

# Mblem

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### Words From Nick

Nick Sanford

RVC Column, RVC5@us.mensa.org

#### National News:

At the March AMC meeting the motion to require the National Office to take charge of the preregistration, financial accounting, and oversight of onsite registration for all future AG contracts passed with just two of us voting against it. The budget amendment to remove the \$35,000 consultant failed by two votes. I fought as best as I could on both of these issues, but it just wasn't enough. At this point all that I can do is promise that I will make the most of the experience with the consultant. The next meeting will be at the AG in July. As of right now there are no major issues scheduled for discussion.

I have a retraction from my last article. The budget that was voted on at the AMC meeting (it passed) did not actually work out to a \$100,000 deficit. That is what popped out before adding in the "non-cash allocation" from those people who have life memberships. When you pay that lump sum for a life membership it is put in an investment account and

each year a small amount is transferred into the operating account. This is that small amount. The bottom bottom line is that the budget worked out to a \$0 surplus.

#### Local News:

Jami Francis has done some excellent work on the regional website region5.us.mensa.org. Currently we are working on creating a repository for articles that editors can use if they need extra content for their newsletters. If you are a regular writer for your newsletter and would like to offer your words to the other groups in our region then please send me an email. I am not sure of the exact format that we are going to end up with, but our goal is simplicity.

In May the National Office is running a contest to see which region can administer the greatest percentage increase in the number of Mensa admission tests. The baseline is May 2007 when our region tested 33 prospects. The region that wins will receive \$500. If we take home the prize then I will give the group that did the best job (as defined by a combination of percentage increase and the absolute number of tests administered) \$350 and I will give the proctor or proctor coordinator that did the best job \$150. Let's see what we can do.

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#### SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Really nothing interesting in this issue*
- *Well, MENC ExComm change, —Page 1*
- *No one ever went broke — (Really) P. 2*
- *Look for Page 10 in this ten page publication*

### MENC Executive Committee News

From the Editor

As reported in last month's Mblem, after our election, there is a new set of members. They have decided amongst them the official duties. Each chapter, or, local group, of the American Mensa is required to have at least the following four officers in the Executive Committee: LocSec, Deputy LocSec, Treasurer, and Parliamentarian. The following listing reflex the assignment of these positions. It is listed in alphabetic order by last name of the ExComm members. In addition to these four positions there are appointed officers. Please see the MENC contact information on the inside back cover (P. 7).

Fran Greenstein, Parliamentarian  
 Ann Lewis, Member at Large  
 Kim Oliver, Deputy LocSec  
 Dan Singer, Treasurer  
 David Skaar, Member at Large  
 Shiangtai Tuan, LocSec  
 Ed Williams, Member at Large

### LocSecond

LocSec column  
 Shiangtai Tuan

On April 13, during Durham Brunch, we had our first ExComm meeting. I dare say it was a good meeting. We had the offices assigned. Kim would prepare the minutes. You can find out about our discussions and decisions. You elected us and trusted us to do things for you. I believe in letting you know what we do and how we do it. I also believe the communication is a two-way traffic. We welcome your suggestions. Tell us what you would like to see happen and we can put it into our agenda. Please make comments, write to us by e-mail or by US mail. ExComm meetings are always open to all MENC members. In general, meeting time and place will be announced in Mblem. At the April meeting, the Potters are with us. Their beautiful 9-month old daughter watched intensely at her parents giving their opinions and discussed matters with some of the ExComm members.

## No One Ever Went Broke Underestimating the Intelligence of the Public

David Skaar

I have taken as my inspiration this month a few wise words about intelligence, stupidity, and communication.

First, a quote regarding a rather unpopular comic strip character, from an astute reader – “He talks like a stupid person’s idea of what a smart person sounds like.”

Second, “Never underestimate the stupidity of people in large groups.”

Third, “The knowledge of the average person is usually overestimated, and their intelligence underestimated.”

These quotes are relevant at the moment, because I have recently become even more concerned/annoyed than I usually am about the perception of intelligence in popular culture. There are not any intelligent people providing good role models in the media formats that most people are exposed to, television and comic strips. I won’t even bother to comment on intelligence in TV news, I’m just looking at characters on TV shows. Traditionally, the most intelligent characters appear on doctor or crime shows (and the combination doctor-detective shows, like Quincy or Diagnosis Murder), but as the genre has embraced more technical aspects, the characters have become more obnoxious.

