

Tell the Truth
1975 Annual Conference — Atomic Industrial Forum
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The Greek playwright Aristophanes once wrote: “Wise men often learn from their enemies.” I will assume you are wise men; I think you probably assume I am your enemy.

When Carl Goldstein called me two weeks ago to invite me to give a talk to you about the nuclear industry’s lack of credibility, he said he did not want me to spend thirty minutes flinging your past mistakes in your faces; something positive, such as what the industry could now do to improve its credibility. He also wanted me to “spill my secrets” on how I operate.

(I later ran this by the Ruling Praesidium of the Anti-Nuclear Cabal, and there was some consternation that I would even consider revealing my methods. I later received a cable instructing me, “Tell them nothing they can use.” Although there is an old Neopolitan adage, “You surrender your liberty to him to whom you reveal your secrets,” I have decided that I can safely tell you what they are.)

Once I realized what Carl Goldstein wanted, I told him, “If you want to know how I do it, and how you’re going to have to do it to be believed, then I am going to recite Crossman to you.”

“Who is Crossman?” he said.

R. H. S. Crossman was the senior British officer in charge of Allied psychological warfare in Europe during the Second World War. Almost universally, he is regarded as the leading propagandist of that period. One British leader has stated flatly, “I would say that most, if not all, of what the Americans learned about psychological warfare they learned from Dick Crossman.” An American colleague once told me, “I personally think our greatest propagandist was Dick Crossman, because he had an insidious mind. It was this type of loveable and likeable but extremely insidious personality that made him tremendously effective for psychological warfare.”

Crossman was not an advertising or public relations technician; he was an Oxford don, where he had taken his bachelor’s degree in Greek, Latin, and philosophy. He was elected a fellow of New College even before he took his degree in 1929 and he spent the next ten years at Oxford lecturing on Plato’s *Republic* and Marx’s early philosophical works. Until his death last year, he had been a Member of Parliament since 1945. At the present time the British Government is suing under the Official Secrets Act to prevent the publication of his memoirs.

The following exposition of Crossman's principles of successful propaganda are taken from my notes on the lecture he gave at Oxford during the Michaelmas term in 1953. The quotes are Crossman; the *capitalized* interpretations are mine.

As you listen to Crossman's principles, I am sure you will understand what the French writer Fontenelle meant when he said, "Truth enters the mind so naturally that when one hears it for the first time, it seems one is only remembering what one already knows."

1. *The Basis for All Successful Propaganda is the Truth.*

It is a complete delusion to think of the brilliant propagandist as being a professional liar. The brilliant propagandist is the man who tells the truth, and tells it in such a way that the recipient does not think that he is receiving any propaganda. The art of the propagandist is never to be thought a propagandist, but seem to be a bluff, simple, honourable enemy who would never think of descending to the level of propaganda.

2. *The Key to Successful Propaganda is Accurate Information.*

If you give a man the correct information for seven years, he may believe the incorrect information on the first day of the eighth year when it is necessary, from your point of view, that he should do so. Your first job is to build the credibility and authenticity of your propaganda, and persuade the enemy to trust you although you are his enemy.

3. *The Most Successful Propagandist is the Person Who Cares About Education.*

The job of propaganda is not merely to enter into some arid debate with the Government of the other side; it is to stimulate in people of the country thought for themselves, to make them begin to be, not cogs in a machine or units of a collective organization, but individuals. Individualism is the first act of disloyalty to a totalitarian government, and every individual who begins to feel he has a right to have a view is already committing an act of disloyalty.

4. *To Do Propaganda Well, One Must Not Fall in Love with It.*

In the last war the British did better propaganda than any other nation in the world. We British were ashamed of our propaganda and therefore took more trouble to conceal what we were doing. The Russians undoubtedly did the *worst* propaganda during the War, and the Americans in many ways had the failings of the Russians in the propaganda field. The Germans, because they *loved* propaganda, could not do it. Lord Haw-Haw was a disaster to the Germans because he was obviously a propagandist.

5. *A Successful Propagandist Cannot Afford to Make Mistakes.*

Ten good truthful news stories will be cancelled by one mistake. We found this throughout the war with Germany. If one mistake was made about something which the Germans could check, they would write off the rest of our propaganda as lies. Therefore, that which is written about what goes on in an enemy country must not only be checked and double-checked for fact, but it must be written in such a way that it sounds credible to the enemy and not to us.

