

Poli-ticks as Usual

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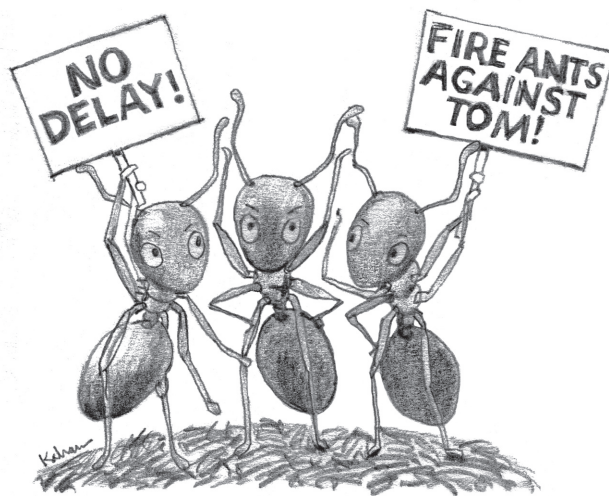
The term “political correctness” is defined on Wikipedia (an astonishingly comprehensive if not always completely accurate source of information) (Giles 2005) as “language that appears calculated to provide a minimum of offense, particularly to the racial or cultural groups being described.” Much of my life has been devoted to being inoffensive and nonjudgmental—I exhort my students to use “humanity” instead of “mankind,” for example, and scrupulously avoid using any common name at all when referring to *Corimelaena pulicaria* (Germer). So I was abashed to be chastised, justifiably, for being thoughtlessly offensive in the spring 2006 Buzzwords (Berenbaum 2006) in writing about large, tattooed males. James Fuxa of Louisiana State University correctly pointed out that, in implying that there might be reasons to be fearful of large, tattooed males, I was guilty of the same sort of stereotyping that I described as benevolent anti-Semitism. So, I apologize (although I feel compelled to mention that at least one large, tattooed male, Skip Lazell, wrote telling me how much he enjoyed the column and also mentioned that he enjoyed being the only large bearded male sporting a scorpion tattoo (the scorpion from Comstock’s Spider Book) on the staff at both Harvard and Yale Universities for about 25 years.

I could offer as an excuse for the infraction that entomological training doesn’t necessarily equip an entomologist with political savvy. After all, there’s little in the study of insects to provide insights into systems of government and human interactions. William Shakespeare wrote a lovely passage in *Henry V*, comparing British society with honey bee society (King Henry V, I, ii, 191–217) but managed, among other things, to get the gender wrong (of the bees, not of British society).

Yet, remarkably, there’s a lengthy history of entomologists’ involvement in government, albeit not in the United States and not in recent years. Carl Gustaf Mannerheim (1797–1854) was a coleopterist, as well as

a governor in 19th-century Finland; Thomas de Gray (1843–1919) was both an entomologist and the sixth Baron of Walsingham; and, perhaps most famously, Sir Walter Rothschild was not only a noted lepidopterist who wrote more than 1,700 scientific papers and described 5,000 new species; he was also a member of the House of Lords and was instrumental in drafting the Balfour Declaration that led to the ultimate establishment of Israel (Rothschild 1983). More recently, on this side of the Atlantic, Francis Taylor McGough, a graduate of Mississippi State University’s entomology program, served as mayor of Morton, MS, and Jan Mills (1980 B.S. degree in entomology from Iowa State University) was elected mayor of West Lafayette, IN, in 2003 (<http://www.entm.purdue.edu/news/2003news.html>). Given the presence of Purdue University’s Department of Entomology within the city limits, West Lafayette is probably more entomologist-friendly than the average Midwestern town.

There have certainly been other insect-savvy politicians inside and on the outskirts of the Halls of Power in America, but there have been none so firmly ensconced within those halls as Thomas Dale DeLay (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_DeLay), the congressman representing Texas’s 22nd District for 11 consecutive terms and serving as House Majority Leader from 2002 to 2005. Before becoming politically active, DeLay was an exterminator. He graduated from the University of Houston in 1970 with a B.S. degree in biology (spending two years before in Baylor as a premed student, until he was asked to leave after painting a building on the Texas A & M campus in Baylor’s school colors). He then worked for three years for Redwood Chemical (<http://www.redwoodchemical.com/>), a pesticide manufacturer, but in 1974, he struck out on his own and acquired control of a small com-



pany called Albo Pest Control, a name that he recalled that he hated, but that he “kept anyway because a marketing study noted it reminded consumers of a well-known brand of dog food” (Weiskopf and Maranis 1995). In short order, Albo became the “Cadillac” of exterminators in Houston.

The 1970s was a tumultuous decade for exterminators in Texas, thanks to the red imported fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta* (F.) (Taber 2000), an invasive species originally from South America that was first discovered in the southern United States in the 1940s. Because of its phenomenal reproductive capacity and its ability to inflict painful stings, the red imported fire ant quickly became a noxious pest of major economic significance. In 1957, Congress allocated \$200 million over a 12-yr period for a cooperative federal/state program with the goal of eradicating fire ants from 126 million acres. By the time DeLay entered the profession, the eradication program was acknowledged to be a failure and an environmental disaster. Despite massive pesticide use, fire ants had wreaked untold havoc over much of their expanding range, including Texas. The U.S. government had spent more than \$90 million and the states more than \$64 million for fire ant control, leading E. O. Wilson, a world expert on ant biology, to call the eradication effort the “Vietnam” of insect control efforts (Berenbaum 1995).

