

## “PUT THAT IN YOUR PIPE AND CHEW IT!”

### More Marvelous Mixed Metaphors

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In two previous *Word Ways* articles (August 2001 and May 2004), I quoted choice examples of amusing mixed metaphors I had collected. Since then, I’ve accumulated many new specimens. They’re not difficult to find. Indeed, they leap off the page like a sore thumb! All citations that follow are genuine, and the humor was presumably not originally intended.

But first, it should be noted that not all mixed metaphors are bad. Some are acceptable, especially when either or both have entered the language. When a metaphor becomes a familiar expression or cliché, it tends to lose its metaphorical quality; the result is called a *dead* (or *dormant*) *metaphor*. Moreover, they don’t always clash in an awkward manner.

For example, the following sentences mix their metaphors but are not especially objectionable: “In the blink of an eye it all went out the window.” “You’ve got to have the stomach for this and be able to take the heat.” “People in love still have an ax to grind, especially when they discover what lurks beneath the surface.” A wheeler-dealer made an offer “only to pull the plug in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour.” And I’ll even approve one that aspires to literary heights: a real estate ad appealing to a prospective occupant whose “soul is hungry for the majesty of the river.”

But other mixed metaphors don’t pass the test. The problem arises when the combination creates incongruous, absurd, or impossible images:

“The clock is ticking on that bottleneck.” “The Clintons started this fight, and . . . Kennedy returned the volley with interest.” “I know I have these skeletons in my closet. . . . It is a terrible cross to bear.” Google’s market share “is an arms race that they’ve won by a landslide.” And an obsession with online gaming “avalanched beyond repair.”

Here are more examples, ranging from tolerable to ludicrous:

- “We’ll just throw darts in the dark and let the chips fall where they may.”
- “This was one of those wedge issues that did not bite.”
- “I plan on sitting on the money for a while so I can get my feet on the ground.”
- “Congressional Democrats said they were wary of handing a lame-duck administration what one aide called a ‘blank check.’”
- A new TV series is “a critical slam-dunk, but likely to be too inside baseball to turn into the big hit that NBC badly needs.”

- “Mr. Obama . . . is not taking the high ground when he throws the race card. . . .”
- An innovative new technology for police is “a gold mine of information. . . . But law enforcement is still way behind the curve.”
- “Investors smelling trouble can vote with their feet. . . .”
- On Sarah Palin: “The inquiry would probably not turn up a ‘smoking gun on the governor’ but . . . it ‘certainly has the possibility of giving her an ethical black eye.’”
- “After a diet of lighthearted comedies poking fun at the national character, Italians are not used to having their dark side laid bare.”
- A public-interest lawyer explained how to “prevent a free speech controversy from mushrooming into a witch-hunt.”
- On consumers’ response to tax rebate checks: “It’s not quite proving to be a hot potato that’s burning a hole in people’s pockets.”
- John McCain “has to hold his nose and keep his bread buttered with the religious right.”
- Within the space of a few months, *The Wall Street Journal* ran two articles on investing for retirement. Headlines: “Weatherproofing a Nest Egg” and “How to Bulletproof Your Nest Egg.”

And consider how deftly some people can mix *more* than two metaphors:

- Headline: “Amid High-Tech Turf Battles, Baby Bells Feel Heat on Cash Cow.”
- “Now Mr. McCloskey, marching to a drummer perhaps only he hears, is taking on a powerful incumbent . . . in a long-shot quest to return to Washington for one last hurrah.”
- Jessica Alba on Indiana Jones: “But at the end of the day, he steps up to the plate, and he kicks ass.”
- “This claim of a constitutionally protected pants-drop is simply a race to the bottom that is sucking all the available capital out of the entertainment system. . . .”

To conclude, a remarkable instance of a mixed metaphor that manages the feat of having the metaphors contradict each other:

“Bruce Springsteen pushes his boundaries by returning to his roots . . . with *We Shall Overcome*, his brand-new CD. . . .”