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The Unlikely Wordmen

OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

From the start the Nixon Administration sought to present a self-portrait of sobriety and dullness suggesting pious drones full of gray but excellent earnestness. At the same time, however, it was talking and popularizing a language more gaudily outrageous than any contrived in Washington since Franklin Roosevelt discovered the alphabet.

The odd thing, looking back, is that there was no hint in the 1968 campaign that these were men fascinated with language, drunk on words. The basic Nixon speech of 1968 contained only one attempt at music. It was that line about "the lift of a driving dream."

A driving dream? It sounded like an automobile commercial. With lift? Well, it is wasted energy to cavil at nonsense in campaign talk, and nobody expected style from the Nixonians anyhow. "At that point in time," as Nixon men apparently always say when they mean "then," nobody expected them to venture beyond the incomprehensible glugglegloop of middle Federalese which characterizes state papers and messages to Congress.

Very quickly, however, slogans began to fly. John Kennedy had braced us with "Let us begin," and Lyndon Johnson with "Let us continue," but the Nixonians were to make the ears throb with slogans. "Bring us together" and "let us lower our voices" were among the first, although "law and order" had gone so well in the campaign that it "came on board" to stay until Watergate rendered it indiscreet.

"Coming on board," was the way everybody started new jobs in Mr. Nixon's Washington at that point in time. Once on board, of course, Administration men were expected to "maintain a low profile."

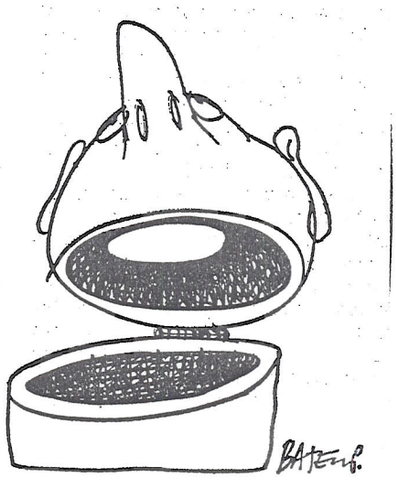
The low profile was part of "the game plan." You came on board, maintained a low profile and talked about ways to carry out the game plan. This was called participating in "the input process."

If the Administration's critics ("Eastern liberal intellectuals," "establishmentarians," "elitists") complained that they could not understand the language, much less the name of the game, the Nixon men had a standard rebuttal. "It will play in Peoria," they said.

When the President complimented himself on having created "peace with honor," and sticklers for detail were saying, "Well, yes, but he is still bombing a lot of people and land," the White House men said, "Maybe so, but it will play in Peoria."

Besides the Peoria-playing "peace with honor" slogan—the 1972 campaign also produced the undistinguished "Four more years!" and "Nixon's the one!" — the election's most memorable slogan was Henry Kissinger's "peace is at hand," meaning, as events demonstrated, "We will still be bombing them in the summer of '73."

"Watch what we do, not what we say," was John Mitchell's contribution to phrase-making early in the game plan. When the press took his advice, however, the Vice President was summoned to Webster's Unabridged. "Agnew," the Administration's most famous household word, in turn made a household word of "permissiveness" by elevating it to a sin of such grandeur that it now seems to transcend even pride and gluttony.



As "bring us together" gave way to playing in Peoria, a new language of abuse enlivened political discourse. "Nattering nabobs of negativism" and "effete intellectual snobs" will survive in memory long after everyone has forgotten that they were merely people at odds with the Government. TV news people were said to have trafficked in "ideological plugola" and "élitist gossip." Colorful stuff from such earnest men.

Even the President has shown a flare for the tersely ungenerous statement, memorializing campus antiwar demonstrators as "bums," women guests at Washington dinner parties as "dogs" and large parts of the judiciary as "soft-headed judges."

Metaphorical excess is commonplace in all Administrations, but this one has produced two that may speak eloquently to generations yet unborn (L.B.J.-type rhetoric) about the values of our time. One: the President's statement that the first NASA moon mission was the greatest event since the Creation. Two: the declaration by Mr. Colson that he would walk over his grandmother for President Nixon.

Euphemism flourishes in every government. In this one it is rampant. Bombing is "protective reaction." Breaking and entering is "surreptitious entry." Casing the joint to be burgled is called "a preliminary vulnerability and feasibility study." Burglary's purpose is to enhance Daniel Ellsberg's "prosecuteability." Reports of criminal activity among the faithful are withheld from John Mitchell in order to give him "deniability."

When it comes to phrase-making, the Administration's game plan seems to call for ultra-high profile by everybody on board. If it doesn't play in Peoria, it can only be because it is "inoperative," and who knows what that means, if anything?