

FRAMING THE NARRATIVE

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Henry Daniel, HD, our familiar sleuth, missed watching the debate between the two candidates that took place the previous evening. Great was his surprise the following day when the news report mentioned a lackluster performance of candidate Roger Cray, his cousin. Lackluster, it turned out, was a generous term. People were outright mocking him. The ribbings reached fever pitch among his right-wing colleagues at work. Law-enforcement agencies usually teemed with such individuals. HD decided to volunteer to help calm the storm that erupted after the debate.

That the matter had reached this level of fodder for comedy and feeding frenzy for the media spoke volume of the polarization in society. Its amplification was evidence of the monster created by Information Technology, in trying to make data available to the mass in a nick of time. Speed overtakes accuracy; convenience hampers substance. Gullibility toward partisan dogma coexisted with spontaneous suspicion to anything other. The end result being the simplistic wrapping of an idea into a catchy label, a soundbite, just like in advertising and sound analysis becomes the collateral victim.

The brouhaha that developed during an exchange between these two gubernatorial candidates in a New England state stemmed from a simple question. Asked to opine about the opposing poles of economic development and ecology protection, candidate Thompson provided this answer, “The persistent notion of victimizing jobs creation for clean air is a false premise advanced by liberal minds that forget that wages bring bread to the table. Regulations don’t. So let me say this loud and clear, the solution is simple and obvious: ‘Wages are in, and regulations are out’”. Candidate Cray rebutted: “It’s a false idea to pretend that our policies don’t exact a cost and consequences no matter how well meaning our intents are. Unbridled development during the Industrial Revolution created a lot of injuries for workers. The smokestack industry wreaked havoc with the environment and made a lot of people sick with lung disease. Coal miners are a prime example of what can happen when we are not careful and blindly pursue measures without any attention being paid to the health consequences to citizens as well as nature. Short-term gain for long-term disaster is not a good recipe. Folks who claim otherwise with vehemence and intolerance to careful planning are part of a rabid whole, a luxury we can’t afford.” His opponent promptly twisted his words and came up with this quick-witted, many would add quick, but dim-witted, riposte: “This rabbit hole is a trip you will take on your own. I won’t go there with you!”

In a classic example of a populist simpleton averse to nuances of speech and analysis but craving punchy one-liners just to attract vote-stimulating headlines, the construct behind the verbal locution *rabid whole* quickly found its way to the dustbin. In its place the catching and popular *rabbit hole* expression, conjuring fear of one-way alley leading to quagmire won the day. Kindred spirits in the press, if truth be told part of the described *rabid whole*, took it and ran with it. It wasn’t long before a copy editor of a newspaper came up with the heading, **WE DON’T NEED ANY RABBIT HOLE BUT JOBS**. The narrative about the pitfalls of patchwork policy making as opposed to sensible approach, was upended in one fell swoop and found itself in a deep burrow, just like a *rabbit hole*, a radioactive notion.

HD was indeed incensed. Although candidate Cray came from the white side of his family, he was the one person he grew up to be closest to and their life experiences mirrored the sometime checkered exemplar of race relations in America. They were both wunderkinds, quick learners and always into books. They protected each other from snide remarks by the bigoted on both sides of the fence. Their love affair with books dates back to their fascination with the *Dictionary of Global*

Culture, edited by Louis Gates and Anthony Appiah, two eminent scholars. That started a trend of searching for the outstanding and thinking outside the box. That list grew over the years. The encyclopedia *Africana* by the same authors joined it. Dale Carnegie's famous *How to Win Friends and Influence People* soon became a favorite. Books by and on leading historical figures from Abe Lincoln to Frederick Douglass, Gandhi to Churchill, Stalin to Tito, Sekou Toure to De Gaulle, Castro to N'Krumah and so on were read and discussed avidly. Niall Ferguson's treatise, *The Ascent of Money* populated the list. Kofi Anan, Lao Tzu, Machiavelli were also part of the collection. A very recent acquisition was *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*, an excellent but voluminous study of the financial consequences of ecological policies. Hence making fun of his cousin was a very personal matter, an affront, for they were both learned individuals. His cousin went full throttle into academe and had become a Rhodes scholar.

