

QUOTABLES Words of wisdom

Fish Story

As a student at Syracuse, William Safire once waded in too deep.

On February 4, New York Times columnist William Safire reminisced at a University-sponsored dinner in New York City about his first great ethical dilemma as an SU journalism student. Later that evening, Safire was honored with the announcement of an endowed faculty chair in his name.

I WAS A PRODUCER when I was a freshman at Syracuse—a producer of radio programs. We had a program on WAER, which at the time had two-and-a-half watts of power. Two-and-a-half watts of power was enough to take the signal to the top of the tower and out to a few sorority houses across the street, which was, after all, all we really wanted.

Instructor Larry Myers sent us out one day to cover an event—an actual live event. They had just invented the portable tape recorder, and the event we were going to cover for our class was the opening of trout season in Onondaga County, which is, as you know, a significant event up there.

So, the reporter, the engineer, and I were the task force and we went out to cover it. We got to the trout stream leading into Onondaga Lake, the center of everything, and there were a lot of fishermen around, and there was a crowd on the banks.

So I told the correspondent to wade out in the water and he went out to his ankles. Standing on the dry shore, I said, "Get out there! You're working for WAER!" He waded out to where the water was up to his hips,

holding the equipment over his head, and proceeded to get up next to the fishermen. One fisherman, holding a net in one hand and a rod and reel in the other, caught a fish and dramatically put it in the net. The announcer cried out, "First fish caught in the exciting opening of trout season at Onondaga Lake!" It was kind of exciting.

The correspondent waded back in and handed the tape recorder over to the engineer and we all went back to the studio to play it back.

There was nothing on the tape. Okay, sometimes that happens. I had neglected to turn on some minor thing. So we faced disaster. We faced a C in that assignment.

I figured we wouldn't fail because we *were* there. We found the place and finding the place was surely worth a C.

WE HAD OUR STORY all set for the professor and then we got a call, coming in to WAER from WSYR—from Curly Vadeboncoeur's office. He was the man in charge then. He said, "Did you guys have anybody covering the opening of trout season?"

I said, "Yeah, we covered it."

He said, "A strange thing. We've just had a call from the NBC News Network asking for three minutes on the opening of trout season. But

we didn't send anybody there this morning. It just seems to fit into their show for tonight. Here's a terrific opportunity for you kids at WAER, so bring us the tape quick."

This was my first great ethical dilemma. I looked at the reporter, who later went on to a distinguished career in electronic journalism, and I looked at the engineer. I said, "Come with me." We went into the men's room. There was a shower in there. I turned on the shower and turned on all the faucets and started flushing the toilets. There was a particular *clunk* of the handle when you flushed the toilet.

I explained, "These are sound effects. Everybody knew we were there; we were really there. You remember what it was like. Close your eyes, Al, and do it again, and I'll keep the water running and splashing and all."

The engineer this time got things going right, and the reporter closed his eyes and he heard the rushing and the clunk and he proceeded to recreate the event. Just about the right length of time—we had it right on the button.

I said to myself, "We were there. All right, so we've recreated a little bit. We've helped it along, but we didn't exaggerate. We didn't make anything up. So therefore, let's do it!"

WE SENT THE engineer down with the tape to WSYR to feed it to NBC. The head of the radio school, Ken Bartlett, heard about our coup and said, in his crisp way, "Get the whole damn school in the auditorium and we'll tune in NBC."



William Safire, speaking in New York City.

So a crowd gets together and I'm sitting there. We hear the network—I mean, this is big-time stuff. This is NBC, not two-and-a-half watts. This was heard all over the country—sorority houses everywhere!

Sure enough, the announcer says: "And now we take you to Lake Onondaga, thanks to WSYR, the NBC affiliate in Syracuse, and WAER [the first time our call letters were used on the network, ever]. We now take you to the opening of trout season."

The next sound I heard was *clunk*. Only the three of us who had been in the men's room heard that *clunk*. Nobody else in the entire auditorium, including Ken Bartlett, was able to tell the difference between the rushing of the Onondaga waters and the rushing of the waters in the men's room. We sat there, the three of us ashen-faced, perpetuating this hoax on the American people, realizing through our horror what we had done. We received the accolades of our professors, and from that day to this, I felt guilty about that moment. I feel much better now.

