

NY Times
4/12/87

On Language

BY WILLIAM SAFIRE



KEITH BENDIS

Useful Idiots of the West

REFERRING WITH derision to what he called "so-called notables who were convened as props for Gorbachev's speech," Zbigniew Brzezinski used a stinging phrase that has become a term of art among hard-line historians and former national security advisers: *useful idiots of the West*.

Certainly Zbig was not labeling "idiot" the likes of former Secretaries of State Cyrus R. Vance and Henry A. Kissinger, columnist Jeane J. Kirkpatrick and Bronx High School of Science alumnus Harold Brown — not in the sense of the Greek word for "peculiar," later applied to those with an I.Q. of less than 25, now loosely tossed about in rough equivalence to "jerk."

None of those foreign-affairs worthies took offense because they recognized the phrase as a derogation more historically resonant than *unwitting dupe* and less politically damaging than the outdated *fellow traveler*.

The phrase is in current use among the geostrategic cognoscenti. "Lenin had a name for these people," wrote Susan Spreen of Mission

Viejo, Calif., to the editor of The Los Angeles Times in December 1986, denouncing Congressmen who were pro-Sandinista and anti-contra, "*useful idiots*."

"Maarten van Traa, the Dutch Socialists' international secretary," wrote John Vinocur in The New York Times in 1981, "insists that the party is not playing the role of the *useful idiots* for the Russians, a phrase used by Lenin to describe left-liberals and Social Democrats. . . ." Several months after this instruction within the story by correspondent Vinocur, a Times headline on another topic read: "Lenin's 'Useful Idiots' in Salvador." In 1985, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was quoted in Business Week as rapping the "fellow travelers who support this [Soviet] propaganda effort in Western Europe. We call them *useful idiots*."

This seems to be Lenin's phrase, once applied against liberals, that is being used by anti-Communists against the ideological grandchildren of those liberals, or against anybody insufficiently anti-Communist in the view of the phrase's user. But as one who

has tied himself in knots looking for Lenin's supposed quote on another subject — "The capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them," or words to that effect — I wondered when and where Lenin said it.

"We get queries on *useful idiots of the West* all the time," said Grant Harris, senior reference librarian at the Library of Congress. "We have not been able to identify this phrase among his published works." A call to Tass, the Soviet news agency, gets a telephonic shrug and a referral to the Institute of Marxism and Leninism in Moscow; I tried them before, on the rope trick, and it's a waste of a stamp. I called Communist Party headquarters in New York City, thereby setting off tape recorders in a dozen F.B.I. offices (it's only me again, fellas), but to no avail.

Librarian Harris got back to me, however, with a lead to the possible source of both the "rope" remark and the "useful idiot" attribution. Former Colgate Prof. Albert Parry writes in The St. Petersburg Times: "You will not find the rope prophecy in any of the voluminous Lenin

works published in the Soviet Union." Right.

He suggests we look instead in the 1966 book "People and Portraits: A Tragic Cycle" published in New York by Inter-Language Literary Associates, written by Yuri Annenkov, a painter and writer who had been commissioned in 1921 by the Communist Party to do a portrait of Lenin. After Lenin's death three years later, Mr. Annenkov said he was given access to the personal papers of the dead leader at the Lenin Institute in Moscow, as he was illustrating some books about him.

Here is what Mr. Annenkov claims he copied from notes in Lenin's handwriting, italics in the original: "To speak the truth is a *petit-bourgeois* habit. To lie, on the contrary, is often justified by the lie's aim. The whole world's capitalists and their governments, as they pant to win the Soviet market, will close their eyes to the above-mentioned reality and will thus transform themselves into men who are *deaf, dumb and blind*. They will give us credits ... they will toil to prepare their own suicide."

Look, I know it's a little far-fetched. I would be a lot happier with a photocopy of the original Lenin notes, but such proof is not readily available, and no explosion of glasnost in Moscow is going to allow Western scholars on-site inspection of all of Lenin's notes. However, this gives us one clue about the source of the "sell us the rope" attribution, and the "deaf, dumb and blind" phrase may be one of the phrases that helped start the "useful idiots," whether or not originally by Lenin. This investigation needs more work, and we can hope it will be put on the agenda of the next summit.

In the meantime, outspoken anti-Communists have permission to use *useful idiots of the West* as well as *the West will sell us the rope with which to hang them*, but must not precede either with "As Lenin said..." until more precincts are heard from. Instead, try "As Lenin was reported to have said..." or "In a phrase attributed to Lenin..."

Lexi-Klepts

IN VICTOR HUGO'S "LES MISÉRABLES," which is getting a big ride these days, hero Jean Valjean is pursued by the relentless Inspector Javert in effect for stealing a

loaf of bread to feed a starving child.

I identify with Javert. That is because this Reuters dispatch has come across my desk: "San Francisco's posh Stanford Court Hotel has never lost a Bible but since it put dictionaries in its 402 rooms last month, 41 have been swiped."

That dream of a dictionary in every hotel room was my big idea. I saw myself as the Johnny Appleseed of linguistics, persuading hotel owners to put dictionaries in rooms everywhere, enabling weary travelers to look up the meanings and spellings of words used in late-night X-rated movies. (Go look up *lubricious* in the middle of the night with nothing but a Gideon Bible in the room.)

And what happens when a high-class hotelier sensitive to the needs of literate guests stocks his rooms with dictionaries? One out of 10 guests turns out to be a lexi-klept. At this rate, all the dictionaries will have been stolen by the end of a year. What a sad commentary on the human condition; it is as if somebody is following me around, pulling up apple-tree seedlings.

The managing director of the Stanford Court, John Cameron, offers this excuse, probably because he doesn't want to knock these thieving guests: "I guess everybody has a Bible at home but a lot of people would like to have a dictionary."

Wrong. People think that if they steal a Bible, the very inappropriateness of the act will cause them to be struck by lightning; but if they lift a dictionary, they assume God won't care. As a result, departing guests leave The Word and grab the words. The Stanford Court management, a bunch of softies, is now putting stickers on the remaining lexicons: "Love is leaving our dictionary here when you leave."

If that namby-pamby stuff doesn't work, try Safire's Curse: If you steal a dictionary, there will come a day when your child will ask you for the meaning of a word, and you'll feel too guilty to look it up in the stolen book and will misinform him, and he'll be on a quiz show with a chance of winning Vanna White as a prize and will repeat your mistake and will then sue you for parental malpractice and pick you clean.

Patronize hotels with dictionaries. Use the dictionary as needed (*lubricious*: slippery, or wanton; see *lecherous*). Then leave the dictionary in the room. ■