individual listeners, it's probably a waste of breath.

Live Out Loud

Weyrich declared that the cardinal premise of the conservative movement is that "the power of example is far greater than the power of exhortation." They actively sought out and promoted people who were living their worldview, and held them up as examples to others of the success that awaited anyone who joined up. They understood that the best salesmen for the cause were the people who weren't afraid to live their conservatism right out loud.

Liberals tend to break out in a rash if you suggest that we should allow ourselves to be held up as role models for anyone. Who are we to be telling anyone else how to live? And besides: who needs all that scrutiny and judgment? But I'd argue that we might want to reconsider this. Like it or not, when we step up as leaders, people are watching - and many would-be progressives will be judging our movement and modeling their own lives after our example. Being a leader means accepting that burden with some grace, and recognizing example-setting as a central part of the job.

It's an act of courage to step up, tell the world, "This is what a progressive looks like," and then commit yourself to living up to the movement's highest ideals. But it would only take a few million of us openly living out our values that way - not full of self-righteousness and judgment (people have had a bellyful of that), but modestly and graciously and without apology - to change the way our movement is perceived throughout the country. We're offering the world an alternative. We need to commit our lives - literally - to showing them through our actions what that alternative looks like.

No Whining

Huebeck and Weyrich told conservatives to quit their bitching about "leftist double standards and hypocrisy." They recognized whining and pity-parties as a huge time and energy sink that drags everybody down, and sucks resources away from the movement. The real question movement conservatives needed to confront, they said, is: "What are we

going to do about it?" They offered two solutions for the swamping despair that comes with the never-ending gush of stupidity from the other side.

First, they suggested that conservatives regard their opponents' excesses with the same kind of dispassionate detachment one uses to survey the ravings of rabid dogs or the aftermath of natural disasters. Accept that they do what they do because that's who they are. They can't help themselves; and it's a useless distraction to be angry or frustrated with them, let alone to think for a minute that we can change their essential nature. If liberals got that detached and gave up complaining, it would dramatically reduce the volume of bloggage coming from our side; but it would also enable us to conserve our energy, stay focused on what matters, and help us endure for the long haul.

Second, they told conservatives to take responsibility - not only for themselves, but for the country as well. "Leftists are never morally responsible for the evil they commit," wrote Huebeck, "but we as conservatives are morally responsible for not having done more to prevent them from committing that evil." (Take a minute and breathe. Laugh, if you must. I know - the stupendous projection in that statement is just too much to take in all at once.)

Voluntarily assuming personal responsibility for everything the conservatives do sounds preposterous at first. But if you think about it, it's actually a neat piece of ontological Aikido, and we might consider borrowing it. The right-wing has savaged the country. We are morally responsible for not stopping them. No, it's not quite true - but if we go ahead and accept responsibility for the outcome anyway, it reframes the situation in a way that puts us back in control of events. We're no longer helpless underdogs at the mercy of an overwhelming foe outgunning us on every front. Instead - in our own minds, and eventually that of the country - we become the rightful People In Charge, endowed with a clear duty to stand up and put a stop to it.

The conservatives adopted this "we accept responsibility for the mess, and are thus in charge of cleaning it up" stance early on. They believed they owed it to God, the country, and their grandchildren to seize the reins of power and call a halt to the liberal onslaught. This belief has been central to keeping their troops engaged through 30 years of hard fighting - and it also mentally prepared them to move briskly into leadership when they finally started winning.

Know Your Enemy

Huebeck advised conservatives to "know more about the history of the left than any leftist, and be ready to beat liberals in any debate" - preferably by knowing so much that you can easily make them look foolish.

This advice has been mostly honored in the breach, which isn't surprising when you consider how few serious scholars there are in the conservative world. (Buckley's gone; and David Brooks and Bill Kristol couldn't fill his shoes with all four feet.) Most of us have run into smart conservatives who've read Marx and Mill and Bentham and can debate their ideas; but a ridiculous amount of their so-called scholarship has been more along the lines of Jonah Goldberg's Through-The-Looking-Glass rantings in *Liberal Fascism*. And their rhetorical skills - which rely largely on being able to out-scream people on cable talk shows or simply deny the existence of contrary facts - aren't up to left-wing standards of proof, either.

Which means that it's not all that hard to beat them, especially with that big steaming pile of conservative failures to point to. And every time we can humiliate a conservative in public by exposing their worldview as a barrel of hateful, immoral bilge, we win another small battle.

Master the Mass Media

"The ideas of the masses never come from the masses," wrote Huebeck. "The most important thing any movement can do is capture the imagination of the people. One must give them dreams and ideas that have been put in terms they understand, and touch their hearts as opposed to their rational minds. If we cannot capture the imaginations of our members, then we cannot expect our members to make great sacrifices for us."

