

ALS & L

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Safire as comic

William Safire must be angling to start a humor column. ("We shop till values drop," (Opinions, Nov. 30). Finding 38 shirts in his closet one day, former cold warrior Safire was suddenly struck by the realization that man does not live by bread alone. Lamenting the triviality of "shoppertainment" (the new national pastime that has replaced worrying about the evil Russkies and the Sandinistas), he asks whether adding to our already glutted closets teaches us anything or satisfies our souls. We can replace the money spent on excess goodies, he says, but the time lost is lost forever.

Is this man a great comic, or what? As one of America's most articulate spokesman for capitalism, does he really expect us to believe that he is now concerned for the nation's spiritual values — values that have long been eroding under the profligacy we call the American Way? The Cold War was all about protecting that profligacy, and Safire was an enthusiastic propagandist in that scam.

— Bill Becker
Woodland Hills

Daily News Public Forum
P.O. Box 4200
Woodland Hills, CA 91365-4200

November 30, 1999

As submitted
Text omitted by
editor enclosed
between "E", "J"

Dear editor,

William Safire must be angling to start a humor column.

("We shop till values drop," Opinions, Tuesday, November 30.)

Finding 38 shirts in his closet one day, former Cold Warrior Safire was suddenly struck by the realization that man does not live by bread alone. Lamenting the triviality of "shoppertainment" (the new national past-time that has replaced worrying about the evil Russkies and the Sandinistas), he asks whether adding to our already glutted closets teaches us anything or satisfies our souls. We can replace the money spent on excess goodies, he says, but the time lost is lost forever.

Is this man a great comic, or what? As one of America's most articulate spokesmen for capitalism, does he really expect us to believe that he is now concerned for the nation's spiritual values -- values that have long been eroding under the profligacy we call "The American Way?" The Cold War was all about protecting that profligacy, and Safire was an enthusiastic propagandist in that scam.

[Safire's riff would be funny if it weren't just another example of the anti-environmental, right-wing dictator-loving crowd's efforts to pretend that they aren't crass materialists after all. Keep it up, Bill. There's a spot on Comedy Central waiting for you.]

Sincerely,

Bill Becker

William Safire
New York Times,
Editorial Department
229 W. 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

December 8, 1999

Dear Mr. Safire,

Seasons's greetings. I've enclosed a letter to the editor I sent to my local (conservative) newspaper in response to your recent column wherein you share your angst over owning 38 shirts. They didn't print it, but I thought you'd enjoy seeing it anyway.

Your op-ed piece reminded me of that other great kidder, William F. Buckley, whose comment in a 1994 Orange County Register op-ed piece also gave me a chuckle:

"How best can men and women combine to transmute the raw abundances of nature into a general prosperity?"

Buckley's use of the word "combine" reminded me of Adam Smith's comments on "combinations." Luckily, I had scanned that section of *Wealth of Nations* into my computer:

"What are the common wages of labour, depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour.

"It is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute, and force the other into a compliance with their terms. The masters, being fewer in number, can combine much more easily; and the law, besides, authorizes, or at least does not prohibit their combinations, while it prohibits those of the workmen. We have no acts of parliament against combining to lower the price of work; but many against combining to raise it. In all such disputes the masters can hold out much longer. A landlord, a farmer, a master manufacturer, a merchant, though they did not employ a single workman, could generally live a year or two upon the stocks which they have already acquired. Many workmen could not subsist a week, few could subsist a month, and scarce any a year without employment. In the long run the workman may be as necessary to his master as his master is to him: but the necessity is not so immediate." (Chapter VII, "Of the Wages of Labour.")

The legal strictures against combinations by labor have been weakened in the First World, of course, but they are still intact in the Third World. (Praise the Lord!!) Do you suppose Buckley used “combine” as an ironic joke? (Do you suppose he read “Wealth of Nations?”)

Anyhow, capital won the Cold War, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union are basket cases, and the next century will probably see the earth's temperature rise by 5 degrees centigrade. We won't need any shirts then.

Warmest regards,

Bill Becker

William Safire
New York Times,
Editorial Department
229 W. 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

December 9, 1999

Dear Mr. Safire,

Hooray!! I spoke too soon – the Daily News printed my letter after all (slightly shortened). Even better, the editor chose a great cartoon by Toles to accompany it. Copy enclosed.

Actually, I know for a fact that the editor intended not to print the letter. I suspect that he must have been stung by my suggestion that if such a letter had been received from one of several regular conservative letter-writers (troglodytes all), criticizing Richard Cohen, say, it would be printed in a flash.

If there are any responses to this, I'll send them on to you also.

Warmest regards,

Bill Becker