

The Style Invitational

Week XCVII: Omb Directive No. 2



You can be funny
on Sunday without being
vulgar or crude.

BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Above, a recently published pronouncement by The Washington Post Ombudsman, upbraiding The Style Invitational for "lapses into vulgarity and just plain bad taste" that "seem inconsistent with a serious newspaper such as The Post."

This week's contest: We are so ashamed. But it's not too late to make amends. Your challenge is to revisit any contest The Style Invitational has ever run, and rewrite our tawdry past by proposing a new first-prize winner serious and/or decorous enough to please the Ombudsman. (No need to remember the actual winner; you know the sort of vulgar and crude stuff we routinely reward—well, just do the opposite.) First-prize winner gets Grandpa Pig from the Gas Family line of novelty dolls ("Try me—pull my finger"), which includes a fact-at-your-fingertips booklet on flatulence.

First runner-up wins the tacky but estimable Style Invitational Loser Pen. Other runners-up win the coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get the mildly sought-after Style Invitational bumper sticker. Send your entries via fax to 202-334-4312, or by e-mail to losers@washpost.com. U.S. mail entries have been canceled due to rabid, spit-flying fanaticism. Deadline is Monday, Dec. 10. All entries must include the week number of the contest and your name, postal address and telephone number. E-mail entries must include

the week number in the subject field. Contests will be judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next year's contest is by Tom Witte of Gaithersburg.

REPORT FROM WEEK XCIII,

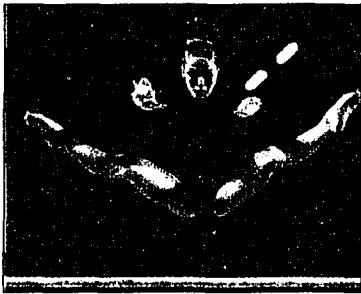
in which we asked you to create new captions for any photographs or illustrations in that day's Post. On the advice of our lawyers, the firm of Krindge, Bough & Snivvel, P.C., we wish to emphasize that these are made-up captions, for humor purposes, and do not in any way reflect the truth about any persons depicted herein. Some worthy entries could not be reproduced in the space below. The best of these, by Chris Doyle of Burke, featured a Page A1 aerial photo of smoke billowing from a bombed Afghan village. The new caption: **Moments after the Northern Alliance entered Kabul, they lifted the ban on smoking.**

◆ 2nd Runner-Up:



Bob explains yet again to his HMO why he should not have to pay for his recent smallpox vaccine. (Barry Robbins, Silver Spring)

◆ 1st Runner-Up:



The new Delta Stealth aircraft design may offend Muslim sensibilities. (Erica Ginter, Beltsville)

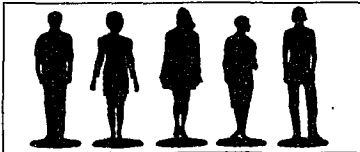
◆ And the winner of the alligator-head letter opener:

"John Smith" (foreground), president of Paranooids Anonymous, begins to regret his choice of living room wallpaper. (Jennifer Hart, Arlington)



FILE PHOTO BY ANDREA BRUCE WOODALL—THE WASHINGTON POST

◆ Honorable Mentions:



BY PAUL SARGENT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Despite the obvious dangers, Georgetown University students increasingly engage in the newest fad: Manhole cover standing. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

Hasbro's "Inaction Figures" failed to meet sales projections. (Brian Broadus, Charlottesville)



FILE PHOTO BY SARAH L. YOUNG—THE WASHINGTON POST

Men dance the forbidden Islamabada to the amusement of a young onlooker. (Chris Doyle, Burke)



FILE PHOTO BY RIT HAYES—AGENCE FRANCE PRES

Andy Pettitte fails for old trick of switching Krazy Glue for neat's-foot oil. Pettitte remembers Randy Johnson saying, "Hey, your glove smells funny." (Jean Sorensen, Herndon; Steve Fahey, Kensington)



