

## What Was Your Name, Again?

When we are born, within moments of drawing our first breath, we are given a name. This name will, to one degree or another, identify us for the rest of our lives. And yet, when our parents bestow this most significant form of identification upon us, what do they know about who we are? They know very little. They know our gender, our race, and our ancestry, and they know how we look as a goopy, crying infant. Aside from that, the rest is a complete mystery. Will this infant grow up to be a surgeon, a star athlete or the president of the United States? Or will he be a bum, a mass murderer or a defense attorney? Because the proud parent is ignorant as to a newborn child's future personality, the name given to the child may ultimately fail to reflect his true nature. When this is the case, society is forced to step in to correct the parents' misidentification by granting the person a more fitting moniker. The person is given a nickname, and the world is better for it.

Richard, George, Abraham, Joseph. These are all very solid, proper names frequently branded on newborn American children. But who are these guys? They could be almost anyone. But what if the list instead read "Tricky Dick," "the Babe," "Honest Abe" and "Shoeless Joe." Then we immediately identify them. We know their character. We know their great feats and their great failures. We know their nicknames.

Nicknames play a significant role in our culture. They both glorify and vilify our public figures by boiling down all that we view as significant about them into a few descriptive syllables. Nicknames are also important in our own inner circles. Think back to your group of childhood friends. As you think about those interactions, I would be willing to bet that the group frequently addressed its members by names other than those found on their respective birth

certificates. In this paper, I hope to explore the significance of the nickname, both in popular culture and in our own private lives.

So why do we have nicknames? First, they give us insight into who people are. This could include their character, their occupation, their past experiences or their physical characteristics. Let's say you were attending a basketball game and failed to buy a program. Without ever glancing at a roster, you could likely discern "Tree" Rollins from Nate "Tiny" Archibald. Similarly, even without a vast amount of sports knowledge, a reasonable person could probably infer that William "The Refrigerator" Perry was a rather rotund football player as opposed to, say, a ballet dancer.

People of ample physical proportion seem to be the beneficiaries of nicknames at a disproportionate rate. In addition to The Fridge, the sports world has bestowed upon us the "Round Mound of Rebound" (Charles Barkley), "Big Baby" (Glen Davis) and simply "Hefty" (Phil Mickelson). Large political figures have likewise been branded, including several obese presidents. John Adams, second president of the United States, was known as "His Rotundity," Grover Cleveland was known as "Uncle Jumbo" and William Howard Taft was called "Big Bill."

Nicknames based on physical appearance are not limited to commentary on stature. One need not be a baseball historian to guess at the unique physical characteristics of early pitching legend Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown. Similarly, not being a great historian of the political history of Sweden, I cannot provide a great deal of insight into the man, the myth, the legend of Sverker I of Sweden. However, given his nickname of "The Clubfoot," I can say that I know more about him than I know about any other Swedish political leader in history. Thus, the power of the nickname.

In addition to alerting us to a person's physical appearance, nicknames let us know something about a person's life experiences. Reggie Jackson was "Mr. October" due to his history of stellar postseason hitting with the New York Yankees. "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, who holds the third highest batting average in baseball history, was granted his nickname for playing a game in his socks when his new spikes blistered his feet. In addition to his "Uncle Jumbo" nickname above, Grover Cleveland was known as "The Hangman of Buffalo" for his pre-presidential occupation as sheriff and executioner. (I uncovered no definitive evidence as to whether anyone was hanged for referring to him as "Uncle Jumbo.") Each of these nicknames, then, gives us some insight into its owner's life experiences.

Nicknames also tell us something about an individual's character. History looks kindly upon Richard I of England as "The Lionheart," Abraham Lincoln as "The Great Emancipator" or "Honest Abe," and Kentucky's own Henry Clay as "The Great Compromiser." These nicknames are like mini-biographies, describing in a word or two what society considers the essence of the person. But just as nicknames can elevate the perception of a political figure's character, it can just as easily stigmatize. A recognizable example to the individuals in this room would be Bill "Slick Willy" Clinton. Less familiar, though equally unflattering names include Wenceslaus, King of the Romans, known as "the Drunkard," and Louis V of France, known as "the Sluggard." While these gentlemen sound like they would make outstanding fraternity brothers, their nicknames seem to indicate that they failed to inspire their contemporaries with their Kingly exploits. Having said that, nicknames like "the Drunkard" and the "Sluggard" would have been coveted by William the I of England and Henry IV of Castille, whose marketing teams clearly let them down in the nickname department. Apparently what residents of England at the time of William I lacked in imagination, they more than made up for in bluntness. Thus, their king was

