

Living in a post-truth world

SHIFTING IMAGES



I have been racking my brain for a positive New Year message. But the US election outcome, the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Aleppo, the brutalities against the Rohingyas in Myanmar have plunged me into despair. So if you were expecting "Happy New Year" wishes, this column will disappoint you. For, it's about my disillusionment in a world turned upside down...

It is small wonder that the Oxford Dictionary selected "post-truth" as 2016's international word of the year. The term is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The use of the new adjective has reportedly escalated after Donald Trump's election campaign where he and his surrogates deceived supporters and the media by crafting a new reality through fake news and fallacious propaganda.

People like us, who are still tuned to old beliefs, are finding it difficult to adapt to the new culture and ethos of carefully constructed lies marketed as the truth. To survive we need to recalibrate our brain and adapt to a set of new rules that seem to be guiding the leaders of today's post-truth era! Here are some of these newly minted rules:

New Rule 1: If foul play is suspected in an election held in a developing country, observers demand a re-election with stricter checks and monitoring. But, when a leading intelligence agency reveals that the US election was influenced by a foreign power through email leaks of one particular candidate, the phenomenon is termed as a "cyber attack". In fact, the winner counters these claims, discrediting the intelligence



apparatus. Example: The CIA concluded that the Russians hacked and leaked Clinton campaign emails to compromise her position in the elections. Donald Trump dismissed the CIA's assertions as "ridiculous" and politically motivated.

New Rule 2: If the elected president of the United States uses his official status to help his foreign businesses, there are no legal consequences. However, if a leader from a developing country expands his business employing political influence, it is termed as corruption. Example: President-elect Trump's corporate interests in multiple countries have raised concerns about his future foreign policy decisions. Trump, however, tweeted

that the US president cannot have any "conflict of interest", implying that the presidency holds absolute power.

New Rule 3: It's perfectly acceptable to be an opportunist -- a politician can alter his public position to seize an opportunity. Principles are of no consequence. Example: Mitt Romney and Donald Trump threw barbs at each other during the campaign. Once Trump won, Romney praised Trump effusively and solicited a job in his administration.

New Rule 4: Spinning lies and hyperbole is the most effective strategy for winning an election. Before the public can refute a lie, replace it with a more lethal one so that

people are utterly confused. If the media exposes a compromising truth accuse them of being dishonest and biased. Divert attention by pointing fingers at someone else. Example: When Trump was caught on tape admitting that he had made sexual advances on women taking advantage of his status and power, he and his surrogates trivialised the allegations and crucified the victims as "disgruntled partisans". The Trump machinery then resurrected cases of President Clinton's philandering and insinuated that Hillary was somehow responsible for her husband's infidelities!

New Rule 5: If a politician perceives a popular backlash against immigrants, he can

unsparingly feed on this negativity to achieve electoral success. Brexit paved the way and later, Donald Trump trashed Mexicans, Muslims and other immigrants. Truth does not matter as long as the rhetoric appeals to the voter pool. Example: Trump accused all US Muslims of being terrorists or having terror links and labelled Mexicans as criminals and rapists. In summary, immigrants were made scapegoats for the economic and social problems facing "white America".

New Rule 6: A leader may live in opulence, be surrounded by the elite, evade taxes, but he can use false promises and clever lies to convince his voters that he is the champion of the middle class. Once elected these promises can be trashed and replaced by programmes that benefit the rich and leave the lower income groups worse off. Example: Given his billionaire and business CEO cabinet picks, the gap between Donald Trump's implied promises and delivered reality to the working-class is already looking ominous.

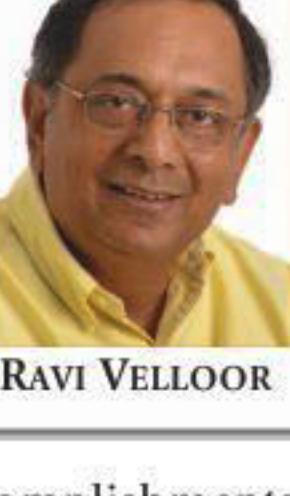
Truth seems to be the most serious casualty of 2016. Some may argue that life is not black and white -- it functions within shades of grey. And, we must accept "new realities" if we are to evolve. I agree that sometimes it is difficult to determine where virtue ends and vice begins. However, moral relativism can be dangerous since it blurs our vision from distinguishing between right and wrong.

