Incorrections
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ON LANGUAGE BY WILLIAM SAFIRE

Raising (not rearing) an interest in disinterest.

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em.

As a young language maven, whenever I heard someone say, "That's how I raise my kids," I would pass along the rule "You raise cattle but you rear children."

That's the correct usage that I was brought up (or reared, never raised) to say. The "rule" was easy enough to remember: Raise animals or crops, rear little human beings. As the years smoothed the sharp corners of my irascibility, whenever I heard a friend slip into that solecism, I zipped my lip; still, a little gong went off in Wernicke's area of my brain, where word meanings are recognized.

With the increased coverage of the same-sex marriage issue, the constant gonging keeps me awake nights. "Growing numbers of couples," reports The Boston Globe, "are choosing to raise children, buy homes and build family lives without religious or civil approval of their partnerships." The gay New York Blade notes, "We go to work, raise children, pay taxes and live in the boring 'burbs." And on the cover of The New York Times Magazine last month was the headline: An Extended Nuclear Family? Gay men, lesbians and the kids they are making and raising, sort of together.

Other reports on nontraditional marriage adhere to traditional usage: The Washington Post writes of "new possibilities for lesbians and heterosexual women to rear children successfully." The Richmond Times-Dispatch quotes a former lawmaker describing marriage as the best way "in which to rear children."

So which is it to be? (So I offend good usage by beginning a sentence with so. So what? Idioms are idioms.) Etymology is no help; both raise and rear as verbs come from the same Scandinavian root, the earliest meaning being "to set upright, to stand on its end," the way a horse rears, or raises, itself on its hind legs. Over a millennium, raise covered more meanings than rear; no poker player says, "I'll see you and rear you." Rear has become a loser verb, used only in clichés like "rears its ugly head."

Although I'm usually a prescriptive usagist, I'll now argue that to taut at "I'm raising my kid to be a millionaire" is to commit an incorrection. (That relatively new noun means "a correction that is itself incorrect.") My advice to the stalwart rear/raise differentiators, drawing to an inside straight: fold 'em. Raise takes the pot.

Disinterest (Yawn)

"I don't have a dog in that fight" has long been a favorite Texas saying of former Secretary of State James Baker (now cuttingly called "acting secretary of state"). Now that he is back in the news as co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group, we can anticipate such a description of non-

canine involvement — along with a more benign Bakerism, "singing from the same hymn book" — as a way of declaring his impartiality in striking a compromise between "cut and run" and "stay the course," between dovesh "timetable" and hawkish "benchmark." His search for common ground will be determinedly disinterested.

That word disinterested presents a problem. It means "impartial; free of bias; without any ethical conflict or selfish motive or financial interest." It does not mean uninterested; the word with the un- prefix, less frequently used, means "lacking interest; indifferent; disengaged to the point of terminal boredom."

A big difference in meaning, right? The dis- word deals with ethical purity, while the un- word deals with the lack of attention. No argument; no semantic overlap; everything clear in everyone's mind.

And yet, and yet. In 1954, the literary critic I.A. Richards dared to say, "More people seem to be saying disinterested when they mean uninterested" and worried that "would only mean that a noble distinction, hard to replace, would be lost." Like a clockwork orange, in 1985 the British linguist-novelist Anthony Burgess agreed, calling the use of disinterested to mean uninterested "one of the worst of all American solecisms."

Hmph! snorted E. Ward Gilman of Merriam-Webster, the most influential usagist in America. In a lengthy entry in his magisterial 1989 Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, he reported that nearly three-quarters of the citations of disinterested in their files used the ethical sense and that "reports of its demise have been shamefully exaggerated." His conclusion, meekly followed by his army of acolytes ever since: "The alleged confusion between disinterested and uninterested does not exist."

As M-W's previous paragon of permisivism, Philip Gove, might say: Ain't so. It may well be that most published citations still preserve the distinction, but to my ear the breaking down is under way, especially in the spoken word and the blogosphere.

Recent examples from the newspaper with the most eagle-eyed copy editors in the U.S.: a cultural critic noted "Bush's disinterest in serious policy analysis"; an anonymous letter alliteratively attacked a prelate for "dishonesty, deception, disinterest and disregard," one sportswriter described a Mets player as having "waved at the television in disinterest and ignored the Phillies game"; while another described a Redskins football coach's "disinterest in controlling the ball and the clock."

The alarmists of a generation ago were right to warn of barbarians at the gate. To paraphrase a poet: Rear up and rage, rage against the dying of an enlightening distinction.

P.S. to the Phraselid Legion: The source of "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em" was the song "The Gambler," by Don Schlitz, recorded in 1978 by Kenny Rogers. The aphorism was probably used earlier and was reflected in the card game of a couple of generations before named Texas Hold 'Em.

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