

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

'Inoperative'

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE is pollinated in curious ways. The sudden and usually transient changes in usage and meaning are usually instigated at the top; the permanent changes usually come from the bottom.

Changes of the first order can usually be called cant of the second order, slang. Both quite often derive from the desire to conceal something thought to be unworthy or unfortunate, as in thieves' cant or political diction.

Thus far this year the two great innovators of language in America have been distinctly dissimilar men who have one thing in common, an involvement in the Watergate obscenity. These men are Ronald Ziegler, who came out of Disneyland by way of the J. Walter Thompson ad agency to be official White House liar for the Nixon administration, and James W. McCord Jr., the security chief of the Committee to Re-elect the President.

Mr. McCord presented himself to the Senate Watergate committee and the nation's television audience as a Jesuit prefect of discipline who had been caught slinking out of a cathouse, and was dutifully penitent. He punctiliously designated all of his derelictions, of which he had usefully kept a full and complete record. He used the mind-numbing phrase "at this point in time" or "at that point in time." The usage became extremely attractive to the other White House burglars. Nearly all of them used it for the simple words now and then. The phrase seemed a healing unguent to their souls.



MR. ZIEGLER'S contribution was more subtle. It smelled of the Madison avenue lamp. The word "inoperative" doubtless originated in one of those famed ad agency skull sessions where the Talleyrands of that strange trade invent words to conceal thought.

To inoperate means, if I get it rightly, to launder a lot of lies by a vast benign corporate sweep of the hand. What Mr. Ziegler did was to announce that all the truths he had been announcing about Watergate and the Washington Post were actually bald lies and had been proven so. To blanket this interesting concept and give it corporate legitimacy, Mr. Ziegler said his previous lies were "inoperative."

ANOTHER 1973 usage, which is rapidly becoming endemic among the telly announcers and others who make a living with their mouth, involves an omnipresent Washington character called Present Nixon. The air waves are flooded with, "The Present announced," "The Present yesterday denied," "The Present arrived in Moscow," etc., etc. Just what this huge elision means I refer to those who worry about this sort of thing.

The Present himself made a pretty good contrib with "peace with honor." This means, again as near as I can descry, peace without honor. It is a shibboleth few will march behind, as a description of our last days in Vietnam; but it fits in admirably with a theory I have about cant words.

IT SEEMS that people talk funny the minute they are found with their fist in the jam. They talk like a police report, or worse. A typical boobie of this sort, when found cooking the books of the Pismo Beach First Security, will start to babble about his days as an Eagle Scout. We recently had one of these lads in the White House.

Could people with clear consciences inflict on their fellow men such barbarous usages as meaningful dialogues, ambiance, viable, ambivalent, ethnic, relevant, visceral, relate and input? Not to speak of that ubiquitous horror "hopefully." These massive illiteracies are all part of the galloping J. Walter Thompsonism that has become an ensign of these crooked times. Meantime I am glad to report that the favored word of the young and the underground press remains a four-letter expletive for manure.