

A swinger at Birchers

WASHINGTON — Readers of this column may forgive me a concluding attempt, as the glass runs out, to frame what strikes me as a few signal differences between Then and Now.

When I entered editorial journalism some 38 years ago, the question of whether the country would be subverted from within was still regarded as a lively issue — believe it or not.

In the late 1950s, even after the demise of Sen. Joe McCarthy, conspiracy-hunters still flourished. Among their number, one of the truly curious was Robert Welch, a retired candy manufacturer of North Carolina origins. Welch founded the John Birch Society, a secretive organization named for a young American said to have been murdered by the Chinese Communists.

I would hesitate to say what drew me to Welch's strange musings, except that for a pundit whippersnapper they made a juicy target. I acquired, in particular, Welch's so-called "Blue Book" and was astonished by its paranoid thesis that some of the nation's most trusted servants — even Dwight D. Eisenhower — were secret participants in a dark conspiracy to overthrow the Republic.



EDWIN M. YODER JR.

Eisenhower's treachery, as I recall, was not so much documented — for indeed it could not be — as deduced by rigorous logic from his celebrated friendship with his Red Army counterpart, Marshal Zhukov, and even more so from the "broad front" strategy he'd insisted on in the reinvansion of Europe in 1944 that left Berlin, Prague and other capitals to Russian capture.

I reviewed Welch's stuff in The Charlotte News, in less than flattering terms. I also referred to it in personal correspondence with Welch as "seductive trash."

Soon after I moved from Charlotte to Greensboro in May 1961, my new editors heard rumors that I had been "fired" by The Charlotte Observer (for which I had never worked). They knew the rumors were unfounded; but the persistent whippersnappers bothered the wise and diligent "Silent" Kendall, my editor in chief. I was stumped too.

Then one autumn night friends took me to a gathering of the history club at Woman's College, UNC, to hear the "area coordinator" of the John Birch Society. After describing its beginnings, with a certain pedantic emphasis on the precise number of stab wounds Birch had suffered from his Chinese assailants, the gentleman from Birch maundered on about this and that.

Then, from my inconspicuous seat toward the rear, I suddenly heard the speaker say, "... And you may be interested to learn that the main defender of the communist line in this area is one Ed Yoder, an editorial writer for the Greensboro Daily News, who was fired from his last job by The Charlotte Observer."

So this was where the rumors came from — a whispering campaign by the John Birch Society! As inconveniently as Banquo's Ghost, I sprang from my seat and half-shouted at the startled speaker: "I happen to be Ed Yoder, and everything you're saying is a lie!" The meeting dissolved in confusion and the "area coordinator" vanished into the night. A letter of legal admonishment on the dangers of a slander suit from my newspaper's lawyers put an end to the rumors.

In retrospect the incident — and the political climate of which it was a part — seems bizarre and amusing, although it made me hot under the collar at the time and inoculated me permanently against political gossip and hearsay. Most Americans, even then, had the sense to see that the Soviet menace was nuclear weapons and missiles, and the imposition by force and fraud of puppet regimes on near neighbors like Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and the Baltic States.

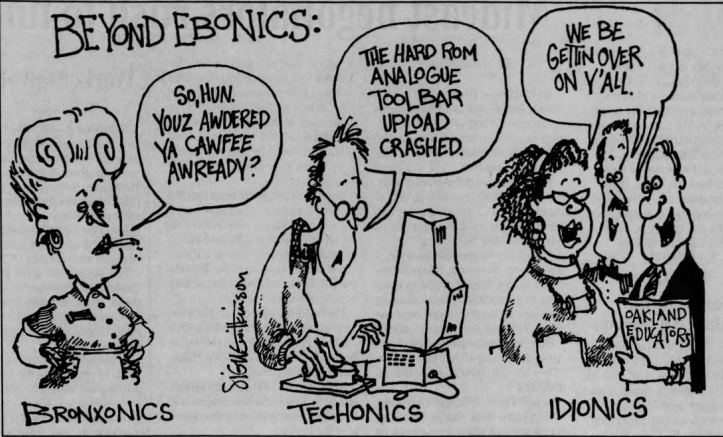
The strategy of Cold War victory had been devised by some of the very men Welch, McCarthy and their acolytes traduced — George Marshall, George F. Kennan, Harry S. Truman. The Birch Society, like the McCarthy committee, was a pestiferous distraction.

In my youthful innocence, I really thought that conspiracy theories could be countered by facts, by arguments, by ridicule. I know better now.

Conspiracy theories are not usually symptomatic of misunderstanding, but of a temperamental susceptibility to simplistic explanations of random and complex events and are perennial catnip to the ahistorical American mind.

So it can be said that I have learned at least something in almost 40 years of hectoring the public with my opinions!

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Note to readers: Ed Yoder's final column will appear tomorrow.



Ebonics: Getting past a word

By PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS
NEW YORK

The melting pot is boiling over again, this time with a decision by the school board in Oakland, Calif., to reclassify "ebonics," or black vernacular, as a distinct language.

The battle is a familiar one that has raged at least since the 1960s. The issues it raises are too often polarized in a simplistic debate about whether black American speech is "good" West African traditionalism or just "bad" English.

