

Three Years of Weasel Words

-A Sample

M A R I O P E I

THE PAST THREE years have produced a bumper crop of weasel words and expressions. Were weasel words an agricultural commodity, we would have enough and more than enough to feed the starving millions of India, Egypt, and other worthy recipients of our bounty.

Unfortunately, that is not the case. What we have instead is wheat for the threshing-floors of our dictionaries, and something to relish in the privacy of our studies, for as long as the privacy and the studies may endure.

The new crop shows all the refinements of the old. There are brand-new coinages, worked out and put into circulation for the purpose of engendering desirable frames of mind for whatever the propagandists choose to ply us with. There are brand-new meanings for old words. There are ingenious word combinations, wherein existing words are surrounded with carefully selected modifiers, so that they will be re-learned in a new context.

The main fields are the customary ones. The 1964 presidential campaign supplied a choice harvest. So did ordinary govern-

ment administration, particularly in connection with taxation and foreign aid. The Civil Rights agitations, demonstrations, marches and counter-marches have proved most fruitful. Foreign policy, or what goes by that name, has contributed. The military establishment has given us a few good euphemisms. And we always have those old reliables—education, sociology, and commercial advertising.

I

THE TWO BEST and most effective adaptations of the 1964 campaign were, to my mind, "mainstream" and "moderate." The former was used by the Rockefeller wing of the Republican Party to indicate what that wing wanted us to believe was the majority trend in that Party. While its two component parts are very old in English usage, they were not fused into a single word, even with benefit of hyphen, until recent times, as evidenced by the fact that the 1933 Oxford Dictionary fails to record the compound. It appears, however, in the 1961 Webster Third International, where

it is defined as "the prevailing current or direction." Objection, if any, would be only to its campaign use. On the face of it, judging from the manner in which the Republican National Convention voted, its application by the Rockefeller wing would seem unjustified. Since, however, it was charged that Goldwater won his topheavy delegate majority by a series of stolen marches carried on well in advance of the convention while the opposition was presumably asleep, it will be well to suspend judgment until we see what happens in 1968. We shall then be in a better position to determine whether the mainstream of the Republican Party is liberal or conservative. There may even turn out to be two mainstreams.

The application of the term "moderates" to describe the anti-conservative faction of the Republicans was such a triumph of semantic strategy that it may well have been thought up by the Democrats. The only parallel that comes to mind is the earlier use of "temperance," in connection with "movement," to refer to rank Prohibitionism or teetotalism. It may be well to explore this singular earlier phenomenon first. "Temperance," starting with Latin *temperantia*, then going on into Old French and ultimately passing into English, had always meant "moderation," "self-restraint," "the avoidance of excesses, particularly in connection with eating and drinking." It first appears in English with those meanings in 1542. The shift to the meaning of "total abstinence" came in 1834, when leaders in what earlier had been a true temperance movement, designed to do away with the evils of drunkenness, decided that "temperance" should mean "total abstention," not merely from the stronger spirituous liquors, but from alcohol in any amount and any form, even that of beer and wine. It was with that meaning that American "temperance" or-

ganizations (the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Methodist Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals come to mind) campaigned for the noble experiment of prohibition, which was to turn the United States into a land of scofflaws and bootleggers.

In like manner, the application of "moderate" to the Republican wing that opposed Goldwater was a master stroke of semantic propaganda. "Moderate" also goes back to Latin, where *moderatus* means "avoiding extremes," "using discretion and self-control," "tending toward the mean or average"; to use a modern paraphrase, "middle-of-the-road." The word first appears in English in 1644, and finds its political application in 1753. It was applied to the Girondins in 1794, and the Girondins were indeed the most moderate among the French Revolutionary parties that advocated a break with the feudal past, to the extent that they were lumped with the aristocrats and polished off on the guillotine by the followers of Marat, Danton and Robespierre. The Oxford Dictionary informs us that around 1894 the word took a curious turn in British municipal elections, being opposed, of all things, to "progressive," particularly in the matter of do-good legislation calling for heavy expenditures. This would make the British "moderates" of the period approximately the equivalent of our ultra-conservatives.

Since "moderate," to an even greater extent than "temperance" and "mainstream," tends to create a highly favorable impression in a reasonable but uninformed mind, the pinning of such a label on a wing that included Rockefeller, Lodge, Javits, and Case, coupled with the opposite label of "extremist" fostered by Goldwater's own pronouncement on behalf of "extremism" (even though qualified by "in defense of liberty"), was probably enough to account for a couple of million votes

when the showdown came. Even now, it is a favorite practice of left-wing editors and writers to describe as "extremist" anything and anybody that is conservative, and as "moderate" anything that is on the left, including the ADA and numerous groups that agitate for a number of things, among them America's withdrawal from everywhere and leaving the world to the Russians and the Chinese.

