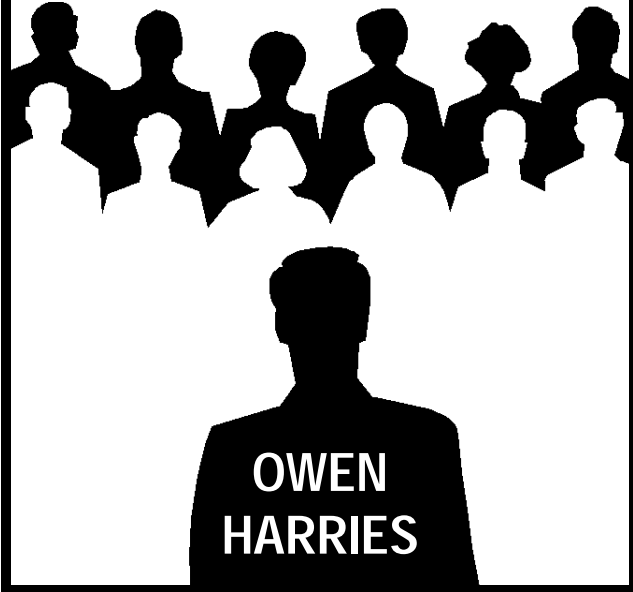




# A PRIMER FOR POLEMICISTS



Irving Kristol has written that in an ideological age such as ours, the key political question is: who owns the future? Owns, that is, the prevailing notions concerning what is possible, inevitable, desirable, permissible, and unspeakable. An ideological age is also a polemical age. Hence, if one rules out the notion of a free-floating or impersonally determined *Zeitgeist*, the answer to Kristol's question will to a significant degree turn on the polemical presentations of the main competing ideological cases.

This being so, it is surprising how lightly and casually ideological polemics are taken in the West. Examples about: the contemptuous dismissal of the UN and its agencies as "talk shops"; the retreat from

simple, resonant language to meaningless acronyms and technical jargon in making the case for the Western alliance; the belief that, even in the face of constant attack, it is more important to avoid being "provocative" and "abrasive" than it is to argue forcefully for free societies; the characterization of ideology itself as "mere rhetoric" or "window-dressing", and the refusal to recognize it as a potent motivator of political action.

After nearly forty years of cold war (also known as "peaceful coexistence", "competitive coexistence", and "détente"), after more than two decades of assault by the Third World on Western values and institutions, and constant attacks from within the West itself by alienated groups, there is, so far as I know, no body of work that concerns itself with the techniques and tactics of political polemics. This, in an age when virtually every other area of human activity has received saturation coverage - from how to succeed in the boardroom to how to succeed in bed to how to live in perfect health until the day you die - seems a strange omission.

There are, of course, some in the West who are outstandingly good at political polemics. But for the most part they are good by instinct rather than because they have a clear, conscious idea of what they are about. Even those who write and speak like angels and are marvelously knowledgeable about the issues seem to give scant systematic thought to what precisely they hope to achieve and how best to achieve it. For the beginner there seems to be no alternative to learning on the job, laboriously repeating the mistakes of others and (if he is lucky) eventually reinventing the wheel.

In the circumstances, it seems worthwhile to try to formulate a few modest precepts or rules, both to help the novice and to stimulate experienced practitioners to give the matter some thought. Here, for what they are worth, are my suggestions. The illustrations I give naturally reflect my own, neoconservative position. But the rules themselves are general in character, and those individuals misguided enough to adhere to a different position can substitute their own examples.

**Rule 1:** Forget about trying to convert your adversary. In any serious ideological confrontation the chances of success on this score are so remote as to exclude it as a rational objective. On the very rare occasions when it does happen, it will be because the person converted has already and independently come to harbor serious doubts and is teetering on the edge of ideological defection. This is due, more often than not, to some outrageous action by his own side or some shocking revelation: witness the effects on members of Communist parties in the West of the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 and the Khrushchev speech of 1956. Then, but only then, a particular argument

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or example may provide the catalyst to complete the process. When that happens it should be treated as the equivalent of winning a lottery - bearing in mind Lord Bryce's remark (actually made when discussing American presidential elections) that success in a lottery is no excuse for lotteries.

