

## *Weasel Words—The 1967 Crop*

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AT THE outset of an election year, the finest crop of weasel words is understandably still in the future. All we can present at this time is an advance sample, a sort of winter harvest that is a foretaste of juicier morsels to come.

As usual, the world of politics, national and international, has the most savory offerings. Bureaucratic coinages of the type of Medicare, Medicaid, Medical, were joined by Mayor Lindsay's ineffable Urbanaid. The formation of these words is crystal-clear (Medical is the California version of the Medicaid phenomenon), and etymologies won't be necessary. The recent creation of all these edifying terms is attested by the fact that none of them appears in our most recent and comprehensive dictionaries (1955 Oxford, 1961 Webster III, 1966 Random House) with the single exception of Medicare, which comes to light only in the latest of the three, with a defini-

tion that may be summarized as "comprehensive medical care sponsored by government" (Socialized or State Medicine was the earlier term). In all these expressions there is the image of a benevolent, beneficent Welfare State, coupled with the implication of something for nothing. Urbanaid further establishes a link with the made-to-order fiscal problems of the cities, and how to get both Federal and State governments involved in them.

"Charisma" is another lovely word, far from new, which we have seen applied to such popular leaders as Senator Robert Kennedy. It is of biblical Greek origin, and the Oxford traces its use in English back to 1641, but in the form "Charism," and with the meaning of "favor vouchsafed by God," "grace," "talent." Even the 1961 Webster gives it in the sense of "supernatural effluvia," stressing its divine origin. But the later Random House carries the definition

on to "special spiritual power or personal quality which gives an individual authority or influence over many." The second part of this would seem to cover the Kennedy case adequately. The charismatic quality may also be exercised by virtue of one's office, which would conceivably take in anything from Pope Paul and Billy Graham to Adam Clayton Powell. But apart from this, "Charisma" is a good tool for placing halos around politicians' heads.

The gap between national and international politics is superbly bridged by Governor Romney's charge that on his earlier visit to Vietnam he was "brainwashed" by the military. "Brainwash" is a term that does not appear in the older Oxford, having come into the language at the time of the Korean Police Action. Webster III describes it as a literal translation of the Chinese *hsi' mao*<sup>3</sup>, "wash brain." "Forcible indoctrination" and "menticide" are among the synonyms. Its application to internal democratic politics is exemplified by "to brain wash the voters." Random House goes into greater detail: "to change attitudes or beliefs through torture, drugs, or psychological devices, characteristic of controlled systems, and often based on repetition or confusion." The voters seem reluctant to accept a candidate who admits to having let himself be brainwashed, and the word that was meant to explain away some of the inconsistencies in Governor Romney's stand on the Vietnam war boomeranged badly. Nevertheless, we may now expect anyone who seeks an excuse for his actions to claim he was brainwashed, so that the expression superlatively qualifies for the role of Weasel Word.

Two other expressions, both of long standing, have lately come to the fore in weasely connotations. They are "building bridges to" and "the spirit of something or other." The first is a favorite term with our President and State Department, being reg-

ularly rounded out to "building bridges to the Communist countries" or "to the Soviet Union." The implication is that we are trying to get closer to those nations, through trade and cultural and diplomatic relations. This could perhaps be accepted as a national policy were it not for the fact that we are waging hostilities against other Communist nations, and the ones with which we trade in turn supply our enemies with deadly arms to be used against us. Some of these arms are manufactured with materials supplied by us. The situation is reminiscent of our huge sales of scrap iron to Japan before World War II, and the use of that scrap in the bombs that hit us at Pearl Harbor. But on that occasion there was at least a time lag between our supplying our potential enemies and their ultimate use of what we supplied. Here the two processes are simultaneous. Logic would demand that you either build bridges, or blast them.