It appears that we have reached a difficult juncture in human civilisation. Hence, as we welcome 2017, it may be worthwhile to take a short pause and reflect on Alexander Pope's warning in the *Essay of Man*:

*"Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace."*

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

The Pakistani who missed the Nobel



LOOKING through the list of Asia's greats who passed away in the year past, it is impossible to escape a sense of awe at their accomplishments even as you are struck by the realisation that ultimately, everyone is mortal.

One standout personality who did not waste a moment of his life, and will perhaps be immortal among his people, was Pakistan's Mr. Abdul Sattar Edhi.

It is not quite possible to tally the contribution Mr. Edhi had made to his adopted land by the time he passed away this July. By some reckoning, he was 88 years old then. But it would be no exaggeration to say he was the most respected Pakistani of his time. All three service chiefs showed up for his state funeral.

The eponymously named foundation he started in 1957 as a tent hospital for victims of the Hong Kong Flu had grown into a sprawling enterprise involved in running ambulance services, clinics, maternity homes, blood banks, mental asylums, shelters for street kids and battered women, and much more.

Among the millions who benefited from his charitable work were thousands of dead men whom he had washed himself before shrouding them for burial. Such was the enormity of his humility that he never once considered this too menial, or demeaning, a task.

Mr. Edhi was sometimes called the Mother Teresa of Pakistan but that, while intended to flatter, is an inadequate comparison. It is a wonder that the Nobel Committee,

which awarded the Peace Prize to Mother Teresa in 1979 and to child rights activists Kailash Satyarthi of India and Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan in 2014, should have overlooked Mr. Edhi all these years. He himself did not care about the award, saying he expected a better reward from Allah when it was his turn to meet his maker.

Mr. Edhi was born in Gujarat before the Partition of India, and moved to the new state of Pakistan as a young man, his parents choosing to start their new life in the bustling port city of Karachi.

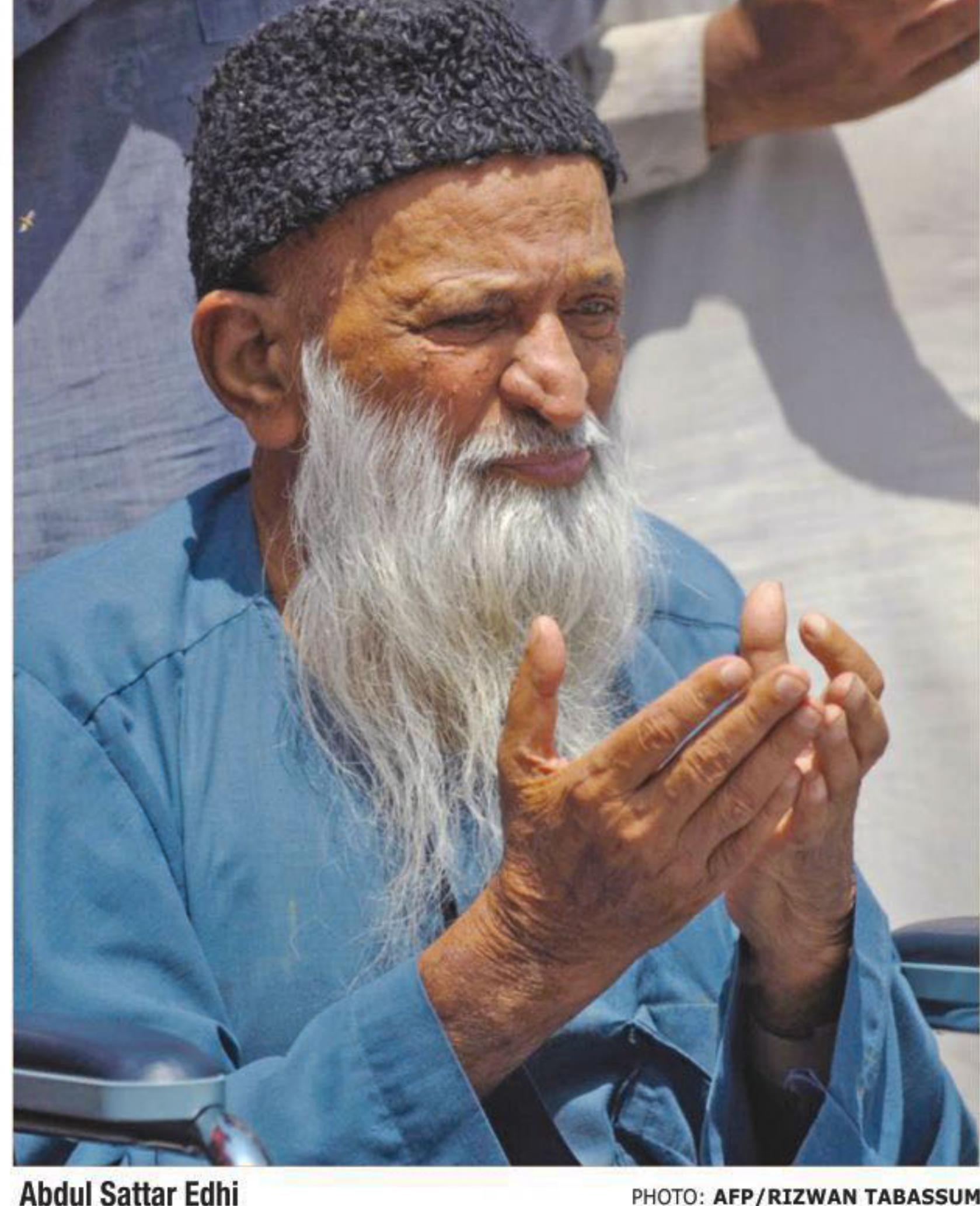
The Edhis were from the Momin, or Memon, tribe, who converted to Islam from Hinduism some three centuries ago. Although *Edi* translates as "lazy" in the Gujarati language, the tribe was committed to hard work.