Lieutenant Columbo (played by Peter Falk) is generally considered one of the most intelligent television characters ever, but he was best known for downplaying it to the point of acting stupid. Now, crime dramas have reached the point where the investigators are spending all their time explaining technical aspects, so that they seem to be primarily concerned with showing off how smart they are. In my opinion, the CSI franchise is particularly egregious for this.

However, the show that I consider the worst example of this is Bones, a forensic drama about a team of astoundingly smart people in the lab, and the merely average FBI agent that they keep around to explain things to. However, it’s not enough for them to just be smart, but they must also be completely out of touch with the rest of the world, and be unable to carry on social interactions or understand the thoughts and motivations of mere mortals.

It was brutally pointed out to me that the natures of the Bones characters (who I can’t stand) are nearly identical to that of the physics nerds in The Big Bang Theory, a show I enjoy. I then had to justify this conflict with some fast thinking. My argument was then that The Big Bang Theory is played for laughs, highlighting the ridiculousness of the characters, and having them realize that they are ridiculous. My next point is that I spend almost all of my time in the company of smart people, and they behave very much like The Big Bang nerds, and not at all like the arrogant putzes on Bones.

I think that the main reason I feel about these shows the way that I do goes back the first quote regarding “a stupid

person’s idea of what smart people sound like”. Most of the television shows and characters that annoy me sound like a writer read a few technical facts and then put them into the mouths of the characters without actually understanding them. The shows that I like sound like they were written by people who actually understand what they’re saying. When the characters on the Big Bang Theory tell physics jokes that both make scientific sense and are actually funny, that implies that somebody involved understands.

The second quote I gave about the stupidity of large groups is probably directly related to the state of popular entertainment, as the purveyors of such material feel that they need to aim low for their target audience. Another quote from George Carlin relates, “Think about how stupid the average person is. Now, half of the people are dumber than that.” The attitude is that the simpler you make things, the more people will understand it, and the bigger the audience will be. The result is either completely brain dead material, or excruciating levels of exposition.

Thus coming to the misestimation of knowledge and intelligence. I will leave this quote as an exercise for the reader, for to explain it would be to endorse it. I will however, give you an example from my life. When I was in public school, in the 1970s and 80s, we students knew nothing about the recent unpleasantness in Vietnam. It was too current to be in the history books, all the adults knew all about it, didn’t want to talk about it, and didn’t feel it necessary to talk about since it was something everybody already knew. As a result, my generation was remarkably ignorant on the subject, but it was assumed that we would get any references made. Until the Vietnam movies started coming out in the 80s, we didn’t have any details, and then, when we started getting the facts, it was assumed that we couldn’t understand the politics of the time or the implications for the present. The way prescription drugs are marketed is another good example. Despite the nauseatingly complete information required by law, it is still assumed that people can’t understand that there are both risks and benefits.

Just keep these things in mind during political season, which is a great example of stupidity in large groups, and treating people as informed, but too stupid to understand. When was the last time you saw a political ad or speech that actually attempted to explain something and treat the audience as if it were capable of understanding. I think Ross Perot tried this with his slideshows, and Ron Paul gave it a shot this year, but either the masses are genuinely too stupid to understand content, or too out of practice to handle it. Or it could be that people want histrionics and drama, and statements that have an underlying logic just aren’t interesting. Maybe that’s why Ross Perot was the most successful of any third party candidate, which I credit to the histrionics contained in his slideshows.

(Conti. To P. 3, No One)

## Rehearsals At Large Column Shiangtai Tuan

After rehearsals after rehearsals, I slowly see the similarity between life in general and the little universe of “theater life.”