This rule is important for two reasons: because beginners are likely to confuse polemical exchanges with genuine intellectual debate, in which persuading *is* a proper and sensible goal; and because, in the oddly symbiotic relationship that often develops in a prolonged polemic, even the experienced are susceptible of becoming fascinated by their adversaries.

**Rule 2:** Pay great attention to the agenda of the debate. He who defines the issues, and determines their priority, is already well on the way to winning. Example A: In a debate over the cold war, so define the issues that the ideals of the Communist system are not contrasted with the reality and practice of democratic countries; otherwise the whole debate will be rigged in favor of the former. Example B: In the current debate on UNESCO, it is essential to insist that what is at issues *is* the actual current performance of the organization, not the worthiness of its ostensible aims as originally set out in its constitution, or the seriousness of the plight of the world's poor.

This rule often requires a debate before the debate - with sponsors and organizers as well as with one's adversary. Diplomats, at least when they are performing effectively, understand this well, which is one reason they often appear fussy and pedantic to outsiders who have not grasped the point at issue (another reason is that they sometimes *are* fussy and pedantic).

It is just as important, and on the same grounds, to deny your opponent the right to impose his language and concepts on the debate, and to make sure that you always use terms that reflect your own values, traditions, and interests. Carelessness, complacency, or misplaced tolerance in response to semantic aggression - as by accepting "socialist" as a description of the totalitarian states of Eastern Europe, "détente" as a description of almost uninhibited hostility, "neo-colonialism" as a description of market relations between Western and Third World countries - can be, and has been, enormously costly in surrendering control over the terms of debate.

**Rule 3:** Preaching to the converted, far from being a superfluous activity, is vital. Preachers do it every Sunday. The strengthening of the commitment, intellectual performance, and morale of those already on your side is an essential task, both in order to bind them more securely to the cause and to make them more effective exponents of it. As religious move-

ments in earlier times and the anti-Vietnam-war and civil-rights movements in our times have shown, dedication and enthusiasm are enormous assets, more than compensating (in the initial stages) for lack of numbers.

On the negative side, one of the most embarrassing experiences in a polemical exchange is to have one's case misrepresented and mangled by one's own supporters. Correction involves delicate problems of alliance management and gives one's opponents rich opportunities to exploit apparent differences of opinion; witness the innumerable free polemical gifts which have been presented over the years to Communists and anti-anti-Communists by crude and uninformed anti-Communists.

**Rule 4:** Never forget the uncommitted: almost invariably, they constitute the vast majority. This may seem obvious, but intense polemical activity is often a coterie activity, and in the excitement of combat and lust for the polemical kill the uncommitted are often overlooked. The encounter becomes an end in itself rather than a means of influencing wider opinion. Yet what works best in throwing the enemy off balance - cleverness, originality, pugnacity - is often counterproductive with those who are neutral or undecided, who are more likely to be impressed and convinced by good sense, decency, and fairness. It was said of the brilliant English politician, F. E. Smith, in explanation of his failure to get to the very top rather than of his success in getting as far as he did, that "he could as soon hold a hot coal in his moth as hold back a witticism" - a serious deficiency in a polemicist.

One should not, of course, positively strive to be dull and boring, but a modified form of Dr. Johnson's advice on self-editing, applies: whenever you think of something that strikes you as particularly brilliant, at least consider seriously the advisability of suppressing it in favor of something which projects moral and intellectual seriousness in a straightforward way.

**Rule 5:** Be aware that, at least potentially, you are addressing multiple audiences. Decide whether, on a particular occasion, you want to make a broad appeal to many audiences, which will usually involve compromise and restraint in presentation, or whether you want to make a sharply focused pitch to a particular audience, even at the risk of alienating others. Either decision - or one to strike some sort of balance between the two - may be right, depending on circumstances; the important thing is to be aware of the problem and to take it into account.