That was a distinction he would beam about, "It's a sign of pride to have reached such a height of accomplishment," while sheepishly acknowledging, "although its origin makes one shudder because it excluded women and non-whites at the onset. Thank goodness this has changed." HD had his work cut out for him. He had the ambitious mission of calming an unfavorable storm, turn the tide and aiming for a tidal wave so his cousin could take the space by storm. Lofty goals indeed, but HD had this uncanny inkling of going for broke, trying to find a needle in a haystack. He was fond of repeating this French saying that a Haitian friend had concocted, "Trouver anguille sous roche, poursuivre grenouille en métamorphose pour éviter aucune magouille." ("Leave no stone unturned, flesh out any monkey business to thwart any scheming."). His cousin was just as quick to needle him and quote Lao Tzu, "Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small." As the situation demanded it, their interplay gravitated between the role of each other's ballast or counterweight.

Bringing a discussion of sound policy insofar as preservation of the ecology has become the rallying cry of progressives and the fault line of modern times. A clear-cut separation of science-based conversation from partisan's iteration that sounds more like religious belief. HD had to go to his cousin's help in an unbidden effort. What irked him the most was the fact that such a fate couldn't have occurred to a more inappropriate individual than Roger, an erudite man with a cosmopolitan outlook and a very capable ability for analysis. HD once referred to him as "the man with the competence of a guru and the passion of a wonk." His weakness, as HD saw it, was in the delivery. The audience at a political debate differed from that at a seminar. He needed to implement Dale Carnegie's principle of "Flaming enthusiasm backed up by horse sense and persistence is the quality that most frequently makes for success." Hence this misstep needed a quick counterattack. Political campaign, described as a contact sport, entailed blow-by-blow exchange, bobbing and weaving at times and controlling the narrative. Of course, it's always easier said than done, not an easy-peasy task.

Needless to say, *Jobs but no rabbit hole*, as a campaign theme invaded the airwaves and became ubiquitous bumper stickers. Candidate Cray had become the butt of political jokes, painting him as a nerd committing rookie's mistakes and out of step with reality. Well, this couldn't last under HD's watch. He promptly sent the following text to his cousin: "You need to come across not like a professor but more like a problem solver. Don't give a seminar but provide punchy and memorable quick answers. Remember Carnegie's advice. Horse sense backed by science. Quick counterpunch is needed at all times."

HD went to visit his cousin and their first order of business was to have a mock debate. The rules were simple: simple and short answers. "You need to reword your answer. It was too

long. Instead, he made the following suggestion, “Hold a cup of clean water in one hand and muddy water in another. Now make your point about why we need to protect the environment.”

“I am your candidate if you want to make sure we hire people to protect our clean drinking water. Turning our backs otherwise will ask for disaster.”

“Now you need to show people a picture of normal lungs and another of a cigarette smoker who was exposed to asbestos and now can barely breathe because of cancer. Show a picture of his lungs and have a caption, ‘Removing asbestos from building construction is good for our health.’”

“Now have pictures of a nor’easter with all the damages and add the caption, ‘If we don’t have a strong government to provide help in disaster, who will step in?’”

Release of these ads helped to turn the tide from jokes to attention to environmental harm. For the next debate, candidate Cray brought his toolbox loaded with quips that can’t be twisted. HD who did some background search into his opponent shared some interesting tidbits that caught the opponent off-guard, during this exchange.

“Tax and spend liberals keep taking our money. We need a smaller government.”

“I am sure you would be nowhere alive today if it weren’t for big government that came in to help you when you were a student without health insurance and needed emergency surgery for an appendicitis.”

A stunned opponent lost his composure and cool. This was a skeleton in his closet that he thought was buried deep in a rabbit hole that resurfaced from the left field. The narrative changed from “Jobs, but no rabbit hole,” to “Jobs and safe environment.” A woke copy editor devised the following headline, **“SMALL-GOVERNMENT ADVOCATE THOMPSON’S LIFE WAS SAVED BY BIG GOVERNMENT ONCE.”**