One thing I have noticed is that people tend to be late and like to chat a lot. There is a constant rumble going on even when the director is giving directions of what we should do. Some how these people either do not think they are bothering the others or they simply do not care. To

them, the sister’s new dress, the brothers new house, his car’s new feature ... are more important than what we are supposed to do then. Once some friends convinced me to go to a Seminar. It was the EST training. The first thing we were supposed to do was to be on time and to be absolutely quiet during the lectures. and it was called “integrity”. Everybody thought it was great, I thought that was what we have always been told at home and in schools. Well, of course, I did not go school here. I suppose people learn to disrupt classes in schools here. Most people consider it a special merit, something worth extra points or extra dollars to be on time or to be quiet while someone is giving directions. Well, as I realized, it is not their fault that they have never learned it. This is similar to the situation when some drivers on the road who stays in the left lane all the time. They have never heard of the traffic rules that one should stay at the right side lane and pass only from the left lane (which is called the passing lane not for nothing). It is very annoying when you are in a hurry (or not) but the car in front of you is driving 53.999 miles per hour trying to pass a car driving at 53.998 m/h in a 55 m/h zone. Both drivers probably think they are close to speed limit and it is your problem if you are in a hurry. Another case is when one drives in the left lane at the same speed as the on in the right but is spaced so that no one can get by. It is not this drivers fault because he/she never learned to stay in the right side lane. This reminds me something I witnessed in a place, say, sort of like a third world village. (Well, everything is attributed to the third world; no one gets offended; no one is to blame me.) There were some puddles in the middle of the street and it was a clear day. I was puzzled for a while until I saw a kid come down the road holding the mother’s hand. The kid stopped and squatted down. The mother stopped, still holding the kid’s hand. When they started to move again there was a puddle left where the kid squatted. It does not surprise me any more when I hear that’s what people do during Mardi Gras. I suppose chatting at rehearsals falls in the same category. They never learned otherwise.

Then there are many ways the directors cope with situations like that. Some of them are very strict and some are rather “friendly”. For instance, one stage director would not let any one speak when he is giving directions. If there was chattering, he would speak very loudly: “Quiet.” (I try to avoid the word “yell” because it has strong implication of negativity.) He also made it clear that he was not mad, not angry, not wishing to offend anybody but only wanted to be able to carry out his work smoothly. This is like a dictatorship, very efficient. A good dictator leads a country to success and a bad dictator leads a country to disaster fast either way. That was, luckily a good director. I enjoyed working in that company.

The other extreme was one who did nothing about it. It turned into such a chaos that one of the chorus members stood up and said something about it. He turned out to be a minister and was an authoritative figure. So, we elected him to be the leader of our chorus and put the responsibility on him to maintain order. So, we experienced a real life creation of democracy.

I have always believed in “virtue takes the middle course” as Mencius would say, some four thousand and three hundred years ago. So, there are directors who are not so forceful but not so friendly, especially one who equated “friendliness” to “kindness.” He would state that no one should make big noises during rehearsals, added a rule or so once a while, and would kindly remind people once a while. People soon picked up the “kindly” image and took advantage of it. Chaos it was. There is no point making new rules if the old rules are not followed. I have seen the same thing in congress. Creating new “control laws” only restrict law abiding citizens. Criminals go free on bonds, on probation the minute they walk in the court house.

Then there was the one who delegated the job to the stage manager. In fact, it is part of the stage manager’s job anyway. To be sure we understood that, at the beginning of the sequence of rehearsals, he would make the following introduction/announcement: “This is So And So, your stage manager. Tell him if you are to be absent ... Finally, when you hear him say: ‘Places please, ‘Be quiet’ ... or any such things, please respond by saying: ‘Thank you’ and go do whatever he asked. Most importantly, do not say ‘thank you’ and then keep on chatting.” We all learned to say “thank you” and stay quiet, at least most of us did. Ha, this was like the formation of a government, I thought, complete with the separation of powers!

Now, how well this may work depends on how well the manager works. Once our manager was a chatter box herself. It was chaos country. Isn’t it like a corrupted government? Once we had a nice and polite manager. It was just as bad

(Conti. From P. 2, No One)

I’m not in the business of providing morals to these pointless rambles (at least, not officially), but I’ve actually got a obvious sappy statement to make. Until everyone has to wear their intelligence on their shirt, people will have to using the starting assumption that strangers are either smart or stupid. Likewise, when addressing a large anonymous group (like a TV audience) an assumption has to be made about the average of the typical group member, and I think I know which assumption is less offensive when it’s wrong.