The "Spirit of" bit, in its diplomatic application, first came to my notice in Eisenhower's "Spirit of Camp David," where there was friendly entertainment of then Premier Khrushchev. The Spirit blew apart when the Soviets discovered that we were spying on them via U2 planes. More recently we have had the "Spirit of Glassboro" or "Hollybush" (satirized by some wit into "The Spirit of Quackenbush"). Here the circumstances were that Premier Kosygin had come to the United States for the sole purpose of making strongly anti-American speeches in the UN Assembly. It was seen fit to extend to him the hospitality of the nation's President, the Governor and State of New Jersey, and Glassboro College, which at least proved that we had not forgotten the rules of courtesy. Kosygin accepted the hospitality in non-committal fashion, though politely enough. It was observed, however, that upon his return to New York and the UN Assembly, his anti-American attitude was altogether unchanged. This

doesn't mean too much, save that the incident was fastened upon by the appeasers in our midst as indicative of what a "soft" approach could accomplish. Actually, it accomplished nothing, although some Glassboro residents traveled to Russia to try to convince the Russians that we are human, something the Russians were probably aware of even before. So the "Spirit of Quackenbush" went to join the earlier "Spirit of Camp David" despite all optimistic editorials and wishful thinking. The confrontation between the West and the Communist world still stands. It may be remarked in passing that the only definition of "spirit" that seems to fit this peculiar American manifestation ("The Spirit of —") is the one given by Oxford as "disposition" or "prevailing tone," by Webster III as "special attitude or frame of mind characterizing individuals or groups," and by Random House as "dominant tendency." The precise application of the term in the fashion described above appears nowhere in the dictionaries (closest example given is Shelley's "The spirit of the age"). "The Spirit of Old Siwash" is, of course, traditional in academic circles.

Before leaving the international field, it may be worth while to give a glance at an item that is not properly a Weasel Word, but rather a misnomer due to a widespread misconception of the same class as that which led early explorers to describe the natives of the Western Hemisphere as "Indians." At the time of the appearance of the novel *The Ugly American*, the title described a character who, while physically unprepossessing, was morally lovable and tremendously helpful to the native population of a southeastern Asian country. People who did not read the novel but thought they knew what the title meant began to use "Ugly American" in the sense of an American who goes to a foreign land to exploit it and throw his weight around, making both

himself and his nation objects of scorn and execration. As is usual in these cases (note how Capri is now universally stressed on the last syllable because it suited a song writer to make it rhyme with "me" at the end of a verse), corrections were worse than useless. "Ugly American" stands today as a perennial monument to folk-misinterpretation, standing in the popular mind for all that is unlovely and unwise in our dealings with other countries. No mention of "Ugly American" in any of our dictionaries, however.

Another angle of foreign policy involves Weasel Words that are not our own, but our enemies'. Here we find the *wen<sup>2</sup>-hwa<sup>1</sup> ge<sup>2</sup>-ming<sup>1</sup>* of Chairman Mao, translated into "cultural revolution," a term so recent that it finds its way into none of our major dictionaries (Webster III gives us "cultural evolution," Random House "cultural lag," but these are entirely different things). The literal translation of the four Chinese characters, in case you are interested, is "refined-influence (or change) remove-mandate"; transformation by good influence, but with a removal of the mandate to rule. "Cultural revolution" would seem to refer to the anthropological rather than the traditional meaning of "culture" (the sum total of a social group's customs, ways, and habits of thought). In practice, the cultural revolution as applied by Mao's Red Guards involves the obliteration of China's ancient culture and its replacement by the drab contents of the Chairman's little red book, with the concomitant destruction of monuments, works of literature and philosophy, and anything else that might remind the Chinese that they once were a highly civilized race. If we replace the anthropological definition of culture with the older one that makes "culture" synonymous with "civilization," then "culturicide" might be a better rendering of the concept, if not of the words.

