

“Telling Union’s Story”

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The title of my speech today is “Telling Union’s Story.” I decided on it months ago, but as I was researching the subject, I came upon a startling discovery: the real, nearly untold story of the Labor Movement is that for the past seventy years, *somebody other than labor has been telling it*. And what made it even worse was that when I discovered who the enemy was, I had to accept that it was me. Or at least *who I used to be*.

You see, I come from an advertising background, which basically means that I’m in the public opinion business. And for fifteen years I got paid to sell people crap they didn’t really need. And while it provided it a good living, I always knew that I didn’t want to do it forever. And so, the entire time I worked in the advertising I had secret—I knew that one day I would defect. And on that day, I would stop selling people crap they didn’t need, take what I know, and sell those same people something they really do need—say, for instance, *a family wage, a safe workplace, a secure pension, a respected place in American society...need I go on?*

And so, I started making political ads. And just so there’s no confusion, I’m a liberal. I make no apologies for it and I take no prisoners, but, in the end, I’m loyal to principles--not parties or personalities. I say this because I think the majority of Americans are that way. That’s why I don’t believe that the notion of strong, healthy unions is an exclusively liberal issue at all. Unions are about back-boning our country with jobs that provide for the common good of the American family. Healthy unions keep big business in check. Union jobs pay mortgages and fund

college educations and provide health care and retirement security and many of the things that always made the America I grew up in a *truly great, truly powerful nation*. There is nothing “leftist” about that. That brand identity is one of many false notions put into people’s heads by a very long and calculated campaign to denigrate the union brand at every step.

But I am getting a little ahead of myself. I was talking about defecting from traditional advertising. So in 2003 I experimented with that idea and made a spot for MoveOn.org Bushin30seconds contest called “Bankrupt”

MOVEON.ORG SLIDE—SHOW MOVEON.ORG COMMERCIAL

It was a very simple commercial and so it surprised me by finishing in the top ten out of thousands of entries. Needless to say, I was encouraged by that and so about six months later I made another political spot. This time it was for the democrats. It’s called America’s Party and I made it with Jefferson Smith of the Bus Project for 2004 DNC Convention ad contest.

AMERICAS PARTY SLIDE

And like MoveOn,org it was decided by popular vote---only this time the spot won.

Let’s roll it.

ROLL AMERICA’S PARTY

For me, this was the beginning of a new brand conversation for the Democratic Party. I wanted to put an end to the defensive, one-sided argument the dems keep losing and show the party in a light that was totally affirmative while, at the same time, rooted in the values and proud history that all Americans share. And the reason I am showing it here today is because this is exactly the kind of work I think the unions

need to be doing if they are going to start telling their own story. You see, the democratic party brand and the labor brand have something essential in common—they have both spent the last thirty years breaking the Golden Rule of Branding. Can anyone guess what it is?

Never, ever, ever let someone define your brand for you.

Now this is more obvious with the dems because we see it happen every two years--wedge issues backing democratic candidates into the dusty corners of the national conversation while the truly important issues, the ones that affect the everyday lives of real Americans, get labeled “radical” and “too far left.” This keeps the dems perpetually off balance, reactive rather than pro-active, and weakens their resolve by forcing them to abandon their deepest convictions.

And if you believe I’m overstating the case, just think about how many people you have met since 1994 who have switched their political brand from “liberal” to “progressive” because it goes over better at cocktail parties. Maybe you’re one of them. I know I am.

Now, as I said, this phenomenon is not so obvious with the unions, but in many ways it has had a much more devastating impact. Because the truth is that a 4.5 billion dollar industry cut its teeth on union-busting and after seventy years of quiet but consistent effort, they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

CORNELL GRAPH SLIDE

This figure is from a 2003 Cornell Study on Union Membership trends and it graphs Union Membership as a percent of total employment from 1930 to the time the study was conducted in 2003. Now, I know I’m telling you something you don’t already know. Unions have been getting a bad rap for a long, long time. But what I want to add to that is something very important—this did not happen by accident. Nor is it a natural trajectory for the labor unions organic evolution, because according to the ALF-CIO research, 60 million workers say they would join a union if they could. What’s stopping them?

To answer that we have to recall a time when modern unions were first taking hold in America. And since this a labor history conference, it seems fitting to look back to history so we might see the future more clearly.

Does anyone know when the last national legislative victory for organized labor was in this country?

SHOW WAGNER SLIDES

Well, the bad news is it was over seventy years ago. The year was 1935. The bill that passed was the Wagner Act and it accomplished something completely unheard of—it granted labor the legal right to organize into unions. For the American Worker it was a hard won miracle that delivered on the American Dream. For corporate America, it never supposed to happen and needed to be dismantled as quickly as possible.

Conveniently, at the same that the Wagner Act was being passed, a new industry was taking shape on the American landscape. Lessons learned from World War I about how to galvanize public opinion around an unpopular war, about how to bust unions through fear mongering campaigns like the Red Scare, were giving rise to an erudite social science industry that had, at its core, an agenda of corporate and governmental control over public opinion. In a word, propaganda. Or as it politely referred to today, *Public Relations*.

