

I Just Have **1** Question

“Did I Do That?”



by Doug Carpenter

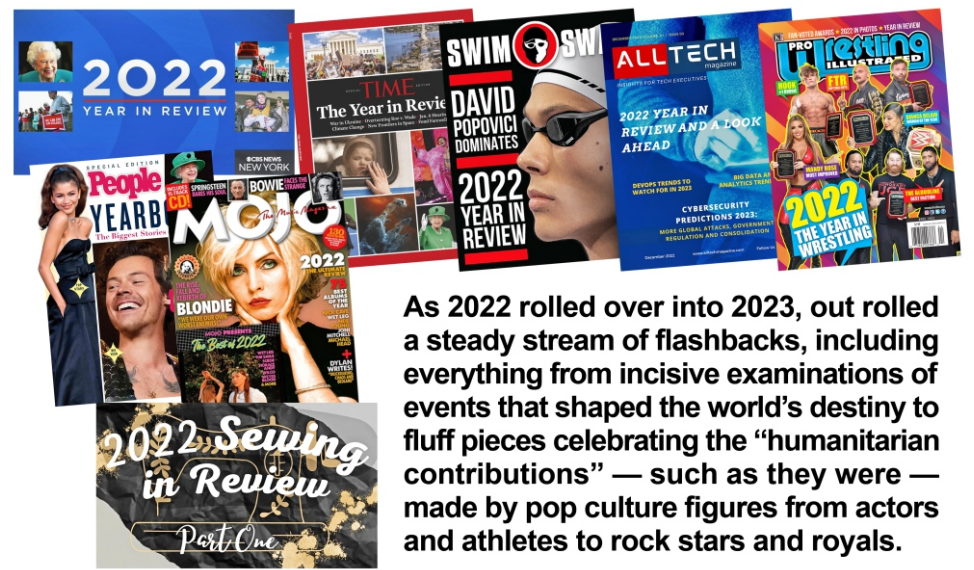
If you’ve spent even a little time following the goings-on in our nation’s capital, you’ve almost surely heard someone speaking “governmentese,” the clearly contrived dialect that appears to be the native tongue of the political animals and other administrative life forms who dwell in D.C. and other such places.

Considering that it’s a veritable wellspring of words seemingly designed to *unclarify* any situation at the slightest risk of becoming even a *little* clear [...and thereby obviously *dangerous*...], you shouldn’t feel bad if you don’t understand what they’re talking about. It’s not like *they* do.

But still, it can be great fun to watch as they strategically deploy some of the language’s most semantically-tortured phrases. One of my favorites is “plausible deniability.” It’s got a nice ring to it, doesn’t it? [Not necessarily one of *truth*, of course. But that’s not really the point, *is* it?]

Dating back to Harry Truman’s White House days, it’s long been a popular verbal refuge for those seeking a figurative [...and sometimes *literal*...] “Get out of jail free” card when they’re forced to face up to things they *knew* — but can’t *admit* they knew — were *wrong*. [And how often does *that* happen?]

What really surprises me, though, is that we didn’t co-opt this impressively-versatile slice of bureaucratic boloney for our personal use a long time ago. Just imagine how handy it would be the next time you get pulled into one of those awkward and poten-



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tially-embarrassing conversations about the “good old days.”

Although “reminiscing” has always been a part of human nature, the unusually-bountiful crop of 2022 “Year in Review” specials and retrospectives that popped up on TV and in magazines at the end of this past year would suggest that — whether we’re simply nostalgic or, not completely without reason, nervous that something is *after* us — we’re looking over our shoulders more than ever.

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And though they may have lacked star power, even the year’s less profound developments were given their documentary due. And while I *can* picture the kinds of annual report-worthy advances that might transform fields like cybertechnology, I’m completely stumped when I try to imagine what 2022 breakthrough could’ve blown the roof off the world of — seriously — *sewing*? [I don’t know. Self-stitching fabric? Help me out here.]

But that’s all about *them*. What about *you*? What did *you* do last year? Did you get to all the things on your *list*? Did you even *have* a list, and if so, what was *on* it? [*Come on. Give!* We’re waiting for *answers* here!]