The War of National Liberation is something that on pure dictionary grounds could well be applied to the heroic uprising of Budapest's Freedom Fighters and the ill-fated exploit of the Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs as well as to the Vietnamese and Algerian revolts against the French colonial regime. But in the Aesopian language of the Communists and fellow-travelers, it is applied also to such adventures as that of Che Guevara in Bolivia, where a dozen or so foreign agitators try to stir an indifferent local population into revolt. We are left in doubt as to whether the term is applicable to Biafra's separatism from Nigeria, the Angolan uprisings of a few years ago, or Tchombe's attempt to separate Katanga from the Congo. It all depends on which side of the fence you're on. Again, the expression receives no recognition in our dictionaries; but a possible precedent for it appears in Random House's "National Liberation Front," which is equated with the Vietcong.

One rather ingenious linguistic creation that unfortunately did not take hold was Sukarno's "Necolim" (Neo-Colonialism-Imperialism), which came out shortly before he was shorn of most of his power. It is well for these mouth-filling phrases of our anti-Americans to be condensed into briefer and more readily usable forms.

The military continues to distinguish itself by its modest understatements. There is the use of "confrontation," which, however light-hearted or ominous it may sound, is legitimate enough. Its etymology has to do with two foreheads that touch (Latin *cum plus frons*, "with-forehead," almost like Secretary Rusk's "eyeball to eyeball"), and the verb "to confront," in the sense of to face in hostility or defiance, has been in active use since 1589.

"Destruct," which is used of missiles that miscarry or malfunction, does not appear in Oxford, but is given in the American dic-

tionaries in the sense of "to destroy intentionally." It is further described as a back-formation from the noun "destruction." Since it is seldom that one destroys unintentionally, we still wonder whether it is not superfluous in the language.

Then there is the use of three adjectives in connection with weapons: "sophisticated," "anti-personnel," and "conventional." The first, in use since 1603, has its root in Greek *sophia*, "skill," "wisdom," but also "cunning," "shrewdness." The earliest English use is in the sense of "altered, adulterated, falsified." Webster III goes on to add "complex" to "adulterated," while our truly sophisticated Random House calls it "altered by education or experience, worldly-wise, not naive, complex or intricate." In connection with weapons, it is presumably the "complex," "intricate" definition that applies. Sophisticated weapons are those the Russians have of late been supplying to the North Vietnamese and to the Egyptians, who used them to good effect on Israel's *Elath*. "Anti-personnel," again appearing in the American dictionaries but not in Oxford, refers to that which is meant to destroy or maim enemy personnel rather than such objects as trucks or buildings. "Anti-personnel weapon" is a sophisticated euphemism for "killer weapon." "Conventional," in use since 1583, referred at first to what is settled by convention, law or contract, or is in accord with tradition. The American dictionaries define it as "sanctioned by agreement or usage," "conforming to standards or agreement." Nowhere is there reference to "conventional" in connection with weapons, though we all know that what is meant is weapons such as were used down to the end of World War II, not of the new atomic fission, ballistic, or space type. In accordance with the earlier definition, however, even such weapons become conventional now that their production and

use are governed by international agreement (or are they?).

One touch of comedy in the midst of tragedy is the abortive attempt to replace "napalm" (a telescoping of naphthene and palmitate) by "naphthegel" and similar coinages. Perhaps it was thought that the students wouldn't demonstrate quite so loudly if Dow Chemical produced the same product by an unfamiliar designation. But a rose by any other name. . . .

While the military sector of government deliberately underplays its vocabulary, the economic sector is flamboyant and prone to exaggeration. Here are such loud-sounding terms as "overheating economy" and "gross national product." New taxes are justified not on the basis of the government's needs for its multifarious activities at home and abroad, but on the ground that the economy is "overheating" (whatever that may mean), and that we must "siphon off excess purchasing power" (what excess purchasing power?), under penalty of "inflation." But an "expanding" or "booming" economy is what our modern school of economics has been advocating for years and decades ("a little inflation," like a modest dose of pregnancy, "does not really hurt"); and the government has been going along with all sorts of built-in inflationary provisions: farm price subsidies, minimum wage laws, higher Social Security payments, Medicare and Medicaid, educational grants, failure to control either prices or wages. It isn't really fair to pour money into people's hands and then want to siphon it off. A milder substitute for "overheated" or "overheating" economy (none of our dictionaries recognize the combination, by the way) is the earlier, optimistic "expanding economy." Here it is amusing to note that at a UN committee meeting, the Russian delegate took violent exception to the term as it came out in his translated version ("self-expanding economy" in Russian). He

