



Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones.....

By Deborah D. Thornton

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”¹

-- Well-known old folk saying

When uttered on the schoolyard or in the field behind my parents’ home, this phrase was often accompanied by a “Na, na, na-na-an!” a raspberry sound, and the sticking out of one’s tongue at an annoying cousin or neighbor. Generally it followed a tease or taunt that someone was too short, too young, too weak, or too chicken to do “X.” As farm kids, we were a fairly rough-and-tumble bunch, though no one was ever really mean. We knew our limits and did not often exceed them. We knew what the result would be if we did.

However, in the rough-and tumble-world of partisan politics today, there are few limits, fewer who recognize limits, and virtually no punishment for exceeding them. For example, in September, Teamster’s President Jimmy Hoffa said to a union Labor Day rally, “Let’s take these sons of bitches out and give America back to America where we belong.”²

Congresswoman Maxine Waters (Democrat – CA), who has a long-standing reputation for inflammatory rhetoric, most recently said, “As far as I’m concerned, the Tea Party can go straight to hell.” Earlier in the year she said that Democrats “should have made them (Republicans) walk the plank.” Back in 2005 she called President George W. Bush names, saying, “The President is a liar. Dick Cheney, the chief architect of the Big Lie, is not only a liar, he is a thief.”³

Admittedly, Republicans have also accused Democrats of lying, as in Congressman Joe Wilson’s (Republican – SC) outburst of “You lie!” during President Barack Obama’s healthcare address to Congress in 2009.⁴ Other Republicans have also earned moments of infamy, as Alaska Governor Sarah Palin did when she issued what turned out to be the fourth most notable quotation of 2010, according to Yale University, when she tweeted, “Don’t retreat. – Instead reload!”⁵

Since 2006, Yale University librarian Fred Shapiro has issued a list of “Most Notable Quotations” every year. Unfortunately, in his opinion, the quotes become “perhaps stronger, harsher, more unconventional every year.”⁶ When our politicians and citizens, whether Democrat or Republican, make ill-considered inflammatory statements they do their cause harm. Do we respect Jimmy Hoffa more for his implied threat to anyone who does not agree with his and his union’s support of Barack Obama? The Teamsters already have a reputation for violent acts, giving his statement an even harsher feel. Has Maxine Waters strengthened her national image by telling fellow citizens to “go to hell”?

The book *Words That Work*, by Dr. Frank Luntz, discusses how to best choose effective words and language, whether speaking or writing. I think he would agree that while Hoffa, Waters, Wilson, Palin, and others used words that earned attention – this attention was not necessarily positive.

Luntz’s 10 rules of successful communication include using small words, using short sentences, being sincere and credible, being consistent, and offering a new idea or definition of an old idea. These rules are fairly straightforward – yet are not always practiced by either writers or speakers.

Additionally, he focuses on the idea of sound and texture of words. As an example, he offers

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“Snap, Crackle, and Pop” – the slogan of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies cereal, one of the most recognizable advertising slogans in history.

A rule applying specifically to politicians is that of speaking “aspirationally,” or speaking to the hopes, fears, and dreams of your audience and triggering an emotional response or feeling. President Obama was especially successful at applying this rule in the 2008 election campaign. Hoffa certainly triggered an emotional response on Labor Day.

Rule nine recommends asking a question to involve your listener or reader in the topic being discussed. The most famous use of this technique was President (then candidate) Ronald Reagan’s question to Americans during the final debate with President Jimmy Carter in 1980: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?”

The final rule, and the one Luntz considers most important, is to provide context and explain the relevance of “why” something is important. If your reader or listener does not understand why what you’re saying is important, they will not pay attention to the rest of the message.

The language our elected representatives and public figures such as Hoffa use in debating and arguing critical national issues is important. It is important that they stop and think before they speak. The potential policy actions resulting from the decisions Congress makes must be clearly understood by all. Legislation must go through the full committee and hearing process, and must be debated and refined with the input of all.

Further, it is important that we, the voters, hold them to a higher standard. Whether Democrat or Republican, Liberal, Conservative, or Tea Party, schoolyard taunts are not effective. Additionally, in my opinion – the voters are tired of schoolyard taunts. We want honest debate about the issues – not meanness and inflammatory bullying.

Sticks and stones may be required to break our bones – but words can hurt us, as a people, and as a democracy.

(Endnotes)

¹ Gregory Y. Titelman, *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings*, Random House, New York, 1996.

² Tommy Christopher, “James Hoffa’s Full ‘Take These Sons of Bitches Out’ Quote: ‘Everybody Here’s Got a Vote,’” *Mediate*, September 5, 2011, <<http://www.mediaite.com/tv/james-hoffas-full-take-these-sons-of-bitches-out-quote-everybody-heres-got-a-vote/>> accessed on September 12, 2011.

³ “Top 10 Outrageous Maxine Waters Quotes,” *Human Events*, August 27, 2011, <<http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=45762>> accessed on September 12, 2011.

⁴ Associated Press, “‘You lie!’ highlighted among top quotes of 2009,” *MSNBC.com*, December 16, 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34442711/ns/us_news-life/t/you-lie-highlighted-among-top-quotes/> accessed September 12, 2011.

⁵ Antonia Woodford, “Associate librarian chooses top ten quotations,” *Yale Daily News*, December 12, 2010, <<http://www.yaledailynews.com/news/2010/dec/12/associate-librarian-chooses-top-ten-quotations>> accessed on September 12, 2011.

⁶ Dr. Fay, “Palin’s ‘Don’t Retreat. – Instead Reload!’ Tweet Makes ‘Most Notable Quotes’ List,” *Sarah Palin Information Blog*, December 13, 2010, <<http://sarahpalininformation.wordpress.com/2010/12/13/palins-dont-retreat-instead-reload-tweet-makes-most-notable-quotes-list/>> accessed on September 12, 2011.

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