## Gushing Apologies

Suzie Bolotin

I received the following from my sister, who sent it out to one of her distribution lists with the following introduction:

"This email was sent by a professor friend.... who received it from a colleague. A tribute to kids' illiteracy these days...."

You know, as a colleague pointed out to me, I don't think we need a writing course for our first-year students at all.

This morning I received an e-mail from a student (a junior, taking my Writing Essays course, which assumes some expertise in basic writing) who apparently believes that a spell checker is all he needs to write.

I am very sorry I wrote down in my planer that we were meeting Thursday at 1:30, I just know realized that we are really meeting today at 1:30 obviously I missed the meeting could you meet another time tomorrow?

Sorry for the incontinence.

He might very well know the difference between "meet" and "meat," and he might very well know the difference between "know" and "now," but "incontinence"? One wishes his spell checker had landed on "incompetence." That I can feel sorry for.

Some might consider this a piddly little issue, but I find exploring this apparent lack of awareness completely absorbing.

I wondered how it happens that one intends to type "inconvenience" and ends up with incontinence. I read the following explanation in the course of my Googling (see below), which was confirmed by my testing: if you type "inconvienc", the first choice of the Word spell-checker is "incontinence". I have an option to automatically correct common misspellings (e.g., "teh" is autocorrected to "the"), but for others, including "inconvienc", I have to right-click on the misspelled word and select one of the suggestions (none of which is "inconvenience") provided.

I wondered if this account, like so many classroom stories, could be an urban legend rather than an actual experience of a FOAF (friend of a friend). My curiosity whetted, I Googled "Sorry for the incontinence". There were enough hits that I thought I had indeed landed on an apocryphal story spread by the internet. To my surprise, however, each seemed to be a unique (and believable) occurrence. Most involved people who saw and were amused by this mistake, but some appeared to be original occurrences of this phenomenon. The following are some examples.

<http://al-tawasul.net/>

This is a web site for Tawasul Technologies. There's not much on it—mainly the message, "Sorry for the incontinence, website is Under Maintenance".

<http://www.japanlinked.com/real/lesson1.html>

This is a Japanese lesson. For the hiragana table 3 (it says "hirigana", which I think is a typo, but I don't know enough to be sure), it says, "Note: I missed adding the 'R' ones please add them accordingly. Rya, Ryu, Ryo Sorry for the incontinence." A similar note for a katakana table, however, uses "inconvenience". I'm tempted to let this one pass—it might be written by someone who knows Japanese a lot better than English, and the incorrect usage is balanced by the correct one.

[http://h41186.www4.hp.com/country/us/en/forums/tree\\_display.html?forum\\_id=9&posting\\_id=67707](http://h41186.www4.hp.com/country/us/en/forums/tree_display.html?forum_id=9&posting_id=67707)

This is on a forum for error-message questions about HP DesignJet. The person submitting the question appears to be quoting the error message: "Printer driver for the HP DesignJet printers in Windows NT has encountered a problem and needs to close. We are sorry for the Incontinence." He got several replies, none of them remarking on the unusual message. In fact, two of them admitted to having the same problem.

Flushed with uncontained excitement, I went on to Google "apologize for the incontinence" and found more of the same:

<http://blogs.minitex.umn.edu/cpers/2006/09/>

This is a CPERS (Cooperative Purchasing & Electronic Resources Services) blog on a university-affiliated web site. The blog describes itself as "The product and vendor news you need to manage your library products and electronic resources". Where it says "We apologize for the incontinence this loss of functionality has caused you and your patrons," it appears to be quoting a message from EBSCO (provider of online research databases). But if so, at least it could have added "[sic]". I do like the pairing of "incontinence" with "loss of functionality".

<http://www.cltatumandassociates.com/resources.asp>

And finally, a "page not found" message from CLTatum and Associates ("a counseling and life coach agency") that says, "If you clicked on a link and received this message, we apologize for the incontinence, please notify us via email."

There's a lesson to be learned here, especially if English is not your native language. Just as you should not trust Word's grammar checker to correct your sentence structure, you should not trust a spell checker to provide the correct spelling for what you intended to say. All you know is that it will provide the correct spelling for *something*. But your innate common sense, *if you use it*, should provide some protection against these embarrassing accidents. I'll keep my fingers and legs crossed for you.

