

The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit

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THE DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL BULLSHIT

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*To Fred and Bobbe,
who spur me on
&
To bullshitters everywhere,
who keep me in business*

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INTRODUCTION

This is a milestone in lexicon history: the first comprehensive, unvarnished dictionary of American political bullshit. There are no asterisks to make it look respectable (bullsh*t). It is not abbreviated (BS) so as not to offend. After all, politicians offend mightily: What they say is not what they mean. So, the Dictionary translates the lingua franca of elected officials, candidates, their surrogates, and staff. It is a public service, a Rosetta Stone that arms average Americans against the wiles of those who would beguile them.

Like all bullshit, political bull derives from the universal “language” of hyperbole, duplicity, and braggadocio. Cavemen swelled their chests and beat their breasts to bullshit their rivals into thinking they were favored for the attentions of the same Neanderthal damsel, setting a precedent for Tarzan to impress Jane by pounding his pecs. Students of animal behavior have identified bullshit in the interactions of fish and fowl—so much so that “It’s fishy” and “He struts like a peacock” are shorthand for “That’s bullshit.”

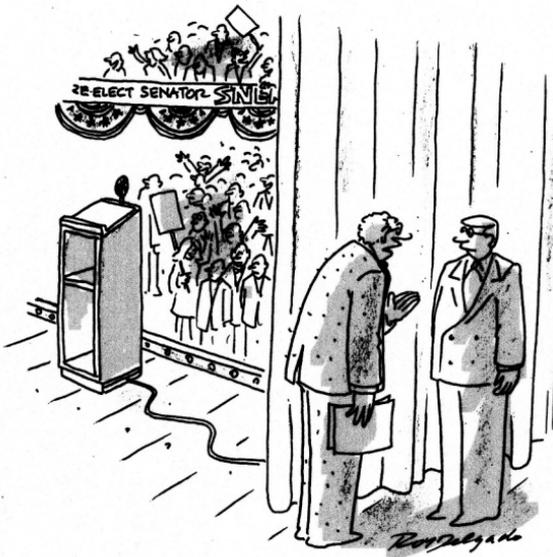
At the top of the Great Chain of Being, mankind has uniquely evolved bull to high art and low purpose. Human history may be dubbed “survival of the shitters”—the most adept rising to the level of artists; the worst, criminal cons. It oozes through our conversation, defines our relationships. Almost everyone uses it to one degree or another, though few would admit it. There is bullshit *with bravado* (“I have a condo in Mexico,” which is only a time-share); bullshit *with aplomb* (“Yes, I am Salvador Dali,” a look-alike routinely answered). There’s *pathological* bullshit (“My father was U.S. Ambassador to Egypt,” alleged by the son of a hotel manager). Most is harmless, almost playful. A.A. Milne’s young Christopher Robin had phony

“wheezles and sneezles that bundled him into his bed” and fooled “all sorts of physicians.” Bullshitters know no age—or limits.

Political bullshit is in a class by itself—and *everywhere*. It is bipartisan, non-partisan, and independent. We step into it far more often than that of any other variety. It puts the entire English language at risk. As definition after definition makes clear, words don’t mean the same things to average people and to politicians. They are dough—too often sour—to be molded into any shape that suits them. Bill Clinton’s questioning “whatever is, is” was the height of bullshit. All campaign promises are bullshit, until proven otherwise—which is almost never. There’s bullshit with obfuscation—to hide a multitude of real or imagined sins (“enhanced interrogation” or beating the crap out of someone). There is bullshit with intent to blow off (“We’ll take that under consideration”) and bullshit with overblown or false praise (“This candidate for traffic court has all the makings of another Clarence Darrow”).

Empowered by this Dictionary, everyone will be able to translate a sentence as promise-filled as “Someone from my staff will get back to you” into its real meaning in honest American English: “Don’t hold your breath. You didn’t contribute to my campaign so why would you be so dumb as to think I’d ever do anything for you?”

Forewarned is forearmed. The widest purpose of this Dictionary is to cleanse the Augean Stables of political bombast and help average Americans hold those who represent them to their word; the narrowest, to put politicians on guard that we are on to them and that they dissemble at their peril. Nothing has been held back; nothing has been sugar-coated. You’re getting the unvarnished truth. And that’s not you-know-what!



**"Which speech should I give them . . . Bullshit #1 . . .
Bullshit #2 . . . or Bullshit #3?"**

THE DICTIONARY

ACCESS THROUGH WORLD-CLASS

The Dictionary of American Political Bullshit

ACCESS

(ac•cess) *noun* 'ak-ses

(See also Equal Opportunity)

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” is written over the gates of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*. “Abandon all hope of ever getting in” should be written over the door to most politicians’ offices.

In political bullshit, access is whitewash for elitism and institutionalized payola. We claim to be the land of equal opportunity—not just for once-disenfranchised minorities, but for everyone. Our national mantra proclaims that the whole country is one big “open door policy” to personal success. Come one, come all. In a country in which “all men”—and now women—are thought to be “created equal,” everyone allegedly has equal access: a shot at becoming president, the key to the executive washroom, the chance to marry the boss’s son or daughter. Our rights and privileges are not inherited, or so we say: Every American has an equal chance to grab “the brass ring.”

