Next month, in the first regular-season NFL game ever to be played in Canada, the Bills will host the Miami Dolphins at the Rogers Centre, in flourishing Toronto. Under a recently signed agreement, the Bills will play a regular-season “home” game in Toronto, about 100 miles by car from Buffalo, in each of the next four years as well.

The Rogers Centre deal is widely seen as the first step toward an eventual move of the Bills to Ontario, and a “last one turn off the lights” moment for America’s fifth-largest city, giving itself “Super Bowl” status. If some games were played in Canada, Buffalo could help forge mutual prominence. I don’t just think this will happen, I know it will.

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**LANGUAGE**

**Freedom’s Curse**

**WHY WASHINGTON’S CRUSADE AGAINST SWearing ON THE AIRWAVES IS F*CKED UP.**

By Steven Pinker

A word is an arbitrary label—that’s the foundation of linguistics. But many people think otherwise. They believe in word magic; that uttering a spell, incantation, curse, or prayer can change the world. Don’t snicker: Would you ever say “Nothing has gone wrong yet” without looking for wood to knock? Swearing is another kind of word magic. People believe, contrary to logic, that certain words can corrupt the moral order—that piss and Shit and fucking are dangerous in a way that pee and Shoot! and freakin’ are not. This quirk in our psychology lies in the ability of taboo words to activate primitive emotional circuits in the brain.

My interest in swearing is (I swear) scientific. But swearing is not just a puzzle in cognitive neuroscience. It has figured in the most-famous free-speech cases of the past century, from Ulysses and Lady Chatterley to those of Lenny Bruce and the late George Carlin. Over the decades, the courts have steadily driven government censors into a precarious redoubt. In 1978, the Supreme Court, ruling on a daytime broadcast of Carlin’s “Filthy Words” monologue, allowed the Federal Communications Commission to regulate “indecency” on broadcast radio and television during the hours when children were likely to be listening. The rationale, based on rather quaint notions of childhood and of modern media, was that over-the-air broadcasts are uninvited intruders into the home and can expose children to indecent language, harming their psychological and moral development.

In practice, the FCC recognized that the impact of taboo words depended on their context. So in 2003, when Bono said in a televised acceptance speech, “This is really, really fucking brilliant,” the FCC did not punish the network. Bono, they noted, did not use fucking to “describe sexual or excretory organs or activities.” He used it as an “adjective or expletive to emphasize an exclamation.” This usage differed from Carlin’s “patently offensive” routine, with its “repeated use, for shock value,” of taboo words.

But the Bush-appointed commissioners flip-flopped on that case and subsequently targeted the Fox television network after it broadcast awards ceremonies in which Cher said of her critics, “So fuck ‘em,” and Nicole Richie asked, “Why do they even call it The Simple Life? Have you ever tried to get cow shit out of a Prada purse? It’s not so fucking simple.”

In 2007, after a federal court invalidated the FCC’s policy as “arbitrary” and “capricious,” the commission appealed to the Supreme Court. That’s when I got dragged in. The FCC claimed that “even when the speaker does not intend a sexual meaning, a substantial part of the community ... will understand the word as freighted with an offensive sexual connotation.” A brief filed earlier this year by the solicitor general in defense of the commission’s position quoted from my book *The Stuff of Thought* as follows: “If you’re an English speaker, you can’t hear [words such as the F-Word] without calling to mind what they mean to an implicit community of speakers, including the emotions
that cling to them.” In fact, the words elided in the brief were “nigger or cunt or fucking,” and the context was an explanation of why people are offended “when an outsider refers to an African American as a nigger, or a woman as a cunt, or a Jewish person as a fucking Jew.” I was certainly not arguing that when listeners hear “It’s not so fucking simple,” their minds turn to thoughts of copulation!

On the contrary, I noted that over time, taboo words relinquish their literal meanings and retain only a coloring of emotion, and then just an ability to arouse attention. This progression explains why many speakers are unaware that sucker, sucks, bites, and blows originally referred to fellatio, or that a jerk was a masturbator. It explains why Close the fucking door, What the fuck!, and Fuck you! violate all rules of English syntax and semantics—they presumably replaced Close the damned door, What in Hell?, Holy Mary!, and Damn you! when religious profanity lost its zing and new words had to be recruited to wake listeners up.

The FCC was right that I think linguistic taboos aren’t always a bad thing. Fucking—peppered speech gets tedious, and malicious epithets can express condemnable attitudes. But in a free society, these annoyances are naturally regulated in the marketplace of people’s reactions—as Don Imus, Michael Richards, and Ann Coulter recently learned the hard way. It’s not clear why swearing on the airwaves should be the government’s business.

Indeed, given how language is interwoven with thought—the major theme of the book cited by the solicitor general—any ban on words will lead to absurdities. Take Carlin’s monologue. Carlin mentioned the word fuck not to describe sexual activities, nor to shock his audience. He mentioned it to show how people use taboo words and to advance the argument that the government should not regulate them. The ruling that restricted his language restricted public criticism of the ruling itself—mocking the very rationale for free speech.

And consider the press release issued by FCC Chairman Kevin Martin expressing his displeasure when his ruling was struck down:

Today the [court] said the use of the words ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ by Cher and Nicole Richie was not indecent … I find it hard to believe that the New York court would tell American families that ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ are fine to say on broadcast television during the hours when children are most likely to be in the audience.

Somewhere, George Carlin is still smiling.

Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology at Harvard and the author, most recently, of The Stuff of Thought.