

Bedtime for Safire

By Bernard Roshco

Scene: William Safire—*New York Times* columnist, past Nixon speechwriter, one-time public relations executive—drifts toward sleep, musing on his recent columns. Sunday, in the *Magazine*, he is the language “maven” who rules on English usage and abuse, a linguistic Scalia. Twice a week, on the op-ed page, he is the self-described “right-wing tout.” Occasionally, the tout dons the judicial robes of a polling maven, ruling on the legitimacy of poll questions and the validity of responses.

The polling maven dreamily savors his dismissal of the *New York Times*/CBS poll that found a dip in President Bush’s approval ratings. The paper ran a front-page story citing the poll on June 21. Four days later, his op-ed column offered the “Henny Poll.” It was polling as shtick, a vaudeville turn, a put-down showing why polling in general, and this *Times*/CBS poll in particular, ought not be taken seriously.

Suddenly, a ghostly figure appears at the foot of Safire’s bed, the namesake of his Henny Poll, the late Henny Youngman, vaudeville’s “king of the one-liners.”

Henny stands there, in full cry, as always: “Bill, baby, you brought me back! The *New York Times*! Op-ed page! I’m a headliner again! When Benny and Berle saw the space you gave me, they plotzed! You want more?”

Safire stirs in his sleep. “More what?”

“More questions for Henny Polls! A guy calls his lawyer. He says, ‘Can I ask you two questions?’ Lawyer says, ‘What’s the second one?’”

“Henny, you don’t get it. The questions don’t matter. The point is to make the

polls come back with the right answers. The *right* answers! Get it?”

“I got answers! The Henny Poll gives you any answer you want. Ask me the wife question, like you did in the paper!”

Safire is glad he’s dreaming. “How’s your wife?”

“Compared to who?”

“Not ‘who,’ Henny, ‘whom.’ The question is, ‘With whom are you comparing my wife?’”

“Who! Whom! Whom cares! You want answers, I got answers! I can make my wife look good, I can make her look bad. Ask me, ‘How’s your wife compared to Lucrezia Borgia?’ I say, ‘She’s the same. Her cooking poisons me.’”

“That’s great, Henny, but we need questions about politics.”

“I got politics! Ask me, ‘How’s your wife compared to Strom Thurmond?’ I say, ‘Compared to Strom Thurmond, Sadie is young!’”

“You don’t get it, Henny. The poll has to be about President Bush and politics.”

“Same answer! Compared to Strom Thurmond, even I’m young. Compared to Strom Thurmond, President Bush is bigger than Lincoln!”

“That’s a non sequitur, Henny.”

“Who you calling a non sequitur? I mean, whom? I mean, what’s a non sequitur?”

“In this instance, it means the answer and the question have no connection.”

“So what? This is a Henny Poll. Ask a question that gives the answer you want. If you won’t like the answer, don’t ask the question!”

“Henny, you should have been a political consultant.”

“Politics is beanbag, compared to vaudeville. You know why I talk so fast? So nobody interrupts me!”

“You should have had a column, Henny. Nobody interrupts me, no matter what I say.”

“You got it, baby! So, what were you saying in the column about me?”

“The column wasn’t about you, Henny. It was about President Bush and his poll numbers. Read it.”



“I read it more times than my last notice! I still don’t get it. How can a poll be about Bush when it doesn’t ask about Bush? I got the clipping here. I’ll read it to you. You tell me what it means.” Henny reads aloud, slowly for him:

Between campaigns, those polled tend to judge incumbents in a vacuum. We will put that right today.

Much was made of a New York Times/CBS News poll showing a four-point dip

in Bush the Younger's job approval ratings over the past month. However, the Gallup poll showed virtually no change in that period, and the most recent Zogby survey showed a bump upward for Bush.

Safire yawns. "What's your question?"

"I haven't gotten to a question, yet." He reads:

The lesson: put not your faith in pollsters, especially when they offer their interviewees no alternative. Instead, measure your opinion of the president against those who may be running against him in a few short years. Here is the early-morning line handicapped by one right-wing tout...

Henny looks at Safire. "You're the tout, right?"

"Right. What's your question?"

"You got ten guys listed here. All senators."

"Eight senators. One congressman. And one ex-vice president. He lost, remember?"

