



INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES
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INTRODUCTION TO ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Professor Henry G. Roberts

NOTICE

This lecture has not been edited by the speaker. It has been reproduced directly from the reporter's notes for the students and faculty for reference and study purposes.

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Reviewed by: Dr. M. S. Reichley

Date: 17 September 1959

INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES
WASHINGTON, D. C.

1959-1960

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10 September 1959

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Reporter: Ralph W. Bennett

Publication No. L60-21

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COLONEL SILLS: The subject this afternoon is "Introduction to Oral Communication". "

I know that we all recognize the fact that a man may have a lot of ideas and a lot of knowledge and great experience; but unless he can convey these on to someone else, he might as well be living at the South Pole or somewhere as a hermit.

Recognizing this fact, the College has established a public course speaking ~~class~~ for students. The first class will begin next Monday, and we will have classes on Mondays and Wednesdays and one class on Friday.

You will be organized into 9 classes of about 16 students each. Each class will meet for ten sessions. You will find a memorandum to this effect in your box when you return to the mail room.

To assist us in a better understanding of oral communications, the College has two professors here who help us with this project. One of them is Professor Henry G. Roberts, who is consultant to the Secretary of the Air Staff of the United States Air Forces; and Professor Edwin L. Stevens, of George Washington University. They rotate in presenting this presentation each year, and this year it's the turn of Professor Roberts. So, gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to introduce a man who has the most outstanding ability in the area of oral communications--Professor Roberts.

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: Thank you, Colonel.

Gentlemen, I see some of you with notebooks. Will you do me the courtesy of closing them and forgetting about them?

I am going to talk to you for some thirty or forty minutes, but I don't think I'm going to say anything of world-shaking importance. I am sure you will never be questioned about it, and the greatest surprise of my life would come if it were ever labeled "Secret."

As you have just heard, we are about to begin some courses in public speaking, and may I point out that you are in very good company. It happens that over the week end I was up in the mountains, up on the Blue Ridge. I don't know whether any of you happened to be there or not; but Sunday was, I believe, one of the most dismal days that I have ever run into. It was chilly and it was raining and it was altogether miserable. That I think is perhaps my only excuse for having picked up a copy of the Richmond Times-Dispatch; but as I read it, I found on the second page a very interesting article about courses in public speaking.

In this instance it was a class of 24 students at the Virginia State Penitentiary; and as I started reading through the article, I couldn't help but make certain comparisons, shall we say, with the student body at the Industrial College. Perhaps you might be interested in some of the things.

"In the current class are lifers and first-time men, college graduates, and some with a minimum of education." I know there are a good many of you who are lifers in this service, I suppose. I take it

for granted, however, that this "minimum of education" does not completely apply.

But as I read on down, I came to what seemed to me to be perhaps the tag line of the whole article. One of the men, a Richmond man who was finishing out a four-year sentence for grand larceny explained why he took the course. "I took the course, frankly, because it's the only place that we can express ourselves down here." And, gentlemen, after you get through with the murder boards and the oral presentations, I think you will have a clearer concept of the humor of that last statement.

I've been teaching public speaking down here now since the winter of 1947. I've seen a great many classes of officers go through this institution. Over that period of time I've learned, I think, something about the men who are in the classes and about the problems that they run up against when it comes to making a speech.

This afternoon I'd like to talk with you, not about the minutiae of public speaking, about what to do, how to stand on the platform, what to do with your hands, and all of those things; but, rather than that, I'd like to take a few minutes to talk about some of the things that, it seems to me from my experience have bedeviled your predecessors-- the things that have caused them difficulty when they got up here on the platform or in the various rooms around this college, to make either very simple or quite elaborate presentations of the material that they have.

The one thing that has impressed me over the years with the classes at the Industrial College has been their apparent determination to do things the hard way rather than the easy way. I suppose it stems from the feeling that making a speech is a difficult thing to do; and so, lest they be caught short, they overwork. They overwork their speeches, indeed, to the point where practically all of the life has disappeared from them.