FILE PHOTO BY JONATHAN NEWTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

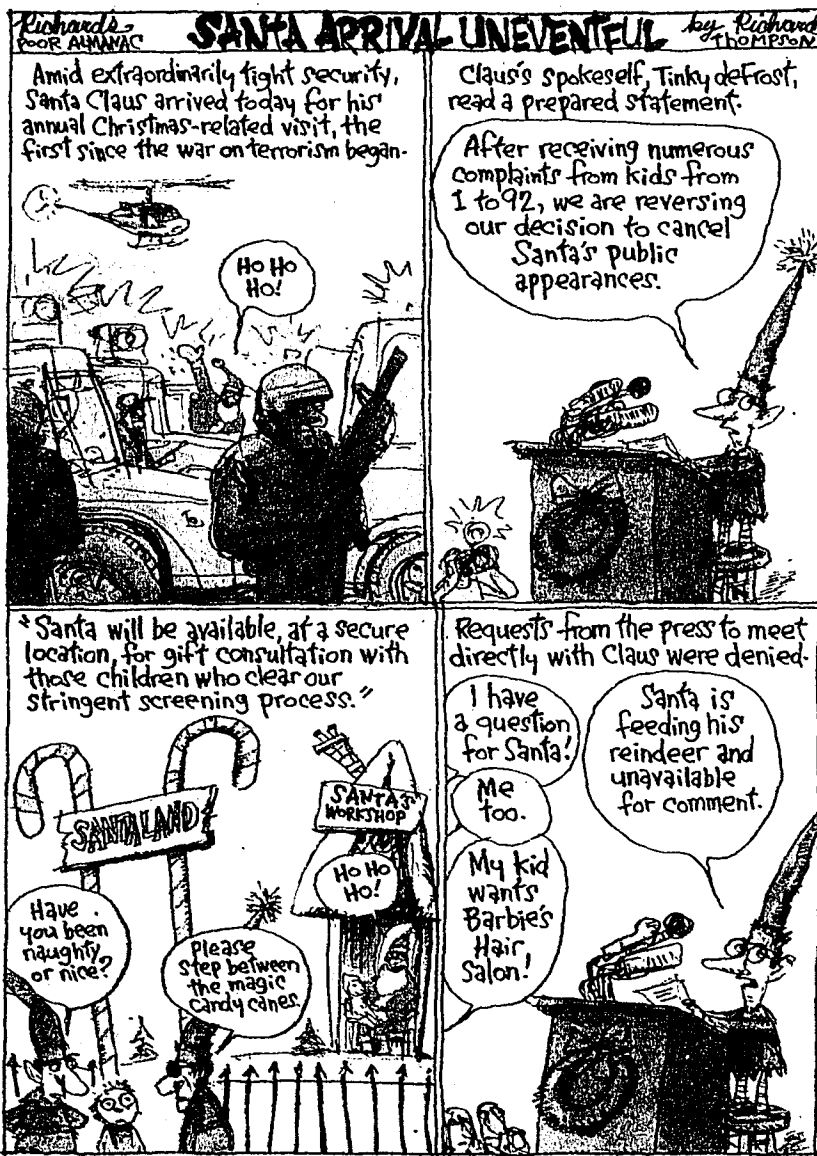
Sporting new cornrows, Vishnu elevates for a dazzling 360 slam. (Mike Cozy, Silver Spring)



FILE PHOTO BY RICHARD CARSON—REUTERS

Golfer Scott Verplank is caught doing the "behind-the-nagging-wife's-back" look. He is expected to recover from his injuries. (Jean Sorensen, Herndon)

Next Year: The Odds Must Be Crazy



MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

Good Taste Makes an Unscheduled Stop

What was that, again? For a moment, Miss Manners thought that she heard the creators of movies, television and video games talking about good taste.

Good taste? It has been decades since she heard those words come out of any mouth but her own. Unless, of course, it was to refer to what was going into the mouth.

But these people were not fussing over the quality of their brunches. The national situation appeared to have shocked them into acknowledging a new factor to be taken into consideration in regard to their work—one that was not identical with how much money it would make or even how accurately it expressed their rage or lust. Known for their indignant chafing at any legal restrictions on their artistry, they were recognizing a restriction with no teeth: taste. This is of concern only to those who want to refrain from offending other people, even when those people can do nothing to stop them, and even when doing so might startle those people enough to capture their attention. No wonder those who worry about this—and etiquette, the system that says that it is important—have reputations as wusses.

