

The Contrarian

ANYONE WHO HAS been reading my column for any length of time probably knows by now that I often tend to write things that aren't going to sit very well with certain segments of our readership. Not only do I rarely trouble with being "politically correct," the truth is, I often purposely couch my remarks in verbiage specifically designed to ruffle somebody's feathers. Call it a hobby of mine.

I think I inherited the trait from my Father, who always loved a good argument, and I became a true devotee of the art when I joined the debate club in high school. I probably should note, however, that I was removed from that same debate club by unanimous vote of the rest of the membership, for being, as I recall, "overly combative and unnecessarily inflammatory." Later in life, a publisher would have me removed from an editorial position for being, in his words, "a rabble-rouser." Neither the publisher nor the debate club members were wrong, and yet I have never felt any remorse for my actions in those situations, either, and in fact carry those memories proudly, as if trophies for my efforts.

So, when I first discovered *Road Rider* magazine in the 70s, I was naturally attracted to what the magazine called its "contrarian philosophy." RR, unlike the other, more mainstream motorcycling magazines, wasn't at all averse to tweaking a few corporate noses now and then, or toppling the occasional sacred cow. Little did I dream at the time that the perpetuation of that philosophy, created by Roger Hull and later honed to perfection by Bob Carpenter, would, nearly 20 years later, be handed over to me. It may seem like a minor thing to most, but I take my guardianship seriously, and prize it highly. Because of that, I'll let you in on a little secret: Even I don't always believe whole-heartedly in what I write. Sometimes, I'll do it just to get a rise out of you—to make you think, and to see how you react. And more often than not, it helps me learn something new about the subject at hand, just by prodding you to defend your own point of view.

However, what surprises me most is when I get an adverse reaction to what are often simple, off-the-cuff statements I've made, into which some reader somewhere has discerned some deeper meaning of which I was not even aware. As an example, I once mentioned that I thought a Suzuki Bandit 600 would make "a good starter bike for women wishing to get into motorcycling." That simple statement unleashed a firestorm of protest from several dozen females who branded me a "sexist pig" for suggesting in



any way, shape or form that women perhaps shouldn't ride the exact same bikes as men. As I recall, I responded to them by saying I hadn't meant anything of the kind, only that a smaller, lightweight and easy-to-handle machine might be less intimidating to women, who are, by and large, of a lesser stature than men. That, in turn, got me lambasted even harder, and a couple of large women's riding clubs even called for a boycott of our magazine, claiming it was "demeaning to women."

Then, there was the case just a few months ago, when I wrote about my fears that the internet chat rooms and bulletin boards often seemed to be a hotbed of misinformation regarding what was going on in motorcycling. As an example, I used the GL1800 overheating scenario, and claims that Honda was ignoring the problem, when in fact I knew that Honda was devoting unheard-of resources to solving the problem as quickly as possible. I wasn't really trying to defend Honda—merely show an example of how the facts could get misplaced or overlooked at times in our new age of instant communication. Well, soon someone was distributing the message that MCN had made a wholesale change in its editorial policy and had become "an apologist for all the OEMs." Even worse, a number of readers wrote to me personally, asking whether I had taken a payoff from Honda, or was campaigning for a job.

If you know me at all, you can probably guess how I reacted to all this. The next month, I wrote a column ten times more inflammatory. "What the hell," I figured. "If they're going to flame me, I'll give them something worth flaming about!"

Luckily for me, the cooler head of our editor-in-chief intervened and killed that column. Dave reasoned with me that per-

haps this was a good time to settle back a bit, and write something light and entertaining. I don't want to make it sound like Dave censors me—he never has, and I doubt that he ever would—but I trust his judgment, and have always followed his suggestions. So it was that I wrote last month's "Weird America" column, about the strange sights I had encountered traveling around the country.

But, this morning, I received three different e-mails taking me to task for calling the USS South Dakota "the most decorated Navy ship of WWII." Now, all I was doing was repeating what I read on the plaque at the memorial—I didn't make it up, and it certainly isn't an "opinion." And I will admit that one of the letters was kind enough to point out that the reader had done his own research and found several conflicting reports of what was actually the most-decorated ship of the war. But the other two insisted on calling me "an idiot," accusing me of defaming the other ships they thought deserved the title, and calling into question anything they might read in MCN in the future, because I hadn't bothered to research all the naval records of WWII to make sure my facts were correct.

This incident was followed in less than an hour by yet another e-mail from a woman commenting on my mention of the Shelburne Museum in the same column. She said she was "irritated" and "annoyed" that I had "made light of...one of the finest private collections ever assembled." Evidently, she didn't like the fact that I had included the Shelburne in an article that also included the likes of "Mike the Headless Chicken," and also felt that it was "disrespectful and lazy" of me not to have looked up the name of the woman who established the museum (Electra Havemeyer Webb). Her missive ended with the admonition that I should read more about the museum, and that I "should be embarrassed."

Little does she (and two out of the three WWII history buffs) know that they have actually strengthened my resolve to continue pursuing the contrarian philosophy passed on to me by Roger and Bob. I mean, what the heck? If I'm going to get kicked around for quoting a historical monument, or mentioning a strange museum without genuflecting, then I may as well give you guys something to really get upset about!

—Fred Rau
Senior Editor