pointed out that an economy, particularly of the capitalistic variety, could not possibly be self-expanding; someone would have to expand it. The point was rather well taken.

"Gross national product," on the rise of which so many rosy hopes are predicated, is an American invention. Oxford defines the three words, but not together. Random House equates it to "the total monetary value of all final goods and services produced in the country in a year." If we deduct an allowance for depreciation of capital goods, we have a "net national product." There is a third term, "national income," which is defined as "the sum total of wages, salaries, rents, dividends and interest." Webster III has a strikingly different version of "gross national product": the total value of goods and services, including total expenditures by consumers and government, plus gross private investment. Here the key phrase seems to be "expenditures by consumers and government." This is at loggerheads with "goods and services produced." There is a secondary contradiction between "services" and "produced" or "product." Services are not produced, but rendered, and no product results from a service, such as the barber cutting my hair or the delivery boy putting the paper on my porch. But if we accept the Webster III definition of "gross national product," our basis is expenditures, not production, or even service-rendering. These expenditures include not merely those of consumers, but also those of government, which are superlatively non-productive. We can double our welfare payments and send the gross national product spurting skyward. We can lavish a few more billion dollars on foreign aid, and obtain the same result. "Gross national product" is one of the most weasely of weasel expressions ever coined. The word "product" lulls you to sleep; it makes you think we are producing more, when we are mere-

ly spending more. There is a parallel in the inclusion of Secretary Freeman's "concessional exports" (those for which we don't get paid, like wheat to India or Egypt) in our plethoric excess of exports over imports. As our synthetic prosperity dwindles, along with our gold reserves, it is to be hoped that the voters will finally awaken to the phoniness of the terminology (and concepts) of our government economists.

Among contributions made by the Civil Rights movement we find a continued misuse of "non-violent" to betoken its opposite; an "activist" that does not appear in Oxford, but is given by both American dictionaries with the meaning of "an advocate of 'vigorous' action, such as the use of force, for political ends"; and an "open housing" seemingly so recent that none of our dictionaries report it ("open house," in the hospitable sense, is there, but there seems to be little or no connection between the two expressions); this is strange, because "open housing" bills and laws have been under consideration for some time, constituting the legalistic version of the earlier "block-busting."

There is a thoroughly legitimate demand on the part of some Civil Rights advocates that "Negro," which lends itself to the well-known Southern mispronunciations and which is, rightly or wrongly, associated with the days of slavery, be replaced by "black."

The use of a derisive "honkies" by the more radically inclined blacks to refer to whites of foreign extraction is countenanced by none of our dictionaries, though the American ones give the earlier "hunkies." Random House goes so far as to etymologize "hunky" into "Hung(arian)" plus "(don)key." There is a still earlier "Bohunk," said to be a telescoping of "Bohemian" plus "Hungarian," which was current in the days of widespread immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Still

earlier is "Hunker," applied to a conservative faction of the Democratic Party in the late 1840's. There seems to be no connection with "hunk" meaning "piece," derived from Flemish and in use since 1813, or with British "hunks" (crabby old man) of 1602, or with the 1861 "hunky" of "hunkydory," which comes from a Dutch word meaning "goal," and was originally used in the sense of "safe on base." If we discount Random House's rather improbable link of "hunky" with "donkey," both "Negro" and "honky" are perfect illustrations of words that historically and etymologically are purely descriptive, and not at all offensive, but have been invested with unpleasant connotations through usage and misuse—typical Weasel Words.