There are more complex questions to consider. Can the notion of a singular black vernacular (if that is what ebonics purports to be) account for the enormous variations in black American speech, which range from true dialects, such as Gullah, to a panoply of distinct regional accents?

Is so-called Received Standard American English what most Americans speak anyway?

And, as a prickly Oxford-educated acquaintance of mine wonders, when could any part of the American vernacular be called "English"?

The consensus in the media seems to be that, because black vernacular is indeed not a language in the strict linguistic sense, the Oakland board is just wrong. That leads to more wrangling about whether the board is full of Afrocentric neo-nationalists or whether it's just another example of Teachers Reusing to Teach.

It is true that most black speech is clearly comprehensible as a variant of American English, albeit with grammatical and syntax patterns that are strongly influenced by West African language structures. The contorted battles over rap lyrics as political speech — however densely vernacular the language is — have not been about the failure of the larger society to understand the words as English.

At the same time, part of the battle over ebonics is premised on the assertion that black vernacular cannot be understood: that its continued use accounts for the high numbers of blacks in remedial education, and high black unemployment rates. So maybe the Oakland school board was right.

If it's Greek to non-speakers, then go ahead and treat it like Greek. And if funds are available for bilingual education to help recent immigrants assimilate into the mainstream, then maybe this isn't strictly about linguistic history, but more about an investment in the future.

So by all means hitch the aspirations of the Middle Passage right onto the forward-lurching wagons of the progressive immigrant myth.

Perhaps the real argument is not about whether ebonics is a language or not. Rather, the tension is revealed in the contradiction of black speech being simultaneously understood yet not understood.

Why is it so overwhelmingly, even color-

fully comprehensible in some contexts, particularly in sports and entertainment, yet deemed so utterly incapable of effective communication when it comes to finding a job as a construction worker?

Causing further confusion in this debate is the apparent treatment of illiteracy as if it were black speech. Black children are crowded into remedial education classes and are disadvantaged in finding jobs because too many of them have never been taught any variation of the printed word, whether phonics, ebonics or Esperanto. Some young children learn more of the alphabet on "Sesame Street" than they can in overtaxed and overcrowded inner city schools.

Moreover, the very conflation of illiteracy and the reasoned, rich and expressive complexity of most forms of black speech is based on a peculiarly freighted symbolism in the American lexicon.

While accent prompts many levels of discrimination in the United States, there is no greater talisman of lower or underclass status than the black accent, no greater license to mock than with some imitation of black speech. Even solidly middle-class blacks with strings of higher degrees and perfect command of standard grammatical structure can face discrimination if their accents are deemed in any way identifiably "black."

Is it really any wonder that there is such an ambivalent response to mainstream standardized speech patterns among black children when

the "standard" is so often imparted with such missionary conviction about eliminating "bad" linguistic acts?

It's as if the very spontaneity of their speaking were an extension of the general lawlessness of black existence. Is there not a way to teach the rules of what is called Received Standard American English without such generous side dishes of humiliation?

Would the recognition that there really are rules and structures in black English help us get past those smug assertions of nobler, higher linguistic conventions? Can we resist the evocative echo of Henry James's fear of random, chaotic utterances spewed from the dark recesses of the vulgar (read Irish) mouth? Can we resist the nostalgia for an unalloyed classicism that never was?

I understand the effort of the Oakland school board to legitimize ebonics as one of translation, which is a generally respected enterprise, rather than cultural uplift, which is inherently condescending. That said, one thing that troubles me about the Oakland proposal is the reported plan to teach the city's teachers not only the structure and history of ebonics but also how to speak it.

It's hard enough to sort out the values embedded in the aversion to black

speech as a "bad" version of what is rather too exclusively called "white" English. Imagine having teachers who speak standard classroom English flailing about in some really bad version of a standardized black English.

If they end up speaking ebonics as badly as teachers who learn a little "professional Spanish," I cringe to think of the consequences: pidgin versions of Talking to Tonto. Ugh. And I do mean ugh in the most classical sense.

There are enough standard-English speakers who just love to "talk black," who at the drop of a hat break out in "basketball" — now there's an unofficial language — and who, encountering any black person, start "dule-ing and 'I be-ing up a storm, high- and low-iving to beat the band.

This phenomenon is part minstrelry, part presumptuousness and, most complicated of all, part of the mainstream's assimilation of black speech patterns that, once incorporated, are promptly forgotten as such.

I worry a bit that this natural and overlapping fluidity of American vernacular and its regionalisms will be rendered all the more invisible by falsely turning teachers into linguistic anthropologists, adventurers in the "foreign" terrain of alien verbiage.

Finally, a great concern about the Oakland school board's action has been the rather transparent strategy of categorizing ebonics as a distinct language in order to gain access to extra financing for the education of bilingual students.

It's a strategy lawyers know well. Consider, as law students must, the question of whether a lame horse dipped in tar and beaten with pillows qualifies as a bird — technically defined as a two-legged creature with feathers. Ah, literalism.

