

Arthur W. Page Society Distinguished Service Award Acceptance Remarks
Organized, Ethical Persuasion
John M. Reed
September 13, 2004

Thank you, Mr. President, and thank you to the members of the Honors Committee for this unexpected honor. Ladies and Gentlemen. Since receiving notification of the award, I received a letter from Larry Foster, an old friend and colleague. He suggested that I take you on a 20-minute tour of just where international PR is today, the obstacles and challenges, etc. As usual with Larry, he called for a tall order; however, I'll try to comply, albeit in a very personal manner.

The day after I was born, May 20, 1927, to be exact, Charles Lindbergh took off from Long Island and flew nonstop to Paris, an amazing feat at the time, and an indirect indication to a very young John Reed of things to come. While in boarding school I loved receiving post cards from my father, and one day a card arrived from Lima, Peru. Wow. My first direct contact with the wider world. I became fascinated with geography and foreign cultures. I dreamed of visiting far-away places. That urge and interest continues to this day. I spent my third year of high school in Berthierville, Province of Quebec, Canada – a real experience. There I studied French and Latin. You can see the pattern. Uncle Sam sent me to Korea and Japan in 1945/46 where I studied Korean and Japanese. The future was clear: I would have an international life. And I haven't looked back, with trips to Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Mexico, England and Portugal so far this year. Those early journeys taught me the importance of understanding other cultures, their histories, languages and customs.

The real secret in my life, however, is that it was, and is still, fun. If my bosses and clients had only known, I would have paid them to allow me the pleasure of working in assorted parts of the globe. Happily for my family's sake, I did get paid.

Because of my own experience, I continue to look for enthusiasm on the part of young people who want to enter the field of international PR. Enthusiasm, plus a knack for understanding other peoples and cultures, without losing a deep respect for their own society and country.

My definition of public relations is “organized, ethical persuasion,” and to me international PR means we do it someplace else – persuading people of cultures, languages, religious, ethnicities different from our own. The first rule of international PR is “get local help.” No matter how fluent we become in other languages, no matter how deeply we understand other cultures, there is no way we can attain a native's instincts for his own place. So, get local help.

Did you know that Magellan had a PR man on his epic first circumnavigation of the world? His name is Antonio Pigafetta, a young Italian from Vicenza who obtained passage as keeper of the log, and who collected word glossaries of each territory visited on the two-year trip. It was Pigafetta who wrote the account of the trip that was published by a newspaper in Cologne, and who later wrote two books that electrified Europe and made Magellan a household name. Today we have the straits of Magellan at the bottom of South America, and the Magellanic Cloud up in the sky. A neat trick considering that Magellan failed to complete the trip, being killed half-way.

The chap who captained the ship back to the starting point in Spain remains virtually unknown, because he didn't have a PR man. Antonio is my hero.

From Pigafetta to today, nearly 500 years later, tell your story straight, truthfully, and direct it to the right audience. Therein lies persuasion. In modern times we have moved from the tub thumpers who promoted circuses to e-mail, microwave television and the like. Our most recent progenitors began work in the early years of the 20th century, growing largely in the hot-houses of early American corporations, including the Bell System, with Arthur Page. Over time, with practice and responding to changing conditions, PR has become a routine function of business management, government and the non-profit community. Side by side, ethical practitioners and charlatans alike have moved ahead, utilizing the evolving media to meet the needs of ever-smaller segmented units of society. What has happened in America has also happened abroad.

The early extension of PR around the globe was a result of the need by such groups as transportation, extractive industries, foreign investors and the like to use PR in lockstep with their global expansion. Airlines and hotel chains pioneered in hiring and training local people to conduct PR in many countries; operators of ships did likewise, as did mining companies and eventually producers of pharmaceuticals and consumer goods. Along with spreading American foreign trade came growing PR operations, using Americans sent abroad plus local hires, and training. This expansion was chiefly an American development that resulted in people in various countries being trained and establishing PR practice in assorted places. This was followed by large PR agencies setting up overseas branches to serve the clients, and incidentally to train local practitioners. One of the first such agencies was formed by Sylvan Barnett and Arthur Reef in the late 1950s, and those two pioneers will be honored in New York next month by the International section of PRSA with the Atlas Award.

American universities have played an important role in the development of international PR. Most major universities now have courses on PR, usually in schools of journalism or communication. Eventually, there will be specialized curricula just for PR majors. In my opinion, the best place to locate PR courses is in departments of rhetoric, with access to courses in departments of language, journalism, media, history, etc. The reason for this choice is that the aim of PR is persuasion. That objective is wider than the courses taught in media or journalism departments. Writing is a tool, not an objective. There are many other tools needed by future practitioners. Of course, that's just my opinion.

Today the field of PR continues to grow, and will do so as long as bottom-line results are seen. Gradually PR is reaching parity with advertising in many companies, including ad agencies themselves, and in the future advertising will be seen as a sub-set of PR, rather than the opposite, as it is today. While earlier I noted that PR is distinct and separate from journalism, it remains crucial that future practitioners be excellent writers and speakers, for language is the vehicle for the transmission of persuasion. Too many people in the field are inarticulate in their own language and need serious training if they are to be successful.

We Americans are now engaged in a great global war. You would not think so to study the program of the forthcoming national annual conference of the Public Relations Society of America that will be held next month in New York City. I counted just under 150 meetings,

seminars, roundtables and assorted gatherings to take place at the PRSA Conference. Of that number, about 10 may be considered to deal with some narrow aspect of international PR, and of that small number, only one – yes, just one – actually deals with our primary problem in the world today: war. So please allow me to make a modest proposal to you.

The Arthur Page Society membership is the most senior, experienced, serious, dedicated, ethical group in the field of public relations. It is uniquely qualified to render sensible, effective advice to our government on the creation of a sound international public relations policy, and the conduct of international public relations programming to support our global military effort. That military action is designed to root out and destroy the worldwide terrorism network. To do that, in addition to military might, the United States needs a vigorous program to persuade all of the many audiences affected by this conflict of the need to do so, and that benefits will accrue from our success in this global war. In short, we need an international PR campaign to assure that we win speedily, and in the aftermath of the war, have the support of various audiences abroad for the rightness of our actions. To accomplish this goal, I suggest the Arthur W. Page Society form a voluntary action committee to study the matter, and present its recommendations to the U.S. government. Unfortunately, the once-logical center for such study and planning, the former U.S. Information Agency, is no longer equipped nor positioned to handle such a task, now being a small unit within the State Department. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sense of urgency fostered by the real dangers of the expansion of communism, we have let down our guard (and budgets) in the international governmental PR arena. To reinvigorate and, if necessary, staff a renewed, practical international PR program to deal with our present danger, America needs the benefits of the best minds in the PR profession. Besides, any danger or damage to American prestige and any lowering of respect for the American people will have adverse effects on American companies and the American economy. There is safety and a competitive advantage in being out front and successful in the PR arena globally.

There you have it, fellow practitioners of the noble profession of public relations: an international challenge, on which could well hinge the kind of world in which our children and grandchildren will live. Thank you.