It has been my almost consistent experience that in practically every instance, if there is a choice of doing things the easy way or the hard way, your predecessors could be depended upon to choose the hard way. I would like, therefore, this afternoon to take just four things that I would suggest that you do and four things that I would suggest that you not do which, I think, if followed, might make not only your courses in public speaking, your presentations, but your use of speech in after life rather easier for you rather than making them more difficult. So I shall give you four "do's" and four "don'ts."

And the first "do" is obvious, I think. The first "do" is, Do it, and do it every opportunity that you have.

It's no fun making a speech. It's work. Naturally we are reluctant, because most of us are completely lazy people, to put out the effort to make a speech. ^{It was} ~~it's~~ ^{easy} awfully/for you gentlemen, who may have been in command positions, when you were approached by some civilian group, let us say, to speak to them, ^{it was} ~~it's~~ awfully easy to plead another engagement. Or, failing that, it was very easy for you at the last minute

to find yourself engaged and to send a junior officer to make the speech for you.

My suggestion is, gentlemen, why not face it now? You're coming to a place in your career when speechmaking is inevitable. It's no longer possible for most of you to escape the situation in which you have to speak. Why not face up to it this year and just determine that every time you get a chance to get up on your feet and say anything, you're going to do it; that you are going to learn how to do this thing; that you're going to get practice.

You can read Goren's columns on bridge for ten years without learning a thing about playing bridge. You learn to swim by getting into the water and swimming. You learn to speak by getting up on a platform and talking. Why put it off?

One of the best definitions of a school that I have ever heard, I think, is the definition that a school is a place in which to make mistakes. Here is an opportunity, and a good one, to work some of the mistakes out of your system as far as public speaking is concerned:

Don't sit there like a bump on a log all through the year. When you've got something to say, get up and say it; and, incidentally, you'll become better speakers as you do say it. Of all the injunctions that I could give you, I think this is perhaps the most important one. Do it. Do it every time you have an opportunity.

The second one that I would suggest is this: When you do it, do keep it simple. Over the years, particularly when you get around

to the oral presentation, I've been rather interested that when a man finds that his O.P. is coming up, he immediately seems to think that he's in competition with Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt and Daniel Webster. Whatever he does up here has got to be a production. You will suffer from it later on in the year.

And so after a man has studied for months on some problem, he gets together the most complex and intricate presentation that he can devise--every word weighed and guided, every idea compressed into its minimum space. And then he bedevils the visual aids people, and here he comes up with some charts, diagrams, slides, viewgraphs, what-have-you; and, well, before you get through you'll hear approximately 120 of them this spring, and I think you'll realize that what I'm saying makes sense.

Ten or twelve years ago we had rather a job down here trying to get people to use visual aids. It was that way all through the service. It was very difficult to get them to use some charts and diagrams et cetera. Now I think the time probably has come for a crusade in the reverse direction. I'm getting to the place where it's really rather a pleasure, as far as I'm concerned, to hear a speech without having to do a reading assignment at the same time. I would like to suggest that you go back to some of the simpler days where a few ideas, one, two, or three, presented with some reasonable simplicity, are perhaps much more effective than 25 ideas compressed into a relatively short speech.

When it comes to this point I think we all perhaps overestimate our capability as a speaker. I was reading something the other day that rather interested me. I know that as I stand up on this platform this afternoon, what I'm saying ~~is not~~^{is} of world-shaking importance; it's vital to you and to me and to everybody else; and I would love to have the feeling that ten years from now you could repeat verbatim the things that I'm saying to you. But let's face it. What actually happens actually runs something like this:

No matter who it is up on the platform, good or bad, about one-third of whatever he says will be forgotten overnight. One-half will be forgotten within a week. Three-quarters will be forgotten within a month. And after six weeks, 85 percent of the audience will not remember a single significant thing that they heard during the lecture.

