

Alexander Hamilton Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Public Relations

Acceptance Remarks, Patrick Ford

November 30, 2016

Thank you, Mike, for that introduction. And many thanks to the IPR Trustees for this extraordinary honor.

I have been proud to serve as an IPR trustee for nearly 11 years. I have seen the Institute flourish under the remarkable leadership of Frank Ovaitt and now under the amazing Dr. Tina McCorkindale.

Under their strong leadership and a very productive board, IPR gets amazing results with a very small staff. We do this by keeping a laser-like focus on “research that matters to the practice” and by engaging many of the best academic minds in our field. Those of you who attended our Research Symposium today saw vivid evidence of that.

Mike Fernandez was the most recent of the 18 recipients of the Alexander Hamilton Medal, a list that includes some titans of the PR profession – many of them friends and highly valued mentors of mine, and all of them much more worthy of this honor than I.

One of the past recipients, Jack Felton, the longtime IPR president, said, “This Hamilton Medal is like receiving the Olympic Gold to me.” I now understand what Jack meant, and, as the Oscar winners always do, I have some people to thank.

I want to start by expressing my deepest appreciation to the second recipient of this award in 1999. He is and has been for many years my hero, my greatest mentor and my treasured friend: Harold Burson, who is here with us tonight.

Thank you, Harold, for teaching me how to be the best PR practitioner I could be. And for teaching me how to be a trusted adviser to our clients, who we both value so highly. And about how to be a considerate and generous colleague to our people at every level of the organization and beyond. And about how to be a great listener. And, most of all, for teaching me the importance of character and integrity in every aspect of our business. Our friend and former colleague Chris Komisarjevsky likes to quote Hericlitus on this topic. He said: "Character is destiny." I agree.

My sainted grandmother used to say, "tell me your friends and I'll tell you who you are." Well, Harold, you have epitomized character for generations of PR professionals, and I am eternally grateful that you are my friend. I'm quite certain Grandma Woods is looking down with approval!

I'm also grateful to the seven Burson-Marsteller CEOs who succeeded Harold and under whom I have served -- especially Don Baer, another great friend and mentor, who is with us tonight. Thank you, Don. And I am immensely grateful for the deep and special relationships I have developed with thousands of Burson colleagues around the world, quite a few of whom are also here tonight as well. And I have been privileged to serve many wonderful clients in my 27 years with the firm, and I thank them as well.

Most of all, I want to dedicate this award to my wife Pat – or PJ, as I call her. She is everything to me: the love of my life, my best friend, my most important teacher and my unwavering moral influence – my Polaris, always keeping me aligned with “true north.” Thank you for all of that, PJ.

In all my years on the IPR board, I’ve always been excited by the idea underlying the Hamilton Medal. Of course, Alexander Hamilton is all the rage these days, thanks to Lin-Manuel Miranda and the unprecedented success of “Hamilton—The Musical,” which is playing at a Broadway theater just a few blocks from here.

But IPR was onto the magic of Alexander Hamilton long before Miranda made it cool.

As Shelley Spector, one of the founders and driving forces behind the Museum of Public Relations, recently pointed out to me: the case for Hamilton as a PR master, before anyone called it public relations, was made eloquently in a 1978 essay by Dr. Allan Nevins in *PR Review* a publication that had been launched in 1975 by the Foundation for PR Research and Education, which eventually became IPR.

Dr. Nevins described Hamilton as “a born public relations man – a born master of persuasion by the spoken and written word.” He cited another scholar – Professor Broadus Mitchell of Rutgers University (my alma mater), who described *The Federalist Papers*, most of which were written by Hamilton, as “the best job of public relations in history.”

So this recognition is doubly special – not only because I so admire IPR but because Hamilton himself was the consummate PR expert, among many other amazing accomplishments.

In the Hamilton musical, in the wonderful opening song, the Hamilton character sings, “there are a million things I haven’t done, but just you wait, just you wait.” That is how I feel tonight. While I appreciate the IPR board’s assessment that my modest accomplishments are worthy of this medal, I prefer to look ahead. We – not only I but our entire PR profession – have so much left to do.

One need look no further than the coarse public discourse that characterized the US elections this year, and others around the world, to see that the role of the public relations professional is more important today than ever. By that, I’m not just referring to the lightening-fast changes in technology, or the 24-7 news cycles, or the tectonic shifts in media channels.

I also mean our most important role: to focus as much or more on behavior as we do on words. Not to be “spin doctors” or to engage in what someone described as the “bottomless mendacity” that seems to be spreading in the so-called “post-truth” world. Unfortunately, by the way, the term “post truth” was recently named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries. Rather, we need to be the driving force we have always strived to be: for truth, authenticity and transparency.

In accepting this award, therefore, I will politely decline any praise for what I might have done in the past. Instead, with the validation from my

peers that this medal represents, I will focus instead on my pledge for the future.

First, I promise to work with all of you, and with IPR, and with the Arthur Page Society, and with the PR Council, and with the Plank Center for PR Leadership, and with the Museum of Public Relations, with The LAGRANT Foundation, and with the PRSA and PRSSA – in short, with all the organizations and resources available to PR professionals – to drive greater understanding and adherence to the values that we have always embraced as a profession. They are expressed well in the Page Principles, especially the first three of those:

- Tell the truth
- Prove it with action
- Listen to stakeholders.

Second, I promise to “pay it forward.” As the PR profession continues to grow, and encompasses more and more professionals from other disciplines, we need to train the next generation, and also to understand their special needs and respect their diverse perspectives.

This means suspending our own personal agenda and defining our success on more than our own personal achievements – to embrace the example set so well by the likes of Harold Burson and Betsy Plank to dedicate ourselves even more fully to mentoring young professionals in the tangible and intangible aspects of public relations.

And my third and most important pledge relates to something on which I have spent an enormous amount of time and commitment in recent years:

diversity and inclusion in the PR profession. I believe we have made genuine progress in the past few years in generating real change in mindset at the top levels in our field. I could see this in the entries for the PR Council's Diversity Distinction in PR Awards, for which I served this year on the judging panel. But we have not done enough and it is not moving fast enough.

Saying we are committed to diversity and inclusion is just a platitude if we don't combine it with a bias for action. I am passionate about this, as I know many of you are. Now, to quote those second and third Page Principles: we need to prove it with action and listen to our stakeholders, because the answers are there. To paraphrase the Hamilton musical, "history has its eyes on us."

For my part, I will not consider my career successful unless we can all look back in 10 years and say we made this happen.

But just you wait. Just you wait!

Thank you.