



National Security Communication: The Progressive Challenge

When speaking about national security issues before general audiences, progressives start in a hole: before the discussion even begins, we are at a disadvantage. This disadvantage has three principle causes, each of which is intimately related to our identity as progressives.

The Hole Part I: The Cult of Smart

We are progressives because we want to see the world become a better place, and believe we have policy ideas that will help. It is our strength, but also our weakness: we have such a keen understanding of how important sound policy thinking is in governing that it's hard for us to accept the overwhelming scientific evidence that Americans do not choose among politicians by considering their policy positions.¹ Our strong concern for policy blinds us to the experience of average Americans, who mostly assess politicians the way they assess people every day, looking to get a sense of them as people and see who seems right for the job – based largely on emotional, gut-level reactions.



This is especially true in the national security area, where emotions – fear and anger in particular – run high. When people are scared, or contemplate issues of security and safety, that immediately triggers the limbic system—the reptilian, fight-or-flight part of our brains. The limbic system bypasses the intellectual and rational receptors, and goes straight for the emotional gut in reaching conclusions. That means intellectual arguments and sound policy alone are not enough to convince someone you are right on a national security topic. You need to reach their emotions.

But because we progressives take policy seriously, we are always tempted to talk first to the rational part of voters' brains, to win their hearts by winning their minds first, rather than the other way around. At best, this is ineffective, as policy details are lost on an audience who does not emotionally connect with the speaker. At worst, audiences can feel condescended to.

The Hole Part II: The Sissy Stereotype

Below is a “message matrix,” a tool used for mapping competing political arguments, that considers the way progressives (“us”) and conservatives (“them”) approach national security issues.

¹References are provided at the end of the document.

What We Say About Them:

They've alienated allies we need to keep us safe

They are stupid

They are destroying the constitution and our civil liberties

What They Say About Themselves:

We are willing to be tough against our enemies

We will do what it takes to keep America safe

We don't need other countries' permission

What We Say About Ourselves:

We're smart and strong

We will focus on all the issues they have ignored

They are spending money abroad/in Iraq that should be spent at home

What They Say About Us:

They won't admit there are bad guys out there who you can't negotiate with

They care more about the rights of terrorists than about your right to be safe

They are **weak**: they don't have the stomach to do what it takes to keep America safe.

Until recently, survey research showed that not just conservatives but also most independents agreed more with conservatives' vision of progressive weakness than with progressives' vision of sober judgment in security policy. Importantly, this has been shifting (at least temporarily). The foreign policy disasters of the Bush Administration have soured Americans of all political stripes on conservative foreign policy ownership. However, the stereotypes about progressives are deeper, have been held longer (40 years vs. 2-3 years), and lie under the surface. Despite conservatives' own credibility problems, the stereotype of progressive weakness is still there for conservatives to tap into.

That perception is mainly due to America's unresolved debate about the war in Vietnam. Vietnam conflated national security issues with the broader culture wars, splitting America into those who saw themselves as pro-war, pro-troop patriots, and those who saw themselves as anti-war, antiestablishment, open-minded, and deeply critical of America. Ronald Reagan's campaign drew upon these unresolved national wounds to paint progressive open-mindedness as anti-patriotic; their stance against Vietnam as anti-troop; and drew heavily upon their unwillingness to use force.

In focus groups conducted by Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner as recently as June, 2008, independent Americans still hold three stereotypes about progressives that are seen as the three key reasons for not trusting progressives in national security:

- **Progressives are not respectful of our military**
- **Progressives are indecisive**

- **Progressives are not willing to use force to protect America**

Against that backdrop, it takes work to identify oneself as patriotic but open-minded, pro-troop and pro-responsible military action but firmly against wars that undermine our national security. Progressives instead are still generally seen as anti-military and unwilling to stand up to foreign enemies – the “sissy party.” Thus general audiences are skeptical of progressives opinions on national security before they even hear them.

The dovish image may be rooted in outdated 60’s-era stereotypes, but it also partly reflects current reality. The progressive party’s wealthiest and best-educated voting bloc is significantly more dovish than the majority of the party and the electorate. On three of four foreign policy and national security questions examined by the Pew Center in 2005, the dovish positions presented were endorsed by these highly visible progressives thirty to forty percent more often than by than median voters.

But the roots of this perception run even deeper than Vietnam.

The Hole Part III: The Psychology of Fear

Perhaps most ominously of all, some intriguing social science research has shown that thinking about security issues – specifically, contemplating the possibility of one's own mortality – makes people more sympathetic to a range of conservative positions, including hostility and violence to outsiders.

