

## The Scarlet-Lettered

By Bernard Roshco

The current mode of expressing the unspeakable originated in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which he abbreviated the A-word to communicate Hester Prynne's adulterous misdeed. Last September, Howell Raines became the Hester Prynne of US journalism when he was appointed executive editor of the *New York Times*.

Instead of a scarlet "A" embroidered on his chest, the Alabama-born Pulitzer Prize winner had an "L"—for liberal—stamped invisibly on his brow. While Hester Prynne sinned in secret, Raines committed liberalism on the editorial page he supervised, in full view of *Times* readers. When Raines became responsible for the paper's entire news content, media-watchers speculated whether he would shed the letter or try to conceal it.

Economics writer Robert J. Samuelson, whose columns appear in *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, spelled out Raines's sin:

In many ways, he seems superbly qualified.... But what ought to disqualify him is his job as editorial page editor, where he proclaimed the *Times*' liberal views. Every editor and reporter holds private views; the difference is that Raines's opinions are now highly public.... And because they are so public, Raines's positions compromise the *Times*' ability to act and appear fair-minded.

Samuelson was, however, evenhanded:

Suppose, hypothetically, that the *Wall Street Journal* had named Robert Bartley, its fiercely con-

servative editorial page editor [Note: *Bartley has since retired*], to run its news columns. Questions surely would have arisen (and properly so) about his suitability—about whether he might use the news columns to promote conservative views.

Samuelson didn't explain why an editor with undisclosed biases is less likely to manipulate news content than one whose biases are on the record. Like others who stay in the closet, might such an editor not exercise his or her bias but keep it deniable by acting discreetly? Might not scarlet-lettered editors, knowing the eyes of critics are upon them, lean over backward to demonstrate fairness?

At about the same time as Raines stepped into his new job, a perennial policy debate that ostensibly separates conservatives from liberals flared up again—whether or not to dip into the Social Security Trust Fund. Republicans and Democrats in Congress were equally wary of opening the "Social Security lockbox." Some commentators, with no election to lose, waded in and seemed to reverse their political labels:

- In the *Wall Street Journal*, Robert Reich, a past Secretary of Labor for Bill Clinton and a liberal, argued that "it doesn't matter if the so-called Social Security surplus erodes this year, or even next."
- William Safire, the house conservative on the *New York Times*' op-ed page, preached the deficit-spending gospel according to John Maynard Keynes, a liberal icon: "The reason that good Keynesian sense is not prevailing is that Bill Clinton, eager to find a way to avoid tax reduction, spooked the nation with his phony notion of a 'lockbox' on revenues coming in from the payroll tax."

- Economist Paul Krugman, a recent recruit to the *Times*' roster of liberal columnists, took issue with both Reich's and Safire's views: "Some liberals have recently made common cause with the Bush administration, arguing that the economic slump is a reason to put aside promises to protect the Social Security surplus. But those liberals are making a big mistake."

Whose bias was "liberal" and whose "conservative"? Even when commentators are paid to publicize their biases, how they come down on contentious and complex issues often is unpredictable.

However, one group of policy partisans does live up to its labels. They flaunt their scarlet letters, reliably and publicly. They are the *condottieri* of polling, the hired gunslingers who poll for candidates and parties. We will see them vying for publicity and future clients during the midterm congressional races, which provide warm-ups for the '04 presidential marathon.

These pollster-advocates give added value beyond polling expertise and political counsel. They operate as sources for political reporters, who produce "unbiased" news stories by juxtaposing quotes from contending pollsters.

Spinning political scenarios serves the self-interest of the pollster-advocates. But what's good for them is, unfortunately, bad for the long-term repute of nonpartisan polling on politics and public policy.

Some partisan polling has gone over the line to become pseudo-polling, which solves the non-response problem by reducing the need for respondents. Pseudo-polling's extreme version of downsizing is to discard samples entirely and substitute focus groups. Television loves focus groups. They are cheap and provide instant patter and pictures.

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Pseudo-polling is incarnate in the person of Frank Luntz. His best-known achievement was gaining widespread acceptance of his 1994 claim that at least 60% of those he polled favored every item of Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." True or false? Nobody knows for sure because Luntz refused to release his data. He won subsequent distinction as a televised manipulator of focus groups. Luntz rates a scarlet letter of his very own, for giving a completely new meaning to the L-word.

Samuelson had a point when he noted the importance of appearing fair-minded as well as acting fair-minded. When pollsters become opinion-mongers, why should the public give their analyses and predictions more credence than it gives the client-serving pronouncements of other flacks?

Pollsters acting as spokespeople for partisan clients must be willing to keep their "data" in the closet, a key element of Luntzery. The clients presumably get the straight stuff, if there is any. The public gets the partisan commentary and, perhaps, data manufactured to justify the commentary.

By going public as advocates while keeping their data private, advocate-pollsters make it harder for respondents to distinguish polls that are legitimate from those that are counterfeit. Over time, Gresham's law comes into play. Like debased currency, poll data will lose acceptance as it loses credibility. ●

*Bernard Roshco is a past editor of Public Opinion Quarterly, and he directed the Office of Opinion Analysis at the US Department of State.*

*To the Editor*

## National Conceit

"Suppose a... soldier were captured during war and held outdoors in an 8-foot by 8-foot cell, and when traveling from one location to another was blindfolded and had his hands bound. Would you consider that to be acceptable or unacceptable treatment?"

This question was asked twice in a recent poll, once regarding an American and once regarding a Taliban soldier [March/April *Public Perspective*]. Forty-six percent responded "unacceptable" for an American soldier, but only 20% did so for a Taliban soldier.

It is worth noting that the question did not specify that the cell was outdoors in a warm climate with protection from rain; also, that it carefully specified "soldier captured during war," to indicate prisoner-of-war status, not terrorist or criminal, a point that not all respondents may have clearly understood and considered in their response. Some may have associated "Taliban" with "terrorist."

But even allowing for these factors, the result is disturbing. It demonstrates that many Americans still like to think of their enemies as inferior human beings, rather than merely different, dangerous, and perhaps distasteful. It recalls the depiction of Germans as ferocious apes in World War I, and similar media treatment of the Japanese in World War II.

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### Correction

On page 24 of the March/April issue of *Public Perspective*, the responses to a Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates question were reported incorrectly. The question asked whether the government should move welfare recipients into jobs as quickly as possible, even if the jobs offered little opportunity for advancement, or whether they should be helped to develop skills for jobs where they would be able to advance. The results should have been 19% for "Move people into jobs quickly," 77% for "Find jobs where they can advance," and 4% for don't know or refused. The same error occurred in the Roper Center's iPOLL database and has been corrected.