So it's predictable that at a time of badly dwindling resources, if there is a pot of money earmarked for teaching in any way that substantively communicates with students — well, call it communication, call it language, call it a rose if need be. Just go for it.

Cynical, so say to others, it's a creative manifestation of the instinct for survival. I think the whole thing is sad.

While the Oakland proposal is quite understandably the practical result of a bureaucracy trying to maneuver the limits and roadblocks of category imperfections in a categorically imperfect world, maybe part of what we are sidestepping in the fight about standardized speech practices is the ongoing abandonment of public schools, a de facto fight begun with the resistance to the promise of Brown vs. Board of Education.

After all, if this controversy boils down to the old familiar ingredients of struggle for respect, resources, opportunity and jobs, then we are really faced with just one more clarion call for commitment to public education as standard. This in turn, depends on a more generous evaluation of the standards by which we judge each other's humanity.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

The new year's news

WASHINGTON — Four of my long shots came in last year, including the second mole in the CIA and the upset in the Israeli election. Obdurate contrarianism led me astray on 11 others, however, including the presidency of the United States and the stock market. But a New Year is a new day:

1. When Newt Gingrich steps down, the new House speaker will be (a) Henry Hyde; (b) Richard Armitage; (c) John Kasich; (d) John Boehner; (e) Tom DeLay; (f) Susan Molinari.

2. Surprise best seller of the year will be (a) "The Names of Things," etymological wonderment by Susan Brind Morrow; (b) "Crazy Rhythm," a revealing memoir by Len Garmet; (c) "The Night in Question," stunning stories by Tobias Wolff.

3. At the secret heart of the Clinton dirty-money scandal is (a) the financial hushing of Webster Hubbell and Craig Livingston; (b) the Riady conversation

in the presidential limousine; (c) the dealings in Jackson Stephens' Worthen Bank; (d) Paul Redmond's search for the ghost of Larry Wu-Fai Chin.

4. Clinton's major domestic success will be (a) restoring food stamps to legal immigrants by being

gentle in use of the line-item veto; (b) holding GOP capital-gains reduction to a measly 5 percent, no indexation; (c) unreforming welfare reform by one-third; (d) getting Trent Lott to join him in passing the bill to commissions on Social Security and Medicare.

5. Clinton's Albright foreign policy will be (a) happily hawkish as NATO expands eastward despite Moscow's grumbling; (b) decidedly dovish as commerce with Castro commences; (c) inept as U.S. pressure on Netanyahu encourages Arafat to demand a divided Jerusalem; (d) impotent as China lays a heavy hand on Hong Kong freedom with no U.S. economic retaliation.

6. The Supreme Court will decide (a) that in doctor-aided suicides, there is no "right to die"; (b) that libertarians are right in their objection to drug testing; (c) to reverse the Eighth Circuit and hold 7-to-2 that Paula Corbin Jones' lawsuit will have to wait until her accused harasser leaves office, Scalia and Ginsburg dissenting.

7. First Whitewater witness to crack and implicate the boss in a cover-up will be (a) hushed Webster Hubbell; (b) sick Jim Guy Tucker; (c) unparadonable Susan McDougal; (d) central Bruce Lindsey; (e) broke Maggie Williams; (f) resentful David Watkins; (g) dumped Harold Ickes.

8. President Clinton will (a) pardon co-conspirators and risk impeachment; (b) refuse pardons and risk co-conspiracy charge; (c) fire Ken Starr as ultra-partisan and risk firestorm; (d) let justice take its course and win in court; (e) laugh heartily when frustrated Starr files a criminal information in lieu of indictment.

9. Al Gore will (a) clash with Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson in Senate dirty-money hearings; (b) begin shutout to put space between himself and a weakening Clinton; (c) replace command-and-control environmentalism with flexible industry incentives.

10. Winner of the year will be (a) "The English Patient," sweeping the Oscars; (b) dissident Wei Jingsheng, getting the Nobel Prize he needs to save his life in a Chinese prison; (c) Web-TV and the digital video disk that plays movies, and they zoom past cable TV and dish the satellite Whigs.

11. Power is realigned as (a) Daschle and Gephardt front coalition of united Democrats and rebellious moderate Republicans to back Clinton and overwhelm the GOP "majority"; (b) contrarian, united Republicans join with blue-dog Democrats to overcome presidential vetoes; (c) Aleksandr Lebed makes surprise deal with the Communists, forcing Yeltsin to replace dull Prime Minister Chernomyrdin with lively Moscow Mayor Luzhkov and hated staff chief Chubais with reformer Yavlinsky.

12. President's popularity (a) drops under impact of congressional hearings on Asian connection and revelations of independent counsel; (b) rises slightly as new White House counsel espies balance-of-contrition strategy with ethically wounded Speaker Gingrich; (c) holds steady as people grow bored with scandal and economy stagnates, interest rates drop, stock market marches on up; (d) soars as Madonna's sympathetic portrayal of the first lady in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Trial of Hillary" smashes Broadway records.

My choices: 1-c, 2-c, 3-d, 4-d, 5-all, 6-c, 7-c, 8-d, 9-c, 10-a (to avoid a shutout), 11-none, 12-a. Remember: There's no fun in playing only favorites.

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