This research is still not thoroughly understood at the level of general theory, much less what it specifically implies for progressive national security communication. Even in the absence of conclusive research, however, it is important to take this phenomenon into account. Consider two relevant studies:

Inducing Anti-Semitism: Two groups of Christian (but not necessarily observant) subjects were given a pair of essays to read and asked to rate them. Among other things, they were told that one essay was written by a Jewish author and the other by a Christian author. The first group of subjects who rated the two essays to be of about the same quality. The second group of subjects was first asked to describe in detail what they thought would happen to their bodies when they died. This group of subjects rated the essay identified as being by a Jewish author as far inferior to the other essay.

Inducing Support for Bush: Even more relevantly, in 2004, two groups of college students were shown some a-political images and then asked whether they preferred Bush or Kerry. The first group preferred Kerry by 4 to 1. The second group was shown images that had “9-11” and “WTC” flashed subliminally among them. That group expressed a 2 to 1 preference for Bush.

Researchers have concluded that the sub-conscious awareness of one's own mortality triggers a set of primitive emotional reactions that aim to preserve one's own kind against perceived threats. Intriguingly, most, but not all, progressives become more conservative in their outlooks when this kind of subconscious dread is induced.

Again, this phenomenon is only incompletely understood. Clearly there was once a time

in American history when progressives communicated their values in such a way that they were perceived as strong on national defense, despite this psychological dynamic.

Regardless, this represents a formidable challenge for progressives: it is very easy for conservatives to raise national security issues in ways that create a subconscious dread of death. Progressives must be prepared to overcome this psychological bias if they hope to win Americans' trust on national security issues.

Climbing Out the the Hole

Clearly it is important for progressives to be aware of these challenges when they are addressing specific national security issues.

But whenever progressives discuss specific national security issues, there is also a larger issue at stake: the image of progressives generally. The topic on the table might be terrorism, or torture, or military funding, but what is said tells the audience more generally about how progressives view the world:

- **Are we technocratic eggheads, who see a matter of life and death as just another management issue?**
- **Has Vietnam led us to believe that our military is part of the problem and projecting American force abroad is morally wrong?**
- **Do we feel a profound need to protect and preserve our way of life?**

No matter what national security issue is under discussion, and no matter what the outcome on that specific issue, countering these stereotypes is key. Only once we get beyond them can we hope to persuade Americans of the soundness of thoughtful, progressive approaches to national security.

Key take-away: *every word we say on national security should be crafted around the idea that we want to win, and to stop those who want to harm Americans.* Winning, and understanding that there are people who want to harm us who we wish to stop, are key emotional ideas that show independent audience you understand them.

Simply by adding to any policy statement, “But if we want to win against terrorists, we had better do X, Y, and Z” or “Well, our most important need is to stop our enemies from harming Americans—and my opponent’s plan is not going to do that...” is a good start to showing your audience you are on the same emotional page that they are.



Truman National Security Project

Designing Persuasive Messages

Connect First, Then Lead

Most politically aware people are reasonably good at marshaling arguments for their positions: we can use logic, cite evidence, argue by analogy to familiar events, use emotionally charged phrases, and maybe even come up with a story that illustrates our point. All of this is good, and all of it is sometimes effective.

But the key to persuading people who are skeptical – whether because they already disagree with you, or because they have a conservative telling them something different in their other ear – is to first convince your audience not of your case's merits, but of *your* merits.

Your character is the skeptical audience's first filter: Why should they listen to you about whatever you want to tell them? Why should they set aside their skepticism and really consider what you have to say?

Now one might think a good way to tackle this problem would be to run through a list of your credentials and experience in the area – and making sure your audience knows those things will certainly often help.

Ultimately, though, the way to get past the first filter, to convince your audience that you are worth a listen, is to connect with them emotionally. You do not have to agree with them. ***But you must show them that you understand where they are coming from, their perspective on things, their feelings, and you consider that perspective and those feelings valid.*** Never mind if you ultimately disagree with the opinions they hold at the moment: show them that you “get” them, and you approve, and that's all the credentialing you'll need.

Once your audience feels like you're on the same page they are, then you can turn to the next page, and they'll come with you. Once they know you're their kind of people, they'll listen to what you have to say and see if they like it.

But if you don't connect with the audience first – if they write you off as some stereotype or other they don't much like – all your logic and evidence will get you nowhere.

Connect, then lead: that is the physics of persuasion.

The Game of 'Feel, Felt, Found': Talking to People who Already Disagree

When we meet someone who disagrees with us, it is tempting to revert to facts to back up our point. But if we are talking to someone who disagrees with us, or is ambivalent, these strategies backfire—badly. In risk communications expert Peter Sandman’s words:

“I believe Y. When you tell me X, I naturally respond (sometimes out loud, sometimes just in my head): “No, Y.” So you escalate: “X-X-X!” And so do I: “Y-Y-Y!” The longer this exchange continues, the worse off you are. It’s not just that you’ve failed to convince me of X. You have actually reminded me, strongly, that I’m a Y supporter. You have rekindled and reinvigorated my belief in Y.

