

Translating Ideas into Success

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(On Sept. 15 in Hong Kong, Joseph Lehman delivered the following speech to open the inaugural Asian Liberty Forum, a meeting of Asian free-market think tank leaders sponsored by the Virginia-based Atlas Economic Research Foundation and the Beijing-based Unirule Institute of Economics. The remarks are a condensation of ideas presented at the Mackinac Center's semiannual Leadership Conference, which has trained more than 300 national and international think tank executives in management, communications and fundraising. Contact Kendra Shrode for information on the next Leadership Conference.)

It is a great privilege to address the very first Asian Resource Bank meeting this morning, make new friends, and reunite with familiar ones. Mackinac Center President Larry Reed asked me to express his warmest greetings to you. He told me he was so grateful that I could stand in for him today and that he doesn't mind if I borrow liberally from his material!

If you've been around think tank people very long, you've probably realized that not many of us can tell a good joke. In a lot of professions, that would be a real setback, but it doesn't hold us back. We don't have to come up with our own funny stories: We've got the whole government doing ridiculous things all the time for us to talk about.

We can even retell other people's jokes; Will Rogers told *that* one more than 70 years ago. Telling jokes about the government helped make Will Rogers the best-known American humorist of his time. But government is not just funny – it's a deadly serious enterprise. Some of you doubtless can testify first-hand to government abuse of the ugliest sort. Figuring out how to limit government – to make it the servant of the people and not the other way around – is a necessary work and a noble calling.

So how do we translate our ideas into success? How can we actually shape public policy with a mere notion – that freedom and free markets are the best way to organize society?

THE POWER OF IDEAS

We start by realizing that ideas are the most powerful force in the world. Power can be found in politicians, armies, activists and institutions. But the reason for their power is ideas, because ideas explain why people do the things they do.

What people believe determines how they behave, for whom they vote, the laws and rules they accept or reject and what kind of society they will work to adopt. Ideas determine whether a culture embraces free markets or socialism, democracy or dictatorship. Change ideas, and you change the world.

Political leaders may enact public policy, but they seldom generate the ideas that drive policy. Politicians usually act within a fairly narrow range of politically acceptable

options. They cannot operate outside that range without jeopardizing their political standing.

The range of credible ideas circulating in the intellectual marketplace determines the range of politically acceptable options. So if you have a think tank that changes the intellectual landscape, that think tank actually shifts the range of politically acceptable ideas. And that's how think tank ideas have impact.

To take a simple example, if the generally acceptable income tax rate is 60 percent, it is very hard for a politician to say it should be 15 percent. A 15 percent tax is outside the window of political possibility. But if the tax is at 60 percent already, then 50 percent is easy to propose. Forty percent may be easy to propose if think tanks or others have done the research and shifted the intellectual climate of opinion. The 40 percent tax rate may not be enacted right away, but a politician can propose it without seeming crazy if intellectuals have paved the way.

Milton Friedman has said think tanks are at their best when they change what is politically possible.

We must remember we are engaged in a battle of ideas. In spite of political obstacles, we are not battling against personalities or people. We can win by promoting ideas that shift the very ground of battle.

OPTIMISM

But even the very best ideas are apt to go nowhere without optimism. I have the privilege of working for probably the world's most optimistic man. Larry Reed likes to tell the story of how he once lost control of his car on an icy road. As he was rolling over and over down an embankment, he swears the thought going through his head was this one: "At least I'm going to get a new car out of this!" Now that's optimism!

Well, we don't have to be pathological optimists to have every reason for optimism ourselves. We are winning the war of ideas.

We have watched the ideas of Soviet communism become discredited around the globe. The world's most aggressive exporter of communism has crumbled. Liberalism is taking hold and gaining respect in dozens of former socialist strongholds. In my own country, about the only place you can find someone who still believes Marx was right, it is on college campuses!

Another reason for optimism is that the drift of ideas is in our direction. I don't know about you, but I run into a lot more former socialists than former free-marketers. I can't remember the last time someone said to me, "You know, I used to believe in free markets and individual liberty, but I've looked at the evidence, and now I think central planning is the way to go."

The final reason to be optimistic is simply that pessimism is self-fulfilling. What band of revolutionaries ever said, "It's hopeless; we're fighting a lost cause; but let's spill our blood anyway?" An optimist is not blind to obstacles and setbacks, but he views them as momentary and finds ways to overcome them.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The next ingredient for translating ideas into success is entrepreneurship. I don't mean just talking and writing about it. I mean being an entrepreneur.