Even abstracting from the use of "non-violent" in the names of groups pledged to burning and killing, we find a curious discrepancy between the definition offered by Random House ("refraining from the use of violence, as in reaction to oppressive authority") and that of Webster III ("peaceful but passive resistance and sabotage"). "Sabotage" starts out with its etymological meaning of throwing a shoe into a piece of machinery. It goes on to acquire the meaning of any deliberate act of destruction. Its more recent derived meaning of "an act of obstruction" makes no non-violent sense if the action is carried through to its logical conclusion. If I am running out of a house that is on fire, and you deliberately set out to obstruct me, it stands to reason that I'll knock you out of my way. Will your reaction then be a non-violent one? Sabotage entails violence.

The best we can muster from the field of labor relations is "round-the-clock negotiations" to "beat a strike deadline," as exemplified by what goes on every two years in New York public transportation. These are old, tired expressions reflecting a mentality and methodology that should long ago have

been outmoded. Why the deadline? What is wrong with uninterrupted negotiations until an agreement is reached, with retroactive provisions or some other sensible device to ensure justice to both sides and, above all, no damage to the long-suffering public and the national economy? This ultimatum system of conducting labor relations should have been outlawed at least half a century ago. Linguistically, it may be noted that our dictionary definitions of "beat" do not include examples connected with deadlines, save for Webster III. "Deadline" itself is defined as a "fixed time limit for finishing something." But when the word first appeared, in 1860, it had a far more literal meaning: a line around a military prison which could not be crossed by a prisoner under penalty of being shot dead. Appropriated by the journalistic world, the word lost its spatial connotation and acquired a temporal one. Still later came its take-over by the labor unions in connection with strikes.

The world of advertising has added to "gracious living" (where "gracious" has lost its original content of "kind," "benignant," especially in a religious sense, and has brazenly acquired that of "characterized by taste, wealth, comfort, luxury"). Another favorite phrase, "the good life," once a life of virtue, led in accord with moral or religious precepts, is now one marked by "a high standard of living" and abounding in "material comforts and luxuries." A third, but little-used meaning of "the good life" is one "characterized by the harmonious, many-sided development of the individual," but this is largely lost in the materialistic shuffle for the "good" things of life.

Many must have been shocked, as I was, to see "now" used as an adjective in advertising ("the now car," "the now taste of Tab"). Almost equally surprising was the discovery that the use of "now" as an ad-

jective goes all the way back to 1444, in the sense of "existing," "present" ("the now king," "the now judge"). Could our Madison Avenue agencies be guilty of research into Middle English? Could they be bringing archaisms back to life? Or is all this purely coincidental? For what it may be worth, Random House, the most up-to-date of our comprehensive three, neither lists nor exemplifies the use of "now" as an adjective.

Many vogue words and expressions come to mind. Some are ancient forms used in new contexts. Do they qualify as true Weasel Words, or do they merely betoken (or betray) a frame of mind on the part of their users, who thereby lay themselves open to classification? Consider "jet set," so recent that only Random House reports it. Or the new uses of "camp," "underground," "happening" (the last already appropriated by French, Etienneble and his strictures against *le Franglais* to the contrary notwithstanding: *le happening*). Or the "explosion" of this or that (population, freedom, etc.) which has also crossed language boundaries (Italian *esplosione dialettale*). Or the "serendipity" that has given birth to "popendipity." Or the "gap" that is now attached not merely to credibility, but to a lot of other things ("the generation gap"). Or the "contact" that is not only expanded into a verb, but also used as an adjective in connection with sports ("contact sports," those sports where human bodies collide and clash). Or the lovely *mini-* prefix that has passed on from skirts to all sorts of other things, including even *love*. Or formerly obscure words like "empathy," "viable," "ploy," that suddenly burst forth from everybody's lips.

Space fails us. We shall keep them under study. To the extent that they develop more definite weasel qualities, we may refer to them again in a later article.