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Wagging THE Dog

A few choice phrases and their origins

By Ralph Keyes

IN ONE OF AESOP'S LESSER FABLES, AN OX approaches a manger to eat some straw and is driven off by a furious dog who was napping there. Finally the ox wanders away, musing that even though the ill-tempered dog does not intend to eat the straw himself, he is determined that no one else should either. A person like that is now known proverbially as a "dog in the manger."

Dogs are not only man's—and woman's—best friend, but a fertile source of expressions firmly rooted in our past. Think of them as "retroterms." Most retroterms only make sense when you know where they originated. Many originated with dogs.

In years past, smaller circuses that featured trained dogs and decorated ponies were disparaged as "dog and pony shows," spectacles that could only afford modest-sized animals (no tigers or elephants). This phrase is still used to characterize events with more show

Art by Michael Stevens

than substance. One news commentator called Iran's conference on Holocaust denial a dog-and-pony show.

Or take Yellow Dog Democrats. Old Yeller notwithstanding, in rural America, a yellow dog has never been considered particularly desirable. After the Civil War, unreconstructed Confederates vowed that they would vote for a "yaller dog" before they'd vote for a Republican. This inspired the term "Yellow Dog Democrat"—meaning a voter who is blindly loyal to that party. Today, those willing to work with Republicans call themselves Blue Dog Democrats.

During the late 19th century, "dog" became slang for pretension. Ostentatiously handing someone your business card was a form of dog. So was making sure others knew your ancestors fought in the Revolution. In time, "dog" fused with "putting on airs" to become "putting on the dog." An 1869 graduate of Yale later wrote about student norms at his alma mater: "To put on the dog, is to make a flashy display, to cut a swell."

In Arthur Conan Doyle's 1892 story *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*, a murder mystery is solved by Sherlock Holmes' observation of a "curious incident." On the night of the murder, a dog in the stable where the body was later found did not bark. The dog's silence suggested that nothing was amiss until the racehorse this man was trying to maim reared up and killed him. This is the famous case of the dog who didn't bark. The concept has since become a popular allusion to situations in which a revealing element is something that did not happen. Author Bob Woodward noted that throughout Richard Nixon's Watergate tapes, neither the president nor any aide ever asked what would be the right thing to do. Woodward called this omission "the dog that didn't bark."

One durable canine-based retro-expression was apparently born in the newsroom of the *New York Sun* during the Gilded Age. "If a dog bites a man, that's not news," *Sun* city editor John

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Bogart is said to have told a cub reporter who asked for his definition of news. "If a man bites a dog, that's news." In general discourse, this reporter's axiom has become shorthand for any extraordinary event at all. An *Indianapolis Star* article described counterintuitive research findings that show workplace stress is in decline as a "man-bites-dog kind of story."

Every profession has terms, concepts and yarns so familiar to insiders that they can be referenced with a single word or phrase. Like the journalist's definition of news, some also involve dogs. Take the publishing industry: Since it was well established that book buyers had an insatiable appetite for books about Abraham Lincoln, medicine and dogs, an old saw among publishers is that a book titled *Lincoln's Doctor's Dog* would be a surefire best-seller. Over time, in and out of the book business, "Lincoln's Doctor's Dog" is used as shorthand for a guaranteed commercial success.

Another crossover retroterm originated in the St. Petersburg lab where Ivan Petrovich Pavlov studied dogs' salivary glands. The Russian physiologist

noticed that his canine subjects began to drool whenever they expected to be fed, whether food was forthcoming or not. In an ingenious set of experiments in the early 20th century, Pavlov engaged a stimulus—blowing a whistle, striking a tuning fork, ringing a bell—every time his dogs were fed. Eventually, the animals began to salivate when they heard such a sound. Reference to "Pavlov's dogs" evokes images of an automatic response like this, and is often applied to human beings. Those who reach for their BlackBerry at the sound of any beep have been compared to Pavlov's dogs.

When dealing with English speakers from other countries, retrotalk can be risky. Six decades ago, Lawry's Prime Rib in Los Angeles began offering patrons paper sacks in which to take home leftovers for their pets. Since then, among Americans, the term "doggie bag" has referred to any container used to transport leftover food from a restaurant. In England, however, "doggie bags" are what dog-walkers use to clean up their pets' messes.

Retroterms don't have to be antique. Some have a fairly recent pedigree. Take *Wag the Dog*. This 1997 movie featured a U.S. president who hires a political consultant to help him cope with a looming sex scandal. The consultant fakes a conflict with Albania, complete with phony newscasts. Because the movie was released less than a month before Bill Clinton became embroiled in the Monica Lewinsky affair, any subsequent military action authorized by Clinton was derided by detractors as a "wag the dog" strategy. More broadly, "wag the dog" has come to suggest diversionary tactics of many kinds. But in the sense of smaller events controlling larger ones, the catchphrase has been around for centuries. Some believe it originated in an old joke: "Why does a dog wag its tail? Because a dog is smarter than its tail. If the tail were smarter, the tail would wag the dog." **Ⓑ**