Now, I'm not one for conspiracy theories but I do think it would be hard to underestimate the long-term corporate commitment to dismantling labor as quickly and effectively and consistently as possible. Let's face it: from the corporate point of view, union busting is just part of the cost of doing business. And so, in the years leading up to 1935, when it was becoming clear that the goon squads and intimidation tactics weren't working anymore, big business accepted that they needed a new strategy.

Two years later, they got a chance to try something new. It was the Sit Down strike of 1937 in Western Pennsylvania at Johnstown. And Instead of sending in the knee-breakers and gorillas, organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers and the Business Roundtable used their immense resources and media influence to position, through a very deliberate and focused public relations campaign, the strikers as “a disruptive influence” and “Anti-Business” and therefore “Anti-American”. Business positioned themselves as victims of the “Labor Bullies” who were making unreasonable demands and holding their businesses and, of course, their country, hostage.

And guess what? It worked really, really well. In fact, a decade later this theme would be crafted into a law that was, without a doubt, the single most devastating blow labor has ever received. Anybody know where I’m going?

Taft-Hartley. 1947.

SHOW UNION ADS AGAINST TAFT-HARTLEY

Also known as the Labor Management Relations Act. And what it accomplished from a branding point of view, from a public relations point of view, is really unprecedented. Because the very first thing it did was re-define the term “unfair labor practices” by no longer applying it only to employers who exploit their workers, but also to strikers. This is a classic reversal technique designed to attack unions where it hurts the most--*at the level of perception*.

All of a sudden, ”unfair labor practices” includes secondary boycotts, picketing and closed shops. It is the beginning of the “right to work” ideology which again uses language to turn the tables on the argument by implying that unions are against someone’s “right to work”. To me, these kinds of techniques tip me off as to who really crafted Taft Hartley.

And what is even more astonishing is that this is all happening under the banner of “labor is unfair to big business.” This is madness, right? But it goes to show the power of a well-funded, well executed public relations campaign. It managed to not only completely turn the argument on its head, but also craft the language and the new, negative brand identity of the unions, *into law*. This is a staggering accomplishment and it’s no wonder that after Taft Hartley membership begins to plummet.

THE CORNELL GRAPH

Look at this. Union membership in America peaks in 1947. After that, it’s straight down hill. And if you look closely enough, in 1981 both lines are completely broken. I guess that’s in honor of Ronald Reagan. Or maybe it’s there in memoriam to the air traffic controllers who tossed out like yesterday’s garbage.

After that, Clinton passes NAFTA and here we are today, exactly as many had predicted, having our family wage jobs exported overseas like meaningless trinkets while working and middle class economies get completely gutted. And the reason they can get away with this is because the brand has been so systematically denigrated that it is always open season on organized labor. We even have cheap, cowardly websites like unionfacts.org taking pot shots at the unions with impunity.

UNION FACTS WEBPAGE

How many people have been to [union facts.org](http://unionfacts.org)? It’s really an atrocious site, full of the worst kind of lies and propaganda about unions. However, the story they tell is right out of the playbook: unions are corrupt, it’s members are violent, its tactics are dishonest, its demands are outrageous and its entitlement is bad for business.

But maybe the most egregious libel in all of these smear tactics is the idea that unions are anti-American. This one really hurts because I grew up on my father’s stories about how the men and women who

established the unions in this country were heroes, patriots who exercised their democratic rights to their fullest and raised the standard of living for an entire nation. I was taught that a picket line was a sacred boundary and crossing it was an act of near treason.

But the problem is, no one is telling that story, *not even the unions*. It's wonderful and essential that we are here and Labor History Conference telling each other these stories, but sadly that is all we are doing. Meanwhile companies like Fed Ex are producing slick, anti-union propaganda videos they show employees to make sure they never even considering joining a union. I was talking to a union recruiter a few weeks ago who told me he doesn't even have a video to show when he walks into recruitment meeting. Is this universally true? If it is, it explains why unions are getting blasted—everyone is telling their story but them!

But there is some good news. Unions can do something about this. It starts by making a long-term commitment to telling their own story-- *and not just to each but to the American people*. Let's open up a direct and honest conversation with our non-union brothers and sisters and tell them exactly who we really are, and remind them that we need each other to not only maintain our mutual standard of living, but to also help build a healthy, prosperous and fair society that works for everyone.

That means crafting a well-funded national campaign with broadcast, print, radio and internet strategies. It means a serious commitment of resources, *but it also means dusting off our optimism and believing that, in the end, the truth is easier and less expensive to promote because it engages people with a clear and unmistakable ring*.

I have such a campaign in mind and I am here today because I have a vision of building something to begin this process, something like a Union Media Coalition that disseminates a new, inspiring brand identity for the Labor Movement that every American can put into their pocket and feel good about.

And so you don't think I'm completely making this up, I want to show you one last video. It's part of a larger branding campaign I have been developing with the democratic party of Oregon exactly along these lines. There are many other elements that I don't have time to present here, but this is the centerpiece of the campaign for the democrats.

ROLL DPO SPOT

So, I want to do this for this for the unions. And I want us to take the history and values and strength of our unions and show this country the real face of the American Labor Movement for the first time seventy years. Because I know when they see it stripped of all the lies and attacks and ugliness, they will recognize something essential—themselves. And they will come to understand the value of the labor story *when we teach it to them* and show them how to celebrate the men and women who build this country for all of us, every day.

Thank you very much.