

Alexander Hamilton Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Public Relations
Acceptance Remarks by Marilyn Laurie
November 9, 2006

I was surprised and thrilled to receive Frank's call about this award. Although, I must admit the thought crossed my mind that when you start receiving *Lifetime Achievement* awards... you should start sewing your shroud!

I'm deeply grateful to the Board of the Institute. It's a great honor to follow the PR legends who previously won this award. And, I'm endlessly thankful for the love and support of my husband Bob, who put up with many years of neglect so that I could douse the flames of one crisis or another at AT&T.

I was intrigued to learn that this medal honors Alexander Hamilton for the brilliant strategies he deployed to win support for the Constitution. His success in persuading a reluctant public to endorse the bold concept of a federal republic has been called the "best job of public relations in history."

For Hamilton, it was clearly a time of great change when the old rules could no longer apply. *Which, of course, is exactly the kind of time we live in today.*

In Hamilton's day, the *colonies* struggled with new ideas about liberty, sharing power with other states, security and nationhood. Today, America the Superpower is dealing with these same ideas -- under the pressures of globalization.

As a result of our immense political, military and economic power, we have inherited enormous responsibilities for *global leadership*. A tough challenge for exercising that leadership is to grow our capacity to deal with the "other" -- the immigrant at home, the stranger abroad.

I don't know about you, but I've become obsessed with the concern that if we don't educate ourselves in a hurry about the rest of the world -- and understand how *they* see issues that are critical to *us* -- we will keep stumbling into the kind of messes that our self-centered attitudes got us into the last few years.

Hasn't it been fascinating, for example, to watch the level of discourse about Islam and Muslim countries evolve into a much finer grasp of what's *actually* going on? It's almost embarrassing to recall how simplistically we *all* interpreted events just a short time ago.

If there is one thing we've learned, it's how disastrous it is to assume everyone sees the world the way *we* do ... and then to *act* on that comfortable assumption.

Maybe you can sit in some countries and be totally absorbed in your own concerns, your own culture, your religion, your clan. Not in America. Not anymore.

Last week, I was really privileged to be part of an intimate dinner with Vaclav Havel – former president of the Czech Republic and Nobel Peace Prize winner -- and Orhan Pamuk of Turkey, this year’s Nobel Prize winner for Literature. (It was an amazing and humbling experience just being the same room with both of them.)

Both men, of course, are writers – one a playwright, the other a novelist. Both icons of the power of ideas well described and *passionately* communicated. Both took enormous *personal* risks for “telling truth to power”.

Here was *Pamuk* -- noting the brutality and cruelty all around him, but rejecting any easy clichés about a “clash of civilizations” and ferociously *optimistic*.

And Havel -- talking about how difficult the transition to democracy after the long Communist rule ...how many people, unaccustomed to the need for initiative and personal responsibility, didn’t share the aspirations of the Velvet Revolution and became bitter and unable to adapt. “Don’t assume everyone wants the privileges of democracy” he said. “They do not.”

But he, too, was convinced that different ethnic and religious groups ultimately can sort themselves out *peacefully* and link up based on their shared needs.

I left that evening ashamed of my New York patina of cynicism.

I came away convinced that – as in Hamilton’s day --we need to step up and utilize our public relations skills as *citizens*. Because we can help.

After all, aren’t our skills all about engaging productively with people who don’t agree with us?

Don’t our jobs train us to question facile or backward-looking assumptions – to bring to the table voices that reflect the world the way it *is*, not the way we *wish* it was?

We’re all about establishing *credibility*, through dialog and interactions, not one-way communications.

Who knows more – or cares more -- about building trust with skeptical or even hostile stakeholders?

When we talk about what we do in PR, the focus is usually on *advocacy*. “Truth well told” as one agency put it. And considering America’s reputation around the world, there’s obviously lots of work that our companies have to do on that front...to support our brands and what nowadays we call “Brand America”.

But in the coming years, the *other side* of what we do -- the *listening and analysis that helps put decisions into a sound context* -- should be a major contribution to the conversation about America's future.

As we think about our accountability to the public...we'll need to recognize that a larger public now observes us, makes demands and holds us accountable.

Mulling over that dinner, I committed to doing a few things:

First: To enlarge the lens through which *I* can understand how America's role relates to other societies and perspectives. Research of this type can take many forms... Novels, plays and unfamiliar news outlets are on my list.

Second, I'm going to try to help my international clients listen effectively to their global employees and hear directly how their business practices *and values* are being perceived abroad.

Third, since we're in the *relationship* business, maybe some of you will also want to support, as I will, *educational and cultural exchange* programs. We in business can also support *employee networks* than span geographies and cultures. There's a fair amount of evidence that the bonds that connect people through their *professional identities* are often more powerful than the *ethnic identities* that divide them.

And finally, I'm going to contribute money to organizations -- here and abroad -- that teach tolerance and conflict resolution to young people. The old saw that you've got to be taught to hate and fear still holds.

Are those kinds of contribution also appropriate for a business? Sure. It's a no-brainer that we have to create a *civil global society* if we want a *healthy global economy*.

It seems to me we need to do all these things and more for our companies. For our country. And for our children.

Thank you again for the honor of this *lifetime* achievement award... but I feel it's only fair to warn you that I'm just getting started!