O.K. I know that was a little pushy. But now perhaps you can imagine what it must be like to

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- Louise, a resident

“Did I Do That?”

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have a whole hoard of reporters peppering you with questions you don't want to answer. [It *might* even explain why those Capitol Hill types are so — *you know* — the way they are.]

You can relax, though. It's not like anyone actually expects you to issue an annual report-style summary of your 2022 accomplishments. Lord knows there were more than enough challenging things [...both the usual kind as well as the “You've got to be kidding!” variety...] to keep everyone hopping.

But surely there must've been a few things on your “To Do” list that you're glad you managed to check off. Things you'd be proud to tell the world about. Just like there are probably *also* one or two things that you'd just as soon keep to yourself.

And *that's* just from what happened this past year. What if we expanded that list to include, say, your *whole life*? *That's* when reminiscing turns into an entirely *different game*. Not that you shouldn't keep playing.

On the contrary. As the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” The *trick* is knowing what to be examining *for* when you go poking around in your past — a past that, along with the stuff you'll be *glad* to find, will invariably include things you *did* but wish you *hadn't* done and things you *didn't* do but wish you *had*.

As a gesture of kindness, I'm not going to press you about the things you may have done that you *regret*. It's enough that *you* know what they are and how

relatively bad you ought to feel for having *done* them. [None of *us* telling you that will make you feel *any worse* than you will *yourself*.]

Besides, everybody knows that life's *greatest* regrets are invariably not connected with the things we *did* but with the things we *could've* done but *didn't*. And if you're going to try tallying up *those*, it may help if you sort them into two groups, which we'll label “Missed Opportunities” and “Unanswered Prayers.”

The difference *between* the two comes down basically to what you *know* versus what you *don't*. Thanks to our old friend “20/20 hindsight,” with “Missed Opportunity” regrets, we're pretty sure we know *exactly* what would've happened if we had turned a *particular* “woulda, coulda, shoulda” moment into a “*did*.” But what we *don't* know — and frankly, *never can* — is if we'd be *glad* today that we *did* it.

“Unanswered Prayers,” on the other hand, can also deliver their share of regrets. But with *those* usually comes an often uncomfortable but crystal clear level of awareness of why we're *far* better off *not* having gotten what we once upon a time wanted so *badly*. What was yesterday's regret can often become today's relief.

That doesn't necessarily mean we may not still think wistfully about what having *gotten* our wish might've been like. We just know to count ourselves lucky we *didn't*. [Of course, if we always acted in the way that “knowing better” *told* us we should, life would probably be *far* less interesting.]

In any event, occasionally taking stock of your life is generally time well spent — particularly since you never know when someone will come along and unexpectedly bring up some all-but-forgotten episode from your past that, for the sake of modesty

and your current reputation, you'd prefer *not* to revisit.

That's when that “plausible deniability” thing *really* pays off. Combine a convincingly-innocent level of feigned unawareness with a simple “Did I do that?” and you should easily be able to sidestep any indignity the situation might otherwise have dragged you into.

And if your conversational partner should happen to call you *out* on your little avoidance ploy, you can always throw in a couple of quick comedic snorts and tell them you were just practicing your impression of “Steve Urkel,” the annoying but lovable character played by Jaleel White on the long-running late-'80s sitcom *Family Matters*.

As for Urkel [...*sorry*...] White himself, I doubt that he'd really have a problem with you invoking

the uber-klutzy supernerd he portrayed early in his youthful career — a role for which, by the way, he made what I'm sure *had* to have been a *ridiculous* amount of money.

Certainly not *now*, anyway, when — in his real life — the one-time child star is rapidly closing in on 50. Which means that he's already lived *more* than long enough to accumulate plenty of stuff he'll spend the rest of his life trying to “plausibly” live down.

Just like the *rest* of us.

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Throughout *After 50's* first 16 years, veteran WNY writer and columnist Doug Carpenter regularly shared his wry generational observations with readers as *Everyboomer*. He has now returned to write a uniquely-named new monthly humor/opinion column called *I Just Have 1 Question* — which he says he'll ask and then bravely try to answer... without, he fervently hopes, looking excessively foolish in the process. [We wish him luck.]

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