I SUPPOSE YOU LEARN something about ethics in everything you do. I then went to the Nixon White House; I was a speech writer there. I remembered always, in the back of my mind, that I owed society some kind of confession for my youthful lapse.

At one point, I was asked to write a speech about Vietnam—a serious speech. I knew that President Nixon had in his office the "Wilson desk." He had the Wilson desk in his office when he was vice president and asked that it be returned when he returned to Washington as president. . . . So I figured I'd write an interesting line about "the war to end war."

I wrote a line for Mr. Nixon, "Here, sitting at this very desk, a previous American president said this would be the war to end wars. Well, as we all know, this wasn't. . . . But maybe we can come out with a generation of peace. . . ." It all worked together and it was a good speech. The President liked it and it was well-received.

Next day, the curator of the White House came into my office and said, "Are you the guy who wrote the speech about the Wilson desk?"

I said, "Yes, as a matter of fact.

Speechwriters never claim credit for any speech, but now that you mention it, I did have a hand in that one."

He said, "The Wilson desk—that's the desk that belonged to Henry C. Wilson, vice president under Grant. It had nothing to do with Woodrow Wilson."

Now, was I going to be the one to go into the President of the United States and say, "You know this desk that you thought was Woodrow Wilson's desk, and you went before the American people and said this was Woodrow Wilson's desk? Well, you were wrong." No, I didn't have the courage.

But I remembered that experience at Syracuse—that terrible moment when I knew I was living a lie. What lesson could I draw from my unethical moment as a freshman at Syracuse to apply to my White House service two decades later?

Historians will find, in the collected work of Richard Nixon, a footnote in the tiniest agate type anyone can find, at the bottom of that speech. It refers to the line that reads, "Woodrow Wilson sat here and talked about the war to end wars. . . ."

Asterisk. Tiny footnote: "Subsequent research found. . . ." And there is the truth about Henry C. Wilson and his damn desk.

Now, nobody has ever seen that footnote, but I know it's there. It soothes my ethical conscience. And now, with my soul cleansed about that day at Lake Onondaga, I stand before you clean as the proverbial hound's tooth.

ELLIOT L. RICHARDSON

Asia in Change

Elliot L. Richardson, chairman of the United Nations Association of the United States and former Cabinet member, visited campus in late January to speak in the Spring Lecture Series on "Asia in Change."

THE CHALLENGES that emerge [in Asia] can be seen as falling under, broadly speaking, the consequences of a vacuum in leadership that no country, and no combination of countries in the region, is equipped to fill. . . .

Japan, quite clearly, is not in a



Elliot L. Richardson

position to take over for the United States. It's true that, in many respects, it can be argued that in terms of disposable economic power Japan is now stronger than the United States. . . . Nevertheless, Japan is constitutionally constrained from becoming a major military power. It is and wishes to continue to be militarily dependent to a substantial degree on the United States, confining its military capacity to home waters and overseas supply lines but not acquiring offensive military capacity.

Japan is also psychologically unprepared for assuming a role of leadership in any sense comparable to that which has been carried out by the United States since World War II. Even if it were prepared to do so, it would inevitably encounter risk to do so. Japan's role in World War II is still too well-remembered in much of the Far East for Japan to be received warmly in any attempt to assume a substantial part of the responsibilities cared for and undertaken by the United States. . . .

Quite equally, clearly China will not be in a position to take over as the geopolitical or military backbone of this area. China has large military forces, but is relatively backwards in technological terms and by no means equipped to

operate beyond, or much beyond, the borders of China. China has enough to worry about in trying to maintain sufficient military capability to offer substantial deterrence to any temptation to aggress on the part of the Soviet Union.

The role of China could affect the overall strategic balance in a dramatic way if there should occur a significant degree of rapprochement between the Soviet Union and China. The U.S. would be hard put to know how to deploy a sufficiently credible degree of strength in the region to maintain a balance—the kind that there is now. . . .

If you shift the position of China, then the relative credibility of the U.S., Japan's role will become seriously undermined. If you shift the position of Japan as well, residual credibility of the U.S. role will have been all but destroyed. The result of a rapprochement between North Korea and South Korea could also result in a significant diminution of the occasion for the preservation of a powerful U.S. presence. It would be a shift substantially less radical than that which would result in the realignment or shift in the Chinese position, but it would have consequences that are not now easy to think through.