

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 Buffalo. The Bills’ owner, Ralph Wilson, who recently turned 90, is fiercely loyal to the city, but someday Wilson will cross the river, and between estate taxes and inheritances to his three daughters, the Bills may need to be sold when he passes. The Toronto communications magnate Ted Rogers, owner of the Rogers Centre, is an obvious potential customer.

But there’s another, more hopeful possibility: the current arrangement might actually help keep the Bills in Buffalo—and perhaps even catalyze the city’s revival.

A long-term deal by which the Bills play in both Toronto and Buffalo might make economic sense. Television revenue is the same for all NFL teams, meaning there’s no small-city penalty for games in Buffalo; and despite its depressed economics, Buffalo is consistently in the top 10 for NFL attendance. If some games were played in Canada, the cost of season tickets in Buffalo would decline because of a smaller home slate, keeping season tickets affordable and attendance high. And the team would add a fan base in North America’s fifth-largest city, giving itself two sets of supporters—one set quite prosperous, even paying for tickets and merchandise with the suddenly valuable Canadian dollar.

The Bills could help forge mutual affection between the cities—even a regional identity. Buffalo’s civic promotion has generally reached southward; in this newly globalized world, it should reach northward, toward a country that is as underappreciated among nations as Buffalo is among cities.

Connections to cosmopolitan, multicultural Toronto might change Buffalo’s image from backward-focused to wave-of-the-future. Toronto is growing by

leaps and bounds, and some portion of the growth may already be spilling over; most of the immigrants to Buffalo in recent years were Canadian. Buffalo offers urban living free of traffic jams and boasts one of the nation’s last underdeveloped stretches of premium waterfront. During its City of Light heyday, when Buffalo was the first electrified metropolis, Frank Lloyd Wright, Frederick Law Olmsted, and other fabled names designed homes and parks. In the lovely Delaware Park area, magnificent Beaux Arts homes sell at exceedingly low prices compared with homes in elite U.S. cities—or in Toronto.

So long as the Bills keep a foot in the city, they keep alive the dream of a Super Bowl win—a hope that an infusion of Loonies (Canadian dollars) might sustain. And should the Bills win the Super Bowl, Buffalo will return to national 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 “indecentcy” 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

## CAMPAIGNS

## All the Right Moves

WILL FORMER NBA ALL-STAR KEVIN JOHNSON BECOME THE NEXT MAYOR OF SACRAMENTO?

By Joshua Green

AS A LATE-SUMMER TWILIGHT descends on Sacramento, Kevin Johnson, formerly of the NBA's Phoenix Suns, is once more running the fast break. His teammates fan out before him, crisscrossing the blacktop and signaling their captain when they want to run a play. Johnson still wears expensive black Nikes. But above the ankles, his uniform has changed. A summer suit and silk tie signify his new game—politics—and the team he leads now is working to elect him mayor. As he walks down the middle of 33rd Avenue in the trim, quiet neighborhood of Fruitridge Manor, teenage volunteers race ahead to canvass the block, waving when someone comes to the door, at which point Johnson nods, excuses himself from a conversation, and breaks left or right into an athletic trot toward another Sacramentoan pleasantly surprised by this encounter with the city's famous son.

During the spring, Johnson did a lot of trotting, hitting an estimated 20,000 households ahead of the June election, in which he bested six other candidates, including, narrowly, fellow Democrat Heather Fargo, the stolid two-term incumbent whom he'll face again in a November 4 runoff. Outsiders generally can't resist the Obama-Clinton parallel, especially because Johnson endorsed Obama, and the mayor Clinton. But what makes the former All-Star point guard's trajectory interesting goes well beyond that. Even as a rookie, Johnson is as unusual in politics as he was in pro basketball.

"Have an exit strategy," Johnson remembers his grandfather telling him when he was a 22-year-old NBA newcomer. The advice took. Johnson, who had majored in political science at Berkeley, passed the long hours of travel reading books and policy papers while his teammates played cards and video games. After his first season with the Suns, he returned to Oak Park, the gritty neighborhood where he'd grown



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?*, *Holy 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. *Fuck*-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. ■

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