

was never clearly organized, and had no efficient leaders and no money, and was without the slightest public support! The boobs, in fact were against it as violently as the trembling captains. They always are, and for a reason lately plainly stated by Secretary Colby; they hope to rise and believe that they *will* rise—they want the loot protected so that it will be still there when they come to collect their share of it. Until this universal belief in prosperity around the corner dies out in the American people, there can be no serious radical movement in the republic. Now and then—as after 1893—there may be a few growls, but that is as far as the thing will go. Nor can there ever be any genuine passion for liberty, or any organized movement against harsh laws, or any effective punishment of profiteers. Such things, to the bourgeoisie, are not evils; they are goods; upon them the whole structure of bourgeois society rests.

Only one thing will ever seriously damage that structure: unsuccessful war. The day the United States is beaten on land and sea, and the unbroken hope of 144 years suddenly blows up—that day it will be high time to look for the birth of radicalism. Until then, let us snooze at peace. We are all safe. All we have gobbled we may keep.

From: H. L. Mencken, A Carnival of Buncombe
(Johns Hopkins, 1956)

GAMALIELESE

March 7, 1921

On the question of the logical content of Dr. Harding's harangue of last Friday I do not presume to have views. The matter has been debated at great length by the editorial writers of the Republic, all of them experts in logic; moreover, I confess to being prejudiced. When a man arises publicly to argue that the United States entered the late war because of a "concern

for preserved civilization," I can only snicker in a superior way and wonder why he isn't holding down the chair of history in some American university. When he says that the United States has "never sought territorial aggrandizement through force," the snicker arises to the virulence of a chuckle, and I turn to the first volume of General Grant's memoirs. And when, gaining momentum, he gravely informs the boobery that "ours is a constitutional freedom where the popular will is supreme, and minorities are sacredly protected," then I abandon myself to a mirth that transcends, perhaps, the seemly, and send picture postcards of A. Mitchell Palmer and the Atlanta Penitentiary to all of my enemies who happen to be Socialists.

But when it comes to the style of a great man's discourse, I can speak with a great deal less prejudices, and maybe with somewhat more competence, for I have earned most of my livelihood for twenty years past by translating the bad English of a multitude of authors into measurably better English. Thus qualified professionally, I rise to pay my small tribute to Dr. Harding. Setting aside a college professor or two and half a dozen dipsomaniacal newspaper reporters, he takes the first place in my Valhalla of literati. That is to say, he writes the worst English that I have ever encountered. It reminds me of a string of wet sponges; it reminds me of tattered washing on the line; it reminds me of stale bean-soup, of college yells, of dogs barking idiotically through endless nights. It is so bad that a sort of grandeur creeps into it. It drags itself out of the dark abyss (I was about to write abscess!) of pish, and crawls insanely up the topmost pinnacle of posh. It is rumble and bumble. It is flap and doodle. It is balder and dash.

But I grow lyrical. More scientifically, what is the matter with it? Why does it seem so flabby, so banal, so confused and childish, so stupidly at war with sense? If you first read the inaugural address and then heard it intoned, as I did (at least in part), then you will perhaps arrive at an answer. That an-

swer is very simple. When Dr. Harding prepares a speech he does not think it out in terms of an educated reader locked up in jail, but in terms of a great horde of stoneheads gathered around a stand. That is to say, the thing is always a stump speech; it is conceived as a stump speech and written as a stump speech. More, it is a stump speech addressed primarily to the sort of audience that the speaker has been used to all his life, to wit, an audience of small town yokels, of low political serfs, or morons scarcely able to understand a word of more than two syllables, and wholly unable to pursue a logical idea for more than two centimeters.

Such imbeciles do not want ideas—that is, new ideas, ideas that are unfamiliar, ideas that challenge their attention. What they want is simply a gaudy series of platitudes, of threadbare phrases terrifically repeated, of sonorous nonsense driven home with gestures. As I say, they can't understand many words of more than two syllables, but that is not saying that they do not esteem such words. On the contrary, they like them and demand them. The roll of incomprehensible polysyllables enchants them. They like phrases which thunder like salvos of artillery. Let that thunder sound, and they take all the rest on trust. If a sentence begins furiously and then peters out into fatuity, they are still satisfied. If a phrase has a punch in it, they do not ask that it also have a meaning. If a word slides off the tongue like a ship going down the ways, they are content and applaud it and wait for the next.

Brought up amid such hinds, trained by long practice to engage and delight them, Dr. Harding carries over his stump manner into everything he writes. He is, perhaps, too old to learn a better way. He is, more likely, too discreet to experiment. The stump speech, put into cold type, maketh the judicious to grieve. But roared from an actual stump, with arms flying and eyes flashing and the old flag overhead, it is certainly and brilliantly effective. Read the inaugural address, and it will gag

you. But hear it recited through a sound-magnifier, with grand gestures to ram home its periods, and you will begin to understand it.

