

The New Pragmatism: Coping with America's Overwhelming Problems

Daniel Yankelovich

Introduction by Jeffrey Elman

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Jeffrey Elman

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Introduction

I am honored to introduce today's speaker. Dan Yankelovich is a man of tremendous vision and also of many accomplishments. He has been very important to the University, in particular to the social sciences. Dan did his undergraduate and graduate work at Har-

vard. He then went on to complete further graduate studies at the Sorbonne. His academic achievements include being a research professor of psychology at New York University, a professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research, a distinguished scholar at the University of California, Irvine, a senior fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, and, most recently, a visiting professor in the department of political science at the University of California, San Diego.

Dan has a compelling vision of what he calls the public intellectual. He has argued that scholars and scientists have both the opportunity and the obligation to play a special role in society. This role is not only to serve as custodians and creators of knowledge, but to illuminate and help us understand important and complex public problems. Dan himself has played this role, creating enterprises such as the research firm Yankelovich, Skelly, and White and *The New York Times/Yankelovich Poll*, which then evolved into *The New York Times/CBS Poll*. In fact, he has been called the dean of American pollsters. He is the founder and chairman of three organizations: Viewpoint Learning, a firm that ad-

vances dialogue-based learning as a core skill in newer forms of leadership; DYG, a market research firm that tracks social trends; and Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization that he cofounded in 1975 with Cyrus Vance. The common thread in all of these activities is that they reflect Dan's own commitment to find ways to analyze and present complex public issues.

Over the course of his career, Dan has held directorships at CBS, Loral, and the Meredith Corporation, and has served as trustee of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Brown University, and many others. He is the author of ten books and hundreds of articles and speeches.

At the University of California, San Diego, Dan serves on the Social Science Dean's Advisory Council. Because of Dan's generosity, we recently were able to create an endowed chair, which we are pleased to call the Yankelovich Chair in Social Thought. Less tangible, but perhaps more important, Dan's commitment to the ideal of the public intellectual has energized and inspired many of us.



Daniel Yankelovich

Daniel Yankelovich is Founder and Chairman of Public Agenda, Viewpoint Learning, Inc., and DYG, Inc. He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1999.

Presentation

Prior to the 2008 presidential election, more than 85 percent of the American public felt our society was on the wrong track – an impressive, unprecedented cry of public frustration that was reflected in the outcome of the election. My presentation today describes one possible strategy for getting the country back on the right track.

I.

Serious Problems. American society is confronted with many severe and overwhelming problems:

- a major financial crisis that is international in scope;
- a staggering national debt that swells as the nation ages;
- global warming made worse by the policies of the United States and those of the largest country on earth, China;
- an unprecedented transfer of wealth for importing oil from nations hostile to our interests;
- a severe loss of prestige and credibility in the world;
- a poorly understood and dangerous conflict with the Muslim world; and

- the inexorably rising costs of health care and education that threaten the unwritten social contract at the heart of American democracy.

The United States has overcome equal or greater threats in the past. In my own lifetime, I have witnessed the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, World War II, the McCarthy period, the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, and 9/11. This is not the first time the country has lurched from one major problem and crisis to another and somehow managed to cope, and even to prosper.

Erosion of problem-solving capability. Our problems are solvable. We have extraordinary resources – human, capital, corporate, technological, and scientific. We have the potential to restore our world leadership status and a long tradition of pragmatic problem solving. But – and there is a big “but” – *our nation’s problem-solving gift seems to be badly eroded.*

We see many symptoms of this erosion in our survey data: massive denial, people grasping at straws, ideology instead of practicality, leadership pandering, polarization instead of cooperation, growing public mistrust, and *resentment*, a technical term from political science signifying a particular kind of political resentment. Political scientists feel that it is the second most powerful political emotion after instability. Growing resentment, *resentment*, is what really corrodes societies.

What I find extraordinary and unusual is that the reasons for the erosion are mainly cultural, which makes them particularly difficult to deal with. Some of the cultural forces at work are familiar. For the last thirty or forty years, we have seen:

- a growing expert/public gap, with an elite point of view that does not understand the public or take it seriously,
- a public that mistrusts our nation’s institutions and elites, and
- severe political polarization that is emotional and passionate because of culture wars over core values.