## My "Road to Victory" in VietNam Ed Williams

In 1966 or 67, a magazine that I subscribed to held a contest for its readers:- "Your Solution to the VietNam War". I submitted what I thought was a good solution, but it didn't win any prize. Even looking back on it after 40 years, I still think it was a great solution that would have won the war for us, in spite of Walter Krankheit (German:- "Sickness") and the rest of the Major Media. I recently ran this by a couple of retired Army colonels who served in VN, and got favorable comments.

One of the main factors that kept our soldiers from being very effective was the "one-year tour of duty" policy. A soldier would arrive in VN, and follow his squad around for the first 3 or 4 months, learning things he had not been taught in Basic Training. Then he would become a somewhat effective soldier for a few months. Then, for the last 2 or 3 months, he would think "Gosh, I'm going home soon - I'd better not take serious risks". We should have made a deal with the South Korean Government to send several hundred thousand soldiers to VN, while the US military presence in South Korea would be increased by US soldiers then serving in VN, to guard against another Communist invasion from North Korea. (Actually, South Korea did contribute some troops to the VN war, but not enough to make a difference.) There would

be no "one-year limit" on the South Korean troops, and they knew much better than our soldiers how to deal with their fellow-Asians as "civilian" guerrilla fighters.

Another major point would have been to remove most or all restrictions on bombing North VietNam. They knew what our restrictions were and how to avoid them. Specifically, we should have destroyed the VN roads and railroads leading up to the Chinese border where supplies were brought in (while being careful not to bomb the Chinese side). We should have bombed the dikes along the rivers around Hanoi, which would have flooded their supply routes and their concealed storage facilities for munitions, other military supplies, oil, etc.

Finally, we should have completely blocked the Haiphong harbor, primarily by sinking old ships in the channels, and, if necessary, by planting mines, after giving the USSR and the mainland China governments a formal warning that this would be done.

I think if we had followed the above policies (not caving in to blustering from the Soviets and the Red Chinese, nor to our own domestic enemies), we would have won the war.

## The Mahatma Ed Williams

I recently saw that Dick Van Dyke attended a "Mary Poppins" cast reunion and sang one of the better known songs. By some quirk of my over-active imagination, this made me think of Mohandas Gandhi. Although he lived to be 78, in the last two or three decades of his life, he became more frail physically, though still strong mentally. He usually walked barefoot for many miles at a time, such as the famous Salt March and visits to religious groups, and his feet showed it. He was a vegetarian, and came to have bad, smelly breath. He became known in some parts as the "super-calloused fragile mystic hexed by halitosis."

What reminded me was that Dick Van Duke sang "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious".

(Continued from P. 6, small Universe)

When I was attending elementary schools, our teacher would insist on every student to carry a handkerchief. We learned to cover our mouth when we coughed or sneezed. Until today, I still do that and I believe all those growing up in the same environment do the same. Well, it is really lucky for me. I do not have to talk about a second person because the same lady also coughs without covering her mouth. Say, let's call her Abbey because it is the first one in the list and it is easy to type. I suggested to Abbey that she carried a kerchief. She said it would not help. I suggested she might try. She said it was allergy and it would not have helped. I guess she meant that since it was only allergy and not a cold, she would not need a kerchief. Well, have you ever seen the little cloud one makes when he coughs in a sun beam? The fact is, I don't care to step on anybody's urine no matter whether the person who left it there had contagious disease or not. Similarly, I don't care to breath in someone's cough, no matter whether it is infected or not.



The Gutenberg Bible in LA

I was in LA visiting relatives and show this gem in a museum. What a surprise.

## Small Universe Shiangtai Tuan

I was to wait until next month to write a sequel to this month's: "Rehearsals." However, since I have to fill a large space, I shall work on it now and make it a "continuation."

We talked about directors. How about players? In this theatrical little universe, there are also just as varied, only more obvious. Here, I would have to tell some good points and some faults. The good points I may not have but the faults, I share them all. It is said that there is a theorem:

"One cannot see other's fault unless it is his own." A corollary follows:

"If someone complains about someone else's fault, it must be his too." So, there.

