

William Safire (1929–2009)

by Ben Zimmer

William Safire, Pulitzer Prize-winning political columnist, presidential speechwriter, and self-described “language maven,” died on September 27, 2009 at the age of 79. His three decades as the author of the “On Language” column in the *New York Times Magazine* established him as America’s best known commentator on the English language.

Safire had been a member of the DSNA since 1983, and he was unabashed in his lexicophilia. “I like dictionaries,” he put it plainly in his introduction to the 2007 edition of *The New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge*. “You may know my byline as that of a recovering vituperative right-wing scandalmonger. But I’m also a lifelong language maven lapping up lexicography (and apparently afflicted with alliteration).”

More than a decade before launching his “On Language” column in the *New York Times Magazine*, Safire made his first foray into political lexicography with *The New Language of Politics* (1968). Later retitled *Safire’s Political Dictionary*, the book went through three editions, with the last published by Oxford University Press in 2008, expanded to cover nearly 1,800 terms.

In the introduction to the third edition, Safire credited two main inspirations. The first was Eric Partridge, whose lone authorship of the *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1961) convinced him that he too could undertake a one-man dictionary project, despite lacking a scholarly background. As Safire recalled in a 2008 interview I conducted with him for the Visual Thesaurus

website, “Samuel Johnson did one, Noah Webster did one, and Eric Partridge did one. Why can’t I try?”

The second inspirational force singled out by Safire was Fred Cassidy, founding editor of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Safire called *DARE* “the most exciting new linguistic project in the twentieth century,” and indeed he was a strong supporter of the dictionary throughout its history. In an early “On Language” column, in November 1979, he exulted in the way that the regionalisms of *DARE* illustrated “the color and excitement in our migrating, changing language.”

Safire gave much-needed exposure to *DARE*, and he also valued the contributions of other American lexicographers, with whom he would consult when researching the finer points of English usage and etymology. Though he often came under fire from linguistic scholars for oversights in his analysis, he readily deferred to experts who corrected him. He was, after all, merely a “maven,” with the Yiddish-derived self-effacement that the term implied. “When someone says ‘I am a maven,’” he explained in a 1985 column, “a note of self-mockery is added, as if to say ‘and if I’m not such an expert, sue me.’” For his humor, warmth, and intellectual openness, the maven will be sorely missed.