When people disagree with you.... You must start where they are with Y. That doesn’t mean you start by rebutting Y — that would just get me arguing with you, rehearsing all the reasons why I disagree. Instead, paradoxically, you need to say supportive things about Y. Then (and only then) you construct an illuminated path from Y to X.

“Many people in this room probably believe Y,” you might begin. “There are good reasons for that — this reason and this reason and this reason. I used to believe Y too, and I think I understand its appeal. So if I expect to convince anybody here of X, the burden of proof is on me.”

Okay, you’ve paid your tribute to Y, earning you the right to my attention. Now start dropping breadcrumbs — that is, construct your illuminated path: “I didn’t actually start to wonder about Y until quite recently, when I got sent for training. And I learned some surprising facts — this fact and this fact and this fact. Little by little, I came to see that maybe I had been mistaken, maybe X was right after all....”

Your path from Y to X can be crafted of logic, evidence, emotion, or imagery; ideally you’ll use all four. However you build your path, the essence... is the two-step process: First you ally with your audience’s prior beliefs, and then you start dropping breadcrumbs.”

Used car salesmen, who have one of the hardest persuasive jobs around, generally call this game “feel, felt, found”. When confronting a skeptical customer, they may say, “I feel what you are saying...I felt that way, too. But then I found out X”. In this way, you lead people to your position, by taking them along the same path that you yourself traveled—or that you might have to travel, if you start where they are.

The Game of See-Saw: Talking to People Who Are Ambivalent

What is going on here? Why do you have to empathize with an argument you find fundamentally unsound? If you take that anxiety onto your shoulders, your listener can relax – they know you appreciate that issue and have taken it into account. But if you dismiss their fears, your listener’s worries will heighten! Rather than calming someone when you try to minimize a threat, you push that anxiety onto them, and actually *heighten*

their worries! On the other hand, if you show a little *more* concern than your listener starts with, they may actually moderate their concern.

You've probably experienced this in your own life—for instance, if you are worried about getting somewhere on time, and your partner says, “don't worry,” you end up worrying more. If you are angry about the house being a mess, and your partner says, “it's not such a big deal,” it suddenly becomes a MUCH bigger deal in your mind, because you feel your worry/anxiety/fear is being dismissed.

How can you ride the see-saw, so that you can empathize with your audiences' fear, and then pull them towards your policy position? Sandman describes a few instances of the “see-saw” in action:

- Worst case scenarios, such as nuclear war or a terrorist attack, are horrific—but they are also unlikely. If you focus on how unlikely they are, your audience will probably focus on how horrific they are. If you focus on how horrific they are, your audience will probably focus on how unlikely they are. Note that you don't want to exaggerate so much that you increase the listener's perceived dread, just demonstrate that you take it very seriously.
- In uncertain situations, there's a lot you know and a lot you don't. If you sound over-confident, your audience is likely to fasten on all the things you don't know. If you keep insisting on all the uncertainties, people tend to think you really know what you're doing. By articulating contingencies, you can show that you really understand all the angles of the issue.
- When things go wrong, there are usually reasons to blame you and reason to forgive you. We blame you more when you forgive yourself too easily — or when you scapegoat somebody else. We forgive you more readily if you're clearly blaming yourself.

Sandman's solution for getting an ambivalent audience to accept your position is a counterintuitive counterpart of “feel, felt, found”: publicly acknowledge your uncertainty – thus sharing their feeling of ambivalence or uncertainty – and then take your listener's emotional position! In other words, if you express worry about a situation, you free your listener to see your worries as overblown.

Finally, Sandman points out that in a typical controversy, “You spend a lot of time interacting with critics you're pretty certain can never be reconciled to your point of view... But there's a group of genuinely ambivalent people watching you and your critics go at it. They want to see your critics win some concessions, and they want to see you concede that your critics were right about a lot of things. Then — but only then — they'll let you get your way.” Faced with two experts who they like equally but who disagree, listeners look for a position that reconciles their positions and gives them both credit. Giving your opponent credit where you can makes your overall approach look more reasonable.

Connecting Emotionally is Job #1

Here are Some Examples

Q: *Shouldn't I be worried about the UN's anti-Israel past?*

A: (Agree) Absolutely. And if we want to do good by Israel, we should be sure we're working together with Israel to make the UN a better place.

(Pivot) As it turns out, Israel itself wants to have a greater role in the UN and has worked hard to obtain one...

Q: *Do you support a border fence?*

A: (Agree) We definitely need to secure the border—to be a strong sovereign country, we can't have a porous border like we do now.

(Pivot) But a fence won't do the job. If you talk to Border Patrol agents, they'll tell you a fence will be tunneled under before you finish it. They need more agents and more high-tech surveillance equipment to monitor remote border areas. And we need security at our airport borders, too, which is how the Sept 11 attackers got in—and at our northern border, which is how the Millennium bomber came into our country.

