

## Say what you are, not what you're not

“In the United States of America, we don’t practice guilt by association,” said Denis McDonough, deputy national security advisor to President Obama, “we will not stigmatize or demonize entire communities because of the actions of a few.”

This was part of the statement made by the White House in response to the New York Representative Peter King’s announcement that he would hold Congressional hearings on the radicalization of American Muslims. The problem with McDonough’s comment, though well intentioned, is that it actually communicates the exact opposite of what McDonough is trying to say. The reason is not political, it is a simple inconvenient detail about how our brains absorb information.

What words do you remember from that opening statement? What ideas stuck with you? For better or for worse, our brains can’t deal in negatives. We can’t tell someone not to think something. “Don’t think of the color yellow,” for example. We can’t do it. Our minds immediately go to the words and not the intention of the words.

When McDonough tells us America doesn’t “practice guilt by association” or that we will not “stigmatize or demonize,” those are the words we walk away with. Those are the things that we associate to America for no other reason than because his statement told us to.

Leadership never defines itself, its cause or its vision by what it is not. Great leadership always tells us what it is, where we’re going or who we are. Kennedy didn’t tell us we’re not going to stay on the earth, he told us we’re going to the moon. The founding fathers didn’t define America as a country that would not subjugate, coerce or cause unhappiness. They said the country was founded to guarantee certain unalienable rights among those being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Though the negative statement is technically accurate, it does not inspire. Negative looks backwards and positive looks forward. Vision, if it is to inspire, always looks forward.

Companies make the same mistake. It is amazing how many businesses define

themselves by what they are not instead of who they are. Too many jump at the opportunity to tell you what they don't do instead of what they do do. Meet a small creative agency, for example, and ask them what makes them better and they will tell you that they are not subject to the whims of a large holding company. Ask one retailer what makes them superior and they will tell you that they don't treat their customers like numbers. Words like "don't," "aren't," "won't," "isn't" or "doesn't" do not belong in any statement that is supposed to tell people who you are or what makes you special or different.

If you want people to go where you're going, if you want to inspire people, tell them what you believe, not what you don't believe. Tell them what you do not what you don't do. Tell them who you are not who you're not.

As for Mr. McDonough, if he has to make any more public statements about what America believes, may I suggest this:

"America believes, first and foremost, that all men are created equal. Whether our differences are based on gender, sexual preference, race or religion, we see all Americans as equal players in the pursuit and preservation of the American Dream. In fact, we, more than any other nation on the planet, defend the rights of those who may look or sound different or practice a faith unfamiliar to the majority.

The hearings proposed by Representative Peter King run completely counter to our founding values. We ask of all Muslim Americans who are as offended by the idea of these hearings as we are to come together, stand firm and know that the vast majority of our nation sees you for what you are - just like us. We are all American."

Look forward, tell us what you believe and where you want to go and you'll be amazed how well your positive words will inspire those around you.