

Of Mice and Mail

By Dean Acheson

From *Foreign Service Journal*, May 1965

Long ago, when the world was young, the official censor of English usage and prose style in the Department of State was a charming lady with an imposing and elegant coiffure. In those days we were in the old State War, and Navy Building, just west of the White House. Affection for its tiers of pillared balconies and mansard roof and its present mantle of soft dove gray is the touchstone which separates aging Victorian aesthetes from neoclassicists and moderns. We loved, also, its swinging, slatted, saloon-type half doors. They not only provided ventilation before air conditioning and permitted most covenants to be overheard and hence openly arrived at, but their vicious swings into the hall created a sporting hazard for passersby.

The Department was much smaller then. The country had not yet reluctantly donned the imperial purple of world leadership, or acquired a voice heard hourly around the world, or discovered and exchanged culture; nor was it required to cope with the mounting ill will of the objects of its solicitude and generosity. The days when the Department would add to its little nucleus of diplomatists the equivalent of Montgomery Ward, Chautauqua, CBS, and Lincoln Center were still mercifully ahead.

So much smaller was it that at the end of the day the elegantly coiffured chieftainess of the Division of Coordination and Review could and did bring to my office all the important departmental mail, to be read and signed over the title Acting Secretary. We began with a ritual which would have puzzled the uninitiated. She pulled a chair close to the front of my desk and then sat, not on it, but in it – that is, she perched herself cross-legged in the chair. And thereby hangs a tale.

The Undersecretary's mouse lived in his office fireplace, where for years a wood fire had been laid but never touched, much less lighted. Probably generations of internationally minded mice had grown up within the log structure and gone on to positions in the United Nations. When the long day's work was ending and the busy office was hushed and the fever of departmental life was over, the mouse would come out. Some atavistic fear or urge, older than time, leads women to slander mice by believing that they harbor a lascivious desire to run up the female leg. Elephants seem to share this fear. At any rate, both are traditionally nervous in the presence of mice.

From her safe haven the chieftainess could observe the mouse without tremors as we tackled the mail. For years she had battled bravely with the bureaucracy and maintained the State Department's standard of literacy high above that, for instance, of the Department of Agriculture or the Bureau of Internal Revenue. But time had dampened the fire and dulled her cutting edge. She welcomed the help of fresh enthusiasm and a new blade.

We won a few opening and easy victories over phrases with no solid support—villainous expressions like “as regards to,” “acknowledging yours of,” “regretting our delay in,” and so on. Then came our first major attack on a departmental favorite. The target was the use of the verb “to feel” to describe the Department’s cogitating and deciding process. “The Department feels that to adopt the course you urge would not,” et cetera, et cetera. The Department could, I insisted, decide, agree, disagree, approve, disapprove, conclude, and on rare occasions, and vicariously, think, but never feel. It had no feelings. It was incapable of feeling. So the ukase was issued that departmental feeling was out.

The immediacy of our success brought home to us the immensity of our combined power over the written words. When the chieftainess eliminated feeling from every letter no matter by whom written and I signed letters brought to me only by her, the Department simply ceased to feel. Absolute power, Lord Acton wrote, corrupts absolutely. But in our case, it was not so. Moderation was our guide. The tumbrel was filled discriminately. Into it went “implement” and “contact” used as verbs – “the Department must implement the Act of Congress” or “you should contact the Consul General at Antwerp.” These horrors sneezed into the sack. So did “finalize,” “analyze,” and “flexible” when used to modify “approach.” “To trigger” would have done so likewise if anyone had dared use it.

Thus far the natives showed no signs of restlessness under the new order. Indeed, they hardly noticed the increased literacy and clarity of their returning carbon copies. But our pruning knives soon cut deeper into clichés which had taken the place of thought. The first of these was “contraproductive.” What would a congressman think, I asked, when he read, “The course you proposed would, in the Department’s view, prove to be contraproductive”? It would sound to him suspiciously like a veiled reference to birth control.

Once started on this line of thought, we soon added to the proscribed list two other phrases, also likely to suggest undue familiarity with the shady side of sex. These were “abortive attempts” and “emasculating amendments.” “Crippling” amendments were bad enough. Why not, in both cases, switch to “stultifying” for a change?

Even those oddities were put down to no more than reluctance to admit modern ruggedness of speech into official correspondence. But when the guns were turned on “sincere” the murmurs grew. “For proof of Russian sincerity,” someone would write, “we look to deeds not words.” Nothing could have been more misleading or misinformed concerning both the meaning of the word and the nature of the Russians. Under pressure all would agree that Webster relegated to fifth place the letter writer’s belief that “sincere” meant “virtuous.” As its first meaning, Noah put down just what the Russians were: “pure; unmixed; unadulterated; as sincere as milk,” or, one might add, as sincere – that is, unmixed and unadulterated – trouble. He even quoted the eighteenth-century wit, physician, and friend of Pope and Swift, John Arbuthnot, as writing (incomprehensibly), “There is no sincere acid in any animal juice.” That clinched the matter, and “sincere” as an adjectival encomium went on the *Index Prohibitorum*.

We were tempted to go further and rule out “Sincerely yours,” either as a self-serving declaration that the Department was “unmixed,” which was false on its face, or that, taking a lower meaning, it was “without deceit,” which the body of the letter usually disproved. We preferred “Respectfully yours” for our superiors in the White House and the Capitol, a reserved “Very truly yours” for the citizenry and for foreign VIP’s the stately “With renewed expressions of my highest esteem” (a delightful phrase, since the expressions were never expressed). But “Sincerely yours,” having by usage been deprived of all meaning, was finally adjudged suitable for the departmental use.

Thus we strove mightily at the noble task of returning the Department’s prose to a Jeffersonian level; but we strove against the current. We became obstacles to efficiency. The mail backed up. Congressmen complained of the delay in answering their letters and refused to be assuaged by the superior prose of the answers when they did not come.

When the first symptoms of elephantiasis appeared with our absorption of Colonel Donovan’s Research and Intelligence people and Elmer Davis’ foreign-broadcasting facilities, our doom was sealed. Our evening sessions with the mail became as hopelessly inadequate as Gandhi’s spinning wheel. The revolution of expansion swept our ukases away, and through the ruins the exiled phrases defiantly marched back, contacting, implementing, feeling, contraproducting, aborting, and emasculating in shameless abandon.