In addition to causing death of livestock, loss of livelihood, displacement of native species, and damage to electrical equipment, fire ants may well have been the agents directly responsible for launching DeLay’s political career. In 1971, the brand-new En-

Environmental Protection Agency cancelled the registration of Mirex, the principal control agent for fire ants, based on, among other things, its nontarget impacts on crustaceans and other arthropods. An amendment to FIFRA, the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act, led to public hearings, which in turn resulted in lifting the outright ban but retaining tight regulation of Mirex use in nonagricultural habitats.

As an exterminator, DeLay chafed at these regulations and resolved to end the interference by getting politically involved. He ran for a seat in the Texas legislature with such a reputation for his opposition to federal regulation that he earned the nickname “Mr. DeReg.” A special enmity was reserved for regulations involving chemicals, even as he reduced his involvement with Albo. Just how divorced he was from his business became the focus of a lawsuit and countersuit revolving around whether he in fact owed money from the initial purchase of another pest control business, whether he received compensation for serving as chair of the board of Albo, and whether he perjured himself about that compensation in court testimony (Bardach 1999), but that’s a different story altogether.

As of 22 May 2005, according to the Austin American-Statesman, DeLay was still regularly completing the mandatory 8 hours of Continued Education for Certified Applicators to maintain his status as pest control technician (<http://www.wisopinion.com/blogs/2005/05/delay-still-gub-man.html>), making him the sole exterminator in Congress (but one of 236 former state legislators in the House). For the record, the 109th Congress also contains two chemists, two physicists, a geologist, a microbiologist, a biomedical researcher, 12 doctors, two veterinarians, two psychologists, a pharmacist, an optometrist, and three nurses (Amer 2006).

Throughout his political career, DeLay worked assiduously against his EPA nemesis, voting to slash its enforcement budget, to repeal the Clean Air Act, and to block Congressional legislation that would require school districts to inform parents of the use of pesticides on school property. His early experience in the pest control industry is said to underlie the ire he reserves for the EPA, about which he famously said, “The EPA, the Gestapo of government, pure and simply has been one of the major claw hooks that the government maintains on the backs of our constituents” (Rosin 2005).

Speaking of politics and history, DeLay certainly wasn’t the first to invoke Nazis in the context of environmental debate. In fact, there’s hardly an environmental movement that hasn’t been condemned as a new manifestation of Nazism—enforcement of endangered species legislation, antipollution

laws, even a proposed “white list” approach to stopping the influx of invasive species (“...the first programs to ‘cleanse the landscape of foreign plants’ were initiated by the National Socialist government in Germany under Adolf Hitler”—<http://www.geocities.com/nowwhitelist>). But pesticide regulation seems to elicit this association most reliably. As early as 1967, Louis A. McLean, of the Velsicol Corporation, warned in *BioScience*, “...I submit that the campaign of false fear against the use of modern pesticides has, is, and will cause deaths and sufferings far greater than those of World War II. ...Each person who has played a part in the campaign of fear must accept responsibility for his share of the unnecessary toll of human life, a toll that will continue and increase because we are still handicapped by an environment polluted by that false campaign....”

That kind of rhetoric, although arguably over the top, may be understandable in the sense that the war, which ended only 22 years earlier, was still fresh in people’s minds. But Hitler’s name keeps coming up in the context of pesticide bans. Most jarring is the statement uttered by a fictional character in Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear*, an eco-science political thriller about an organized network of environmental terrorists bent on scaring the world into eco-compliance: “Since the ban, two million people a year have died unnecessarily from malaria, mostly children. The ban has caused more than fifty million needless deaths. Banning DDT killed more people than Hitler.” Oddly, in another twist on science and politics, science fiction author Crichton testified as an expert witness on environmental change before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in September 2005.

How a DDT ban can kill people is yet another story (Berenbaum 2005); basically, the argument is that not using DDT in Africa condemns millions to death caused by malaria, a scenario that appears to ignore completely the fact that insects can and do develop resistance to insecticides. I don’t pretend to know a lot about Nazi environmentalism and Wandervogel nature lovers, but I do know that Nazis were responsible for the grossest abuse of pesticides in historical memory, and invoking Hitler, in any way, to defend the use of a pesticide is at best seriously twisted. Antienvironmentalists even cite Hitler’s vegetarian diet as evidence of eco-fascism. Whether he was or not a vegetarian is subject to debate—some of his biographers say the vegetarian diet was prescribed by physicians to treat chronic flatulence (<http://www.veg.ca/living/p-hitler.html>) and that he displayed a fondness for Bavarian liver dumplings (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vegetarianism_of_Adolf_Hitler). But even if he

really was a vegetarian, that doesn’t mean all vegetarians want to engage in world conquest and ethnic or environmental cleansing; to jump to that conclusion would be stereotyping. I’ve been a vegetarian for almost 30 years and have never once wanted to take over the world. Nor have any of the many fellow vegetarians I’ve met over the years—not even the large, tattooed male ones.

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