Most of the cultural sources of the erosion of our problem-solving abilities, however,

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are less familiar. One that we are especially conscious of is the public demand for a stronger voice. This demand would ordinarily be seen as an asset in a democracy. However, in today’s culture, the demand is unaccompanied by any awareness that having a stronger voice involves taking responsibility for the points of view it expresses. Unfortunately, the public assumes that simply having a passionate conviction makes one’s point of view correct. And when people’s passionate convictions collide, the result is polarization and bad decisions.

The demand for a stronger public voice traces back to the cultural revolution that took place in our society in the 1960s and 1970s and has strengthened over the last thirty to forty years. If people are unwilling to take responsibility for their strong opinions and are impulsive and opinionated instead of thoughtful and responsible, then a stronger public voice is in fact a drag on our democracy, an invitation to pandering.

II.

Blindsided by computer models. Another new cultural factor that interests me particularly is a new form of “technological hubris” that I believe led to some of the worst Wall Street abuses of the current financial crisis.

Some months ago, a front-page article in *The New York Times* featured a quote from Joe Cassano, the former head of AIG’s London-based Financial Products Division. This was the division that managed its catastrophic credit default swap business. Cassano actually said: “It is hard for us to even see a scenario within any realm of reason that would see us losing one dollar in any of our transactions.” More than \$170 billion later (first the government had to put in \$85 billion; it

REASONS FOR EROSION ARE MAINLY CULTURAL



has since added another \$85 billion to the AIG bailout), we realize that Cassano was assuming that AIG's computer-based risk models were protecting AIG against every conceivable risk.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently interviewed the man who developed the risk models for AIG, a professor of finance at Yale named Gary Gorton. In the interview, Gorton explained that AIG management had confined his model to only one form of risk and excluded the most serious ones. (For example, it totally excluded AIG's contracts that permitted counterparties to demand more collateral under certain conditions.) Gorton also said that his model was based on a period of past history when credit rating agencies almost never downgraded bond ratings.

Because his model left out counterparty demands for collateral and was based exclusively on the past, the probabilities of failure were unacceptably high. AIG management took on faith the assumption that because gifted mathematicians were creating the models, they had to be valid. Their wishful thinking is overloaded with naïveté and hubris.

The example of AIG may be extreme, but it is far from unique. The naive infatuation with technology it illustrates, although hardly new, is responsible for many of the worst problems of the current financial crisis.

There are other unfamiliar cultural causes of the erosion of our collective problem-solving abilities. One is the growth of self-isolating communities, as reported in a recent book by Bill Bishop called *The Big Sort*. Bishop points out that not only do people self-select media that agree with their own views, leading to groupthink, but they also self-select

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communities where they can find like-minded people. With so many forces in society strengthening groupthink in so many different ways, dealing with this cultural issue becomes truly formidable.

Finally, there is the cultural obstacle represented by the reality that the baby boom generation and its offspring are unaccus-

tomed to sacrifice or to postponing gratification. Notoriously, they buy what they want when they want it with scant concern for saving or the future. The baby boom generation does not bear the scars of my generation, the Depression generation, which is fortunate for them but may leave them less prepared to deal with the current downturn in the economy.

When you add up the full range of these causes for the erosion of our problem-solving abilities, you realize that the familiar kinds of solutions, the ones that lie within our traditional comfort zone, are not designed to work against cultural forces. We are comfortable throwing money at problems. We are comfortable with legislation and regulation of the sort being considered for the current financial crisis. We are comfortable with technological fixes and with applying specialized knowledge. And we are comfortable with media coverage and PR. But all of these familiar strategies simply don't work against cultural obstacles.

Thus, we face a culture-driven erosion of our problem-solving capabilities, and we lack the tools for dealing with it.

What *would* work best against this wide array of cultural obstacles?

It seems to me that you have to fight culture with culture. You can't fight it with money or regulation or technical magic or putting a clever PR spin on our problems. The domain of culture is a matter of ethics, values, belief systems, philosophies, traditions, group practices, habits of the mind and heart, and social norms. To change the culture you have to change its norms.

III.

Reviving an American cultural tradition. I propose that we attempt to revive a traditional American philosophy and habit of thought. Our problem-solving capabilities can, I believe, best be revitalized through what I call "the new pragmatism." Restoring our American pragmatic tradition is one of the few strategies available to us that has the potential to overcome the kinds of cultural obstacles I've been describing.