Let us turn to a specific example. I exhume a sentence from the latter half of the eminent orator's discourse:

I would like government to do all it can to mitigate, then, in understanding, in mutuality of interest, in concern for the common good, our tasks will be solved.

I assume that you have read it. I also assume that you set it down as idiotic—a series of words without sense. You are quite right; it is. But now imagine it intoned as it was designed to be intoned. Imagine the slow tempo of a public speech. Imagine the stately unrolling of the first clause, the delicate pause upon the word “then”—and then the loud discharge of the phrase “in understanding,” “in mutuality of interest,” “in concern for the common good,” each with its attendant glare and roll of the eyes, each with its sublime heave, each with its gesture of a blacksmith bringing down his sledge upon an egg—imagine all this, and then ask yourself where you have got. You have got, in brief, to a point where you don't know what it is all about. You hear and applaud the phrases, but their connection has already escaped you. And so, when in violation of all sequence and logic, the final phrase, “our tasks will be solved,” assaults you, you do not notice its disharmony—all you notice is that, if this or that, already forgotten, is done, “our tasks will be solved.” Whereupon, glad of the assurance and thrilled by the vast gestures that drive it home, you give a cheer.

That is, if you are the sort of man who goes to political meetings, which is to say, if you are the sort of man that Dr. Harding is used to talking to, which is to say, if you are a jackass.

The whole inaugural address reeked with just such nonsense. The thing started off with an error in English in its very first sentence—the confusion of pronouns in the *one-he* combination,

so beloved of bad newspaper reporters. It bristled with words misused: *Civic* for *civil*, *luring* for *alluring*, *womanhood* for *women*, *referendum* for *reference*, even *task* for *problem*. "The *task* is to be *solved*"—what could be worse? Yet I find it twice. "The expressed views of world opinion"—what irritating tautology! "The expressed conscience of progress"—what on earth does it mean? "This is not selfishness, it is sanctity"—what intelligible idea do you get out of that? "I know that Congress and the administration will favor every wise government policy to aid the resumption and encourage continued progress"—the resumption of what? "Service is the supreme *commitment* of life"—*ach, du heiliger!*

But is such bosh out of place in a stump speech? Obviously not. It is precisely and thoroughly in place in a stump speech. A tight fabric of ideas would weary and exasperate the audience; what it wants is simply a loud burble of words, a procession of phrases that roar, a series of whoops. This is what it got in the inaugural address of the Hon. Warren Gamaliel Harding. And this is what it will get for four long years—unless God sends a miracle and the corruptible puts on incorruption. . . . Almost I long for the sweeter song, the rubber-stamps of more familiar design, the gentler and more seemly bosh of the late Woodrow.

GAMALIELESE AGAIN

September 9, 1921

The learned New York *Times*, in the course of a somewhat waspish counterblast to all the current criticism of the literary style of Dr. Harding (including especially my own modest observations), has this to say:

Mr. Harding's official style is excellent. Its merits are obvious. In the first place, it is a style that looks Presidential. It contains the long sentences and big words that are expected. . . . Furthermore, the President's style is one that radiates hopefulness and aspiration, and is a fit vehicle for sentiment of the kind dear to a million American firesides. . . . It is complained that the President is too verbose and too vague. But this is . . . to miss entirely the point of popular acceptance. In the President's misty language the great majority see a reflection of their own indeterminate thoughts.

In other words, bosh is the right medicine for boobs. The doctrine, alas, is not new. I began preaching it at least six years ago, when the late Dr. Wilson loosed his first evangelical dithyrambs upon the world; it was plainly stated in the very treatise upon Gamalielese that the *Times* complains of. What ails the style of Dr. Harding, in brief, is precisely the fact that he has spent his whole life addressing persons devoid of intelligence, and hence afraid of ideas. His normal hearer, down to the time he became a candidate for the Presidency, was an Ohio yokel whose notions of a lofty and satisfactory rhetoric were derived from reading the *Marion Star* (or Cox's paper, or some other of the sort), and from listening to speeches by visiting fraternal-order magnates, harangues in the Chautauquas upon "Christian Idealism" and "The Glorious Future of the Republic," stump oratory by Ohio Congressmen, and sermons by ecclesiastical morons trying to imitate Gypsy Smith and Billy Sunday. Addressing such simians, the learned doctor acquired a gift for the sort of discourse that is to their taste. It is a kind of baby-talk, a puerile and wind-blown gibberish. In sound it is like a rehearsal by a country band, with only the bass-drummer keeping time. In content it is a vacuum.

