

Metaphors That Go the 'Hang Out Road'

by Arthur Hadley

The writer is Washington contributor to New Times.

Everyone who has mucked through even parts of the Nixon Watergate transcripts has remarked on the immorality they expose. But the accompanying mindlessness seems to have been missed. Not just the lack of precise thought, but the lack of thought itself. This is the vacuum George Orwell described when he wrote in "Politics and the English Language": "By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms . . . (one) is not really thinking."

For example: Nixon talks to Dean about whether to pay blackmail. "If they, for example, say let's cut our losses and you say we are going down the road to see if we can cut our losses and no more blackmail and all the rest. And then the thing blows cutting Bob (Haldeman) and the rest to pieces . . ." The "they" is not identified, nor is the machine that after reaping losses goes down the road with a bang.

Nixon and Dean again, in one of the finest passages in the whole 1,308 pages, are pure Pirandello:

- Nixon: Is it too late to go the hang out road?
- Dean: Yes, I think it is. The hang out road.
- Nixon: The hang out road.
- Dean: It was kicked around, Bob and I and . . .
- Nixon: Ehrlichman always felt it should be hang out.

These men are not talking about getting into their car and driving to a friendly bar. Remove the stale metaphor and they are saying:

- Nixon: is it too late to tell the truth?
- Dean: Yes.

That says it all. To quote Orwell's essay again: "When one watches some tired hack repeating the familiar phrases . . . one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being, but some kind of dummy."

The tapes are crammed with mixed, dull metaphors that scream the absence of thought. Dean tells the President that he can persuade the Cabinet that Haldeman and Ehrlichman are innocent: "Like we were selling Wheaties . . ." Nixon replies: "The problem that you have are these mine fields on down the road." Some poor drummer from General Mills is going to lose his foot? On dealing with the Erwin committee Nixon muses: "I do think Kleindienst has got to take up the leading

oar on this business of Weicker right away." What does he do with the raised oar? Hit the senator?

Nixon waves his mixed metaphor wand at Judge Sirica: "The Judge . . . is the big white knight now. He is clean as a hounds tooth." He ponders whether Haldeman should make a public statement: ". . . Bob, the forthcoming thing which I think I tilted against—I think I am now tilting for." Will the grand jury indictments stop at John Mitchell? Nixon wonders: ". . . if they get a hell of a big fish that is going to take a lot of the fire out of this thing . . ."—particularly if the former Attorney General is still wet when they throw him on the coals.

Orwell wrote: "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity."

Later in the tapes the charred fish turns into an infection and a house cleaning problem. Nixon tells Ehrlichman: "We have to prick the boil and take the heat." Ehrlichman, a hard ball player in the world of mixed metaphor, replies: ". . . the idea is, this will prick the boil. It may not. The history of this thing has to be, though, that you do not tuck this under the rug." Grandmother told me a strip of carpet worn around the neck at night cures carbuncles. Ehrlichman is always "stonewalling" people and "running out the bottom line." He advises Haldeman: "The President has backed off his rock solid position." And perhaps landed on his (expletive deleted)? Discussing who was responsible for paying the hush money he says: ". . . The coloring is, the key was in their pocket."

Will Ehrlichman tell the truth before the Ervin Committee? He answers: "You ask me, 'Do I cave now?' My feeling about this whole thing is that we ought to be looking at every nook and cranny for every device that there is to be forthcoming." The President and his advisers spend so much time on the tapes going over the same ground because they cannot even talk meaningfully to each other. I am often reminded of Vietnam, where the military were not just lying to the press, but, far more fatally, to themselves.

Ehrlichman talks of protecting the President: "What I am getting at here is to insulate you, number one. To make you appear to be ahead of the power curve . . ." But in flying the most dangerous attitude is to appear ahead of the power curve. One is behind but some key instrument is lying. There will probably be a crash; perhaps into a stonewall. One will hang out, hoody and mixed with bits of machine, on down the road.

Occasionally the blurring of thought by junky metaphor becomes almost conscious. Nixon, Ehrlichman and Haldeman discuss how John Mitchell should testify before the grand jury.

Nixon: ". . . Does Mitchell come in and say, 'My memory was at fault. I lied?'"

Ehrlichman: "No. He can't say that. He says—ah—ah."

Nixon: "That without intending I may have been responsible for this; I regret it very much but I did not realize what they were up to. They were, we were, talking about apples and oranges . . ."

Haldeman: "I think so. He authorized apples and they bought oranges."

Translation: He said keep newspaper clips on the Democrats and they bugged the Watergate.

The pressure builds and Nixon is forced to "go public"; make a statement saying he conducted an investigation which in fact he did not conduct. Nixon: "Yeah—the President has—the President on March 21 has undertaken a personal investigation—you know has undertaken his own personal investigation . . ."

There are moments when truth forces its way up through the layers of dead metaphor. At one point the President is trying to pressure Henry Petersen to prosecute Dean and let Haldeman and Ehrlichman go. "I don't like to put the three of them in the same bag," says the President.

Petersen picks up the literal metaphor. "Mr. President, why do you not like to put them in the same bag? You don't like to put them in the same bag because Haldeman and Ehrlichman are loyal to the last minute and you—?"

"No, no it isn't that," the trapped President interrupts. "It isn't that."

In the end, even the stale metaphors were mine fields.