At its best, the entire history of the United States may be seen as opening more and greater access to more and greater segments of the population. The beginning of access to full citizenship for African-Americans was an outcome of the Civil War, however stymied until the 1960s. In 1920, women got access to voting booths. Access for the handicapped, for so long hidden from public view, has made it possible for people with physical impairments to participate in activities from which they were commonly excluded.

So, knowing that Americans are suckers for anything that plays on our historic fight for, and commitment to, access, when politicians are their unctuous best, coming after votes, they never miss an opportunity

to pledge that they'll do everything in their power to help each and every American achieve it—whatever their reason or purpose: "You'll always have access to me after I'm elected."

Bullshit! As soon as candidates win, the doors to them shut tighter than the vaults at Fort Knox, unless you know the magic word: Moolah. If you've got it, they talk, nobody walks. Of course, they deny it: Taking a bribe is illegal. They claim that lobbyists and campaign contributors simply get access to them so they can "educate" them about issues. Translation: The more money people pay to get in the door, the wider it opens and the likelier it is they can get whatever they want: their dumb son a job on Capitol Hill, legislation written—or written by them and handed over to a staff member so they don't waste their valuable time.

By law, auto repair shops must estimate our charges before we agree to use them. In restaurants, we know how much menu items cost. In the interest of full disclosure, it's only fair that politicians should have to post on their website and office door charges for access to them. For example, \$500 to talk to staff member x for one hour; \$1,000 to consult with staff member y and go to lunch; \$2,500 to talk with the big cheese for fifteen minutes by phone; \$5,000 for a tax exemption; \$10,000 if you want a recommendation for your daughter to go to the Naval Academy.

On the Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus's poem may say, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." But once the masses are on terra firma, only the air is free. If they want access, they've gotta pay to play. When you hear politicians talk about access, hold onto your wallet—and block their access to you.

ACCORDING TO A RECENT POLL

prepositional phrase

We live in the Age of Opinion, informed or (mostly) not. Pollsters who call themselves professional would argue that they are objective and disinterested. But they are in business and have to keep churning opinion to stay afloat. Too often accepted as gospel, “scientific” poll results are skewed, depending upon how questions are framed and who is asked. On election night 2012, Karl Rove went ballistic on FOX because even its pundits called Ohio for Obama, so he knew Romney was toast. It simply couldn’t be, he thought. But throughout the campaign, Republican pollsters based their assumptions on the 2010, mid-year, voting patterns. They believed that the 2008 coalition of voters that put Barack Obama in the White House wouldn’t come out in 2012. Bullshit in, bullshit out!

In addition, because of the Internet and the 24-hour cable news cycle, we are inundated with the results of polls, too many of which can’t even pretend to have scientific credibility. The media have a field-day hyping issues and encouraging people to share their thoughts on line. Of course, they really couldn’t care less: They only solicit opinion so they can estimate their viewing audience and increase their advertising rates. Without distinguishing informed judgment from poisonous deception, the Internet in general, and platforms like Twitter and Facebook in particular, now give anyone and everyone a way to say anything and everything to the rest of the world with the click of a mouse—and anonymously.

But it’s one thing if people express their views on trivial matters—their choice to be the next “American Idol” or whether Tiger Woods’s

wife should have forgiven him. It's quite another if the subject is Should Israel bomb Iran? And yet, almost minute by minute, polls report what percent of us thinks we should reduce the size of the military, or allow the building of the Keystone XL oil sands pipeline—as though average Americans could possibly know. Unfortunately, these days, the gravity of an issue doesn't matter; the message to every one is: Come one, come all; we want to know what you think—just because you think it. And Americans, lusting after their fifteen minutes of fame, are only too happy to oblige. So, most poll-taking today is in a free fall, based upon pure gut reaction, not facts.

But long before voters go to the only poll that counts, election day, the results of opinion polls taint their perceptions—creating winners and losers before anyone really knows candidates and issues. They shape elected officials' and candidates' popularity perhaps more than they gauge it. Media-made, popular movements like the tea party and Occupy Wall Street, which may be refreshing or anathema, depending upon your point of view, are vigilantes that disproportionately affect pandering politicians, depending upon what polls say about them at any given moment.

The next time you hear someone say, “according to recent polls,” think bullshit.

And, if you *really* want to foment a revolution, forget the tea party and tune out public opinion polls. With apologies to the Zen koan: If poll results are announced in the forest but no one's listening, will it make a sound? You don't need a poll to tell you the answer.

