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ON LANGUAGE

Obamarama

By [WILLIAM SAFIRE](#)

“Politics has become so bitter and partisan,” [Senator Barack Obama](#) said, “so gummed up by money and influence. . . .” Though the rest of his sentence petered out into a bureaucratic “big problems that demand solutions,” what struck me was the forceful word picture evoked by the verb phrase gummed up. Here was a presidential candidate unafraid to use a slang verb with verve.

It’s an Americanism in the sense of “spoiled,” first cited by the O.E.D. in the college slang at [Yale](#) in 1901. Rudyard Kipling helped it along to trans-Atlantic status with a pregnant observation in a 1932 short story: “Research is gummed up with thinking.” (If you dare to hang that Kipling aphorism on the wall of a stiff-necked research institution or Washington think tank, then you’re a man, my son.) Senator [Bob Dole](#) in 1982 cautioned against undue optimism about passage of an extension of the Voting Rights Act with “the works around here get gummed up pretty easily,” and lest we forget, that senator went on to win the Republican nomination for president.

Obama, often described as a “media darling” (just as Senator [John McCain](#) was in 2000), is a politician who apparently chooses his words with care. Consider the adjective he chose to deal with questions about his purchase of a strip of land adjacent to his home from Tony Rezko, his longtime friend indicted (not convicted) last fall on charges of extorting kickbacks from companies seeking state business. At first, Obama acknowledged that “it was stupid,” a harsh admission, but later found an adjective better suited to a candidate for high office: “I am the first one to acknowledge that it was a boneheaded move for me to purchase that strip from Rezko, given that he was already under a cloud of concern.” (The usual metaphor is “cloud of suspicion”; Obama softened it to concern.)

Boneheaded was a perfect choice: not as condemnatory or self-flagellating as stupid, nor as dismissive as foolish, nor as formal as ignorant, nor carrying a secondary drug connotation as dopey, nor as frivolous as silly, nor as inapt as dumb (considered a slur by the speech-impaired). The successor adjective to blockheaded and woodenheaded, both in lexical desuetude, became fixed in American slang on or soon after Sept. 23, 1908, with the New York Giants facing the Chicago Cubs in the game that would ultimately decide which team would win the National League pennant.

In the bottom half of the ninth inning, with the score tied and Giants on first and third, the batter hit a single and the runner from third seemed to score with what should have been the winning run. But 19-year-old Fred Merkle, running from first, didn’t bother to touch second. The Cubs’ shrewd second baseman, Johnny Evers (remembered as the pivot man in Tinkers-to-Evers-to-Chance double plays), called the umpires’ attention to this oversight; the game was ruled a tie and replayed at the end of the season, and the Giants lost. Merkle’s innocent blunder became known as “the Great Bonehead Play.”

Mixed Race

In a more serious vein, how does Senator Obama identify his personal racial mixture? The golf champion [Tiger Woods](#) told [Oprah Winfrey](#) that he likes to call himself a “Cablinsian,” an amalgam of “Caucasian, black, American Indian and Asian,” but perhaps that was jocular. Obama is the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya. The columnist Clarence Page, who is black, notes that the Illinois senator does not run away from the “black” label: “I can tell you a substantial number of black voters are mightily suspicious and even personally offended by black folks who don’t want to be called ‘black.’” In his recent book, “Audacity of Hope,” the senator identifies himself as “a black man of mixed heritage.”

Mixed-race is a coinage first spotted by the O.E.D. in *The Guardian* in 1971, when the British newspaper referred to “a delegation of six mixed-race Rhodesians.” That new usage was acceptable to many in South Africa categorized as colored, but that description fell out of favor there as well as in the U.S. as recalling the era of apartheid and segregation. Colored had one sense of “neither all black nor all white” and another sense of a euphemism for Negro. Colored is now taken by many to be offensive, but people of color is embraced proudly. In the U.S., black is now widely acceptable, especially in a second reference to African-Americans. Nonwhite is acceptable to demographers but will likely wither as suggesting that whiteness is the norm. Mixed heritage, Obama’s usage following black, suggests ethnicity more than race — like the offspring of British and Russian parents — which is why mixed-race is the compound adjective to keep your eye on.

Media Darling

One way to zap a hitherto little-known person getting a rush of publicity is to afflict him with the bogus title media darling. That’s because media, when construed as singular — especially as mass media and mainstream media — connotes to its crowd of critics some manipulative monolith whose control of communication is to be resisted.

In sports, “the hottest rookie in pro football” in 1983 was, according to *The Boston Globe*, [Dan Marino](#), “embraced as the universal media darling.” In business, *The Times* hailed [Steve Jobs](#) as “reinventing Apple Computer as a media darling with its popular iPod.” (The *Los Angeles Times* updated the phrase by calling YouTube “a new-media darling.”) In April 1976, Clifford Terry wrote in *The Chicago Tribune* about the actress Louise Lasser, whose role in the TV series “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman” was “becoming a media darling, sort of the Margaux Hemingway of the Crock Pot set.”

A Google search shows about 50,000 matches of the phrase with Barack Obama. One is this headlined prophecy from *The Chicago Sun-Times*: “Obama’s sticky switch from media-darling to media-hounded.”

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