

Political Penguin

By Duane Plank

Thanks to reader and letter-to-the-editor writer Alex Schneider, who took the time to forward his thoughts on a recent *PP* that mentioned the passing of broadcasting icon Walter Cronkite.

Mr. Schneider took some shots at Plank; no problem there. But in his letter-to-the-editor, Mr. Schneider pens that I wrote that Cronkite was “the voice of God” and “universally credible.”

Re-read the column a few times, and don't see those phrases. Maybe they were there. Can't always read the fine print without my spectacles. Sure, as I jog the memory as a youngster growing up in the sixties, Cronkite was the main news dispenser available to the masses via the boob tube. But he wasn't “the voice of God,” that's for sure. That would be the Pope. Was he a credible voice, a voice to be trusted? Guess that depends on who is making that judgment. Did he have an agenda that he was pushing? Maybe. Don't all news organizations, covertly or overtly?

It's not like the folks at CNN and the oddballs like the MSNBC's Keith Olbermanns of the world aren't hitting the ball from the left-handed batter's box, right? Or that Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity, two of the staples on the Fox News Channel, aren't trying to push the ball down the right field line, is it?

Although O'Reilly claims to be “fair and balanced,” what with his “no-spin” zone. Maybe. Haven't checked him out on the tube all that much. Used to enjoy listening to his AM790 radio show until he decided to give up the gig. Wonder if he is considering a run for some type of political office next year? That's what my dad has mentioned, and I always respect the voice of the old guy. Even if it is not “the voice of God.”

Had to laugh when I saw the recent story in the local media about the sniping going on between O'Reilly and the incredibly condescending Olbermann. Mr. Olbermann used to work locally in L.A., commenting on sports and other stuff. In an “I am so much smarter than you” way.

Anywho, O'Reilly and Olbermann were told by their parent companies to knock off the petty squabbling. Facts be told, both of the fellas shows air at the same time locally, and Mr. O'Reilly's efforts dominate Olbermann's, something like three to one.

But back to the coches. Bilingual, right? We considered getting in on the “cash for clunkers” program that the government was so generously offering last week, but the idea was nixed by my better half. She has all the smarts and the looks in the family. I have the ...? After all, the Camry does have more than a few miles on it, and seemed to qualify under the parameters of the wildly popular stimulus plan that would put up to \$4,500 in the hands of clunker owners who would then turn around and buy a new, more fuel-efficient vehicle.

By the time we decided to keep the Camry, it looked like the initial \$1 billion appropriated for the program had already been doled out. So President Obama and his stimulus gurus quickly worked out a plan that would free up another two billion bucks. The House then approved the additional funding before packing their bags and leaving Washington for their annual August vacation.

Members of the Senate were being implored by the White House to approve the additional funding, before they start their break this Friday. All of the good folks working so diligently in our Congressional offices are slated to return from their siestas on the day after Labor Day--Tuesday, September 8.

Sure, there are pros and cons to extending the program. It has been reported that ex-Presidential candidate Arizona Senator John McCain was set to lead a Senate filibuster this week cuz he and other fiscal conservatives are tiring of the seemingly endless government spending.

And it has been mentioned that even some Democrats, among them Cali's own Senator Dianne Feinstein, aren't entirely on-board with funding a new bailout unless the guidelines to purchase the new vehicles are ratcheted up. Seems that a few of the lawmakers would like to see the consumer have to use the cashola to purchase a car that gets even better gas mileage than the initial guidelines prescribed.

Whatever the results, the car dealers have to be ecstatic to finally see some foot traffic on their showroom floors. And to be able to close some deals on new rides. Gotta believe that they are very pleased with the program and don't want to see anything change, except maybe more money added to the handout.

Said Bailey Wood, spokesman for the National Automobile Dealers Association: “You have a program which is an immense success...and you want to change it? It doesn't make any sense.” Wood speaks, man, I listen.

So the health care program that the Prez has been tirelessly pushing isn't going to pass muster until the folks toiling in Congress get back from their vacations. If it happens then. But a significant step to getting something done was made last week when the House Demos reached a compromise to move the massive medical overhaul forward.