No need for the *Times* to argue that such a style is grateful to the mob. What the mob wants is the mere sough and burble of words; add a solemn mien and some transparent monkey-

shines, and it is willing to listen and believe. But it is surely a novel doctrine that the merchanting of such slush is the whole, or even the chief business of a President of the United States—that he has explained his ideas sufficiently when the plain people see in them “a reflection of their own indeterminate thoughts,” *i.e.*, of their own vague and blowsy delusions. To argue so much is to argue further that the ideal President would be a complete idiot.

Nay, there is more to the job than that. A President is theoretically (and ought to be actually) the President of the whole nation—of the more or less intelligent minority as well as of the vast herd of human blanks. For him to address himself exclusively to the blanks, leaving the minority quite unable to comprehend him—this is carrying democracy a bit too far. I do not argue that he should accept the ideas of the minority, or even that he should manufacture ideas agreeable to it; all I argue is that he should state his ideas, whatever their character, in such terms that educated men can understand, weigh and discuss them. If he doesn't, then they are never discussed at all, for the blanks never discuss anything; they merely poll-parrot phrases. Certainly, the *Times* doesn't maintain that a President's ideas should not be discussed at all. To do so would be to accept the final implication of democracy, to wit, that the worst clown procurable should reign, and that the doctrines of the reigning clown should be wholly beyond challenge.

What Dr. Harding obviously needs is active contact with superior minds. His own mind is not superior, and, to do him justice, he seems to be well aware of it. It would mellow and improve him to exchange ideas with men who know more than he knows, and have lived in more civilized surroundings, and are more accustomed to ratiocination. But how is there ever going to be any such exchange if he continues to garb his notions in such phrases that men accustomed to ratiocination can only stand aghast and flabbergasted before them, as before the

blood-sweating behemoth of Holy Writ? The louder the boobs yell, the colder the sweat upon the intelligentsia.

My private suspicion, perhaps contumacious, is that the eminent gentleman has done his thinking in terms of the stump and the chautauqua for so many years that the jargon that goes therewith has become second nature to him, and that he couldn't express his ideas in clearer and more seemly terms if he would. Either he has always been of the mob himself, or he has talked himself into incurable identity with it. If this guess is correct, then no amount of pleading will ever induce him to say his say in plain English, and he will go down into history shrouded in the “misty language” that the *Times* praises. The consummation might be conceivably a good deal more sour. After all, the ideas emitted by Presidents of the United States during the past thirty or forty years have not been of such a character that the sum of human knowledge has been appreciably enriched by them. On the contrary, most of these great men have discharged little save piffle, and some of them have discharged so much of it that the world still gags whenever it thinks of them. If, now, we are to have a President who gets through his whole term without setting off a single intelligible idea, good or bad, the fact perhaps may be credited thankfully to the inscrutable wisdom of God. Harding in his mist is bad enough, but Harding crystal-clear might be a great deal worse.

But this consolation is not altogether soothing. The mind inevitably cherishes a yearning for a President who would be less esoteric, and hence more entertaining. We are all used to more active performers. The show is often obscene, but it is usually very amusing. Mere snickering at the snarls and whorls of Gamaliese will soon pall; it will presently irritate, and then it will bore. Far better a Roosevelt with his daily mountebankery or a Wilson with his weekly appendix to the Revelation of St. John the Divine. These boys kept the ball in the air. It was a pleasure, in their days, to read the newspaper. But all Gamaliel

promises is a few more laughs, and then an illimitable tedium.

His acts, unluckily, are almost as obscure as his speeches. A neutral grayness hangs over all his official activities. There were those who hoped that he would select a Cabinet vastly better than that of the late Woodrow, and there were those who hoped that he would select one much worse. He did neither. Instead, he got together a gang of master-minds almost exactly equivalent, in intelligence, ability and common decency, to the gang that went out on March 4. No one can make out whether he is in favor of a League of Nations or against it. No one knows what his notions are regarding Mexico. No one can say whether he is an irreconcilable high-tariff man or a high-tariff man with reservations. No one knows what he is going to do about anything.

This past week I have been looking through some foreign papers, all post-dating the inaugural address. I find in them no echo of the *Times*' delight in the "misty language" of that historic harangue. On the contrary, all of them seem to regard it uneasily, and a bit askance. They seem to be unimpressed by the fact that it shows "a style that looks Presidential"; what they apparently hoped for was a style that would let them know what to expect from the United States. It may be, for all I know, a good thing to keep them guessing; it may work to our advantage to puzzle them and fool them. But how badly they take it! How ill-naturedly they protest that it is an offense against them to deluge them with balderdash! How pointedly they hint that plain English would help them to believe more in the sound sense and good intentions of the United States!