

## To befriend or unfriend, that is the question

By Frank Schell

How do you destroy decades of friendship in a nanosecond? Ask the New Oxford American Dictionary.

In an act of wanton barbarism, the wordsmiths at New Oxford have named "unfriend" as the word of the year. It means "to remove someone as a 'friend' on a social networking site such as Facebook." This is the etymological equivalent of a nuclear strike. While lexicographers rejoice over their selection, we can now dismiss people with the mere click of a mouse. Alas, Dilbert should be the first to comment on this dehumanizing act, now confirmed as a legitimate word by the captains of the English language.

Saying farewell has always been painful, or at least awkward for many. "Till death do us part," is the marital vow. "Parting is such sweet sorrow ..." said Juliet to Romeo. And Chad and Jeremy got it right in their 1960s hit, when they lamented the end of a summer romance: "For me you were the one — but that was yesterday, and yesterday's gone."

The IT age is assaulting the English language, once the Anglo-Saxon medium of the ancients. This new digital act of interpersonal "communication" is a bland, clinical way of getting rid of someone — without having to think much about it, and doing it with electrons traveling at the speed of light. It insulates the judge from those who are being judged.

We must wonder whether this technique will soon be adopted in the workplace, as the private sector seeks new low-cost operating efficiencies in an intensely competitive global environment. There once was a time when dismissals were well-prepared and documented in a conference room, in the presence of a human resources officer to assure due attention to protocol.

But in cyberspace, there are no HR staffers when you need them. It may evolve that the removal of someone from a corporate distribution list will be all that is needed to confirm termination of employment.

Nor does this new digital form of dismissal require robust interpersonal skills. Anyone can do it easily, while multitasking and looking at their feet, or while eating junk food on a comfortable sofa. The embrace of this word shows our societal need for revenge, and the effect of this dark instinct on a principal language of Western civilization. The forces of darkness are not at the gates, but rather inside our drawing rooms and helping themselves to our language.

New applications of unframing will inspire numerous cyber entrepreneurs. There will be no need to limit the focus to Facebook; other social and professional networks could be next. Text messaging, e-mail, telephone and cable TV with computer integration may all become channels for savage dismissals — done through a hard-wired or wireless environment. Soon technologies could permit whoever is dismissed to receive a digital copy, along with countless other interested observers in cyberspace. Or, if the dispatcher so chooses, the dismissed will never know that he has been cut out of the loop and will find out about it through third parties, as the news leaks out through countless chat rooms.

The opportunity is vast. Using a robust high-tech platform, marriages can be annulled, patents can be revoked, treaties can be abrogated and nations can quietly sever ties at the United Nations, without the need for diplomats or perhaps the entire Department of State. Swiss finishing schools will no longer be needed, once crude bursts of electrons become the social norm.

Men and women, bristling with electronic devices, will roam our cities with the comfort that any relationship can be abruptly terminated, without the angst that goes with it. Many smart devices could become instruments of anti-social behavior; done overtly, or by wireless voice activation, while secreted in a plastic pocket protector.

As the capacity of microprocessors continues to multiply, it should become possible to issue an infinite number of dismissals for an infinite number of reasons — without giving a reason. Who knows: There may come a time when we will never have to talk to one another.

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# United we gather

## Thank goodness for Thanksgiving: A break from divisions

We now interrupt Mrs. Palin's book tour to bring you Thanksgiving, a grand old holiday, and we in the book business are thankful for her; that a busy woman who wanted to tell her story chose the medium of ink and paper between hard covers. Her tour is not about politics. It's about books.

Those big crowds waiting in the cold outside bookstores were looking forward to cozying up to her book and savoring the intense intimate pleasure of a memoir; the feeling that you and the author are close personal friends. You don't get that feeling from watching someone on TV; you get it from a book. Mrs. Palin's job was not to impress book reviewers or stake a claim to the Republican Party but to give pleasure to people who already love her, which evidently she did. Good for her.

And that's the challenge of Thanksgiving — to gather among our kin who know us a little too well and have an amiable occasion enjoyed equally by all, at which nobody is stabbed through the heart with a carving knife.

We're a mobile and overcaffeinated people, and at every family gathering, amid the ancient aroma of turkey and sage and squash and sweet potatoes and a few pounds of butter, you'll find some edgy individualists, someone who knows the true story of what happened on 9/11, the story that the mainstream media

have suppressed. A tea-party devotee or two. Someone who believes that yeast is the secret of happiness. People capable of harangues and diatribes, but nobody wants this.

The family liberals smile at the family wing nuts. The vegetarian daughter-in-law produces her tofu loaf, which looks as if a large animal such as a buffalo came by and dropped it hot and steaming on the plate. We don't comment on this. She believes that the treatment of turkeys is a moral blight on America, but she does not say so. The Unitarian cousin listens to the fervent Lutheran prayer and murmurs "amen." The Viking fans and the Packer fans sit side by side.

It is the dinner of all dinners, generous and comforting and completely predictable, and a true test of civility, and we do it in gratitude for the simple goodness of life. Our consumer society is all about need and craving, and politics is so much about complaint and resentment, and here is a day devoted to something else.