If perhaps that deflates your ego, as it deflates mine, it may, however, be useful in putting the whole business of speechmaking into perspective. A speech is a very useful thing for an immediate result. But Lincoln was very, very right when he said: "The world will little know nor long remember what we say here."

Keep it simple. Don't take yourself too seriously. Have one, two, or three ideas that can be remembered and present those to the group.

The third suggestion that I would make to you to do is this: Do keep it short. I was very happy indeed to find out the day before yesterday that I was limited to 40 minutes. I think that's an admirable

limitation. We used to inflict this on you for an hour. I would almost suggest that it perhaps be cut shorter than that. The tendency of any man ~~is very easy~~ ^{it's very easy} actually to make an hour's speech. It's rather more difficult to make a thirty-minutes speech; and it really becomes pretty tricky, as you will find out, when in class you are asked to make a three, four, or five minute speech. On the whole, however, I think you'll agree with me, or at least you will after you've heard a few more lectures ~~at this~~ ^{down here at the} Industrial College, that brevity is indeed a desirable thing.

But let me suggest this: Brevity can have two phases. One way that you can achieve brevity is the way that you achieve it in the writing of a dispatch, let us say, where everything is condensed and pulled together and each word is carefully weighed and has meaning. And I think that your experience and mine in the service was that many times you have to read that dispatch very carefully time after time to make sure that you're getting exactly the meaning that was intended from it. That kind of brevity is ruinous from a platform. It's bad enough when you have to read that material. It's remarkably worse when you have to listen to it. That is not the way to achieve brevity.

Again, ~~the~~ a way to achieve brevity is to take a blue pencil and simply cross out great areas of the speech, coming down again, as I have said, to one, two, or three ideas which you really feel are vital in impressing the group. The way to achieve brevity, gentlemen, is to leave out the footnotes and give them an idea that they can remember.

Irving Lee tells of a group, for instance, on this matter of memory, which is, I think, rather interesting. A high school class was given a series of lectures on safety in which 50 important points were stressed in the lecture. They were not underlined as such, but were very clearly indicated to them. This, I believe, took a period of about two months, in which these 50 points were given. Three months later they were given an objective test and out of the whole class only 6 of the 50 points were remembered.

If instead of giving them 50 points over a two-months period, the number of points had been cut down and driven home, certainly the effect would have been just as great and probably actually greater than it was by giving them 50 points.

You will be soon going into your O.P.'s. You're not too far off from them. You will be spending weeks in working up the information that will be developed in those O.P.'s. With no strain at all you could probably sit or stand for two or three hours giving out the information that you have developed. You are going to have a real problem in slicing out and coming down to the really significant things that you want to say.

And that brings me to my fourth point. My fourth "do" would be this: Do keep your eyes on the target, the audience, the forgotten men that you're talking to.

My experience has been, particularly with, again, people who have been doing research work, that they developed a tremendous amount of information. They want to present it. They have slaved and striven

to get that information. They've put it down on cards. They've got it all together. And it would be a ~~completely~~ crying shame if the world didn't learn about it. Let me again give you my suggestion. Keep your eye on the target. It's the audience that counts.

My suggestion to you is simple. Simply take that information that you've gone through and have digested and ask yourself this question: What points here would I like to have the men in this class remember one week after I have given that presentation? What really is important from their point of view? What one, two, or three things would I like to have them remember? And then if you will fashion your speech to make those one, two, or three points so they'll stick, you will have a very much better presentation than if you try to ring in every statistic you have and take it down to the ten-thousandth after the decimal point.

, a scientist,
I was working in June with a man/who was going over to a NATO meeting in Kiel, Germany. He was an excellent scientist. He had quite a presentation prepared. And when I sat and listened to it, although I was roughly familiar with the subject matter, when I got through, it was just all wiggly, as far as I was concerned. And I asked him a question that I suggest you ask yourselves. I asked him a question that really rocked him back on his heels, and it was the simple question, What do you expect them to remember? And he was floored. He couldn't answer. All he had thought of was what he wanted to tell them, not what they needed to remember.

