

CALLING NAMES

VIRGINIA I. POSTREL

When politicians go into their mud-wrestling acts, editorialists tsk-tsk and voters yawn. Everybody knows it'll all be over come election day.

Politicians can be excused. Pundits cannot. If you're supposedly engaged in a sustained and serious debate about ideas and policies, then *ad hominem* attacks serve a different purpose: not to beat your opponent but to shut him up. And right now, a lot of people seem determined to insult their adversaries into submission.

The flashiest example—though probably the most fleeting—is the flap over Pat Buchanan and the Persian Gulf. Long before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Buchanan was arguing that the United States should return to an “America First” policy that eschewed foreign interventions.

It should have come as no surprise, then, that Buchanan took a skeptical position toward military action against Saddam (although he supported the economic blockade). Nor is it terribly surprising that Buchanan found himself in the minority. Americans, including policy intellectuals, tend to have a visceral reaction to expansionist tyrants who invade strategically situated little countries: They want to kick them out. Second thoughts may prevail, but that's the initial gut reaction.

On a more cerebral level, some proponents of intervention argue that the United States must adopt a globalist policy analogous to that of the British empire. Buchanan attacked this view in a column, arguing, “As Great Britain recedes today into a lesser province of a new socialist Europe run from Brussels and Strasbourg, what is it that so commends the foreign policy that brought them there?”

The column ran. Washington

remained unmoved. So Buchanan tried a more provocative approach.

On “The McLaughlin Group,” he declared, “There are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East—the Israeli Defense Ministry and its amen corner in the United States.”

The statement was both false and stupid. It was a rhetorical bully's attempt to shut up his opponents by declaring them unpatriotic tools of a foreign power. And it transformed a serious debate into a brawl.

Now the debate isn't over whether the United States should pursue an interventionist foreign policy. It's over whether Pat Buchanan is an anti-Semite.

Unfortunately, *ad hominem* attacks don't always backfire. If Buchanan had only argued that “there are only two groups that are beating the drums for free trade—the Japanese and their amen corner in the United States,” *The New Republic* would have given him a cover story instead of attacking him.

Earlier this year, *TNR* did feature just such a cover story. In a nutshell, writer John Judis argued that everyone who supports free trade is a tool of the Japanese, often a paid one. The article was the talk of Washington, a major coup for new *TNR* Editor Hendrik Hertzberg.

Now a book making the same argument at greater length, *Agents of Influence* by Pat Choate, is having a more-sustained impact. Choate writes ominously of how the monolithic Japan Lobby (yes, the *L* is capitalized) conspires to pressure the U.S. government to reduce tariffs and abstain from retaliatory protectionism.

Choate demonstrates that Japanese businesses spend a lot of money and energy on U.S. lobbying and public relations. He doesn't prove that this effort has had

any deleterious effects, that U.S. defenders of free trade are corrupt, or that free trade is a bad idea.

In fact, he admits, “Almost without exception, Japanese contributions support the work of those who advocate neoclassical laissez-faire trade policies. These views are genuinely held; the Americans who argue for this approach would make the same arguments with or without Japanese financial assistance.”

Having conceded that Japanese money doesn't change scholars' views, Choate then implies the opposite: “Since ties to and support from Japan are often obscured or left unreported, the question of objectivity goes unasked.” But most arguments for free trade appeal to facts or reason, which can be evaluated regardless of their source's objectivity.

Choate's smoking gun is a lobbying effort by Japanese automakers to get light trucks reclassified as cars to cut their tariff from 25 percent to 2.5 percent. The Big Three automakers “in a rare show of political unity” opposed the change. It was America vs. Godzilla, and Godzilla won.

But so did America. For all practical purposes, a pickup truck really is a passenger car. In fact, it is the “car” most commonly owned by Americans. And those truck buyers are just as American as Ford, GM, and Chrysler.

Still, Choate's smear campaign is working. Writers who support free trade, who suggest that American companies can compete with Japanese companies without government help, who advocate any policy line other than “What's good for General Motors—or bad for Honda—is good for the country” are on the defensive. Editors expect them to reveal any Japanese ties, while not asking for similar disclosure from their opponents.

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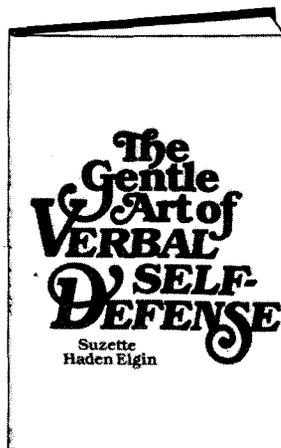
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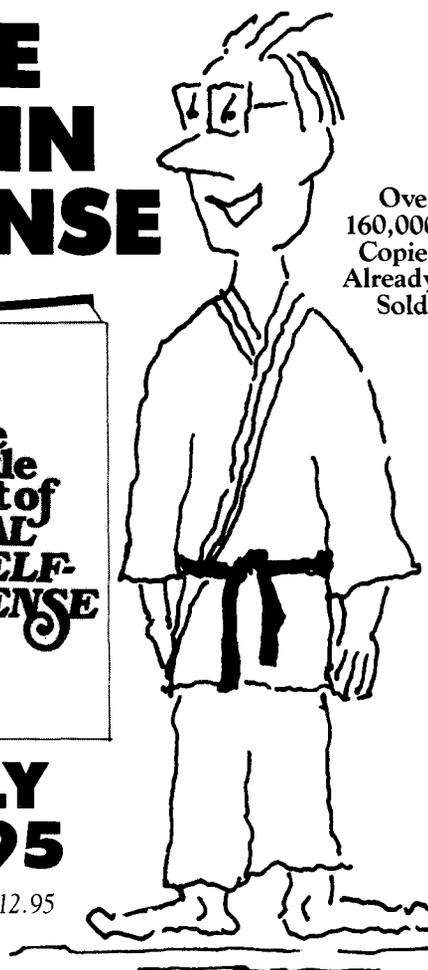
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Psycholinguist Suzette Haden Elgin has presented her innovative self-defense principles in a variety of formats. She has given workshops and seminars all over the U.S., including verbal self-defense sessions for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals.

