Ascent of the A-Word
Assholism, the First Sixty Years
By Geoffrey Nunberg
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In 1976, Tom Wolfe took note of the newfound popularity of a vulgar old word. "Asshole is the going insult this year," Wolfe wrote. The epithet appears, without preliminaries, without a moment's notice: "It's a chorus! A reprise! An opera! A regular Asshole Rigoletto."

Since then, linguist Geoffrey Nunberg (the former chair of the Usage Panel of the American Heritage Dictionary, commentator on language for NPR's "Fresh Air," adjunct professor at UC Berkeley's School of Information and the author of "Talking Right" and "Going Nucular") observes, it's been a golden age, so to speak, for "high-profile assholes," including Jerry Springer, Simon Cowell, Ann Coulter, Charlie Sheen and (of course) Donald Trump. In "Ascent of the A-Word," Nunberg argues that Americans' intense interest in these men (yes, assholes are almost always men) is evidence of changes in the personal and social values we share and a technological context that opens the way for the pervasive phenomenon he calls "assholism."

In this delightfully and devilishly trenchant and provocative book, Nunberg traces the use of common and coarse language by well-bred, well-educated critics of Victorian prudery in the 1920s; the spread of the A-word by returning World War II servicemen (and novelist Norman Mailer in "The Naked and the Dead"); the penchant for obscenities by dissenters in the 1960s and '70s; and, most importantly, changes in ideas about civility, compromise and social class (marked by a shift from power and wealth to lifestyle and attitude as the criteria for membership in the "elite"), which paved the way for asshole to become a staple in middle-class conversation and for assholism to become entrenched in political discourse.

Nunberg dissects his subject with style and surgical precision. The A-word, he points out, identifies a person as arrogant, pretentious, demanding, rude and annoyingly obtuse - about his own importance, the difference between who he is and what he does, the needs of others and the way he is perceived by them. "Asshole" levels us. We tend to apply it only to people of our own sort (Josef Stalin and Osama bin Laden aren't assholes) - and to claim a solidarity of sorts with those who agree with us. The curse word can, therefore, hide differences among, say, airline ticket agents who close ranks against a businessman demanding an upgrade or motorists watching a "cowboy" cut into and out of the right lane at 80 miles an hour.

"Ascent of the A-Word" is especially good at distinguishing "asshole" from other epithets. While phoniness, Nunberg claims, is strictly a matter of behavior, the actions of an asshole stem from self-perceptions that feed a sense of entitlement. For the same reason, according to Nunberg, men are more likely to acknowledge having been an asshole than a prick - because the former is capable of seeing the error of his ways, while the latter "suffers from no delusion and hence has no error to perceive."

Acknowledging that the political left has its fair share of assholes (think Michael Moore), Nunberg makes a persuasive case that the assholism of the right is more extensive and more coherent. Adopting a collective identity that insists on purity and is hostile to compromise and "political correctness," right-wingers see Washington "as a theater of confrontation, a part of the larger spectacle of political assholism."

To label someone an asshole, Nunberg writes, is "to reduce him to an object of contempt rather than fear. It suggests familiarity, as contempt often does; it implies that you've seen under his skin to discern his inauthenticity, his self-delusion, his bogus entitlement and in particular his pathetic unhappiness."

Assholism, Nunberg concludes, serves no constructive purpose. It does not contribute to a robust debate because it is "designed to deny that very possibility" by sanctioning lying and self-delusion in an effort (by "birthers," for example) to unite one group through its contempt for the assholes in the other.

Nonetheless, it seems to me, he is a bit too quick to claim that recognizing when someone (including yourself) is acting like an asshole doesn't really involve "judgment calls." After all, he admits that there are circumstances in which it's appropriate to say "Mind your manners, asshole." And there is a fine line between sarcastic, scathing and scorching responses - and those that deliberately misread innocuous remarks (or slips of the tongue).
Nunberg's larger point, of course, is well taken. Public life should generate an obligation of respect and self-restraint. When someone acts like an asshole "about an important matter," it is important not to answer in kind, but "with the seriousness the question requires."

In the long run, Nunberg suggests, forbearance may be a winning political strategy. But he doesn't see a return to civility anytime soon. And in the long run, we will all be dead.

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