So my fourth suggestion and the last of my "do's" is, Do keep

your sights on the audience. Do it, do keep it simple, do keep it short, and do keep your sights on the audience, and you'll be very much better along.

Now, from my experience there are four "don't's" that I'd like to give you; and perhaps these become immediately more pertinent.

The first "don't" that I'd like to suggest is, Don't write it. I'll have to say this to you gentlemen, but I know you're not very likely to accept it. In these days of security, et cetera, the way of preparing a speech is to write it. Of course, if you're far enough up the line, you don't write it for yourself. Some other sucker writes it for you. But my suggestion to you is, at least for this year, Why not get out of the idea of writing out your speech before you give it?

You've got ideas to put across to the audience. As I said, the rate of forgetting is very rapid. Why not simply get up and talk and tell the audience the things that you have to say? I think that Ed Stevens up here will agree with me that in class we can almost, with probably 99 percent accuracy, spot a speech that's been written out. Would you agree on that, Ed? The characteristics are just plain, and they are not advantageous to the speaker.

There isn't a single man in this audience, if he knows his subject matter and he's given some thought to it, who will not do a better job of standing up here and telling the group what he knows without a manuscript than if he had labored over a manuscript crossing every "T," dotting every "I," and putting in every comma.

Now, there are some reasons for that. The first one is ~~that~~ the fact that we use a different vocabulary in speaking and writing. And the second one--and ~~let's~~ let's be honest--is that every time one of you gentlemen picks up a pen or a pencil, you tend to freeze. You'll write a sentence and, instead of going on and saying what you have to say, you'll go back and look at the sentence you've just written and make some changes in it.

An almost sure way to kill a speech, at least as far as the amateur is concerned--and I put myself with you in that classification--is to try to write your speech. I was rather interested the day before yesterday hearing Admiral Lloyd Benson, of the Navy, who I think, incidentally, is one of the best speakers in the Navy, say that since he had become an admiral, speech-making wasn't any fun any more, because now he had to write it out, and he never succeeded in saying what he really wanted to say when he put it down on paper and typed it.

If you want to do it the hard way, gentlemen, write it out. It will probably take you six to eight times as long to do the job, and it can be guaranteed that it probably will not be as effective. But if you prefer, it is your choice. If you prefer doing it the hard way, I suggest writing it out.

The second "don't" that I would give to you is along the same line. If you do write the darned thing out, for heaven's sake don't get up and read it.

How long have you been down here? About three weeks or some-

thing like that? I don't know whether you've learned it yet or not, but you're going to learn it very distinctly before the year is over, that when you see a speaker get up, climb up on the platform thick manuscript in hand, you may very well just as well relax. The speech isn't really going to be very interesting and you're probably not going to get a great deal out of it.

If you must write, write it, and then leave the manuscript at home and get up and talk about it. There's one thing I've always objected to about this ~~leadership~~ speaker's stand. I don't know whether you have thought about it. There's one psychological difficulty with it. You can't see the stack of the unread manuscript diminish as he takes page after page and puts it on the other side.

Now, let me say the very obvious thing. I realize quite well that there are times when you in the service, particularly as you go up higher and higher in the levels of the service, are going to be forced to do two things--to write your speeches and to read them. The necessities of the situation require it. My only suggestion is, Don't do it prematurely. It isn't worth the energy. And I suspect that you will find, as Admiral Benson did, that as you do it, all the fun and the life and probably a good deal of the effectiveness go out of your speech-making.

So I've given you two "don'ts." Don't write out your speech. Don't read it. And the third one I think is particularly appropriate as far as the military are concerned. My third one is this: Don't worry about the words you use.

I don't know why it is that graduates of West Point and Annapolis in particular seem to have such a complete inferiority complex about their vocabulary. And yet I get it time after time--"My vocabulary isn't good. I haven't a large enough vocabulary to be effective. What can I do to improve my vocabulary?"