"I put a lot of money on the ponies, in my time. But I never bet on one that wasn't running. Who are you asking me to bet on? I'm not sure I want you as my bookie."

"It's not a real bet."

"But you handicapped them against each other. How do you handicap horses, or guys, who aren't in the same race?"

"I'm just asking, who do you like better, President Bush or any of these guys?" Safire grabs the paper and reads:

Now you're ready for the Henny pollster's call. 'How's your candidate? Do you prefer Bush or one of the above?'

"I still don't get it. Bush is running the country, and the other guys are running around Congress, or someplace. They're

not on the same track. There's no race. What's the point of handicapping them?"

"The handicap is part of the gag."

"You mean you call it the 'Henny Poll' because it doesn't mean anything?"

"Of course it means something. It means this poll by the *Times* and CBS didn't mean anything."

"They asked about the president."

"They didn't compare him to anybody. It wasn't a fair test."

"Isn't this president big on testing kids?"

"Right."

"The kids get graded for what they do on a test?"

"Right."

"So, what's wrong with grading Bush for what he does to the country?"

"You don't get it, Henny. There's no comparison."

"If you say so, Bill. You got the column. But do me a favor? Don't call it the Henny Poll."

"What should I call it?"

"You're the language maven, Bill. If there's a name for it, you got it. But I still want to know who—whom—to bet on. How would *you* answer this question?"

"You still don't get it, Henny. When the answer is always the same, the question doesn't matter."

Henny fades out. Safire sleeps. ●

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 Polls and Democracy

Congratulations on the fine Kaiser/*Public Perspective* research on attitudes to, and the value of, polls [July/August issue]. Very important for all of us in the field. A great contribution.

In June I spent a week in Honduras (and had done the same thing a year earlier in Haiti) on a visit paid for and organized by the State Department, talking to audiences there about the value and importance of polls in emerging democracies, and the need to have honest, independent polls.

I met the president (who has his own in-house polling operation), leading candidates for the presidency and other political leaders, business leaders, media owners and journalists, and stressed the importance of honest polls in improving the democratic process, in letting the voices of the people be heard, and in making it much harder to steal elections.

Unfortunately, in many countries, there is a very strong belief in the bandwagon effect (in spite of evidence of its absence) which leads to the corruption, and manipulation, of many (most?) polls there. As one Honduran politician said to me, "Why would I pay for a poll if it doesn't show me ahead?" This is a huge problem because much of the media is owned by politicians or those very close to them.

The State Department says they may want me to pay visits to some other countries. So whatever others think about the polls, someone (other than politicians) in DC seems to value them!

Humphrey Taylor
Chairman, The Harris Poll

To the Editor

Opinion in Public

For many people the term “town meeting” evokes the fake nostalgia of a Norman Rockwell painting (rather than the more frequent reality of a bickering session dominated by a few loudmouths). This image may be an important factor in the public perception of town meetings; in a poll reported in the July/August issue of *Public Perspective*, a plurality of 43% named town meetings as the best way for officials to learn what the majority of people think. Opinion polls ranked second, named by 25%.

There are other factors favoring the idea of town meetings over polls. Attending one is an active, individual decision. Responding to a poll is a reactive accommodation to a stranger’s request. You can award yourself brownie points for the former, but not for the latter. Further, the image of polls may have suffered a decline over the last 30 years because of the growth of partisan polling. The polling pioneers, Gallup, Crossley and Roper, took pains to appear politically neutral, which gave credibility to their findings. We now have Democratic and Republican pollsters whose results tend to run suspiciously parallel to their affiliations.

In theory at least, a town meeting is a forum for a great variety of views, and discussion of their relative merits and flaws. In a poll interview, respondents are guided into narrow channels, both of the subjects covered and the response alternatives available. They usually have no opportunity to say what they would really like to, to qualify their answers in a way that will be reflected in the poll results, or to ask for clarification of questions they consider unclear or ambiguous. For many people, being polled is a frustrating experience.

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The media’s strong preference for polls (52%, versus 25% for town meetings) is understandable. It is easier to communicate simple, numerical results than summaries of messy town meetings.

*Thomas T. Semon
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Have an opinion? Perhaps a reply to something appearing in Public Perspective? Direct submissions to the editor at pubper@ropercenter.uconn.edu. Submissions should be no more than 750 words. Authors will be contacted prior to publication.