

Diplomacy In Peril*

Sometimes its best to return to essentials. We understand diplomacy to be “the processes and institutions by which a country represents itself and its interests to the rest of the world.”

It is a process of both public and private, both verbal and non-verbal communication. Our current global diplomatic norms were seeded in the enlightenment period when the brotherhood of kings gave way to a community of states. Then, diplomats saw their role as tamping down the impulses and emotions of monarchs and contributing reasonableness and rational thought to the process of communicating between states.

There is a strong connection between the language used and knowledge held. We need to think about that quite seriously in the *Age of Trump*. After all, as James Baldwin wrote, “it is experience which shapes a language; and it is language which controls an experience.”

The Secretary of State, visibly cut out of White House action with foreign leaders, is already known as “Silent Rex.” “I’m not a big media press access person,” he says. He may have been hired for exactly that reason.

The administration preference for silence from subordinates has infected the Department too. There was no State Department noon briefing for the first six weeks of the administration, three weeks of intermittent briefings followed with an acting career spokesman, and now silence again. A possible spokesman is being vetted we are told.

This new cloak of invisibility was worn abroad as well. The Secretary’s travel to Asia without the State press pool this month cost him in the global public perception of his competence and stamina. A fake story, generated by a South Korean reporter, about Tillerson’s “fatigue” and cancellation of events with South Korean leaders was never rebutted. First impressions matter and Tillerson’s as America’s new Secretary of State was not good.

Then a long homeward bound interview with the only media representative accompanying the Secretary to Asia got limited play because the interviewer was a reporter for the right wing, small audience, online *Independent Journal Review*. The limited distribution of the interview might have been a good thing because the new Secretary was not very good at it. No one gets good at it without practice. (Perhaps, he has learned something: Two pool reporters are traveling with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his current trip to Turkey and Belgium.)

President Trump’s verbal and non-verbal language, on the other hand, gets the world’s attention. With cameras clicking he refused to shake the German Chancellor’s hand.

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The world also knows he hung up on the Australian prime minister after chewing him out.

His passion for impulsive tweeting continues the pattern of breaking diplomatic norms. His disruptive Tweet on St. Patrick's Day, for example, was not lucky for the Secretary, then speaking in Seoul and caught unaware.

"North Korea is behaving very badly," Trump tweeted. "They have been 'playing' the United States for years. China has done little to help!"

Trump's impoverished language was hardly diplomatic given the Secretary's next stop in China. What was his intended audience? What was the policy point? Just who was the president trying to influence? Or, was he simply drawing attention back to himself to bask in its glow, to flaunt his brand. Or, was he trying to kneecap anyone who might presume to represent him abroad?

Unlike the concrete certainty of the president's Tweets, diplomatic language lubricates, rounds off sharp edges, and creates the space for possibility.

In my research on diplomatic language for the *Sage Handbook of Diplomacy* published last year, I traced diplomatic language's evolution, its purpose, its codes and signals and how -- using their constructed language -- diplomats have created, constituted, and maintained the international states' system by building in the elasticity needed to manage relationships of affinity as well as enmity on the global stage.

The possibility for that kind of meaningful international political sphere evaporates when words cease to matter. When words are cast adrift, when language no longer shows us a shared or common world in which to take our bearings, we will pass *Through The Looking Glass*: (as Lewis Carroll might say)

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means what I say it means neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all."

Like Humpty Dumpty, the president's claim that he "knows words, that he has the best words and he is our voice ... expresses his intention "to be master that's all." Saying whatever the hell he wants when he wants is a naked assertion of power. Perhaps that's all there is to understand.

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He seems uncomfortable with the idea that he could be represented by anyone save family. (Who, we should note are also seen and seldom heard.) He sees himself as a ruler not an incumbent in the institution of the presidency.

Because he believes, all evidence to the contrary, that his bluster uses the “best words,” then he alone will speak for us. Sadly, he does not have the ability to play with words — to agree to disagree — for example. Grammar is not nimble in his use of it. The truth is what he says today, not yesterday.

What we know from history is that when words are cast adrift from their meaning, as Hannah Arendt warned, — when speech is so perverse and so ugly — it will surely turn us away from truth, from dialog and discussion -- including international disagreements -- in the public sphere. When that happens there is no space for diplomacy.

On Feb. 15, for example, Trump was asked, during a joint news conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whether he still supported a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. His meaningless reply? “So I’m looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like. I’m very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one.”

What can he have meant? It seemed an abandonment of the two state solution -- long a core American policy. Yet, maybe not. We must refuse to be confused when the stakes seem so high. **But how can we when -- in the age of Trump -- anything can be said and everything can be unsaid. Therefore, nothing that is said matters.**

Diplomats chose words to be precise enough to communicate clearly to diplomatic interlocutors yet elastic enough to plausibly suggest the alternative meanings the diplomat's political masters need to manage their domestic politics. There may be a bit of aspirational hypocrisy in the diplomatic habit of using ambiguity to create the space for international agreement and room to maneuver at home and abroad but the theatrical play is focused specifically on forming and maintaining relationships that can survive vigorous argument about political disagreements.

Disregard of Language is quite another kettle of fish. **When what words say no longer matters, we are no longer in the political realm.** Diplomatic Language can serve as a cooling saucer for the more intemperate speech of politicians from the rough and tumble of domestic politics. But it cannot provide mooring to words untethered from meaning.

Writing about witless tyrants drunk on certainty, Polish Nobel Laureate, Wisława Szymborska argues that “All sorts of ... dictators and demagogues struggle for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans... **They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all.** They don’t want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments’ force...”

Diplomacy, on the other hand, is not deadly certainty. Diplomacy sustains life by generating the possibility of peaceful solutions to international problems. Diplomats *Remarks delivered at the Ambassador’s Forum, Sarasota, Florida, March 29, 2017, by Donna Marie Oglesby, Diplomat in Residence, Eckerd College*

enter into a constant give and take through engagement with others. Diplomacy is word-work with a life and death purpose.

I honestly wonder if American diplomacy can coexist with a president who, in the words of Phillip Roth,

is ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English."

Let's confront the painfully obvious. We must stop, listen and think about what disregarding language means for American diplomacy. Whatever our policy passions or disagreements, we should come together to save the processes and institutions of American diplomacy because essentially, they are in peril.