Well, I think there is a little book entitled "How to Improve your Vocabulary in Twenty Lessons," which ^I recommend to you. But what really concerns me is why this great concern on your part about your vocabulary when you get on the platform? It never worries you at any other point in your career until you suddenly step on the platform here and all at once you become concerned because you can't find precisely the word that in your opinion fits the situation.

I really wish sometimes that they would put in a course in vocabulary building at both of the Academies simply so that you people could get rid of the complex by the time that you have something to say that is worth saying. I would simply suggest to you that if you're worried about your vocabulary, and if you feel the necessity for improving it, I would like to suggest to you that you just consider yourselves suckers--suckers; that's what I said--because you've been sold a bill of goods.

Where did we get all of this excitement about building a vocabulary? the idea that if you had a large vocabulary, you would almost automatically become a captain of industry? I'll tell you where you got it. You got it from about fifty years of advertising by Funk and Wagnall and the Miriam Webster Company, and they sold you a bill

of goods.

There are a very great number of words in the language. I run across some of them not infrequently that I cannot conceive any reason on earth why I should know those words. My mind is sufficiently cluttered up now with a lot of useless things. I find normally that if I have anything to say, I can find the words to say it.

Forget about your vocabulary. It's said that Henry Ward Beecher -- one time years ago somebody commented upon an error in grammar that he had made and Beecher is supposed to have said to him: "Sir, when I have something to say, I do not propose to allow a little thing like the English language to stand in my way." While I perhaps would not recommend it to you in complete acceptance, I think there is something to be said for it.

The fourth "don't" that I would like to suggest to you is this: Gentlemen, don't be afraid to be yourselves on the platform.

As the year goes past, you will have many important and distinguished speakers on this platform. I think that as the speakers roll on and on and on, you will become more and more in agreement with me that the one thing that in many instances you want to know is not so much what that speaker has to say, but you want to know that speaker. You want to get the feel of the man. You want to know him. You want to know what he, John Jones, has to say on this subject. And I am afraid that in many instances you are going to be thwarted because the ^{that} speech will be delivered by General John Jones probably

was written by Captain Jack Smith and has none of the Jones characteristics about it.

In succeeding classes we consistently get the question, Is it all right if I do something up on this platform? as though there were a rule book, laid out like Emily Post, that laid out all the things that you can and can't do. I'm suggesting that when you get up on the platform, be yourself. Be your best self. But don't try to worry about how somebody else would do it. Do it your way.

And I think that in both my class and that of Professor Stevens you will find the emphasis will be not on trying to turn you into rigidly molded speakers, doing ~~everything~~ ^{everything} the same way, but in an attempt to make you, as I have suggested, your best self, effective on ~~the platform here~~ ^{a platform.}

Now, again, let me give you those four "don'ts." Don't read it. Don't write it. Don't worry about words. Don't be afraid to be yourself.

In some respects, gentlemen, I envy you. During the succeeding months you will have an opportunity, probably an unparalleled opportunity, to observe a cross-section of public speaking as it is done in the United States in the year of our Lord 59-60. Your backside may become tired; but day after day, week after week, you are going to hear speeches delivered from this platform. Some of them will be excellent speeches. Many of them, I am afraid, will not be exceedingly good. But I know of no place in the United States that it would be ~~profitable~~ ^{possible} to get a better cross-section of what men of intelligence and perspective are speaking and the way that they are doing it than to sit, as you

are sitting here, during the next few months.

Now, I make just these suggestions: One, watch what they do. Decide whether what they are doing is effective or ineffective. If you like it, steal it. It's in the public domain. Try it on for size. If you don't like it, just determine that you are not going to get caught doing that thing yourself. If it is intelligently applied, we in the classroom will give you practice, and here in this room you will have, I think, excellent opportunity to learn from this period.

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