

Our Changing Economy

Put Robert Frost In a Board Room

By Philip Stoddard Brown

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LAST week, the two-day interrogation of disc jockey Dick Clark by a House subcommittee revealed a long list of subterfuges, including acceptance of a piddling \$7000 fee for an announcement at the end of his program that transportation for guests was furnished by American Airlines. This advertisement was irregular on several counts.



Brown

What dismayed me was the description of Clark by a prominent Washington reporter as "sincere." If there's any word that doesn't fit, I should have supposed it was "sincere," which my dictionary says means "without deceit, truthful, faithful and straightforward."

Well, I'm reconciled to giving up on "sincere" for I think its redemption is hopeless. But unless a few words are preserved that denote the same ideas to all of us, communication will become impossible, despite all our electronic devices for transmitting sound.

No Precision, No Punch

We live frightfully thick these days. Some move in the direction of a common language is imperative. To be sure, sports writers and physical scientists are intelligible enough, but social scientists have been observed talking for hours without exchanging ideas.

Most disturbing is the language of commerce and finance; it has no precision, no punch; it has become inexact, trite, hackneyed and weak.

Fortunately most ideas in business are simple and a limited argot serves for routine transactions. But often there is ambiguity. In reading an annual report this morning, I wasn't sure what the President meant when he said: "Your company is anticipating a decline in orders for commercial aircraft." I misgave he meant only "is expecting." At another point, he spoke of there being a large demand for another product, but whether he really meant demand, or simply need, no reader can be sure.

Some corporations have tried to lower the language barrier by appointing Vice Presidents of Public Relations and Internal Communications. Some months ago, I was in the office of one of these. There was a THINK sign on this man's desk and in his bookcase were volumes that bore the following and similar titles: "Executives: Making Them Click," "How to Develop Thinking Ability," "The Art of Solving Problems" and "The Dynamics of Learning."

I haven't examined these books and I don't think I will. My strong hunch is that neither this man nor his books is going to improve the internal or external communications of his company. What he communicated to me with "positive and definite assurance" still repels me: "I point with pride to one concrete fact . . . It's somewhat shocking . . . It came like a bolt from the blue . . . Now let's face it and get down to brass tacks . . . My idea is basically sound . . . And last but not least."

A Return to Honesty

The only solution I can think of for this and some other large corporations' dilemma is to appoint Robert Frost or John Ciardi, President—not Vice President. I think either of these men would cut paper costs, telephone bills and eliminate with profit thousands of liaison men, field men, information men and PR people. Eventually, I think, honesty would creep back into internal and external communications. People would begin to think, not THINK. The firm might even become so prosperous that corporations would scout all the colleges for English majors. Poets might become the highest paid members of society.

If in addition to this revolutionary change, we should elect as President of the United States a man who thoughtfully writes his own speeches. And if he should insist that his Secretary of Commerce and other Cabinet officials should write their speeches, who can say where this might lead us . . . Even our lawyers might be induced to adopt a trim, sparse style and forego their wordy citations and bulky exhibits. Judges might revert to hand-written notes, such as are still passed about in English courts.

In the glaring light of such honesty and exactitude, those PR people abroad might come to look foolish calling police states "People's Democracies" and referring to the armed conquest of free people as "Liberation."

Well, enough of all this. Now for a bit of hard news. Wall Street stocks, early last week, firmed all along the line and then churned listlessly for several days. On Friday, according to the Associated Press, a mixed and sluggish market provided the framework for gains by volatile "romance" issues and the blue chips moved diversely.

For those readers concerned about business this summer, I pass along this statement from a confidential memorandum handed me by a prominent Washington economist: "GNP will sag and move sideways in the second and third quarters and then shoot up in the fall."