widely referred to as simply “William the Bastard.” Even more unfortunate is Henry IV of Castille, who was known as “Henry the Impotent.” One wonders how the annals of history may have changed if only one of our fine member physicians would have been available to prescribe Henry some medicinal aid for his high publicized shortcomings. Perhaps he could have then been known as something like “Henry the Content” or possibly even “Hammering Hank.”

If a public figure can avoid the negative brand of a poor nickname, and instead be granted a positive or simply memorable one, the nickname can have great power. The public is drawn to individuals with nicknames because they are memorable and because it lets them into that person’s life. Examples of the power of this connection can be seen both in politics and in sports. Dwight Eisenhower and Theodore Roosevelt were both made imminently more recognizable and appealing to the masses with their nicknames of “Ike” and “Teddy,” respectively. (Despite the fact that tough-guy Roosevelt hated the name.) On a more personal political level, I’m sure many of you recognize the name of Melton Brooks, a local funeral director and perpetual candidate for County Coroner. Taking aside the rather bizarre phenomenon that county coroner is an elected position whose chief qualification seems to be to discern a living person from a dead person, I routinely vote for Brooks. This is not because I have researched his positions on the many important issues that a coroner must face, such as whether or not it is necessary to feel for a pulse when you respond to an accident in which someone has been decapitated, but because his nickname “Sputnik” is printed right on the ballot. I say that if you are going to vote for an absurd elected position with absolutely no basis to determine the qualifications of the candidate, you may as well vote for a guy named after a Cold War era Communist satellite.

Sports figures benefit from recognizable nicknames as well. It is much easier for a casual sports fan to recall a nickname than a proper name. This allows the athlete to be more widely

known, and thus more marketable. A current example would be LSU sophomore cornerback Tyrann Mathieu. Mathieu had some degree of notoriety as an excellent punt returner and defensive back on LSU's #1 football team. But it was not until his nickname of "the Honey Badger" became widely publicized that his popularity exploded. Most feel he would not have become a finalist for the Heisman trophy had his popularity not been infused with the appeal of the catchy nickname.

Other legendary sports nicknames include: "Magic" Johnson, "the Mailman" Karl Malone, "Cornbread" Maxwell, "Crazy Legs" Hirsch, "Dizzy" and "Daffy" Dean, "Doctor J," "Stan the Man" Musial, "Oil Can" Boyd, "the Say Hey Kid" and "Broadway Joe" Namath. In almost each case, the nickname is infinitely more recognizable than the given name, and gives fans a deeper sense of connection with the athlete, not to mention a major marketing boost.

Nicknames are, of course, not limited to mainstream public life. In fact, the black sheep cousin of the nickname, the alias or street name, may make nicknames more widely used in criminal circles than in any other area. As with many other aspects of life, no group has elevated the nickname to more of an art form than has the mob. In January 2011, the FBI conducted the largest organized crime bust in New York history, making arrests in all five major crime families. The published indictments provide a list of street names that are almost too stereotypical to be believable. Some of my personal favorites include: "Tony Bagels," "Meatball," "Vinny Carwash," "Junior Lollipops," "Fat Dennis," "the Beard," "Baby Fat Larry," "Mush," "The Claw," "The Fang" and "Lumpy." Even these humorous nicknames give us some insight into the nature of these distinguished gentlemen. For instance, I can tell you with virtual certainty that if you were forced to engage in a dispute with one of them, that you would prefer that it be "Junior Lollipops" rather than "The Fang."

Our local criminal defendants can also hold their heads high for their inventive nicknames. As a prosecutor, I have always been interested in knowing how the individuals in our courts refer to one another on the street. As Judge Adams can attest, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent in juvenile court, where the young people we encounter on a daily basis frequently have no idea of the actual names of their friends and classmates. This is a particular problem for me as a prosecutor in attempting to enlist the help of witnesses, as seen in the following example using nicknames I have actually encountered in court:

Me: Was anyone there when the Defendant stole your DVD player?

