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DE GUSTIBUS

You, Sir, Are a Bore

By ERIC GIBSON

So Gray Davis has upset everyone by saying, "You shouldn't be governor unless you can pronounce the name of the state." Well, I'm upset too. Not because the Californian took the low road with a dig at Arnold Schwarzenegger's Austrian accent. Rather because this is apparently the best Mr. Davis can do in the way of invective.

It isn't much better on the presidential campaign trail. This year's crop of Democrats has described President Bush as "out of control." (Boy, that must have stung.) On Wednesday, Democratic National Chairman Terry McAuliffe called Mr. Bush's statements on the war "ludicrous and insane." Don't expect Bartlett's to immortalize such utterances from him -- or any current politician.

Good-government types are always decrying "voter apathy." One reason for it may be simple tedium: Our politicians just don't coin the kinds of zingers that give spice to a campaign and spark to a career.

It's embarrassing. The communists in North Korea managed to call John Bolton, the undersecretary of state who bluntly criticized them, "rude human scum" and a "bloodsucker." How is it that colorless apparatchiks in backward regimes can come up with such colorful locutions when the denizens of a dynamic democracy can't?

The Senate in particular is rhetoric's cemetery. One problem is institutionalized hypocrisy. Senate rules state that "no Senator . . . shall, directly or indirectly, by any form of words, impute to another Senator or to other Senators any conduct or motive unworthy or unbecoming a Senator." So mortal enemies address each other across the aisle as "My good friend, the distinguished Senator."

Blame it on Thomas Jefferson. According to Don Ritchie, the associate historian of the Senate, Jefferson was "adamant about making the Senate and the House gentlemanly, to have a fair debating field." So in 1801, while he was vice president, he wrote Jefferson's Manual, rules and procedures calling for self-control and civility.

Luckily, for many decades Jefferson's Manual was honored more in the breach than the observance. Henry Clay was described by an adversary as "a being so brilliant yet so corrupt, which, like a rotten mackerel by moonlight, shines and stinks." In 1856, Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner called Illinois's Stephen Douglas a "noisome, squat and nameless animal" and, in the same debate, said of South Carolina's Andrew Butler that he had "chosen a mistress . . . who though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world is chaste in his sight -- I mean the harlot, Slavery." This gibe prompted the famous caning incident, when Rep. Preston Brooks, a fellow South Carolinian, rose to Butler's defense by belaboring Sumner about the head with a metal-topped walking stick.

Indeed, it sometimes seems as if body English has played as big a role as English. In 1798, Rep. Roger Griswold of Connecticut attacked Matthew Lyon of Vermont first with a walking stick and then with fire tongs. And in our own time, who can forget the 1964 wrestling match between Sens. Strom Thurmond and Ralph Yarborough?

The British, operating under looser rules, have a distinguished tradition of florid political nastiness. Disraeli said of Robert Peel that he was like a poker except that "a poker gives off occasional signs of warmth." In the 1980s, Labor leader Michael Foot labeled Thatcher aide Norman Tebbit "a semi-housetrained polecat." Labor's Denis Healey said the experience of being attacked by the mild-mannered cabinet minister Geoffrey Howe was "like being savaged by a dead sheep."

A lot is revealed by such words. What kind of mind would you rather have grappling with the complexities of government? One that can formulate witty jabs or one that must grope for off-the-shelf phrases, fearful of giving too much offense?

Of late, the Brits seem to have fallen on hard rhetorical times. The parliamentary debates over Iraq produced merely the phrase "sexed up" to describe Mr. Blair's intelligence dossier. Still, our politicians could learn a thing or two from their past transatlantic counterparts. Though Churchill is today celebrated as the master of the bon mot (he once described Clement Atlee as "a sheep in sheep's clothing), the real gold standard of political invective was set in the 18th century, in an exchange between John Montagu, fourth Earl of Sandwich, and John Wilkes, a sometime friend of his and a rakish member of the aristocracy.

"You will die, sir, either on the gallows or from the pox," said Montagu. To which Wilkes replied, "That depends, sir, on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress."

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