My family gathers in the house that Dad built in 1947, by the fireplace that Great-uncle Alfred, a stonemason, built when he was 80. He lived to be 90, and whenever you saw him and Aunt Millie, they were holding hands. Joining us will be cousin Dorothy Bacon, who recently told me that my grandfather James, who died before my time, loved to read and even out in the field raking hay with a team of horses he had a book in his hand; that he was often seen kissing Grandma; and that every night, until he was very old, he carried her in his arms up the stairs to bed. Good to know

these things.

In my day, we went outdoors after dessert and ran off our dinner and when it was dark, were allowed back in the house, and we flopped down on the floor and listened to Uncle Lew tell about the night their house burned down in Charles City, Iowa, and afterward watched "The Bell Telephone Hour" on television with Robert Merrill and Patrice Munsel singing "Dear Hearts and Gentle People," and then a horn honked in the driveway and my sister came down from upstairs where she'd been primping in the bathroom and Mother said, "Tell him he has to come inside and pick you up, he can't sit in the car and honk." And so the boy came in. Sheepish, tongue-tied, hair oiled and swirled around on top, he stood as close to the door as possible and we inspected him as a potential relative and thought, "Naw. She could do better."

I remember the urgency of that horn honking. It meant that Thanksgiving was over. The family that had gathered in a tight circle around the feast of tubers and turkey was now breaking up, in search of something finer. The call of the grown-up life. We all hear the honk and run away in hopes of finding a major romance and adventure and grandeur, and good luck with that, and meanwhile, life is good. Be grateful for it.

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# Race haunts politics

## Will it ever be OK to go there without name-calling?

He takes it back. In a recent interview Attorney General Eric Holder conceded that, if he had it to do over again, he might have chosen another less incendiary word than "cowards" in his now-notorious Black History Month speech to describe the way Americans tend to avoid candid talk about race.

I wasn't surprised. Public backlash over his use of the C-word gave him a fast lesson in why so many of us Americans have become too cowardly to talk candidly about race. We're afraid of being called "politically incorrect" or outright "racist."

Yet, we can't shrug off the baggage of history that easily. Questions about race keep coming up, since race continues to be a subtext of our politics like little land mines of "gotcha" moments — like the one on which Holder stepped.

You can hear it in the question that haunts the mostly white makeup of populist conservatives in the anti-tax tea party rallies, the August town hall protests and former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin's book signings: How much does race have to do with it?

A racial streak always has haunted populist politics. But in most of today's uprising by populist conservatives, race is only a marker, if a highly visible one, for other differences that have defined American politics since at least the 1960s.

If there was ever a time we should be talking candidly about race it is now. Yet, it is considered bad manners at best or even racist at worst to ask how much of today's protests of President Barack Obama's policies might be motivated by race. People are touchy for at least three good reasons: One, race is so hard to quantify; two, the protests are more ideological than racial; and three, most Americans have little tolerance for outright bigotry anymore.

Polls offer limited help. Obama's approval

ratings have fallen in the November polls by Gallup and Public Policy Polling while Palin's have risen. At this rate, they might even meet somewhere in the high 40s, a Drudge Report headline trumpets.

But what's race got to do with that? Much of Obama's fall results from recent bad news on the employment and Afghanistan fronts and much of Palin's rise results from her highly touted book tour. Still, since almost all of Obama's decline has come from white voters, while his numbers among blacks and Hispanics have stayed virtually the same, many still ask how much the difference results from the issue of race.

In some cases, the nuances as to what's racist or what isn't draw distinctions without much of a significant difference. Take, for example, the anti-Obama billboard that auto dealer Phil Wolf erected recently in Wheat Ridge, Colo. In big letters it says, "BIRTH CERTIFICATE" and "PROVE IT," a reference to the goofy movement that questions Obama's natural-born citizenship despite overwhelming evidence. It also features two cartoonish images of Obama wearing a turban and reads "President or Jihad?" and "Wake Up America! Remember Ft. Hood."

In interviews Wolf has said he's convinced Obama is a secret Muslim, a view that Pew Research Center polls have shown about 11 percent of the population shares. Would they feel that way about a white president with Obama's background? Frankly, it's not hard to imagine, considering the paranoid streak in American politics that has nurtured worse myths about previous presidents.

Maybe that's what my friend and MSNBC "Hardball" host Chris Matthews was thinking when he blurted out during coverage of the 1,500 people waiting for Palin at a Grand Rapids, Mich., bookstore that "they look like a white crowd to me" and "not that there's anything wrong with it, but it is pretty monochromatic up there" and "I think there is a tribal aspect to this thing, in other words, white versus other people."

Conservative bloggers took umbrage at that, for all the understandable reasons of



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racial ambiguity that I listed above. You're not a racist just because everybody around you happens to be of the same race as you. Yet, as political demographics take shape, there is a tribal aspect to politics. Birds of a feather flock together; social scientists tell us, and so do people.

Today's American tribes gather for reasons of shared values, interests and attitudes more than race or other shared ancestry. Yet, our ancestral differences play a big role in shaping our present-day attitudes. That's why we need to talk more openly and candidly about race, if we can only find the right language to do it.

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