6. *The Propaganda Must Be Credible to the Other Side, Not Your Own.*

If I write a leaflet which members of Parliament will describe as good propaganda, it will probably read as such crude 'propaganda' that it raises the morale of the enemy. In order to make it really credible to the enemy it must sound a long way off from what most members of Parliament regard as the 'good tough stuff' to tell the enemy. All British leaflets were classified as 'secret.' Members of Parliament, if they could have discussed in Parliament what we were saying to the Germans, would have complained that the propaganda organization was 'appeasing' the Germans. It was essential to make the leaflets credible *to a German* – not to the House of Commons.

7. *It is the Understatement Which Succeeds Best*

Our bulletins in German were the most objective sober bulletins of all that were put out by the BBC. We could not afford to be caught in any inaccuracy. The German listeners would not swallow anything, because they were on the lookout to prove us liars. We had to be 101 percent accurate. We had to claim less than we actually did. There is nothing more effective than saying that there has been a moderately severe raid on Essen, when 2,000 people have actually been killed. That sort of thing gives the enemy cold shivers. The BBC once reported that after a certain mission to the Continent seven British planes had failed to return. The German radio had just described the same incident, stating that five planes had failed to return. In this case we were merely accurate: two planes which the Germans had seen leaving the Continent were already crippled and failed to get to England. The psychological effect on the German public, however, was far greater than mere apparent accuracy would ever have achieved. It demonstrated dramatically our capacity to go beyond what was necessary in the direction of candor.

That is all there is to say. Some of you may be wondering what all this talk about "the enemy" and "propaganda" has to do with selling nuclear power to the American public. Is there a connection, or is Comey slightly crazy?

Due to the past mendacious practices of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the Atomic Energy Commission, the reactor vendors, the electrical utilities, and such groups as the American Nuclear Society and the Atomic Industrial Forum, there now exists an adversary relationship between the "industry" on the one side and a large segment of the American public on the other. You have gotten yourselves into the

posture of trying to persuade a hostile audience that does not believe you or what you say.

Furthermore, if you do not feel that your public relations efforts are “propaganda,” you are focusing on the incorrect pejorative connotation of the word and losing sight of its origin, the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* (Congregation for Propagating the Faith) established by Pope Gregory XV.

As Crossman said, convincing an adversary by bombarding him with the truth is the only effective propaganda, so why be ashamed of doing it? As long as someone understands “propaganda” in the original and Crossmanian sense of the word, I have no problem considering myself a propagandist when I disseminate information and facts about the unresolved problems in the nuclear power program.

If you *still* feel uncomfortable about classifying yourself as a propagandist, and prefer terms of which public relations specialists are so fond, then think of Crossman as having told you to “communicate” or “get your message across.” For that is exactly what he has done: violate any of his strictures and your credibility will be impaired, your efficaciousness vitiated.

Although I prefer the word “propaganda” for purposes of accuracy and brevity, I realize that by using it I am making you nervous, so let us talk about “being credible.”

Obviously Crossman was enormously successful at being credible. The BBC is still trusted abroad because of the way he ran it during the War. One need only talk to American and British intelligence operatives today to realize that thirty years later Crossman is regarded as the apotheosis of credibility to a hostile audience.

Prior to preparing this talk, I had not looked at my Crossman lecture notes since 1959, when I did a series of lectures on overt and covert psychological warfare techniques for the U. S. Army. I could not help noting as I have reviewed my notes that unconsciously I have been using Crossman in my own work for the last seven years as an environmentalist. In fact, I would say that the several occasions when something backfired were due to my straying from a straightforward application of Crossman’s principles.

There are basically two reasons why I have unknowingly adhered to his principles. One is that I could hardly do otherwise, since I am employed by a public interest organization that would not countenance any use of clandestine dirty tricks. The second reason is more pragmatic: I have found that the only way to be credible with the media and the public is to tell the truth. I have seen some rather charismatic figures get caught out in a purposeful lie, and I do not think that their credibility has ever recovered from it. Newsmen have a very low threshold for someone who tells them lies or represents himself to be something he is not. They tend not to cover him thereafter.

I know one utility executive who is not considered credible because in 1969 and 1970 he swore his company could never burn low-sulfur coal in its power plant boilers. “Never” lasted about six months, and now his pronouncements about nuclear plants are received with commensurate skepticism.

As Demosthenes once said, “The facts speak for themselves.”

I find Crossman’s principles 2, 5, and 7 particularly salient advice for building credibility. One must have absolutely accurate information and must make no mistake that undercuts everything else one is saying.

I happen to have a network of “whistle-blowers” inside the nuclear industry. They occasionally furnish me with information that otherwise would not reach the public. They work for the vendors, the utilities, and the regulatory agencies. Were the nuclear industry to air its problems candidly and cease stifling dissent, the need for these whistle-blowers would dry up. These people call me or mail me internal documents because they feel that vital decisions are being made without proper debate or even public awareness.