Pragmatism is a distinctively American philosophy, cited by historian Henry Commager

as America's only major contribution to philosophy. In the first decades of the 1900s, it enormously strengthened our nation's problem-solving capabilities. Pragmatism transcends polarization and heightens cooperation. In recent years it has enjoyed a vigorous revival in our universities.

Let me give you a quick thumbnail sketch of what I mean by the "new pragmatism." Pragmatism is a one-hundred-year-old tradition of philosophy developed by four bold American thinkers: Charles Peirce; William James, who introduced the term *pragmatism* during a 1907 lecture at Berkeley; John Dewey, who best personifies pragmatism in practice; and sociologist George Herbert Mead. From 1900 to 1930 under James's and Dewey's influence,

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pragmatism was key to America's social reforms. After World War II, however, it was brushed aside, particularly in academic philosophy departments, as being outmoded, old-fashioned, and naive.

Interestingly, around 1980, pragmatism began to be updated and revived in a number of academic disciplines. The American philosopher Richard Rorty and the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas were major agents of change. Their influence led to a renewal of pragmatic philosophy not only in academic philosophy departments, but also in literature, ethnic studies, management studies, and, to some degree, the social sciences. Its vitality in the universities makes it somewhat easier to disseminate, because so often ideas and trends start in the universities and then move out into the larger society.

What then is pragmatism? The popular understanding of pragmatism is correct, though limited. To be pragmatic, according to the popular understanding, is to be practical and action-oriented rather than theoretical; it means being experimental, willing to try things out and see if they work.

Being pragmatic also means opening yourself to compromise, to incremental solutions, to focusing on the art of the possible, and to being more concerned with solving concrete problems than with spinning grand visions.

As far as it goes, this popular understanding of pragmatism is correct. But if pragmatism meant nothing more than this, it would not have the potential power to do what I hope it can do. Pragmatism has two other important dimensions that can potentially produce the right kind of cultural change.

1. *A set of core values.* Pragmatic philosophy is strongly value-driven. John Dewey summed up the relevant pragmatic values in one of his favorite phrases: "Democracy as a way of life." The core values of democracy as a way of life are:

- freedom of thought and action;
- the opportunity to develop one's own gifts and capabilities;
- trusting the judgment of the public;
- a spirit of optimism;
- faith in hope and cooperation;
- strong resistance to all forms of authoritarianism, ideology, and fundamentalism; and
- a strong utopian reformist strain.

2. *A theory of knowledge.* The second dimension of the "new pragmatism" consists of its methodological/epistemological side, which includes the following elements:

- a commitment to social experimentation as a fundamental way of knowing;
- a commitment to "communities of practice";
- a constantly evolving, rather than static, culture;
- an acceptance of uncertainty and contingency rather than absolutes;
- a strong emphasis on context and circumstances such that problems are examined from a variety of points of view; and
- a radical theory of truth that defines truth-concepts as tools for coping rather than mirrors of reality.

How can this broad sweep of pragmatic ideas, attitudes, and values spread beyond the academy and restore important lost ele-

If the public learning curve does not advance in keeping with the urgency of the problem, the consequences can be disastrous for the country.

ments in our culture? It will take innovative thinking at all levels of society, encompassing individual, commercial, public, non-profit, private, and institutional efforts, all fitting together in interlocking, interacting ways. Government is one part of the process, but just a small part of it.

IV.

To ground our discussion in concrete realities rather than abstractions, let me present you with two examples of pragmatism in action.

Reducing energy dependency. My first example relates to several strategies for reducing our dependency on foreign oil. One is the T. Boone Pickens Plan and the other is the GE/Google Plan.

As context for these plans, here is a quick overview of our nation's dependency on imported oil.

- The United States now imports 70 percent of our oil, compared with 24 percent in 1970.
- We consume 25 percent of the world's oil demand yet comprise only 4 percent of the world's population.
- World oil production peaked in 2005. The United States has only 2 percent of the world's oil reserves.
- Our dependency on foreign oil represents the greatest transfer of wealth in human history, \$700 billion a year to oil-producing nations, some of whom are quite hostile to our interests.
- This transfer of wealth will lead to an inevitable decline of U.S. power, influence, and leadership in the world. We cannot transfer this kind of wealth – unprecedented in world history – and maintain a position of world leadership and influence.