This is something which most politicians understand readily. Their conclusion usually is that it is better to sacrifice impact on a limited group for breadth of ap-

peal, which is one reason their utterances so often appear anodyne and bland to those who subject them only to intellectual tests. On the other hand, intellectuals - who tend to move in restricted circles, to regard all who are not intellectuals as unimportant, and to equate compromise with sin - are particularly bad in this respect, usually only taking seriously an audience composed of their peers. Which is why their victories are often so Pyrrhic in character. One of the tests of great political oratory is the ability to transcend this dilemma by successfully combining breadth of appeal with a sharp impact on specially targeted groups.

**Rule 6:** Be prepared to go around the block many times. When you have a good point to make, keep repeating it. Success in ideological polemics is very much a matter of staying power and will, and the same battles have to be fought over and over again. There will always be someone who is hearing or reading you for the first time, and even most others will really register something only when they have been exposed to it several times.

Communists understand this rule very well, and may even carry it to excess. Western politicians vary in respect of it - Martin Luther King, Jr. was superb and Ronald Reagan is extremely good - but having to contend with the pressure of the mass media, which consume material at a furious rate and constantly demand something new, makes things difficult for them. Intellectuals, who put a high professional premium on novelty and originality, and have a great fear of being thought boring by their peers, hardly understand the point at all. William Phillips's well-known put-down of Kenneth Tynan - "Your questions are so old I've forgotten the answers" - typifies much in their makeup. They should pin on their study walls a passage from Saul Bellow's novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*:

... it is sometimes necessary to repeat what all know. All mapmakers should place the Mississippi in the same location and avoid originality. It may be boring, but one has to know where it is. We cannot have the Mississippi flowing toward the Rockies, just for a change.

They might also put, alongside this, Wellington's remark at Waterloo: "Hard pounding this, gentlemen; let's see who will pound longest."

An important corollary to this rule, and one which also links it with the following rule, is: do not over-complicate your presentation. Concentrate on getting a few basic, central points over effectively.

**Rule 7:** Shave with Occam's razor. Knowing what you can afford to give away is one of the great arts of polemic. It is truly astonishing how often an ex-

perienced, reputable polemicist will expend time and energy defending what is irrelevant or peripheral to his case. Thus, in a debate over the American decision to withdraw from UNESCO, it is not necessary to contest the fact that the organization does *some* good work, any more than it was necessary to contest that Hitler built good roads or that Mussolini made the trains run on time. In some instances, unfortunately, polemicists just get carried away and feel that they have to deny everything that is asserted by their opponents; sometimes it is the other way around, and they feel obliged to defend a whole syndrome of beliefs associated with their own "side", regardless of the irrelevance of many of those beliefs to the matter at issue; and sometimes it is hard to escape the conclusion that they really do not properly understand their own case or the enterprise they are engaged in.

Polemical economy serves several purposes. It narrows the area you have to defend and gives you more time or space to concentrate on what is really essential to your case. The willingness to concede or ignore what is inessential will make it harder for others to characterize you as dogmatic, and is likely to make a favorable impression on the uncommitted. And it may well have a discovering "judo" effect on your opponent when he finds that you are prepared to concede what he had assumed you would feel obliged to defend.

**Rule 8:** Be very careful in your use of examples and historical analogies. More often than not, their illustrative value is outweighed by their distracting effect. People will tend to concentrate on the factual content of the particular episode referred to, the validity of your account of it, or the legitimacy of analogies in general, and to ignore the original point you were trying to make and illustrate. Before you know it, you are off on quite another track. Thus, any references to the appeasement policies of the 1930's in the context of a discussion, say, of America's policy in Vietnam or of Soviet foreign policy is likely to bring progress to an end and precipitate a prolonged wrangle over the precise circumstances of the occupation of the Rhineland or the writings of Winston Churchill.

I am not suggesting that no use should be made of examples and analogies. On the contrary, they are often a powerful and persuasive way of bringing a point home, particularly when the analogy links the subject at issue to the personal experience of the audience. (Historical analogies are not the only, or necessarily the best, ones.) In some circumstances you may even wish to precipitate the kind of side-show I have described. But you should generally be economical in the use of analogies, choose carefully, and be well armed to develop and defend the ones you choose.

