

X-Rated Expletives

"It makes you realize that whoever is President is going to be a man that all the children of America will either look up to or will look down to. And I can only say that I'm very proud that President Eisenhower restored dignity and decency and, frankly, good language to the conduct of the presidency of the United States. And I only hope that should I win this election, that I could [see] to it that whenever any mother or father talks to his child, he can look at the man in the White House and say: 'Well, there is a man who maintains the kind of standards personally that I would want my child to follow.'"

Thus during a televised campaign debate with John F. Kennedy on Oct. 13, 1960, Richard M. Nixon sanctimoniously criticized the salty language of Harry S. Truman. Now the transcripts of Nixon's Watergate tapes publicly reveal what many White House insiders already knew—that Nixon uses plenty of X-rated expletives. Those who have heard him speak in private say that the swearwords he commonly uses are both blasphemous and obscene; they include four-letter expletives that are salacious and scatological.

Moreover, the transcripts suggest that he uses them with a greater frequency than any President in recent memory—a great deal more than Kennedy and Eisenhower, both of whom could muster choice words on occasion, and even more than Truman and Johnson, whose racy vocabularies were legendary. Truman's language, though earthy, had a funny, folksy flair that Nixon's lacks. As for Lyndon Johnson, his command of invective was a constant source of purple surprise. But unlike Nixon, he did not mechanically spew out obscenities; he used them pointedly to cap his stories. L.B.J. could make people chuckle with his inventive cussing and barnyard phrases, and those who were not afraid of him rather admired what Newsman Peter Lisagor once called his "rich, almost lyrical, Pedernales patois."

To the extent that Nixon is at all like L.B.J., he swears, as Johnson did, at least partly in order to show contempt for others, according to Dr. Michael Maccoby, a Washington psychoanalyst who has made a classification of cussers. "Both were lower-middle-class guys who made good. They felt that certain people were contemptuous of them, so they in turn were contemptuous of those they perceived to be their enemies."

Other behavioral scientists connect Nixon's swearing with his admiration for tough guys like General Patton and the characters John Wayne plays and with his love for sports. Notes Harvard Sociologist David Riesman: "He always wanted to be in the locker room, but never belonged there; he's like the coxswain on the crew." Many psychologists observe a deep-seated insecurity in Nixon and feel that he swears simply to be one of the boys.

Vile Words. Within hours of the release of the transcripts, "expletive deleted" had become part of the vernacular. It was used humorously, for most people seemed to worry less about the expletives that were deleted than about the remaining portions of the transcripts. Yet many were shocked and offended by the President's language. Said John J. Hurt, editor of the Texas weekly, *Baptist Standard*: "It is clear that the words edited out were vile; one can't imagine that a man with decency would use such language, even sparingly, much less have it flow—and flow in the Oval Office."

Blue language, of course, has long been spoken in the theater and on screen and continues to be heard, despite the Supreme Court rulings last year tightening the guidelines on obscenity.

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"He may grow up to be President!"

Broadway plays like *My Fat Friend* and *Bad Habits* are sprinkled with obscenities, as are popular films such as *Mean Streets* and *Serpico*—and especially *The Last Detail*, the story of two U.S. Navy enlisted men escorting a third to jail. Growing numbers of men—and women—are using profanity liberally. Women certainly swear more than they

used to, sometimes in the expectation that saying forbidden words will put them on an equal footing with men. All this is a dramatic turn-around from the days when, as H.L. Mencken noted in *The American Language*, 40% of the coeds at a Southern college deplored the use of the word "bull," and 20% were shocked to hear "leg" (considered an overly physical term for "limb").

Children of all classes and geographical areas are freely using four-letter words, sometimes in the classroom. As one nine-year-old boy in north Atlanta put it last week: "Why not? Mommy swears; Daddy swears; even the President swears." According to New York City Psychiatrist Joel Kovel, children use dirty words "to vent hostility." And, says he, by using expletives for bodily functions and excrement, they "release feelings of sexual excitement."

Swearing, in fact, appears to have certain psychological and social benefits. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu believes that it is frequently more satisfying than laughing or weeping. In his book *The Anatomy of Swearing*, Montagu points out that cussing is "as old as man and coeval with language."

Dr. Vladimir Piskacek, a New York

City psychiatrist who has studied linguistics among various cultures, explains that the prevalence of a particular genre of swearword generally relates to cultural taboos. In heavily religious countries like Poland, Austria and Hungary, he notes, blasphemy is a common way to express rebellion; in Germany, there is a rigid standard of cleanliness and an emphasis on excretory swearwords as a revolt against this meticulousness. In the U.S., long dominated by a puritan code of sexual behavior, a heavy usage of sexual swearwords reflects subconscious anger against prudishness, says Piskacek.

Notorious Machismo. Researchers agree that some social groups make especially heavy usage of obscenities. Truck drivers, factory and construction workers and men in the armed services are notorious cursers, often as a demonstration of their *machismo*. In a survey of the language patterns of 3,000 midwesterners, Psychologist Paul Cameron found that 24% of the vocabulary of factory and construction workers on the job consists of "dirty" words. It is hard, notes Cameron, to put together sentences with more swear words than that. White-collar professionals, he found, have only a 1% rating in the office and 3% to 4% at parties. This distinction does not apply to the nation's No. 1 white-collar professional. Proper at parties, he lets himself go in the highest office of the land.