To this end, conservatives have tried (with varying degrees of success) to produce movies, songs, radio, TV, and other popular culture products promoting their worldview. The religious conservatives have been so stunningly successful at this that you can now live your entire life in America, cradle to grave, watching nothing but conservative Christian TV, reading Christian books, using Christian school curricula, and listening to Christian radio stations. Tens of millions of Americans now live inside this cozy media bubble, where everything that fills their eyes and ears affirms their religious worldview, and nothing ever interferes to disturb it with unsettling questions.

Fortunately for us, apart from that seamless Christian cocoon, the only truly mass media that conservatives really seemed to have a flair for were talk radio and war movies. They really wanted to take over Hollywood, and are actively looking to grow their own Michael Moore-type documentarians, but neither effort has gone very well.

That's because most American media professionals - including the best creatives - almost all skew toward the progressive side. The conservatives fully understand what that means, and they openly envy us these talented treasures. We'd do well not to underestimate their value, and to keep pioneering new outlets through which they can put their skills to work telling the progressive story.

Don't Be Afraid to be Obnoxious

"The thing we have most to fear is that we will be ignored....Complacency only serves the interests of our opponents," wrote Huebeck. "We must be willing to take measures that perhaps we would be unwilling to take under different, more ideal circumstances. We will have standards - we will never try to justify dishonesty, destruction of the personal reputation of our opponents, cheating, assault, etc....however, we will not consider ourselves above appearing "unseemly" or surrendering some of our personal dignity...Which means being obnoxious if the situation requires it."

This just explains so much, doesn't it? From the get-go, the conservatives weren't afraid of making total public asses of themselves (which is why they do it so often - and on such a grand scale). They figured out early that bad publicity was better than no publicity; and that at least some of the voters would soon realize that anyone willing to look like that much of an idiot must really have the strength of his or her convictions. Not only does being an obnoxious blowhard make you fearsome at school board meetings and garner stratospheric ratings on talk radio; there's also a certain martyrdom value in being harassed and ridiculed by the media for having the courage to stand on principle.

I don't doubt that Weyrich borrowed this idea from the civil rights movement. Civil disobedience - which always involves making a public nuisance of yourself in the name of a higher good - is an old progressive idea. Old-style protests are a dying tactic; but the larger theme of boldly and fearlessly standing down conservatives, even when it might scuff up our dignity, is coming due to be resurrected and re-worked by a fresh generation.

Don't Be Afraid to Talk About Morality

"'Sensible' people do not go to the barricades, do not make great sacrifices for a movement," wrote Huebeck and Weyrich. "We need more people with fire in the belly, and we need a message that attracts those kinds of people. We must reframe this as a moral struggle, as a transcendent struggle, as a struggle between good and evil. And we must be prepared to explain why this is so. We must provide the evidence needed to prove this using images and simple terms."

The way progressives talk about morality is one of the salient differences between the 2004 and 2008 elections. Somewhere in those four years, we've begun to find our moral voices - and are using them to tell stories that the country is strongly responding to.

Liberals are not, as the conservatives are wont to paint us, immoral. We believe in family, community, prudent budgets, and that America should be a force for good in the world. We think torture and pre-emptive war are wrong. We believe in equal justice and equal opportunity. And we believe that the planet's ecosystems and the survival of humanity are more important than any amount of profit. Those are intensely moral stances that, taken boldly, draw the majority of Americans to our side.

Beyond that: America's moral high ground rightfully belongs to progressives. It was progressive morality that formed the nation and fought the revolution. It freed the slaves, fought back the robber barons, unionized workers, ended the Depression, and won World War II. The conservatives have, on occasion, wrenched it out of our hands for couple decades here and there; and the results have invariably been a disastrous betrayal of our core values. This last time, they did it by promoting their own idea of "morality" - packaging it in a worldview that, ironically, opened the door to unprecedented amorality and lawlessness.

It's time for us to seize back the moral high ground- but it won't happen unless we overtly step up to fill the void and articulate a clear and specific moral vision to replace the decadent conservative worldview. Both Democratic candidates are doing a strong job of this - for now. But we can't afford to stop talking this way when the campaign is over. The conservatives embedded their moral stance in every message they conveyed to Americans, regardless of the medium or the political cycle. Morality was central to every aspect of their communications strategy, and did much to cement their worldview in the public mind. We need to be equally scrupulous in expressing all of our ideas in the context of the larger progressive morality that drives them, without exception and without fail.

