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ON LANGUAGE

Hard Times

By [WILLIAM SAFIRE](#)

“Lessons Learned From Hard Times Past” was a headline early this month in the business section of The Times; a week later, the gloomy phrase made the front page: “In Renewed Hard Times, New Deal Architecture Faces Bulldozer.” Next day, The Times’s national page got into the act with “Hard Times for Informal Home of Wyoming Politics.”

Across the nation, The Los Angeles Times tried to cheer up readers in this parlous period with “The Upside of Hard Times,” and The Wall Street Journal contributed “Hard Truths for Hard Times.” Other headline writers around the world use the phrase in putting up a brave front: “Estonian Builder Merko: Hard Times Offer Good Opportunities,” the Baltic News Service reported; “Challenge of Hard Times Brings Out the Best of Us” was presented with a wan smile in The Courier-Mail of Australia.

Because we are going to have to live with this lugubrious marriage of words in months to come (along with parlous, a hifalutin variant of “perilous”), it might offer some comfort to unbutton the frayed collar of its extensive etymology.

In the year 1390, more than six centuries ago, the poet John Gower — whose genes somehow escaped transmission to modern business cyclists — wrote, “It hath ben sene and felt full ofte/The harde time after the softe.” That prophetic observation is in the O.E.D. under the sense of hard, meaning “difficult to bear or endure,” but the time is singular; we’re looking for hard times, stretching the length of economic discomfort.

I am no numismatist, but I have picked up a few old coins that sometimes offer clues about the origin of words. One is a worn copper token, about the size of a nickel, on which is inscribed “Millions for Defense” around the edge, and “NOT ONE CENT for Tribute” in the middle. This was the rallying remark at a Philadelphia dinner honoring John Marshall in 1798. It was made by Robert Goodloe Harper, a Federalist politician from South Carolina who urged the U.S. to give that answer to France, which was seeking tribute for the protection of American merchant vessels. His hardheaded advice was taken up as the slogan against the Barbary pirates of 1800 and used by hardy hard-core hard-liners throughout U.S. history. On the envelope containing the old coin is written “Hard Times token, 1837.”

I passed that clue on to Ben Zimmer, executive producer of www.visualthesaurus.com and a longtime capo of the Phrasedick Brigade, with the suggestion that it may have to do with the populist President Andrew Jackson’s assault on Philadelphia’s Second Bank of the United States. Jackson liked “hard” money — silver and gold, money you could bite, none of that soft, paper stuff being printed by private banks — and was furious at the way rich merchants controlled much of the nation’s money supply. As he turned the White House over to his vice president and acolyte, Martin Van Buren, the bottom fell out of the economy, inflation raged and the first Great Depression lasted five years.

“The financial crisis of 1837 was indeed a high-water mark for hard times usage,” Zimmer reports. “I checked Gale’s 19th Century U.S. newspapers database, and there are a whopping 375 articles from 1837

mentioning 'hard times,' 50 of them using the phrase in the headline of the article." (Times may change, but headline writers never let go of a short grabber.) "The Washington Globe reported on April 29, 1837, 'Every paper we open contains some lamentable account of the pressure in the money market, and loud cries of hard times.' That's when the Panic of 1837 began in earnest. In May, banks suspended the payment of hard money, and small change disappeared from circulation, leading to the production of 'Hard Times' tokens." (That accounts for the NOT ONE CENT on my token, to distinguish a coin issued by a private bank from a government-issued cent.)

While he was at it — Netymologists are compulsive diggers — Zimmer provided a citation in the Early English Books Online database from a 1598 poem, "The Complaint of Poetry for the Death of Liberality," by Richard Barnfield. Its plaintive question is echoed these days by journalists induced to take buyouts as well as literary lights dimmed by darkling publishers: "But who can live with words, in these hard times?"

The collocation echoes through the centuries after bright bubbles of euphoria pop and dismal days of dysphoria spread. When the Broadway musical star [Christine Ebersole](#) recently made a supper-club appearance at the [Café Carlyle](#) in New York, she stopped the show with a song composed by Stephen Foster, not your latest hot songwriter. The selection was not his dreamy "Beautiful Dreamer," the classic "Old Black Joe," the romantic "Jennie With the Light Brown Hair" or the rousing "Oh! Susanna." The sad song that the chanteuse chose to move a bejeweled audience nibbling its nails about impending impoverishment was one that Foster wrote in 1855, when he was going through a rough patch in his personal and professional life. The composer had surely remembered the previous generation's shuttered banks and worthless paper money, as his lyric pleaded: "Hard Times, Come Again No More."

The letter that gives the phrase its fearsome economic meaning is the concluding s. Prisoners on long sentences do hard time; students corrected by ultraprescriptive grammarians say, "Don't give me a hard time." Only short sellers, prophets of gloom and doom and unimaginative headline writers profit in hard times.

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