To alleviate the problem, the Pickens Plan substitutes wind power for natural gas in generating electricity and then uses natural gas, which we have in abundance, as a transportation fuel instead of oil.

The GE/Google Plan, which is even bolder and more far-reaching, is to generate all electricity from renewable sources, using wind, solar, geothermal, and nuclear fuels, and to transform the entire automotive fleet to plug-ins.

These two plans are not trivial efforts. They do not nibble at the edge of the problem, but represent serious efforts at a solution.

The benefits of the two plans are considerable. They would:

- wean the United States off of fossil fuels, especially oil and coal;
- cut energy costs;
- create new industries and millions of new jobs;
- improve our national security;
- reduce the transfer of wealth to other nations; and
- help reverse global warming.

Accelerating the public's learning curve. These are bold pragmatic plans with significant benefits. But the American public is not ready for them, and that brings me to the second example of pragmatism in action. It relates to the development of a new research tool to accelerate the public's learning curve on urgent issues such as the energy problem. The Public Agenda and Viewpoint Learning (organizations with which I am affiliated) are conducting the research project.

The new tool, called the "Public's Learning Curve," is designed to cope with a subset of urgent issues that we refer to as "time-gap" issues. A time-gap issue is one where the amount of time the public would ordinarily require to make the necessary changes and sacrifices involved lags badly behind the urgency of the problem. The energy problem is a clear example of a time-gap issue.

One reason the public's normal learning curve is slow on this particular issue is that it is so complex. Our dependence on foreign energy sources poses a triple threat to our society: an *economic* threat in the form of the

rising price of oil, a *national security* threat because major energy exporting countries are hostile to our interests, and a *global warming* threat because oil and coal are major sources of the carbon emissions that are creating climate change. Adding to its complexity is the fact that policies to address one of these three threats tend to undermine one of the others. For example, the United States has plenty of domestic coal that could help reduce our dependence on imported oil, but coal seriously exacerbates the global warming threat.

Countering the triple threat demands huge changes on the part of institutions and the public. Yet, some special interests have the incentive and the means to retard the public's learning curve through obfuscation.

The cultural impediments eroding our problem-solving abilities are formidable, and we cannot deal with them one at a time. We need an overall approach.

For example, up to recently, Exxon paid scientists to take the contrarian side on debates about climate change, so when one scientist warns the public about the reality of global warming, an Exxon-paid scientist will claim that the threat is not real, and if real, not man-made. Even though the first scientist may represent the thinking of 99 percent of the scientific community, the debate is presented as if the two points of view were evenly balanced. The result is to confuse the hell out of the public. People throw up their hands in frustration. They say: "If the experts can't agree, how can you expect us to agree on something so technical?"

On this and on many other issues, if the public learning curve does not advance in keeping with the urgency of the problem, the consequences can be disastrous for the country.

The three stages of coming to judgment. In more than a half-century of studying public opinion I have learned that on important issues

of this sort, people do not form sound judgments speedily or on the basis of objective factual information. Information alone is not enough. The process is not only cognitive; it is emotion-laden and value-driven. Before people make up their minds and come to judgment, they must pass through three stages of an extended process.

The first stage is *consciousness-raising*. Factual information is important in this stage in making people aware of the problem and its urgency. But mere awareness is hardly enough on issues that call for the kind of change and sacrifice that can easily be frustrated by wishful thinking and denial.

A second stage follows consciousness-raising as people struggle with and *work through* the conflicting complexities of the issue. This is by far the longest and most difficult stage.

Only after it is complete do people reach the third stage of *resolution*, when their minds are firmly made up.