Don't Be Afraid to Use Social Intimidation as a Weapon

"We must be feared, so that they will think twice before opening their mouths. They must understand that there is some sort of cost involved in taking a 'controversial' stand....we will be able to take some of the trendiness out of leftist cultural activism, because lukewarm advocates of leftist causes will be forced to actually get their hands dirty. Support of leftist causes will no longer be the path of least resistance."

The conservative letter-writing campaigns really got rolling sometime in the mid-70s. Any time an article appeared in any paper - from the Sunday Suburban Shopper to the New York Times - that could be construed to disparage conservative values or conservative leaders, editors were deluged with cranky letters accusing them of bias, closed-mindedness, lack of professionalism, and worse. It was a blatant effort at operant conditioning, and it worked:

within a few years, there wasn't a newspaper editor in the country who didn't develop a visible, involuntary twitch at the very thought of printing something that might reflect badly on conservatives.

That was a deliberate social intimidation campaign, and it played a large role in creating the right-wing media bias we're working against today. And the intimidation was everywhere, to the point where many other Americans who didn't really agree with the conservative agenda went along with it anyway because they didn't want the trouble these people could dish out. A right-wing whispering campaign could tank a small business, ruin a reputation, put an end to a career. The Dirty Fucking Hippies slander was another social intimidation attempt, this one aimed at silencing an entire generation of liberal voices.

Two generations of Americans have internalized the "don't-piss-off-the-wingers" lesson all the way down to their bones. They may not like the right-wingers - but they sure as hell don't want to be on their bad side.

We are, quite frankly, not that mean - and it goes hard against our grain to intimidate people into doing our bidding. But we progressives could stand to get much, much more assertive about pushing back against this long siege by defending our own boundaries, standing up for our own dignity, and demanding that people present our ideas fairly and accurately. After all, nobody else is going to take us or our positions seriously until we learn to carry ourselves like powerful people worthy of their careful respect. We don't have to be overtly intimidating; but it wouldn't hurt for people to think twice before messing with us.

The good news on the media front is that our own letter-writing campaigns are now underway. Eric Boehlert at Media Matters points out that the AP got over 15,000 letters last week protesting the unprofessionalism of Nedra Pickler's recent article parroting Republican talking points about Obama's alleged lack of patriotism. Most of the letters were generated by Firedoglake's brand-new tool that makes it easy to target local papers for e-mail complaint (and praise) campaigns.

But demanding respect from the media is just one step. We need to get not just good, but reliably great, at insisting on being treated with dignity and fairness on every front. The conservatives have had a good time for the past 30 years being the national political bully. It's time to step up and give that bully the facedown he deserves.

We Are Just Cooler Than That

One of the biggest problems the early conservatives faced is that they were the straight, hopelessly out-of-it dweebs in a decade that valued Cool above everything. Weyrich, in another brilliant stroke of memetic Aikido, found a way to take this disadvantage and turn it into an enormous asset.

As Huebeck explains it, conservatives remedied this by taking on an added veneer of sophistication. "We must make it clear that we are seceding from modern life not because we are unable to cope with modern life, but because we are superior to modern life. We understand popular culture - we get it - we simply find it empty and meaningless."

The Young Republicans of the early '80s declared that they were the New Coming Thing, a counter-counterculture that offered a stinging critique of the 1960s Cultural Revolution. They declared that they old rebels and their anything-goes value system were exhausted and bankrupt; and announced that they were the New Rebels come to supplant a tired old order. Their clean-cut morality and real-world pragmatism served as irrefutable proof that they were, quite simply, Cooler Than The Rest Of Us.

It was a ridiculous conceit, but it worked. A large swath of Gen X, annoyed by Boomer excess and looking for change, were more than ready to sign on the more "pragmatic" conservative agenda; and their votes helped fuel the Republican takeover. The whole definition of "cool" made a similar generational shift. "Cool" wasn't Peter Fonda in Easy Rider any more. "Cool" was scheming Ferris Bueller, ambitious Alex P. Keaton, and Melanie Griffith's spunky Working Girl. "Cool" was an Armani suit, a Hermes tie, and a Harvard MBA.

But "Cool" is also a sword that cuts two ways. Progressives can easily adopt this same skeptical, above-it-all stance to launch a scathing critique of corporate greed-is-good culture. Supply-side economics? Unregulated markets? CEOs as cultural heroes? Yeah, we understand corporate culture - we get it - but we are sooo over it. It's just so 1988. It's empty and meaningless, and we (and all the other cool kids) are heading out toward something better. If you're really cool, you'll ditch that tie, find a job in sustainability, and come along with us. Because we're the ones who own the future now.

In the third and final piece in this series, we'll look at the specific ways that the conservatives took their ideas and their messages out into streets, and made themselves into a truly mass movement.