

# The New York Times Magazine

JUNE 7, 1992 / SECTION 6



CALLAHAN



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BY TIMOTHY EGAN

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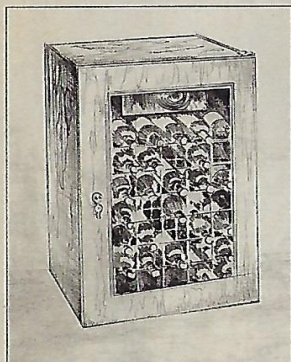
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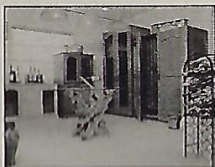
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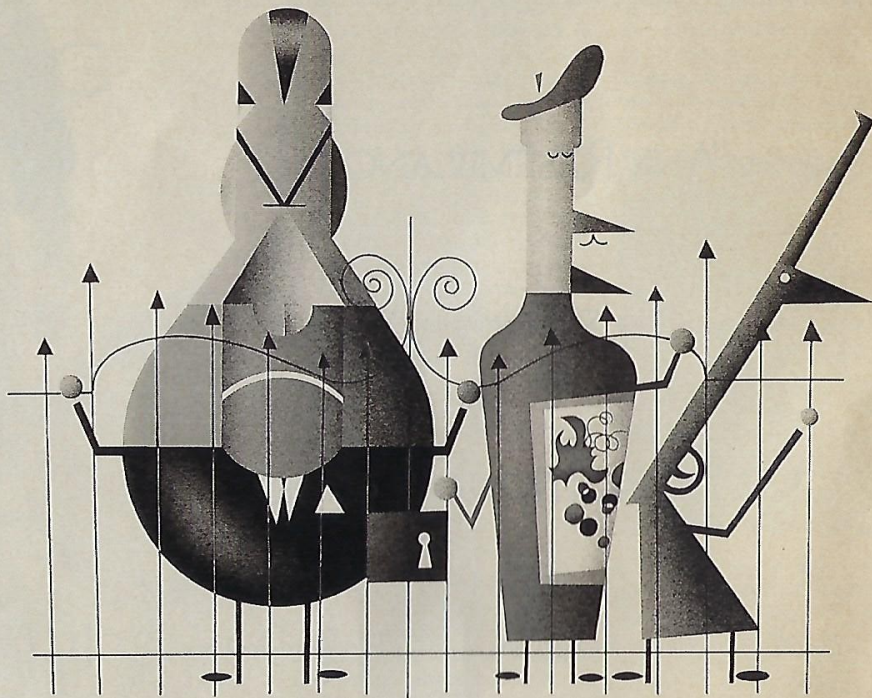


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## ON LANGUAGE

BY WILLIAM SAFIRE



## Starting -Gate

**T**HE EVERLASTING -gate combining form is back with us. It all began 20 years ago with *Watergate*; the final syllable was then clipped and applied to other words to denote scandal.

Not just political scandal: the dilution of Bordeaux wines in France was called *winegate*, and cost overruns in Hollywood were called *heavensgate*. But most writers evoked -gate for political purposes; when Mario Cuomo was a candidate for Mayor of New York City in 1977, he denounced Abe Beame's suppression of a Securities and Exchange Commission report about Big Apple finances as *Applegate*.

Since then, we have seen *Koreagate* and *Irangate*. Although the combining form was trivialized by calling complaints against a Congressman named Daniel Flood *Floodgate* and by dubbing a flap about White House expense accounts *doublebillingsgate*, it came back into its own with the abuse of the bank in the House of

Representatives, which I tried last year to label *kitegate* but which this year emerged as *rubbergate*.

Now we may have another big one: *Iraqgate* was emblazoned on the cover of U.S. News & World Report on May 18, 1992, in a story by Stephen J. Hedges and Brian Duffy, which was subheaded "How the Bush Administration helped Saddam Hussein buy his weapons of war and why American taxpayers got stuck with the bill."

I missed the boat on the naming of this one. "The Lavoro Scandal" was my feeble headline in November 1989, using the name of the Italian bank whose Atlanta branch was being used as the conduit for illicit billions in grain credits, which Alan Freedman of The Financial Times suspected were being used to buy rocket technology for Iraq. But in September of that year, Brendan Murphy of United Press International had already reported from Rome that the Iraqi Embassy "criticized media coverage of the 'Iraqgate' scandal."

