

What's in a Shakespeare?

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, March 29—Frank Shakespeare, the director of the United States Information Agency, is at odds with William Shakespeare, the playwright, and the issue—marvelous to say—is the value of a name.

William held ("Romeo and Juliet") that there was nothing in a name. A rose, he suggested, would not smell a bit different if it were called something else. This point, incidentally (to inject a personal note), seems debatable; it is almost inconceivable that a rose could smell anything at all like a rose if it were called a liverwort, a skunk cabbage or sauerkraut. Nevertheless, William dismissed the opposing view in that blithely airy way of the poet with a rhetorical question: "What's in a name?"

William has had the argument very much his way over the centuries. It takes a brave spirit to argue with the great Shakespeare. In fact it takes a Shakespeare.

On March 17, Frank Shakespeare, pondering William's question—"What's in a name?"—replied with a thundering "Plenty!"

As director of the U.S.I.A., Frank was sick and tired of "U.S.S.R. propaganda" which "refers to the people who live within its borders as 'the Soviets.'"

"There is no such thing," he wrote in a memorandum directing U.S.I.A. men not to call the people of the Soviet Union by the name "Soviets" and not to call the Soviet Union "the Soviet nation."

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," William had said. Frank was rebutting with the assertion that a Soviet Union by most other names would smell sweeter than it ought to.

"Soviet nation," he wrote, "is semantical absurdity. There is no 'Soviet nation' and never will be." (The tone here suggests that the more Frank thought about William's proposition, the angrier it made him.)

The Soviet Union, he said, "is a multinational state . . . but it is not a nation. To call it so, apart from being grammatically incorrect, is to foster the illusion of one happy family rather than an imperialist state increasingly beset with nationality problems, which is what it is."

Mr. Shakespeare (Frank) obviously dislikes the Soviet Union and believes that it can be hurt if we refuse to call its residents by the name of its choosing. What's in a name? The difference between victory and defeat for the imperialistic Soviet multinational state, he suggests.

The belief that institutions, groups and persons we dislike can be damaged if we refuse to accept their chosen changes in nomenclature is not

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new. Despite the lip service paid to Shakespeare's (William) wisdom about the rose, there is still a great faith in the inherent power of names.

A famous boxer, to cite a case, once changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali. He had undergone changes in his view of life, had become in a sense a new man. Cassius Clay by another name thus became another man.

Many sportswriters apparently thought so, too, for long after he had announced his change of name many persisted in writing about him as "Cassius Clay," as though calling him by the name of his choice might change some vital reality. A boxer by any other name might turn the world upside down and start stinging like a butterfly, floating like a bee.

In some cases, perhaps, refusal to use a new name is also a way of protesting against the world's unpleasant rate of change. We have learned about the boxer Clay. "Who is this new fighter, Ali? The same man, you say? You mean Clay and Ali are the same man? And you expect me, with all the other things I've got to keep up on in the world, to interrupt everything periodically and learn that Clay has become Ali, that Jones has become Baraka, that Alcindor has become Jabbar?"

As a general principle it would seem reasonable for those people who believe with Shakespeare (William) that there is nothing in a name, to go along graciously and call a man, a group, an institution, a nation by the name of its choice. If Lew wants to become Kareem, that's his business, and why not? If Cities Service wants to become Citgo, fine. If leaders of the United States want to call the citizenry "Americans," it would be foolish to quibble even though "Americans"—a term for everybody from Baffin Bay to Tierra del Fuego—is semantical absurdity.

Americans would surely watch not one TV show less if they were called New Yorkers, Wisconsites, Wyoming-ers, Arizonans and so on according to their states of origin. The price of gasoline would not be one-tenth of a cent lower if Citgo were still called Cities Service. Ali's weight would not be one ounce less if he were still named Clay. And at a guess Mr. Shakespeare (Frank) is on the wrong track if he thinks the Soviet Union will be one bit weaker if we refuse to call its citizens "Soviets."

On the other hand—though also, admittedly, at a guess—if roses were called liverworts they would smell terrible.