**Rule 9:** When bolstering the authority of what you are saying by the use of quotation, give preference wherever possible to sources which are not identified with your case. If you can, quote someone who is considered unimpeachable, if not omniscient, by your opponents. This will not convince them, but it will embarrass them and impress the uncommitted. Thus, if you are concerned to establish that “peace” is not, and cannot be, a policy, and that appeals to a common interest in “peace” ignore the different content given to the word by different actors, don’t quote Churchill, quote Lenin (writing in the midst of World War I):

Absolutely everybody is in favor of peace in general, including Kitchener, Joffre, Hindenburg, and Nicholas the Bloody, for every one of them wishes to end the war.

On reflection, quote Lenin *and* Churchill.

**Rule 10:** Avoid trading in motives as an alternative to rebutting the opposing case. Or, in Sidney Hook’s words, “Before impugning an opponent’s motives, even when they may legitimately be impugned, answer his arguments.” This is good advice for several reasons. First, it is the proper thing to do and you will feel better for doing it. Second, motives are irrelevant to the soundness of an argument. Anything that is said by someone whose motives are suspect or bad could equally well (and in all probability will) be uttered by someone whose motives are impeccable, and an answer will still be required. Motives can *explain* error, distortion, and falsehood, but they cannot *establish* the existence of these things. Third, motives are in any case notoriously difficult to establish in a convincing way.

All this is not to suggest that discussion of motives has no place in polemics. But its place is not at the beginning but at the end, when the facts have been established and error exposed. Moreover, there is much to be said for gently encouraging an audience to reach its own conclusions about motives (by asking it to consider what motives are most consistent with and best explain a given pattern of behavior) rather than being unduly assertive and insistent.

**Rule 11:** Emulate the iceberg. In any polemical exchange, make sure that you know several times more about a topic than you can conceivably use or show. This is important, for one thing, for one thing, because you will not know in advance what precisely you will have to use on any given occasion: that will depend in part on the performance of your adversary. It is obviously an advantage to be able to respond immediately and effectively to a new argument and to avoid being caught off balance. In addition, and even more important, the unused depth of your posi-

tion, the fact that you have much in reserve, will give a resonance and authority to what you do use. While it is difficult to say how precisely this works (probably through the accumulation of small touches), it is fairly easy to tell whether someone is thinly stretched or is working well within himself.

While you should not overload your presentation with data - the average absorptive capacity is very limited - data used discriminately can be highly effective in establishing credibility, projecting authority, and forcing an opponent on the defensive. An example comes to mind. In a teach-in I attended in Australia during the Vietnam war, great play was made of the fact that, according to evidence presented by the American government itself, there were fewer than 40,000 North Vietnamese in the South. Someone finally had the wit to point out that while this number might not be enormous (a) most if not all of those involved were party cadres, and (b) at the the beginning of 1917 the membership of the Bolshevik party in Russia was under 25,000. Subsequently, no more was heard along these lines.

**Rule 12:** Know your enemy. Always bear in mind John Stuart Mill’s observation that he who knows only his own position knows little of that. Take particular care to understand the position of your adversary - and to understand it not in a caricature or superficial form but at its strongest, for until you have rebutted it at its strongest you have not rebutted it at all. This is a necessary condition both for developing your own position fully and attacking his successfully. It is no accident that many of the most effective anti-Communists have been people who at one stage of their lives have been either in or very close to a Communist party - which is the hard way of gaining an understanding of your adversary.

Knowing your enemy will enable you to anticipate likely lines of attack and to consider now they may be best dealt with. It will also enable you to criticize the opposing position from within as well as from without - in its own terms as well as in yours. The use of the classic Jesuit tactic of accepting your opponent’s premises and turning them against him is both highly effective and particularly enjoyable.

That makes a round dozen rules or precepts. Collectively they will certainly help to lift the level of a polemical performance. But a thirteenth might be added in conclusion, and “for luck.” Before employing these or any other debating stratagems, make sure that the position you decide to defend is intellectually, morally, and politically worthy of your efforts. Being on the side of the good and the true does not guarantee success, but, other things being equal, it certainly helps.