

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

On Bloodbaths

I CANNOT BE too high in my praise of Ronald Reagan's increasing mastery of the English language.

The language of politics, as we do not have to be told, is cottony, evasive, and cowardly. When an official seatwarmer wants to say something important (which in his case usually means something that is going to harm a large number of people) he thinks of the people he is going to harm, and phrases his announcement in language designed to appease his victims. Double-talk, it used to be called.

This may make for good and conciliatory democracy; but it leaves something to be desired in the English language department.



English is a language wonderfully suited to the blunt, honest statement. This befits the instrument of a blunt, honest people. When Cromwell swore by the bowels of Christ, you knew ruddy well he was swearing. When Caroline Lamb said Byron was "mad, bad and dangerous to know," you could figure out what was on her mind.

When the scholars who translated the King James Bible spoke of whited sepulchres we hardly had to be told they meant people and things "which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones."

Good English, like good French or Good Urdu, is honest English. It is no better than when strong feeling is wedded to strong language. The effect is unforced and unmistakable. And, I might add, irrecoverable.

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MR. REAGAN lapsed into stunning English this week. He spoke the truth as he saw it, without fear of consequences or even thought of them. In one sentence, he said the most memorable thing in his public career. It was memorable because it was unforced, and because it had the hard ring of truth, as the Governor sees it.

At Yosemite on Wednesday he came out for bloodshed between the State of California and militant student demonstrators.

Answering a question on the subject, Mr. Reagan said: "If it takes a bloodbath, let's get it over with. No more appeasement."

This is good stuff. It is, as Time magazine used to claim for its content: curt, clear and complete. It is an honest and invincible picture of one man's state of mind, at a certain time.

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THAT MR. REAGAN favors shooting an unspecified number of post-adolescents who happen to disagree with him, comes as no surprise to those who have followed his public words (and, more important, those wonderfully menacing bad guy facial expressions of his on the tube).

He hates the little bastards. As indeed he should, since his hatred of them did so much to assure his election to the governorship.

That he hates them no longer has to be guessed at. The Reagan benediction on bloodbathing removes all doubt, there.

The Governor is willing to risk his prestige on a bloodbath. The demonstrators will be risking their lives. They have been put on notice. The police will be risking their lives. They have been put on notice. Reagan will be risking his prestige.

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JUST AS I WAS about to grade the Governor A for effort, and accomplishment as well, the superb English prose artist began to be extinguished by the politicians who had momentarily nodded.

The whole superb performance was taken back. Reagan and his pals began "explaining" something that was as far outside explanation as life itself. The Governor said bloodbath was "a figure of speech." He "didn't realize he had used the expression." He did not "mean to use it."

His exegeses reminded one of what Talleyrand told a fellow diplomat: "If we go on explaining we shall cease to understand each other."

I would not like that to happen. The pressures of representational government are such that it is almost impossible for a leader to put himself on the line. The Governor this week did so, and admirably. We should all allow him the luxury of honesty, this one time.