

States of the Union

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

ON A FLIGHT from Georgia to New York a decade ago I found myself seated next to the owner of an Atlanta department store, a garrulous fellow who did his best to entertain me with jokes about "the coloreds." His stories featured the usual assortment of stereotypes—shuffling feet, rolling eyes, prodigious phalluses. I felt like Falstaff, buried beneath his mistress' dirty laundry: 'Twas "The rankest compound of villainous smell that ever offended nostril." I soon told my tormentor that I did not find his witticisms engaging, that they were merely further confirmation of Gunnar Myrdal's observation about joke-telling in America being a popular device for both transmitting and reenforcing bigotry.

My seatmate frowned. He squinted hard at me, trying to figure me out. Then a little bulb in his head must have clicked on. "Oh, I get it," he said with a smile. "You're one of those fellows who's in love with the washerwoman, Martha Luther King." Feminists will note that this man's idea of The Ultimate Jibe was

to turn Martin Luther King into a woman: *Ad hominem, ad feminam.*

My seatmate's brain seemed a factory for cheap japeries, each one designed to sting strangers and help make the teller feel superior to the rest of the human race. "Beware of jokes," warned Emerson, "we go away hollow and ashamed." Perhaps—but in America quite a few of us go away comfortably puffed up, stuffed with illusions of primacy among our fellows. Too often, pride goeth before a joke.

There is a passage in the *Koran* where Mahomet outlines his version of just desserts for people who jest at the expense of others: "On the day of resurrection, those who have indulged in ridicule will be called to the door of Paradise, and have it shut in their faces when they reach it. Again . . . they will be called to another door, and again . . . will see it closed against them; and so on, *ad infinitum*, without end."

It may be hard for derisive joke-tellers to get into heaven, but many of my acquaintances seem serenely unconcerned. Ethnic gags abound.

The other day my dentist told me a shoddy story about Puerto Ricans in New York—the punchline was "Si, señor"—and then assured me that he had nothing against Puerto Ricans, so long as they stayed on their island. "They make fine bell-hops," he said.

"But they're *citizens!*" I sputtered through the gauze in my mouth.

"Right," he said. "That reminds me of a story about a Polish immigrant who wanted to become an American citizen. He only had to answer a few simple questions about the flag and George Washington. He studied day and night, and on his way to the naturalization office he kept repeating the right answers to himself: 'First President . . . 50 stars . . . first President . . . 50 stars.' But no sooner did this Pole walk through the door. . . ." And so on, *ad infinitum*, without end.

All of which serves as a footnote to the notorious in-flight joke Earl Butz told to John Dean and Pat Boone. Reading the New York *Times'* bowdlerized version, I could imagine Boone's appreciative snicker and picture the bland, noncommittal mask that stole over John Dean's shiny face as he took precise mental note of Butz's racist lewdities. It was not an edifying occasion, yet it differed little from thousands of others that occur daily. If the scene held any special interest, it was because the crack was made by a member of the United States Cabinet in the presence of America's most successful informer. More or less by accident, the country's foul-smelling laundry had been hung out on the line, within everyone's nose-shot.

The next day Pat Boone, having consulted his conscience, announced that the entire incident had been "harmless" and that the press had blown it up "beyond all proportion." Then Gerald Ford spent a few days consulting *his* conscience. "putting the black citizens of the United States on hold," as Mary McGrory remarked, while he prayed for either

the public to forget or else for his Secretary of Agriculture to quit. Belatedly, Butz answered the Presidential prayer.

"This is one of the saddest decisions of my Presidency," mourned Ford as he accepted Butz's resignation—signaling that he was sacrificing the desires of his heart to the demands of his candidacy. Some people, Ford seemed to be saying, simply couldn't take a joke.

Earl Butz now tells us, again and again, that he is not a racist. Doubtless he believes himself; just as Richard Nixon, in some strange egocentric way, probably thought he was speaking the truth when he proclaimed he was not a crook. It is painful to see yourself as others do. Ask all the good folks who live in South Boston if they are racists, and you will not get a single affirmative response. In fact, President Nixon made it "perfectly clear" in a televised press conference three years ago that "being against busing is not a racist position." And it isn't, necessarily, but the absolution Nixon offered let a lot of bigots off the hook.

There is a peculiar syllogism at work here. We learn early in life—from parents, teachers and television commentators—that racists are not nice. We, on the other hand, *are* nice. Ergo, we cannot be racists. This self-indulgent logic allows us to commit countless little offensive acts, like telling antiblack jokes, without our conscience or self-image once having to pay the consequences.

Apartheid, of course, perpetuates the self-deluding process, since it protects us from the embarrassment of ever having to confront the victims of our prejudice. Butz is the product of a practically all-white world: He lived in white neighborhoods, attended white churches and white schools, and ended up working for essentially white institutions, Purdue University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. How could a man who

saw so little of blacks turn out to be a racist? Well, given the history of America, how could such a man turn out otherwise?

IN POLITICS we always get what we pay for, and sometimes we pay for what we get. Instead of Hubert Humphrey, a decent individual who began his political career as Mayor of Minneapolis by putting through the country's first fair-employment law, we elected Richard Nixon, who began *his* political career by identifying the pro-civil rights stand of his Congressional opponent, Jerry Voorhis, with "Godless Communism."

It may be technically true, as white supremacists have long insisted, that it is impossible to legislate against prejudice; it is also true that when prejudice is welcomed into the Oval Office, the consequences are immediate and forlorn: Policies are poisoned, good programs are killed, and millions of citizens down on their luck are further humiliated. Moreover, a Gresham's law of government holds that bad leaders drive out good ones. A Nixon in the White House invariably spawns a Butz in the Cabinet.

Butz's gaucherie, crude as it was, came as no surprise to the many who had suffered through the long, bitter joke of his tenure. From the beginning he seemed to go out of his way to be cruel. For instance, since 1972, when he became Secretary of Agriculture, the proportion of Farmers Home Administration housing loans made to minorities has dropped from 24 per cent to 14.7 per cent. This year, with the need for decent rural housing unabated, Butz joined with President Ford in making sure that \$700 million in authorized housing loans was returned to the Federal Treasury.

His record on minority employment has been scandalous. Early in his administration he stripped the Department's Office of Equal Op-

portunity of its initiative and left it, for all practical purposes, immobilized. The director resigned in the spring of 1974 and was not replaced until last July. Today the Department of Agriculture has fewer minority employes than any major agency within the Federal government, with the single exception of NASA. According to the U.S. Civil Service Commission, Agriculture's proportion of minority employes is a mere 9.9 per cent, compared with a 15.9 per cent figure overall.

In 1973 the employment performance of the Cooperative Extension Services in seven states—Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland and Texas—were found in violation of the Civil Rights Act. Butz could, and should, have cut off their funds, thereby forcing compliance; instead he appointed a Washington-based task force that spent much of its time looking the other way. As a result, those seven services blithely continue to ignore the law of the land.

These are just a few of the ways Butz managed to convert his private opinions about blacks into public policy. The lesson of Earl Butz's egregious career is not merely that he committed a racist impropriety, but that while in office he gave aid and comfort to racists working for him, winked at countless violations of blacks' civil rights, and generally behaved as if the principle of equality under law were itself a joke.

Finally, it should be clear to everyone by now—even to that Atlanta department store owner I met 10 years ago—that bigoted quips do more than betray bad manners; in their cumulative effect, by some damnable process of political osmosis, they beget leaders and policies that diminish us all. One hopes, though, that Earl Butz has inadvertently awakened in us a resolve that the ongoing struggle for equal rights be not all in jest.