II

ANOTHER INTERESTING term in this field, though legitimately used, is "consensus," which appears in English rather late (1854) and means "general agreement," "agreement in opinion" (Latin *consentio*, from which it springs, literally means "to feel with"). Its implications are not as strong as those of "unanimity," favored by totalitarian regimes, but rather indicative of a majority so large as to be practically overwhelming, even while leaving room for a small, token opposition (less than one Senator out of a hundred, for instance). Consensus may be achieved by propaganda, by friendly persuasion, by boondoggling, perhaps by a little arm-twisting. Federal grants help it along. So does the Attorney General's office. So do tax reductions which have to be countermanded almost as soon as they are issued. Consensus, however, becomes more and more difficult to achieve as time goes by, and the realities of economics and foreign affairs come to the fore.

Slogans are of signal help in achieving a consensus, but their beneficial effect, like that of aspirin, is temporary. Proof of this lies in the fact that the slogan has to be changed every few years. We have passed from "New Deal" to "Fair Deal" to "New Frontier" and "Alliance for Progress" to "Great Society" and "War on Poverty." What new slogans are in store?

One slogan that achieved a certain effect in very recent times was the labeling of a certain Supreme Court decision "One man one vote." The decision dealt with a very far-reaching change in the structure of state legislatures, for which no parallel was suggested or hinted at in connection with the federal government, where each state, large or small, and regardless of its population, is still entitled to two Senators. There may or may not be merit to the decision itself, which might very logically lead our state legislatures in the direction of a unicameral structure. But the slogan "One man one vote" had the merit of sounding extremely democratic and equalitarian, and formed an effective sugar-coating for the Supreme Court pill.

III

THE CIVIL RIGHTS movement has given us a number of semantic shifts. There is, for example, the slogan combination "police brutality," now often invoked in defense of civilian review boards. It is interesting that the two-word combination appears in neither of our major dictionaries, though the individual components do. "Brutality," entering the language in 1549, is at first a quality of animals, but becomes a human attribute by 1641. "Inhuman," "savagely," "grossly ruthless," "devoid of mercy" are among the definitions. In the absence of any indication as to the origin or first use of the combination, all I can say is that it first came to my notice in connection with a televised broadcast of a congressional hearing on subversive activities. There were loud protesters among the audience. When sergeants-at-arms undertook to remove the disturbing elements by force from the chamber, the ousted somewhat triumphantly took up the chant "ah! Police brutality!" This long antedated Civil Rights marches or riots. It would therefore

seem to have been borrowed by the Civil Rights movement from earlier subversive movements. It may be added that while it is undoubtedly overused as a slogan, such a thing as police brutality exists and is occasionally in evidence, though not nearly as frequently as some would have us think.

It is the same with the various manifestations glorified under the names of "sit-ins," "teach-ins," even "kneel-ins." The ancestor of all these popular expressions seems to be the "sit-down" strike, which is fully described by both Webster and Oxford. "Teach-in" and "kneel-in" are so recent that they appear in neither dictionary, but "sit-in," though absent from the Oxford, follows in Webster 3 the verb "to sit in," meaning at first "to take a hand in a card game," then "to participate" in general. As an adjective, it means "occupying a seat in a racially segregated establishment in order to register a protest." All seem to be legitimate coinages, whatever one may think of the practices they denote.

"Black Power" is so recent that it naturally appears in none of our reference works. When it eventually does appear, it will pose serious problems, in view of the various definitions and interpretations that have already been offered. The best link, however, seems to be with another recent combination, "power structure," which again does not appear, but is taken to mean "the group at the top that wields power over the society of which it is a part."