Victim: Yes.

Me: Good. Did they see what happened?

Victim: Yes. They saw all of it.

Me: Good. Who were they?

Victim: (closes eyes to focus) There was "Chili," "DooLoop," "June Bug," "Mo Mo," "Chopper," "Tre-Dookie," "Sheeba," "Baby D," "Funk," "Festus," "Cache" and "Tay Bootie."

This, unfortunately, has the tendency to hamper my otherwise highly efficient prosecuting ability, as subpoenas that are addressed to "Tay Bootie" have proven relatively ineffective.

Though we may roll our eyes at the nicknames of the local kids I mentioned, they really are not so different from the nicknames we all have used in our lives. They are terms of endearment, respect, criticism or humor. They are a sign of closeness and a means of connecting in a way that others outside the group cannot infringe upon. And they follow the same nickname rules that all of us follows. What are those rules, you ask? I think I have found a few.

First, a person cannot give himself or herself a nickname. Instead, it must be earned and branded by others. An example of this can be found in an episode of the television show “Seinfeld” in which George seeks to get himself a cool nickname at work. He wants to be called “T-Bone,” so he continually orders T-bone steaks at lunch. Much to George’s chagrin, his co-workers nickname a fellow employee “T-Bone” and instead decide to call George “Coco the Monkey.” This scenario simply reflects the fact that we have no control over the establishment of our nicknames.

In addition to our lack of control in granting our own nicknames, we also have no ability to turn them off once they stick. In fact, the more a person struggles to disassociate from an unwanted nickname, the more firmly entrenched the name becomes. For example, a classmate of mine in 7<sup>th</sup> grade was nicknamed “Garfield.” While it would be bad enough for an adolescent child to be named after a cartoon cat, the particular alleged incident that led to the nickname was so monumentally embarrassing that the name was intolerable to this boy. (Believe me, you are better for not knowing the details.) He fought the nickname to the point of physically confronting anyone who referred to him in that way. This strategy proved so effective that five years later, during a high school pep rally, the majority of our senior class chanted “Garfield” when he stepped onto the gym floor. I hope that time, and perhaps counseling and medication, have now allowed that young man to face the inevitable. There’s no resisting a good nickname.

Another nickname truism is that one can have multiple nicknames. Frequently, a person is addressed in different ways by different groups he or she associates with. I have had four nicknames during my life. My close family and friends have always referred to me simply as “Dunc.” Growing up, my dad’s high school buddies called me “Little Cav.” A group of work friends refer to me as “Biscuit.” And at the courthouse, in an effort to give me a hip street name

to fit in with our juvenile clients, people call me “Dunquan.” Citing the sad saga of “Garfield,” I don’t resist any of them.

Fortunately, I am in good company as the proud owner of a nickname. In preparing for this paper, I sent out my crack research team on a quest to uncover the nicknames of the members of the Athenaeum Society. I must say that I was somewhat taken aback that such an esteemed sub-section of the elite of Hopkinsville society could hold such common titles. Because I would hate to risk the welfare of my informants, and because there may be those of you out there with a Garfield-like complex about your nickname, I will not directly identify anyone. However, I will say that somewhere lurking amongst you in this venerable society are the following seemly characters: “Big Boy,” “the Head,” “Wild Bill” (a.k.a. “Wilt Bill”), “Red,” “Pig,” “Paco,” “Zorba,” “Steamy” (a.k.a. “Speedy”), “Barney Rubble,” “Preacher,” “L-Dog,” “Buck,” “Boogie” and “Catfish.”

Looking over that list, I’m not sure that I wouldn’t prefer to be associated with “Vinny Carwash” or “Baby Fat Larry.” I would challenge those of you whose aliases I have uncovered, or those that I’ve missed, to stand up and identify your true self during the comments portion of the evening.

Ernest Able, who sits on the Executive counsel of the American Name Society, said the following about nicknames: “When we give a nickname, good or bad, it means that we care. You don’t give someone about whom you are indifferent a nickname.” In public life or in our innermost circles, from “Babe Ruth” to “June Bug,” nicknames identify, characterize and connect all of us.

Sincerely,

Dunquan