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In part, this is because Choate's audience already believes that Japanese money is inherently tainted. And respectable editors don't want to be caught publishing tainted articles. The ad hominem attack works because many people grant its emotional premise—that Japanese companies are evil.

Why the outburst of ad hominem attacks? Partly, it's the natural desire to blame political losses on big, powerful, hidden conspiracies. Choate wants more tariffs. The Big Three want more tariffs. But somehow we don't get more tariffs. It must be the Japan Lobby.

Partly, the ad hominem attack is a substitute for talking about principle. It's a handy tool both for those, like Buchanan, who have principles but can't sell them and for those, like Choate, whose principles are well hidden.

Consider the most successful and sustained ad hominem attack in recent American politics: the environmental movement's discrediting of anyone who

has any tie to any company that makes chemicals, produces oil, manufactures automobiles, or otherwise contributes to industrial society.

Unlike the Japanese or the Jews, chemical and oil companies have few defenders. That's why supporters of California's "Big Green" initiative remind voters on every occasion that the "oil and chemical industries" are paying for the campaign against the initiative.

When they exclude these industries from political debate, the greens reflect their own ideological agenda and goals. "It is a spiritual act to try to shut down DuPont," says Rainforest Action Network Director Randall Hayes. And it is a political act to try to shut up DuPont.

If the greens can shame their opponents into silence, no one will challenge their agenda. They can play "trust me." And, given a trusting public and shame-filled adversaries, they can win.

It's not a cheerful picture, but it's the truth. The first step toward stopping political bullies is not to be ashamed. ■

House Minority Whip Gingrich stormed out of the budget summit and led a successful fight in the House against the summit agreement. But their speeches and TV interviews make it clear that Gingrich and his allies had no principled objection to big government. They just realized that it was politically foolish to vote for tax hikes and Medicare cuts.

The federal budget is over \$1.2 trillion. If Gramm-Rudman-Hollings had been allowed to work, spending would have dropped \$85.4 billion, or 7 percent. There is probably no business or household in the United States that could not cut its spending by 7 percent. And there is surely more fat in the federal government than in the typical household or business budget. But no one—not Gingrich, not even Gramm-Rudman co-author Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.)—questioned Bush's assertion that Gramm-Rudman cuts would be disastrous.

As a group, Republicans don't want to eliminate any federal program. A proposal by Rep. Phil Crane (R-Ill.) to shut down the National Endowment for the Arts, for example, got almost no support. Republicans would rather redirect the NEA to fund "profamily," or at least non-obscene, artwork.

Gingrich himself has long advocated using an activist government for "conservative" ends. His own alternative to the budget-summit agreement involved raising taxes somewhat less and switching some Medicare cuts to other programs. Gingrich likes big government as much as the next Washington insider; he just doesn't want to pay for it.

With the Republicans conceding the basic issue, the Democrats can dictate domestic policy. If they can out-compromise Bush, the Democrats can also outmaneuver Gingrich. If the Republicans offer a new federal program, the Democrats can insist on a better, i.e., more expensive, one. And when the Democrats demand new spending, Gingrich can offer no principled objection. As the budget brouhaha has demonstrated, any future conflicts between or within the two parties will be about electoral politics or personal animosity, not ideas. ■

BUDGET BALONEY

CHARLES OLIVER

Regardless of how the latest federal budget dispute turns out or what the details of the final package are, the Republicans have lost the battle. They lost because they threw down their weapons.

During the latest debate every Republican of any stature conceded the Democrats' basic premise: Big government is good. From President George Bush to Rep. Newt Gingrich (Ga.), the Republicans just react to Democratic proposals—scaling them back, quibbling about details, but accepting the notion that government should act to solve a host of perceived social problems.

The battle between Bush and Gingrich wasn't one of ideology, but one of political expediency: Should the Republicans give the Democrats a lot or just a little?

President Bush must shoulder much of

the blame for the GOP's malaise. As Heritage Foundation analyst Daniel J. Mitchell noted in our November issue, "On almost every issue, from the minimum wage to child care, from disability legislation to taxes, from the environment to racial quotas, the White House has conceded the fundamental argument over whether the government solves problems or causes them."

For the last two years, the pattern has been the same. Democrats propose a massive new spending or regulatory program. Then Bush sits down with congressional leaders, wins a few minor exemptions, and signs the "compromise" into law.

But this time Bush went too far. In his zeal to win a budget compromise, he reneged on his one campaign promise: He agreed to raise taxes.