To really shift the window of political possibility, we have to get out of the purely academic mindset, where the goal is writing reports and studies. Our success is not measured by how much paper we push out the door. We succeed only if we actually shift policy in the right direction, and to do so requires an entrepreneurial approach.

Successful entrepreneurs are focused. They have lots of ideas, but they figure out their comparative advantage and spend their energy there. They don't run in all directions trying anything that seems interesting.

This means that entrepreneurs are planners, but not in the sense of stifling creativity and flexibility. A good entrepreneur makes plans that avoid both rigid bureaucracy and unfocused, free-wheeling frenzies of activity.

Entrepreneurs are problem-solvers. They don't just try to copy what works in other countries — they become the experts at applying freedom ideas and overcoming obstacles in their *own* countries.

Studies and seminars will always be staple products for a think tank. But sometimes you have to get creative.

The most powerful labor union of teachers in my state — the Michigan Education Association — routinely thwarted schools that wanted to save money by privatizing nonteaching jobs such as food, janitorial and bus services. Taking union dues from all the teachers was not enough. The teachers union wanted to force the school to hire only dues-paying cooks, janitors and bus drivers, too.

At the Mackinac Center, we had already published studies showing how much money the schools could save by privatizing, but the union was too powerful. We had to do something to weaken the union's influence.

We brainstormed, and it occurred to us that the union had its own massive headquarters building with 500 employees. Surely the union did not employ their own unionized cooks, janitors and mail clerks. We decided to find out.

So, one of our policy analysts simply parked his car outside union headquarters and counted the various contractors' trucks that entered the premises.

We learned that this union – the one that opposed it when schools privatized to save money – contracted with four outside firms for food service, custodial service, mail service and security. And in three of the four cases, the contract firms were nonunion!

We contacted the newspapers and state lawmakers and exposed the union's hypocrisy. Schools were suddenly emboldened to oppose the union on privatization, and within a few months legislators gave schools explicit authority to privatize without the union's approval.

If there were a think tank entrepreneur's hall of fame, we would make that story our nomination!

Entrepreneurs are creative, but they build on the success of others. Don't waste time comparing yourself to other think tanks or criticizing others in the movement. Learn what you can from them and apply it to your country's unique marketplace of ideas.

PERSEVERANCE

The final ingredient is perseverance; never giving up. Perseverance is the backstop of success.

Freedom is never won in an unbroken string of victories. It's more like three steps forward and two steps back. We persevere by simply refusing to ever give up. There will be discouraging turns of events, unexpected setbacks and even seemingly overwhelming daily pressures.

But those are precisely the times to remember that we are on the front lines of a battle that is infinitely more important than any of our day-to-day struggles, disappointments, deadlines and duties. We can't ever let those things distract us and divert our eyes from the prize.

In our office hangs a photograph that just screams "perseverance." I'm sure you've all seen the snapshot of a lone man in Tiananmen Square who is apparently stopping four Chinese tanks from advancing. That single image of perseverance has probably inspired more freedom fighting around the world than four tanks could ever hope to vanquish.

Let me close with the story of a man who personified perseverance. Some of you already know about William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery.

Wilberforce was elected to the British Parliament in 1780. Seven years later, he decided to work to end British slavery.

At the time, slavery in the British Empire had broad political support and even intellectual defenders. People turned a blind eye to the cruelty of African slavery, which was considered essential to British military and economic success. Wilberforce was that rarest of politicians who stood virtually alone on principle.

He spoke against slavery in the House of Commons for the first time in 1789. Every single year for 18 years he introduced an abolition measure, and for 18 years they went nowhere.

He was ridiculed and called a traitor and a rabble-rouser. Once, even his friends deserted him when the opposition supplied his allies in Parliament with free theater tickets during a crucial vote. Through it all, Wilberforce worked tirelessly to turn the intellectual tide and public opinion against slavery.

Finally, on February 23, 1807, Parliament overwhelmingly approved a measure ending the slave trade in the empire.

This stunning achievement would have secured his place in history, but Wilberforce had not yet reached his ultimate goal of ending the practice, not just the trade, of slavery.

With his first victory taking 18 years to achieve, Wilberforce labored another 26 years, even after leaving Parliament, to end slavery. The prize was finally grasped on July 26, 1833, when Britain became the first major power to completely abolish the trade and practice of slavery everywhere in its dominion. Acclaimed as a victorious hero, Wilberforce died three days later.

We can transform policy with the power of ideas, optimism, entrepreneurship and perseverance. We must keep our eye on the prize – not better government, but less of it – and work with a persistence and passion worthy of our cause.