Leading Well

Once you've emotionally connected with your audience, your job is not yet done. Just because they will not dismiss your message based on their perceptions of you does not mean they won't dismiss it on its own failings. Here are some things to keep in mind after you have got your audience listening.

What makes a good message? Messages should be:

- **Persuasive** - The message should acknowledge and validate the feelings of listeners who may be ambivalent or disagree – but you don't have to bother with completely unpersuadables. You are trying to reach the “reachable” middle.
- **Clear** - The message must have easily understood words that can be internalized and repeated by your audience. Avoid big words.
- **Concise** - In a newspaper quote, on radio, or on tv, you will have about 15 seconds to get your main point across. If you take longer, your interviewer or opposition will “sum you up” for you. The message must be no more than a few sentences. The issues are always going to be narrowed down. Who do you want to do the narrowing: the media, your opposition, or you?
- **Memorable** - Everyone who hears your argument should be able to repeat it, after hearing it just once. A good anecdote, story, or metaphor is far more memorable than facts—and more likely to be repeated.
- **Contrasting** - If the message does not contrast, it is incomplete. Every time we

talk about ourselves, we are also talking about our opposition. By saying who and what the opponent is, you can define the differences between our views on how to protect America, and conservative views.

All messages should:

- Anticipate your audience
- Anticipate your opposition’s attack
- Force your audience to choose between you and your opponent by answering and deflecting their points or contrasting—DON’T SIDESTEP THEIR ATTACK!!!

Using Metaphor and Concrete Images

Short messages are not all you need—usually, a message comes within a longer speech, or in an interview. Messages are your central point—you should repeat them as often as possible. But they are not everything.

When you are answering other questions, **keep it concrete**; empathetic; and about people, not policies.

| <u>Dos</u> | <u>Don’ts</u> |
|--|--|
| Care about the same things people care about: their safety, their families’ safety, and their security. | Talk about institutions, plans systems and programs Appear to privilege what’s good for other countries OVER what is good for America—this needs to be a both-and, not an either-or |
| Talk about people Use concrete images: “protect our ports” or “help our firemen, and policemen, our hospital workers who will be on the front line if there is an attack on America.” | Don’t use abstract or Beltway terms: “homeland security” or “first responders” are meaningless. |
| Use personal stories, and anecdotes | Talk about lists of policies |
| Use metaphors to relate far-off or complex situations to experiences people have every day | Try to make voters understand foreign policy and international relations as an expert sees them. Ban the word “complex” – issues are complex, explaining them should not be |

Points to Remember:

- Concrete trumps abstract
- Draw Word Picture for Each Point—can people picture what you are saying?
- Use Metaphor, Anecdote, Stories: All are short, memorable, easy for others to substantiate within their knowledge and experience
- Whenever possible, use humor to deflect and deflate your opponents' case. No argument works better than deserved ridicule. Use caution, however: bad humor can backfire, and you need to have and keep the audience on your side emotionally for it to work.
- Two Word Phrases are easy to remember, and fit English grammar in lots of useful ways. Homer developed them first, and you can't fight Homer. So it's worthwhile to spend considerable time working on two-word phrases to frame your opponent, or yourself. They will be repeated. A lot.

References

The Cult of Smart: In 1935, social science researcher George Hartman conducted a powerful experiment to determine voting behavior based on emotional and rational appeals—while both appeals had some effect, the emotional outweighed the rational. See “A Synoptic History and Typology of Experimental Research in Political Science,” David A. Bositis, Douglas Steinel *Political Behavior*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1987), pp. 263-284. For an overview of current research, see Drew Westen's *The Political Brain*, (New York: Perseus) 2007, which draws on decades of neurological research to make the case that people respond much more to emotion than reason in making political choices.

The Sissy Stereotype: The Pew Center conducted detailed research into the views of different members of American political parties in 2005 that illustrates that a minority of the democratic party holds views strongly divergent from the general electorate on national security. See also Greenberg Quinlan Rosner focus group research for Third Way, June 2008, on which the Truman National Security Project advised.

The Psychology of Fear: For a general introduction to this research, see Jay Dixit's article in the August 2007 issue of *Psychology Today* at <http://psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20061222-000001.xml>. John Judis of the New Republic also wrote a good article about the application of this research to contemporary politics, available at <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20070827&s=judis082707>.

Persuasive Messaging: This draws heavily on the research of Peter Sandman, an excellent researcher and popularizer of risk-communication research. See www.sandman.org, particularly “Games Risk Communicators Play: Follow-the-Leader, Echo, Donkey, and Seesaw,” <http://www.psandman.com/col/games.htm>.

This discussion also draws heavily on KNP Communications' training approach.