

August 8, 2003

It All Depends on What You Mean by 'Have'

By STEVE MARTIN

So if you're asking me did Iraq have weapons of mass destruction, I'm saying, well, it all depends on what you mean by "have."

See, I can "have" something without actually having it. I can "have" a cold, but I don't own the cold, nor do I harbor it. Really, when you think about it, the cold has me, or even more precisely, the cold has passed through me. Plus, the word "have" has the complicated letter "v" in it. It seems that so many words with the letter "v" are words that are difficult to use and spell. Like "verisimilitude." And "envelope."

Therefore, when you ask me, "Did Iraq have weapons of mass destruction," I frankly don't know what you're talking about. Do you mean currently? Then why did you say "did?" Think about "did." What the heck does that mean? Say it a few times out loud. Sounds silly. I'm beginning to think it's just the media's effort to use a fancy palindrome, rather than ask a pertinent question.

And how do I know you're not saying "halve?" "Did Iraq halve weapons of mass destruction?" How should I know? What difference does it make? That's a stupid question.

Let me try and clear it up for you. I think what you were trying to say was, "At any time, did anyone in Iraq think about, wish for, dream of, or search the Internet for weapons of mass destruction?"

Of course they did have. Come on, Iraq is just one big salt flat and no dictator can look out on his vast desert and not imagine an A-test going on. And let's face it, it really doesn't matter if they had them or not, because they hate us like a lassoed shorthorn heifer hates bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

Finally, all this fuss over 16 lousy words. Shoot, "Honey, I'm home," already has three, with an extra one implied, and practically nothing has been said. It would take way more than 16 words to say something that could be considered a gaffe. I don't really take anything people say seriously until they've used at least 20, sometimes 25, words.

When I was criticized for my comment, I was reluctant to point out it was only 16 words, and I was glad when someone else took the trouble to count them and point out that I wasn't even in paragraph territory. When people heard it was only 16 words, I'm sure most people threw their head back and laughed. And I never heard one negative comment from any of our coalition forces, and they all speak English, too.

Steve Martin is author of "Shopgirl" and the forthcoming "The Pleasure of My Company."