It is always tempting to yield to the argument that these items must be used immediately before they lose their “news value.” Yet I find it advantageous to check them out discreetly with other sources to verify them. This can take a long time, but it always pays off. Frankly, I do not feel I can afford to make mistakes with the press or the public.

I also think it useful to understate, as Crossman recommends. In a recent study on nuclear plant reliability, I sought to give the industry every benefit of the doubt in my selection of data and methods of computation, so as to leave no room for accusation that my data were biased.

Recently an industry journalist published an attack of my study, warning reporters to beware of it because anyone examining the “facts” would see they disprove my study. Unfortunately for him, he failed to follow his own journalistic advice, as I pointed out in my rebuttal.

Obviously I have a great deal more flexibility to do these sorts of things at BPI than does a spokesman for a nuclear utility. Until a utility lets its public relations staff operate independently in accordance with Crossman’s principle 6, its attempts at credibility will be stillborn. What sounds like “good tough stuff” to the average utility executive is likely to sound ludicrous to the public. Moreover, my experience has been that the “nuclear news coordinator” at a utility is often the last person to have access to the facts. This means that he is always behind me vis-à-vis reporters, because I often get the facts directly from the scene before or shortly after the utility management does.

Whenever I issue a news release on a nuclear power issue, I always end it with names, titles and telephone numbers (sometimes home numbers, if it is on a weekend) of the top management people at the facility and the AEC who have knowledge of the facts.

I do this for two reasons. One is that I feel it is more important for the reporters to get the other side of the story, and get it accurately, than for them just to print my side of the story. The second reason is that reporters appreciate being referred to persons who have the facts rather than to a “nuclear news coordinator” who does not know what is going on and must constantly check with management before answering questions.

I recently received a copy of Lee Everett’s internal memorandum on the Atomic Industrial Forum’s Public Affairs and Information Program, which talks about ghost writing articles for prominent pro-nuclear scientists. If you people really think you can successfully avoid detection in this heinous clandestine operation, you are wrong.

There is an old German proverb that says, “Good merchandise sells itself; bad merchandise has to be palmed off on someone.” Until the nuclear industry has viable merchandise to sell, the American public is not going to buy, regardless of the intensity of your public relations campaign.

Crossman says the successful propagandist is the person who cares about educating the public. He wants people to think for themselves, as individuals, and not accept the party line. That is hardly a philosophy many industry executives embrace; they want the public to “accept” nuclear power, and that is quite another thing.

Should you wish to become more credible, a propitious beginning would be to start telling the truth.

Admit that low-level radiation can cause cancer and long-term genetic defects.

Confess that important safety research on light-water reactors has never been done, and that some has been done improperly.

Stop hiding your computer codes under the cloak of a “proprietary” designation and let them be analyzed by the academic and engineering community at large.

Admit that you are not enchanted with the reliability and deliverability of presently operating nuclear plants.

Reveal *all* the costs of nuclear-generated electricity, both present and twenty years into the future.

Do an energetics input-output model of the nuclear program as a whole; then do a comparable one for alternative energy sources and reveal which ones come out ahead on this basis.

Tell the public why you have not been able to reprocess spent fuel; and what impact the lack of sufficient storage ponds may have over the next ten years.

Talk about the ethics of our consuming electricity from fission reactors for 50 years and saddling 20,000 future generations with the social and environmental problems of perpetually caring for actinide contaminated high level radioactive waste.

Discuss the threats to democratic society posed by a plutonium economy.

You may, like Solzhenitsyn, ask: “If the first tiny droplet of truth has exploded like a psychological bomb, what will happen in our country when waterfalls of Truth come crashing down?”

But I do not believe you have a choice.

We critics discuss these problems all the time.

The more you ignore us, the less credible you become.

Perhaps you fear that a full and frank discussion of these issues will result in no further use of light-water fission reactors for generating electricity.

So be it. That is the price of living in a democratic republic.

“But the nation’s economic health demands use of nuclear power, regardless of how a majority of the public feels about it!” some of you may say.

Eureka! You have just had an insight into your own totalitarian tendencies.

I hope I have fulfilled Carl Goldstein’s request that I talk both about how I operate and how the nuclear industry might become more credible.

I rather suspect I may have also complied with my cable instructions not to tell you anything you will use. I have told you all you need to know; namely Crossman’s principles, but I doubt that more than a handful of you believe me, and I am reasonably confident not a one of you will use one bit of it.