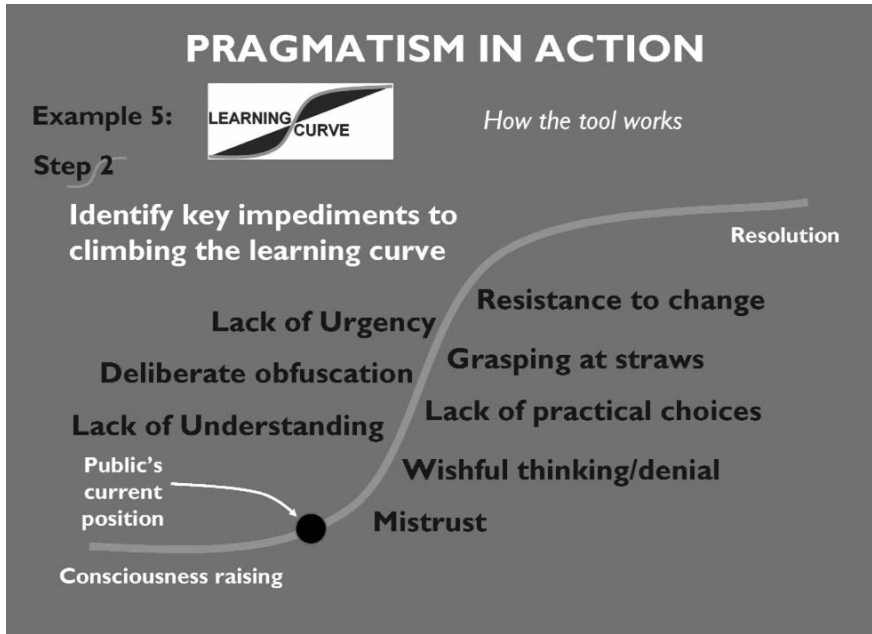
The length of time it takes to move through the three stages of the learning curve varies hugely from issue to issue. Some issues zip through the three stages in a matter of a few months. At the other extreme, issues can get bogged down for years and years. Indeed, the time required can vary by issue from mere weeks and months to decades and even centuries. For example, issues such as slavery and women's rights have taken centuries to resolve.

The key factor determining the length of time for an issue to reach resolution is the degree of emotional and political resistance it encounters. If the resistance is minimal, the issue can sail through the three stages. If the resistance is fierce, the issue can be stalled indefinitely. On some proposals for policies to deal with the energy issue (such as raising taxes on gasoline) the public's emotional and political resistance is powerful.

How then can we accelerate the learning curve on urgent issues like energy, where the need to move expeditiously through the three phases is critical?

Our new research tool starts by monitoring the public's position on the learning curve as it evolves over time. The research shows that the public has made progress over the

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In summary, the cultural impediments eroding our problem-solving abilities are formidable, and we cannot deal with them one at a time. We need an overall approach.

The new pragmatism is a powerful way of approaching problems to transcend the negative forces operating in today's culture. I believe it provides the common ground we need to revitalize our national gift for problem solving.

Since Barack Obama was elected President, the word *pragmatic* keeps cropping up. I believe it symbolizes a new feeling in the country that it is time to move away from partisanship, ideology, and magic fix-its. The mood suggests that Americans have decided that it is time to get down to work and start to cooperate to deal with our problems.

We are, hopefully, at the beginning of the era of the new pragmatism. ■

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past few years in the first consciousness-raising stage (with considerable help from the media's coverage of the issue).

It is just beginning to confront the difficult conflicts and changes called for in the second stage. At this present stage of the learning curve, a majority of the American public says that it is willing to support a wide array of incentives to improve energy efficiency, to reduce gasoline usage, and to encourage the development of alternative forms of energy. But the public is not yet prepared for the trade-offs and challenges needed to make these proposals a reality. In other words, the public is just beginning to engage the conflicts inherent in adopting new energy policies to ward off the triple threat.

Our new research tool is designed to help the public encounter and work through the key impediments to climbing this second critical stage of the learning curve. Those impediments include:

- wishful thinking and denial;
- a lack of understanding of the complexity of the problem;
- a lack of practical choices (people need to have concrete choices with which to wrestle);
- deliberate obfuscation;
- a tendency to grasp at straws;

- a feeling of lack of urgency;
- normal resistance to change; and
- a great deal of mistrust.

These are not trivial obstacles, so the working-through process will take an enormous amount of time and effort. Our California-based research organization, Viewpoint Learning, Inc., has designed a series of experiments to accelerate the learning curve with small groups of people. We do this through intensive eight-hour dialogues with cross-sections of the public. In these dialogues, average Americans engage the energy issue in great depth and struggle with the various obstacles and impediments. At the end of each dialogue session, we gather insights into how policy-makers can assist the public to deal constructively with the obstacles the issue presents.

Based on these insights, we brief leaders on how to keep the public's expectations realistic and how to overcome, step by step, the major obstacles to change.

In addition to briefing leaders, we also contribute to advancing "explanatory journalism," which is a way of assisting the media to give the public a better understanding of the context of the energy issue.