Once a while ago, one of the directors I knew made this comment: "What I ask you to do may not make sense at the time. However, I have an over all picture to achieve. You may have some other suggestions but please let me do my direction and you may critic later." Now, when I think back I realize it was a well thought out statement of a seasoned director. Over the many years, I have seen so many people who wanted to "improve" what the directors said. Once I could not stand it any more and said: "Oh, come on, let the poor man direct his show." I am sure I made an enemy for life. Or, at least, I was considered to be the unpopular, unfriendly, teacher's pet. Well, I may not agree with what the directors said all the times either but after all, it was his show. This is one thing the theater is not a democratic government. Freedom of expression or not, a player simply cannot play a B flat if the composer wrote a B there. Even creating a harmony is not an improvement over a discord, which may have been what the composer meant in the first place. The argument is that there are things we simply cannot do. For instance, we players are not to jump of the second floor to create a scene of disaster. There are things physically difficult or financially not feasible. I would admit that is something can be suggested to the director but things like that are rare.

Have you met some one who is always right, some one who would always tell you what to do? You can ignore them in real world but the theatrical world is too small to ignore them. All right, they got the direction from the director correctly. They will not miss the chance to tell others what to do. The same director I mentioned above also made this statement: "Please do not direct your fellow actors, singers, or players unless what they do interferes with what you are doing. In that case, let me know so I can find a way to be convenient for both of you." "Mr. Right" may be proud of himself for his contribution to the society but it is really annoying.

The second kind of Mr Right is to do things perfect correctly without giving any leeway for others' mistakes. If it is time for him to move a table, it will be your tough luck if you were a second too late to take your stuff from it. Precision is what we need to have on stage but the intolerance in rehearsal can be annoying too.

The third kind of Mr. Right is the pushing type. They

push you around to "help" you because they think you need to be put in the right place at the right time. I suppose it is the combination of the above two. It may be a friendly act. As for me, not so friendly would be good enough.

Then there is the always complain type. The stage is too large one day; the stage is too small the other. The rehearsal was too long one day and there is not enough of the rehearsal the next. I think Woody Allen did the best in making fun of them. He had a way to portrait them in such way you almost think they are adorable.

Then there is the always talking back type. "Go there." "But that is too high." "Go there." "But that is too low." "Please stay even with the others." "My shoelace came undone." "You are off beat." "I know, I did not expect you change the tempo." Come on, just do it and don't waste our time to listen to your complains.

It is hard for me to make up examples or create situations. I always have great admiration how some people can write a novel out of his imagination. In general, I have to describe what I actually see. Well, it is luck for me because there are a lot there to describe.

Yes, talking about being late and chattering, there is at least one in each crowd. I encountered this lady who did both. She was consistently arriving at the rehearsal twenty minutes late, say, arriving at 7:50 for 7:30 rehearsals. I felt sorry for her because I thought she had to come from work and could not make it before 7:50. Then, the director suggested, since it is close to the performance, that we should be there about 7:00 to stretch and warm up so we could start exactly on 7:30. After that, she arrived consistently at 7:35, five minutes after everyone was in motion. Well, that, at least, proved I was wrong, 7:50 was not her absolute cut off point. Then, whenever she was not singing or doing something, she is always talking to someone who happened to be near her and would be polite enough to oblige for an answer. I have seen others who did that too. Once we had a young lady and a young man in our group. Whenever they were together, they would keep on talking and somehow they often end up in the same vicinity of the room or stage. I was worried if they were to carry on their casual conversation on the performance day. Well, actually they did. I think they did exchange a few understanding smiles during the show. No, they were not lovers. No, they did not get married and live happily ever after when the show was over. Sorry, I have to break your imagination of such a fairy tale. Now back to the first lady. She probably thought I was the most boring person on earth because I only respond with a polite "yes" or "no." She was probably right that I was the most boring person. I am not really the most law abiding or rule following person. The truth is that if I had any such interesting stories I probably would have shared. I do not have a dog that fell over the cliff; I do not have a cat that had cat leukemia; I do not have a niece whose husband's leg got an infection from a ski fall ... In fact, none of my nieces' husband knows how to ski. Maybe I should convince one of them to learn so I can report on him – when and if he falls and get an infection.

(conti. to P 5, Small Universe)