David Rubinger of The Atlanta Business Chronicle kept the name alive in 1990, but only as it was known around Rome: "In Italy it is known as 'Iraqgate.'" A year later, The Toronto Star asked editorially, "Will some investigative journalists, in the style of the Watergate scandal, uncover this mass deception by the U.S., which can be termed Bush's *Iraqgate*?"

The Los Angeles Times got a good chunk of the story first, but eschewed the obvious headline. In late February 1992, a series by Douglas Frantz and Murray Waas drew on secret documents being gathered by the House Banking Committee chairman, Henry B. Gonzalez. The intrepid San Antonio Congressman, whose district includes the Alamo, then unloaded a pile of documents still stamped "secret"—but now merely embarrassing—into The Congressional Record, where other journalists could examine them without having to credit The Los Angeles Times.

In Britain, The Guardian

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SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1992

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The New York Times Magazine

tried a variant in its takeout on the scandal, choosing *Saddamgate*, but that did not catch on. Soon afterward, U.S. News & World Report led the news magazines with its coverage of what it headlines unabashedly "*Iraqgate*."

Why had I, an avid *-gate*-combining-form fan, not adopted the name long favored in Italy for the Lavoro story? Philological fustiness, I suppose; the *q* is not followed by a *u*, and that troubled my soul. We have seen the abnormally followed *q* used to express a velar sound in Qazvin, an Iranian city, but in English, Merriam-Webster's Ninth New Collegiate has only four entries for terms that start with *q* and are followed by a letter other than *u*.

In case the question comes up at your breakfast table, as it so often does at mine, these are *Q-boat* (an armed vessel posing as a fishing ship, also known as a *Q-ship*), *qintar* (Albanian money), *qiviut* (the wool from a musk ox's undercoat) and *qoph* (the 19th letter of the Hebrew alphabet). An entry that ends with *q*, unfollowed by the letter that helps to form the sound of "kw," is *Iraq*.

And now *Iraqgate*. Do not hyphenate; that would spoil the nice juxtaposition of two letters whose bottoms curl away from each other.

In future columns, we will go into the origin of phrases likely to be central to the scandal, like *misappropriation of funds* and *obstruction of justice*.

## DAMNED SPOT

IN THE WASHINGTON parlor game of identifying current political people and forces with Shakespearean characters, readers have concentrated on (1) Ross Perot and (2) the news media.

Michael Dowd of Washington nominates Coriolanus, the Roman general, as Perot "because he, too, wanted to be begged to serve."

Most entries, however, agree with Munroe A. Winter of Lake Bluff, Ill.: "Surely the prosperous Ross Perot is Prospero." Goodwin G. Weinberg of New York finds a nonpunning rationale for Perot's Prospero, "who'll subdue the Caliban budget deficit

Some see  
Ross Perot as  
Coriolanus.  
But more  
think of him  
as Prospero.

and mayhap tame magically a few other monstrous ills."

John F. Andrews, president of the Shakespeare Guild, in Washington, takes a different tack but comes out with the same Shakespearean character from "The Tempest": "And who does Ross Perot think he is if not Prospero? The rhyme is irresistible, and the personality fits too. He's secretive, manipulative, testy, self-righteous, autocratic and persuaded that he alone possesses the magic required to control our isle's unruly Calibans."

Estelle Gelshenen of East Meadow, L.I., suggests that "Frivolous political gossip-mongers who delight in digging up dirt" could play "the Gravediggers from 'Hamlet,' who are also referred to in the play as Clowns."

The most unkindest cut for those of us in the information-mediating dodge comes from Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, who is chairman of a Senate subcommittee that is responsible for "Water Resources, Transportation and Infrastructure." He nominates the Washington bureau chief of The New York Times to play Thersites, a "deformed and scurrilous" character in "Troilus and Cressida." Moynihan quotes Thersites as saying, "Lechery, lechery, still war and lechery, nothing else holds fashion."

The reason for the infamously structuring Senator's pique? "Try — just try — to get a follow-up story on the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. Widely acclaimed as the most important legislation of its kind in a generation!" Senator Moynihan is right: in politics and the press, nothing beats war and lechery. ■