However, it happens that taste is not as interested in controlling content as it is in the manner and context in which things are presented. You could strip in front of a stranger and natter on about what your various body parts have been doing without violating taste—if you are having a medical checkup.

Of course, leering at the doctor while doing so would be bad taste. Attitude counts. Laughing at suffering, flaunting sexuality and sneering at such things as patriotism, religion and honest work are in bad taste.

Perhaps that was what discouraged the entertainers. What else was there?

Miss Manners hastens to add that all such subjects can be treated tastefully, although not by taking nastily superior attitudes. The trouble was that that approach, known simply as attitude, or edge, was the dominant and successful tone.

Well, Miss Manners never did believe it was the job of the entertainment industry to serve as models of behavior so that parents, teachers and the clergy wouldn't have to, and could concentrate their indignation on the failure of entertainment to uphold standards. She was just grateful to hear the subject of taste even raised by people who were not used to grappling with it.

Advertisers were having second thoughts about promoting hedonism, and fashion designers were talking about toning down vulgarity. Politicians and athletes were struck that casting their contests as killing off enemies veered toward the vicious.

Ordinary people were learning to comfort the bereaved instead of confronting them to tell them how they should feel. They were curtailing their own festivities and attending funerals instead of what had come to be the reverse ("he wouldn't have wanted us to be sad"), and they were showing up at the office wearing black. They were thanking public officials, and reviving the idea of respecting the office even if they didn't care for a person who held it.

And then—surprise!—a whole new form of tastelessness appeared. It was discovered that the tragedies could be used as an excuse. Any form of selfishness could be explained as fear, and the way to get extra credit for doing what you really want to do anyway is to announce that if you didn't indulge yourself "it would show that the terrorists had won."

Miss Manners doesn't know whether to be saddened or relieved that it represents a return to normality.

Dear Miss Manners:

My significant other and I travel quite a bit, and we have come up with a perplexing situation. When dining out and we leave our table for a few minutes, upon our return the napkins are placed back in the seat, not on the chair arm or beside the plate on the right hand side where we originally placed them. We don't want to appear unmannerly, so we politely pick up our napkins and continue with our meal.

Please tell me what is the correct way to address this matter. We do not wish to put our mouth on a napkin that has been lying on a chair that a person's behind has sat upon millions of times.

Miss Manners has a wish, too. She wishes not to hear of the journey that you believe takes place between the metabolism of previous occupants of your chairs, and your own.

Maybe etiquette is just attracted to danger, but the chair is the correct place for you to leave your napkin if you get up in mid-meal; it is at the end of the meal that it is left to the side of the plate.

Dear Miss Manners:

My wife and I are in our mid-forties and resigned to the fact that we will not have children. We are content with that, have become accustomed to caring for each other and do not want to adopt.

My only and older brother, who is in his early fifties, has a new fiancée in her mid-forties who is expecting twins and has hinted to my wife that we will be asked and expected to be godparents, though my brother has not mentioned this to me. He and I are fairly close, as is our family, and everyone is beaming at the prospect of children finally arriving in our family.

However, my wife and I don't think that we want to assume the responsibility of being godparents, partly out of not knowing the level of commitment involved. What happens if, heaven forbid, misfortune should occur? We don't see ourselves as parents at this stage of our lives, and my wife has seen many women come and go with my brother, so she isn't confident that he'll properly remain committed to a marriage or children.

On the other hand, we don't want to be viewed as inconsiderate, insensitive or lacking familial courtesies or deference. What should we do to continue showing our love, and keep the peace and our reputations intact?

Miss Manners will refrain from asking whether you realize that your inexperience with children doesn't matter, that it may be making you unduly apprehensive, and that most people find it a tremendous joy to have such a connection to the next generation. She just wants you to know that she is finding it a strain.

That said, you may decline graciously if you acknowledge the fact that the offer is a great honor and that you are declining because you will not be able to do justice to the position, although you will look forward to having a close avuncular relationship with both children.

Feeling incorrect? Address your etiquette questions (in black or blue-black ink on white writing paper) to Miss Manners, in care of The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20007

© 2001, by Judith Martin