

AN OPEN LETTER TO HERBERT KLEIN

DEAR HERBERT KLEIN:

I hear that you are going to coordinate all the information that comes out of the Executive branch of the federal government after President-elect Nixon's inaugural. Most of the press people seem unwilling to believe you when you say you intend to expedite the news. They think you plan to conduct an airtight exercise in censorship. But I believe you, and I will tell you why I do. I coordinated all the official news of the Insular Government of Puerto Rico a quarter-century ago. FDR brain-truster Rexford Guy Tugwell was governor of the island then—a Presidential appointee—and I worked for him. Our purpose was to tell the people the truth instead of the distortions they had been hearing for years from the sugar barons who ruled the island like a feudal fief.

Human nature being what it is, you may endure some of the same experiences that I encountered. On the off-chance that it may help you, I will tell you about my operation.

Although the Puerto Rican newspapers screamed in anguish at my appointment, they did not remain a serious problem for very long. They soon saw that because of the work of my office they were getting more information from the Government than they had ever got before. Of course they complained. Newsmen always complain about something. But my problem was the petty politicians who wanted to grab credit for everything that was being done.

Whoever landed in the headlines first got the lion's share of the laurels, no matter how little he deserved it. Since there is no such thing as catching up with a published mistake, I had to put out the news before the publicity-hungry officeholders knew enough to say anything. When they protested my efficiency to the Governor, he paid no heed. So they carried their complaints to the insular legislature, which cut a ludicrously minuscule nick in my pay and sent word to me privately that I was to accept this action as a symbol of popular scorn.

Because we were giving the news to mainland wire services as well as to newspapers and radio stations on the island, our press releases were written first in sparse English and translated from that into Spanish, minus the usual curlicues. The result intrigued local linguists enough to bring me an invitation to lecture on language transition at the University of Puerto Rico. Looking back on

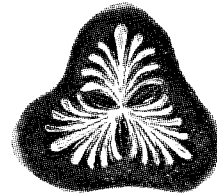
it now, I think it just as well that I couldn't find time to write the lectures.

For one day we slipped in translating from English into Spanish. The phraseology that came out was uncomplimentary to the sugar barons. We corrected the mistake as soon as we saw it. But the Governor and I were nonetheless sued for criminal libel. The Governor thought it would be a lark to go to jail. I wasn't so sure, but I agreed to go to keep him company. The Attorney General of Puerto Rico ordered us to obtain bail, however, because he said the islanders expected us to know the difference between dignified and undignified behavior. We were convicted of criminal libel in a lower court, but the verdict was reversed on appeal.

OUR news-coordinating system worked incredibly well until the biggest story in Puerto Rico's modern history came along. This was FDR's decision to accept Tugwell's proposal to allow the Puerto Ricans to elect a governor from among themselves. I first learned of it in talking to Tugwell about a Washington news dispatch that said he was about to be removed from the governorship. He told me the White House had instructed him to remain silent until an announcement time was found that would be politically opportune to FDR.

That wasn't my conception of the candor I was supposed to guarantee. I thought about it overnight and then hopped a plane from San Juan to Washington. In Washington, I offered the story of the elective governorship to Scotty Reston for the July 4 edition of *The New York Times*. When FDR awoke on the morning of the Fourth

and saw the *Times* front page on the coverlet of his bed, he called his press secretary, Steve Early, on the telephone and bellowed: "Who was the s.o.b. who let this out?" When Tugwell relayed the question to me, I identified the s.o.b. and recommended my own dismissal on grounds of insubordination. The Governor had too much respect for truth to do that. He simply admonished me to avert my face from the portico whenever I passed the White House because the President "might be looking for you."



FDR himself did not have the time to look for me. But others did. And they made his continuing displeasure evident. A few months later, I felt I owed it to the Governor to resign. I returned to New York while he was vacationing in the Virgin Islands. Learning of my departure, he telephoned from San Juan to ask me to represent the governor's office in Washington. But by that time I was back in journalism, where I belong.

I was awfully young in those days, Mr. Klein. I believed that anything was possible for those who wished for it hard enough. I still believe that anything ought to be possible. But I have come to wonder whether it actually is possible to orchestrate information about the government of a democracy.

—JOHN LEAR.



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THE CURRENT LOW LEVEL OF PUBLIC INSULTS

By HILLIER KRIEGHBAUM

PUBLIC insults, like so many things, are not up to former standards. From the recent spate of reports on political confrontations and student disturbances, it appears that present-day invective—if that word can be applied to phrases often used on campuses, in the streets, and sometimes on speakers' platforms—is of pretty small semantic caliber, unimaginatively repetitive, and in a sense Victorian, because it rests on the conviction that hearers will react violently to "dirty" words. One need only cite, for example, that favorite student chant which has been translated into print by *The New York Times* as "Up against the wall, mother-blank."

On the political front, the 1968 Presidential campaign was relatively mild and devoid of much colorful denunciation. During the closing days, when candidates were exhausted and tempers were short, Hubert H. Humphrey called

his Republican rival "the No. 1 double-talk man of all time" and "Richard the Silent." During his efforts to force a debate, initially on television and eventually anywhere, Humphrey vowed "to put a blowtorch to his [Nixon's] political tail and run him out into the open." Richard M. Nixon claimed his rival owned "the fastest, loosest tongue in the nation" and called the Democrats "that scruffy bunch" and "a disorganized rabble not to be trusted with the new leadership."

(Incidentally, when Nixon called *The New York Times'* editorial condemnation of his Vice Presidential running mate, Spiro T. Agnew, the "lowest kind of gutter journalism," the paper answered by printing its original editorial all over again, thus giving the charges much wider publicity than they received on the Saturday they first appeared.)

Compare today's pedestrian debasements of a long-standing language art with some of the rapier-sharp commen-

tary of decades past. Where could we find such a classic demolition of an individual's whole career as William Allen White's single-paragraph obituary for Frank Munsey in the *Emporia (Kansas) Gazette*?

Frank Munsey, the great publisher, is dead. Frank Munsey contributed to the journalism of his day the great talent of a meat packer, the morals of a money changer and the manners of an undertaker. He and his kind have about succeeded in transforming a once noble profession into an eight per-cent security. May he rest in trust!

From an earlier era, there is John Randolph's remark about his contemporary, Edward Livingston: "He is a man of splendid abilities, but utterly corrupt. He shines and stinks like rotten mackerel by moonlight."

MOST of our modern invective—such as "Up against the wall," "Burn, baby, burn," "Fascist," "Oink, oink, pig, pig," and "LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"—undoubtedly had some semantic impact when they were first used as slogans, but now they have become monotonous chants for an impersonal chorus. Repeated usage has worn them down to low-value linguistic currency. They are somewhat below the name-calling that John L. Lewis of the Congress of Industrial Organizations used when he denounced Vice President John Nance Garner as "a labor-bating, poker-playing, whisky-drinking, evil old man." At least, Lewis was the originator, not the thousandth or millionth repeater.

Television has played a role in the watering-down of public insults. Most politicians do not want to risk even an outside chance that anything they say in a speech or an informal exchange before cameras will be deleted from public showing. Every potential minute on a news show is hoarded and guarded. The reverse is true, too. According to news reports, one of the Chicago demonstrators who did not want to appear on television neatly painted a four-letter word on his forehead. His face never showed on any newscast.

Historically, political candidates have made the greatest contributions, either as originators or targets for barbs. For instance, Harold L. Ickes, the sharp-tongued curmudgeon who became Secretary of Interior under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and later retired to write

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