One of the most ingenious semantic shifts of the Civil Rights movement, again so recent that it appears nowhere in our reference works, is the use of "token" and "tokenism" to refer to those Negroes who are fully accepted by and integrated into a predominantly white society. Here the base word, "token," goes back to Anglo-Saxon *tacen*, and has always carried the meanings of "outward indication," "sym-

bol," or "metal piece used in lieu of money." The Anglo-Saxon word has for its Indo-European cognates Greek *deiknymi*, "to show," and Latin *dico*, "to tell, say." The novelty is in the peculiar application of the term in certain Negro circles. It goes hand in hand with other ironic expressions such as "Uncle Tom" and "Aunt Thomasina" to describe those Negroes who in ever-increasing numbers integrate with the rest of us. One wonders why they should be described as "tokens," yet in a sense the word is well chosen. What some Negroes can achieve, all Negroes can and should aspire to. It is the mission of their white fellow-citizens to help them achieve it, but they, too, should exert some effort. It stands to reason that no respectable person, black or white, wants a Molotov-cocktail-throwing rioter for a neighbor. What we may hope for is bigger and better tokenism until all Negroes have become "tokens."

"Ghetto" is an ancient word, first appearing in English in 1611. There is doubt whether it represents Hebrew *get*, "divorcement," or the tail end of Italian *borghetto*, "small city section," "little borough." Its original meaning is that part of a medieval city to which Jews were restricted, but the word was also used in the days of unrestricted immigration to betoken areas of American cities, particularly New York, where Jewish immigrants congregated in large numbers. Eventually, the word acquired the sense of any city area where ethnic groups reside in semi-isolation and under slum conditions. The most recent outcropping is the verb "to ghettoize," appearing in Webster 3, but not in Oxford, in the sense of "to isolate," "to force to live in a slum." The word is occasionally used by hypersensitive writers and reviewers to refer to any separate mention of Jews or Negroes, even where the mention is not at all disparaging.

IV

IN THE ALICE-IN-WONDERLAND realm of taxation, three weasel terms, not necessarily new, but certainly overused, seem to predominate: "broad-based," "ability to pay," "fairest." The first is heard in the case of states, like New Jersey, which had long held out against tax-and-spendomania, allowing excises, bridge and road tolls, and real estate taxes to supply them with the bulk of their revenue (these, be it noted, are all forms of taxation where you pay for what you get and get what you pay for). The "broad-based" tax is a euphemism for the kind of tax that hits everybody, regardless of whether he gets something back or not. The term is accurate only to a degree. Certainly the sales tax hits everybody, roughly in proportion to what he consumes; but so do excises, road tolls, and real estate taxes. All these forms of taxation have in common the characteristic that the taxpayer has some measure of control over them insofar as they affect him. He doesn't have to smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or buy gasoline; he can take alternate routes, save when he crosses rivers; he does not have to own real estate; and he can limit his consumption of taxable articles. The income tax is different. There is no way of legally avoiding it, save by having no income, and that, for most people, would mean starvation. It is in connection with the income tax that we get the other two slogans. It is said to be, by such experts as Governor Hughes of New Jersey and Mayor Lindsay of New York City, the "fairest type of tax," because it is based on "ability to pay." These two claims are swallowed, along with the tax, without thought or protest.

"Fairest" to whom? Here we are reminded of the "unfair" that so often appears on labor union picket signs, which we discussed in an earlier article. What is

"fair" about a type of taxation that promotes indolence and penalizes initiative and success? It may be "fair" in the eyes of Lenin, who advocated a steeply progressive income tax as one of the devices whereby non-Communist regimes could be weakened and overthrown. As for "ability to pay," if two friends, one of whom makes \$100, the other \$300 a week, are in the habit of going out together, the "ability to pay" formula would prescribe that the wealthier of the two should invariably foot the bill. This might even offend his friend's self-respect. There was an earlier formula, current in the first decades of this century, which at least had the merit of being brutally frank: "Soak the rich!" But the steeply progressive income tax, as we now know it, strikes all the way down to the \$600-a-year income. By using the twin formula of "ability to pay" and "fairest tax," we are in a fair way to achieving confiscation, since every taxing authority, federal, state and city, fastens on the same income, and calls it "fair."

V

IN THE MATTER of foreign policy, the give-away program that goes by the name of foreign aid has long made use of such sloganized expressions as "fledgeling nations" (this was Eleanor Roosevelt's creation), more recently replaced by "emergent" or "emerging nations" (emerging from what, one might ask?). "Underdeveloped" and "backward" are far more precise terms, but even they have been invested with the connotation that it's all our fault if they refuse to apply modern methods to their agricultural production and sacred cows, or population control to their exuberant production of more mouths to feed. "Uncommitted" and "unaligned" are splendid terms to apply to these nations when they sponge on both us and our enemies. "Concessional exports" is Secre-

tary of Agriculture Orville Freeman's term for exports of grain and other commodities to countries that never pay for them. These "concessional exports," which have finally turned our huge agricultural surpluses into shortages, go into official figures on imports and exports at their full dollar value, causing taxpayers to wonder how there can be a drain upon our gold stocks when our exports are so much higher than our imports. Historically, the root word "concession" first appears in 1611 as a synonym for "grant," in 1647 with the meaning of "something conceded." "Concessional," not reported by Oxford, appears in Webster 3 as "granted," "conceded," "yielding to request, pressure, claim or demand," which about tells the story.

