

SECOND THOUGHTS

by John Luther
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I wrote this sometime in 2003 with the hope of submitting it to the anthology *Mirth of a Nation*. The editor sent me a nice response but declined.

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MEMORANDUM - *CLASSIFIED*
SUBJECT: TIA-TPA
FROM: Admiral John Poindexter,
Office of Information Awareness
TO: William Safire

Dear Bill,

First, let me express again how pleased I am that you visited us here at Langley and screened our new video, "TIA: What It Is and What It Ain't." Your feedback was invaluable, especially concerning the title. I look forward to reading your "reconsideration" of the system in your next column.

I'm still stinging from that "master of deceit" jab, by the way, but we'll even that score someday on the tennis court!

Regarding your clever proposal for a companion system of Total Punctuation Awareness (TPA), I ran it past the boys here at DARPA. They're interested but asked for a few clarifications. (Is it okay to pluralize "clarification" like that? Please advise.)

Don't misunderstand: we're hot for the idea, but some people are hyper about details. You know how we Pentagon types are. (Or should that be, "...how are us Pentagon types"? The end-of-a-sentence verb thing. Again, pls. adv.)

Okay, here's the feedback from my people:

- My technical advisor doesn't get the overall idea. His initial reaction was along the lines of, "This is insane." The sheer amount of data to process, etc., etc. Ah, well—engineers! No worries—he and I have worked together in the past & he eventually comes around to my way of thinking.

- The software integration guys asked me to explain your sketch—but I couldn't! You and I talked about six boxes connected via two clouds of ether, but the napkin shows five boxes and three clouds. I think it's a cloud, anyway. (Okay, I'll come clean; this is partially my fault. The maid ran your sketch through the wash. Could you maybe provide a better graphic? PowerPoint format works best for us. Examples are at www.darpa.mil/foa.)

- StratOps asks, How does preemptively correcting misused punctuation and reporting the transgressors to William Safire help us win the War on Terror? Is there some Iraqi plan afoot to misinform the Global Community about semicolon rules or something? If so, they suggest notifying Ashcroft &

Ridge. Myself, I'm inclined to keep this info within Defense for now.

- Tech pubs is very excited about the idea, naturally. They also ask if you would settle a little bet in their department: Is "data" strictly plural, or can it also be used with singular verbs in place of the (some argue) arcane "datum"?

- Budgeting thinks it "unrealistic" to use the Chicago Manual of Style (14th ed.) as a basis for the algorithms and alert thresholds. Something about licensing & royalties. Frankly, I agree. The book is a lot bigger than I expected. Listening to you describe it, I imagined something more on the order of *Strunk & White*.

- Many raised questions about immaturity, namely will there be any for special cases? The main concern here is Tumbler (a.k.a., "43," a.k.a., "The President").

- PR wants to know, Can this be sold to the public? They point out that to most Americans "style" means what they see at the Oscars, not what they write in a thank-you note to Grandma.

- Legal: What exactly is the scope of the system? Should it catch things like split infinitives and subject-verb disagreement, or would it be limited only to punctuation? (If I remember correctly, you perceive omitted serial commas and verbs immediately following colons as the biggest threats to Freedom.)

- What exactly is an "em" dash, anyway? Is it really such a big deal if people use a couple hyphens instead?

- Our Congressional Liaison wonders if you'd reconsider the hard line on passive constructions. She was really worried by the term "capital offense." Also, she pointed out that the passive voice is sometimes necessary in their line of work, especially on the Sunday morning programs.

Overall, not too shabby for a first draft. Minor stuff. You think this is bad, you should try a Senate subcommittee!

Please advise on these matters ASAP so we can move forward on TPA PDQ, OK? You and I are definitely on the same page here. My own feeling is, "Good Writing Makes Good Democracy."

Warmest regards,

J. P.

