

Of bucks and bears

Ronald Reagan likes to remind his well-fed audiences in Florida about their resentment when they see "a strapping young man ahead of them in line buying T-bone steak with food stamps while you wait to pay for your hamburger." One fine February day in Fort Lauderdale this Reagan line came out differently, and the presidential challenger instead referred to "the strapping young buck" who buys steak with food stamps. The word "buck", as the *New York Times* delicately phrased it in the 13th paragraph of a Reagan campaign story the following day, "to whites in the South generally denotes a large Black man." Reporters debated among themselves whether this expression was a racist slur but Reagan denied it and nothing much came of it. Fortunately for Reagan, it has proved of little consequence in the Florida primary where virtually all of the Black voters are Democrats.

The Ford campaign organization, made aware by Stu Spencer of Reagan's gift for impolitic turns of phrase, keeps track of all the challenger's verbal slips. But the Ford people have not been in a position to do anything about them lest they draw attention to the President's own phrasemaking. This they dare not do. Ford is a good man, certainly, and maybe even a good President. But he is a clear and present danger to the English language.

This is, after all, the President who believes that his replacement for Daniel Patrick Moynihan as ambassador to the United Nations will "follow the same policy toward some of the Third or Fourth World powers — calling a spade a spade." He is the President who invented the word "perception-wise" and who pronounces "judgment" as if it contained a middle "e" and "resilient" as if it were "res-IL-ent". He is the President who has given us "sickle-cell Armenia" and who toasted that "great leader of the state of Israel", Anwar Sadat.

What is the President's view on abortion? He agrees with the "descending opinion" of Justice Potter Stewart. What made America great? President Ford told a stunned New Hampshire audience that it was "the work ethic". Defending the integrity of the Bureau of Labor Statistics figures on unemployment the same day, Ford claimed they were the work of a trusted "career non-professional". Few speeches fail to add to the collected wit and witticisms of Gerald Ford.

One would think that what this embattled President would need most is appointees, career non-professionals or not, who guard their tongues. Alas, he has not been so fortunate. White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen pushed the President's New Hampshire campaign off on the wrong foot by telling a pre-Christmas briefing that

Ford was going to Vail for his vacation because of the poor skiing conditions in New Hampshire. And Peter Kaye, the Ford campaign committee press secretary, added his own insult to the first primary state by telling reporters on Air Force One as the President was en route to Manchester: "New Hampshire is a difficult state to organize. It's a helluva state to walk in, because if you go 40 miles outside the city there's nothing but trees and bears."

Kaye quickly became the target of a *Manchester Union Leader* editorial headed, "Bears, Elephants and Jackasses." But he is a witty man who took his own gaffe in stride. When the President campaigned in Florida the following week, Kaye was asked what there was 40 miles from the cities in that state. "Alligators and mangroves", he replied.

Reagan's wit is frequent and well-memorized; Ford's is rare and carefully crafted by speechwriter (formerly gagwriter) Bob Orben. When Orben or the President find a line that some audience laughs at, it is treasured and saved for other speeches. Thus, in Dearborn, Ford declared to a midwestern Republican conference: "I doubt that the United States government could make a Model T for less than \$50,000." The Republicans laughed. Next week, in Nashua, N.H., the site of a brewery, the line returned as this variation on the theme: "I don't think the United States government could make beer for less than \$50 a six pack." Again, a laugh, one of the very few in a 40-minute speech. It is a line that Ford doubtless will use again.

Reagan, who puts Ford in the shade as a stump speaker, is both blessed and cursed with a good memory. He remembers one liners, and a single speech of his usually is sprinkled with more quips than Ford would use in a month of campaigning. But Reagan's worst lines are as easily dredged from memory as his better ones. They persist year after year, coming to mind when they sometimes seem least appropriate.

A reporter pondering the "strapping young buck" line reflected that Reagan seemed to have a dim view of Africans. Responding to a question at a New Hampshire high school, Reagan said of the new African states: "It wasn't too many years ago when they invited someone for lunch, they had him for lunch." It was a new phrase to the national reporters but Reagan had said it all before. The careful research of the Ford campaign produced this line from Oct. 11, 1965, when Reagan was preparing for his gubernatorial campaign: "When the emerging African nations have a man for lunch, they really have him for lunch." Nothing changes, but it should.

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