"Escalation," another choice word of our foreign policy, is so recent in its present acceptance that Oxford does not have it at all, and the 1961 Webster has it only in the sense of "an increase in price to counteract an unjust discrepancy." "Escalate," likewise in Webster 3, has only the meaning of "to carry up on a conveyor belt," bearing out Oxford's 1904 "escalator," given as a U.S. term for a moving stairway.

Our military authorities, and the anti-militarists who oppose them, have brought into common use such terms as "overkill" and "fail-safe," which no dictionary offers. Along with them are such groups as "city bargaining" ("you spare Chicago and we'll spare Leningrad"), and a euphemistic "unacceptable damage," meaning what a country can't take in the way of atomic bombardment, leading to a surrender which might even work if there were anybody left to surrender or to surrender to. These word groups do not appear in our dictionaries, but "acceptable" goes back to 1380 with the meaning of "pleasing," "welcome," while the recent Webster defines it as "capable or worthy of being accepted,"

and also "barely satisfactory or adequate," a strange meaning if you try to apply it to its opposite in the military sense. "To accept" is "to receive with consent," "to take without protest," and "to be able to take," which probably justifies the Pentagon in its use of "unacceptable."

"Credibility gap," a very recent creation, can hardly be described as of the weasel variety. It betokens, in the eyes of our independent news media, the difference between what you can and what you cannot believe in the news handouts of government agencies, particularly the Department of Defense.

VI

AMONG RECENT educational creations and special uses, two deserve mention. One is "under-achiever," for a student who won't work, along with "over-achiever" for that even thornier educational problem, the student who insists on doing all his work, and a little more besides. Here the root word "to achieve" goes back to 1607, coming from French *achever*, which in turn goes back to Latin *ad caput (venire)*, "to come to a head." In its present-day acceptance, "to bring to a successful conclusion" seems the best definition.

"Exciting" is a word that stems from Latin *excito, ex-cio*, "to call forth." As far back as Middle English, "to excite" means "to rouse up," while from 1850 on it acquires the added meaning of "to move to strong emotion or passion." In its present-day dictionary connotations, "exciting" means "absorbingly interesting," "arousing excitement" (in turn defined as "augmented or abnormal activity"). In educational parlance, "exciting" is being used more and more as a synonym for "mildly interesting." A writer for a children's encyclopedia, for instance, is asked to make the chapter on language "exciting" to the

youthful readers. Literally, this would mean making them jump up and down and shout with joy merely because they have discovered that English and German are related. Here is a glaring case where the force of a word is watered down to a point where its original meaning is impaired. This puts the modern "exciting" in the same class with "darling," "doll," "heavenly" and "divine" as handled by certain feminine users (latest in this category is "hysterical," used for "screamingly funny," itself quite an exaggeration). Incidentally, there is also a political use of the new version of "exciting." Mayor Lindsay wants to make New York City a more "exciting" place to live in. Perhaps a few more burglaries and muggings will do the trick of "arousing augmented or abnormal activity."

VII

SO FUN WITH words continues apace. We have seen words like "liberty" and "democracy" neutralized by appropriating and applying them to systems that are basically slavery and absolutism; a word like "colonialism" invested with a disreputable au-

ra by reminding Americans that they once suffered from "colonial" status; "profits" brought into disrepute by coupling them with "excessive," "bloated," "extortionate." Keep on repeating that the steeply progressive income tax is the "fairest" form of raising revenue, and people will swallow it and stand for it. Put a "non-violent" label on subversive activities, and you can justify the most destructive riots. Talk long enough of the "underprivileged," "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," and you will eventually convince even the people you are talking about that they shouldn't really get out and hustle for a living, but accept a relief handout as their just due. Call nations that refuse to join you in your defense of human freedom "unaligned," "emergent," "have-not," and you will be able to give away to them everything you have without anyone lifting his voice in protest. Pin the label of "extremists" on the conservatives of the right, and that of "liberals" and "moderates" on the radicals of the left, and you can win a Presidential election. Such is the power of words, in a society where reality no longer has meaning, and the word-symbol has become paramount.