And also seemed to tick off some of the more Liberal Demos, among them Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, who wasn't enamored with the changes to the legislation. Familiar with the name Kennedy? Patrick said that the current legislative compromise “lets insurance companies off the hook. It's a sop to the insurance companies.”

Not sure what Mr. Kennedy meant by sop. Maybe “standard operating procedure?” Or saturate? Either way, the legacied politico was out there supporting us common folk. Which is quite comforting, isn't it? I feel

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South Bay Literacy Program Opens New World



Retired aluminum worker Craig Lang, a client of the South Bay Literacy Council, works through one of his favorite reads, a book about the American Pilgrims.

GROUP IS LOOKING FOR SMALL ARMY OF NEW ENGLISH TUTORS

By Erik Derr

Craig Lang is finally visiting the storybook places he has always dreamed about. “It's unbelievable,” said the retired aluminum worker. Being able to read, he said, “has opened up a whole new world.” Tales about America's history top Lang's new booklist, including accounts of the Pilgrims, West-bound pioneers, automotive inventor Henry Ford, and the seismic forces behind notable volcanoes. Another favorite pick explores the changes one might see if they lived 100 years. For most of his 66 years, however, Lang, a burly, white-haired man with a ready smile, was one of the millions of Americans known as functionally illiterate --- without the skills needed for reading, writing or computing, but often ingenious enough to learn other ways to function through life. He practiced his trade for 27 years in the aerospace industry before retiring.

Data compiled in 2003 by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy placed the rate of adult illiteracy in California at upwards of 26 percent, while illiteracy throughout Los Angeles County alone was estimated at nearly 41 percent. A follow-up study released in 2006 asserted that over 50 percent of all U.S. adults earned significantly lower than poverty-level wages as a result of reading so poorly.

Lang clearly remembers the job promotions and other opportunities he missed because he couldn't complete the paperwork. And then, like many others with similar learning challenges, Lang did whatever he needed --- and avoided whatever he needed --- to keep his inability to read a secret from the rest of the world, particularly his employers.

Over the years, Lang said, “I was able to b-s my way through a lot of things.” But

he never liked living that way. “The whole thing of it was, I wanted to read...I just didn't feel comfortable.”

Lang grew up at a time when schools typically lacked the resources to help students whose learning needs exceeded the common curriculum. School officials placed him in a class they said would provide specialized attention. Lang recalls a system that taught him little if anything and then unceremoniously pushed him out when he turned 18--though he still couldn't even read traffic signs.

Lang tumbled into a professional world that proved “very, very hard.” And, in the years immediately after school, he bounced from job to job until finally landing his gig with the aerospace aluminum company. Fast forward 40 or so years when Lang's sister, his lifelong advocate, encouraged her brother to check out the nonprofit South Bay Literacy Council, a team of volunteers focused on teaching their community how to read. “I told her, ‘OK, I'll go down there. If I don't like it, I'll take a hike.’” That was four years ago, and he hasn't hit the trail yet.

Lang says the SBLC, which annually helps about 300 adult clients through a computer learning program and traditional group and individual tutoring in 16 South Bay cities, managed to give him something no other reading program ever did: a sense of respect. The SBLC's volunteers “take their time with you, they give you personal attention. They don't push you out too early or push anything on you,” he said. “They work on your level.” “Most of our students come to us because the do want to learn,” explained Joan Allen, the SBLC president. And, so, “they come determined and accepting.” Allen disagrees with any suggestion that illiterate adults are inferior students. She recalls several Council clients who struggled over written words, but showed genius in other fields.

Many of those who look to the SBLC for help are tactile, or kinesthetic, learners --- otherwise referred to as hands-on people. That includes the car mechanic who built an entire BMW just by studying the illustrations in a repair manual. Allen also bristles at the notion that schools bear much of the blame for America's illiteracy problems. “Teachers for the most part do the best that they can,” she said. Much more, continued Allen, students face a host of extraordinary circumstances in their lives that leave them distracted and unable to follow typical reading instruction plans. That, says Diane Klein, is what happened with her own daughter, who is now 45 years old and still struggling over the simplest text. “From the time she was in the third grade, I knew there was a problem,” said Klein, who directs the SBLC's outreach efforts. After taking her daughter to a string of reading programs, which all failed to halt

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