ACCOUNTABLE

(ac•count•able) *adjective* ə-ˈkaʊn-tə-bəl

We're taught to be accountable, almost as soon as we exit the birth canal. Always tell the truth, Never lie, Do what you say you're going to do—these and other homey bromides are drummed into our heads by our parents so we'll be good little boys and girls, especially if we show any signs of being pathologically duplicitous. And as we grow older, the gloves come off; the stakes get higher, the messages become more severe: The religious among us, committed to saving our souls, warn that we'll be held accountable before Him and burn in Hell for all eternity if we don't live by "the good book." So, being accountable is shorthand for assuming personal responsibility, always taking the moral high ground, and setting the best example—at the risk of reducing ourselves to pond scum.

Out of fear of the unknown, the vast majority of us heed some of the warnings, stay reasonably honest; out of their unique brand of brazenness, most politicians ignore practically all of them, try to get away being as scurrilous as they can be. Seeing the vote-getting potential of professing to be accountable, they cloak themselves in an aura of moral virginity. It's the mother's milk of their every stump speech, the stuff of every campaign ad, the promise of every handshake that thanks you for a campaign contribution. Emboldened by a lifetime of almost-never detected deceit—in their teens, they convinced their mother the condom she found was a balloon; their spouse still doesn't know they're cheating—politicians look you in the eye and swear that they are accountable to "the people"—and *only* to the people. You're

“people.” So, of course, you’re reassured they will be accountable to you. “Elect me,” their predictable folderol goes, “and I will clean up the system.” You vote for them; they win.

Once in office, on the premise that the best defense is a good offense and it takes a thief to know a thief, politicians go on the offensive and promise to bring Armageddon to immorality, double-dealing, malfeasance, and overall naughtiness, wherever they find it—no holds barred. They will speak truth to power, “hold other people’s feet to the fire.” They will shake things up, root out violations of the public trust. Others are in the pockets of special interests, they claim, but not them.

In the heat of actual investigations and a full-court press, they haul alleged perpetrators before committees to make them accountable. But it’s all Kabuki theatre: Everyone knows the players and the script. Accusers say they want nothing like the scuzziness they’re investigating ever to happen again. Defendants squirm and profess their innocence. Accountable in political theatre is bullshit for “I’m okay. You’re okay.” Everyone gets off scot-free.

So, of course, all of them will forever swear, “My mother told me: ‘Always tell the truth,’ ‘Never lie,’ and ‘Do what you say you’re going to do.’” But God help them if she’s ever around to listen—or He’s there to judge them for all eternity.

ACTIVIST

(ac•tiv•ist) *noun, adjective* 'ak-tiv-ist

(See also Constitution, Judicial Restraint, Strict Constructionist)

In standard English, to call someone “activist” is to pay them a high compliment, applaud them as quintessential Americans: rugged, robust risk-takers who agitate for or against something (vegetarianism, animal rights, an unpopular war)—even if we don’t agree with their cause or stance. From the PTA to Occupy Wall Street, Americans stand up for what they believe in—actively—and we’re proud of them. They are the First Amendment, our coveted free speech right, in action.

More broadly speaking, being activist is the sine qua non of our national brand: We are a people in constant motion, stirring the societal pot. For the moment forgetting the Native Americans we displaced (or worse), we celebrate the get-up-and-go, take-charge, pioneer spirit that conquered the North American continent, made a thriving nation out of a forbidding wilderness, and spread liberty and democracy across the globe. Our national sport is activist football; we can’t sit still for spelling bees. Our Founding Fathers were activists. Our most consequential presidents—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt—had *shpilkes* (Yiddish for has nervous energy, sits on pins and needles, is an activist). *The New York Times* praised the “instincts” of Hillary Rodham Clinton for being “more activist than those of a White House that has kept a tight grip on foreign policy.” In a word, at its best, everyone can always celebrate the United States as one great, big, activist extravaganza—well, not everyone and not always!

Activist is also ultra-conservative bullshit for “liberal-judges-we-detest,” people who allegedly “legislate from the bench,” find rights

their critics insist are not in the Constitution and write laws instead of interpreting them. If the right-wing could rewrite American history, they would white-out 1953 through 1969, when Earl Warren was chief justice and the pro-individual U.S. Supreme Court handed down a dizzying array of allegedly “activist” decisions that they cannot accept to this day: ending racial segregation in schools and prohibitions against interracial marriage; protecting minority voting rights; finding a Constitutional guarantee of a right to privacy, which set a precedent for *Roe v. Wade* and legalized abortion in 1973; applying the Bill of Rights to the states and making the decisions of the Court binding on the states; ending mandatory prayer or Bible readings in public schools; ruling that all indigent criminal defendants were entitled to publicly funded counsel and everyone accused of a crime had to be read their rights (the Miranda ruling).

Of course, the same time people who are catatonic over the Warren Court and see “activist” conspiracies everywhere are curiously silent about—even celebrate—decisions like the 2010 Citizens United “activist” fiasco of the conservative, pro-corporate Roberts Court, which trampled decades of settled law, absurdly ruled that “corporations are people,” their money is protected, political speech, so they may spend unlimited amounts to buy elections.

In other words, activist judges are in the (usually jaundiced) eye of the beholder. A ruling may at once look like both activist justice or injustice. And an activist by any other name may be a quintessential American or a legal, loose canon.