They also carried a humanitarian streak in their veins. Mr. Edhi, who was expelled from school in Grade 4 for fighting, was initiated into social service by his mother.

A watershed moment in his career came in December 1986, when the Pakistani military and intelligence launched Operation Clean-up in Karachi's Sohrab Goth area against anti-social elements backed by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement. Amid the chaos, street fights and arson, it was left to Mr. Edhi's team to pick up the pieces. Working round the clock, his ambulances went everywhere, his drivers and doctors risking their lives as they offered medical help and retrieved bodies.

It was said that rival gangs stopped their fire-fight when an Edhi minivan approached. Such was the respect they had for his work.

Considered the largest private ambulance service in the world – there are some 1,800 Edhi ambulances across Pakistan's four



Abdul Sattar Edhi

PHOTO: AFP/RIZWAN TABASSUM

provinces – this was the part of his work of which he was most proud. The vans sprang from an incident a half-century earlier when he tried to ferry his badly ill mother to hospital and was told that the entire city of Karachi had just one ambulance and that was owned by the Red Cross.

In the last decade of his life, more than the dispensaries and the

sheltered children, it was the ambulances that would regularly highlight Mr. Edhi's work for they were often the first responders to the many terrorist strikes that Pakistan suffered.

The dalliance of the Pakistani deep state with terrorism had come to rebound on the nation badly. Having first used irregulars as early as 1947

in an attempt to wrest Kashmir from India, Pakistan's generals in years to come would allow their nation to be used as a staging point by the US Central Intelligence Agency which stoked the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan by propping up the Taliban. Likewise, the killers who staged the terrorist attack on Mumbai in November 2008 were armed and trained in Pakistan by the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), another outfit considered close to the Pakistani intelligence establishment.

As former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz notes in his recently published autobiography, for years Pakistan's establishment had unwisely distinguished between terror groups that attack the state and those that have their focus away from it. To Pakistan's dismay, some of the terror groups had begun to turn on their hosts. The rudest shock it got came in December 2014 when the Tehrik-i-Taleban Pakistan entered the army public school in Peshawar and massacred more than 130 students sitting their exams.

A determined thrust against these groups by the stout-hearted Army Chief Raheel Sharif, who retired a few weeks ago, has yielded dividends. From 5,379 terror-related deaths in 2013, when Gen. Sharif began taking on the groups in earnest, the number has slid to 1,332 for the first 11 months of this year, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal.

More than 700 of those slain this year were terrorists; civilian casualties have eased to a fifth of the 2013 figure and the economy has begun to turn around.

In the weeks before his death, Mr. Edhi was probably gratified to see the decline of violence in his country even as his ambulance service had less to do.



An obituary in *The Guardian* newspaper of the United Kingdom accurately described Mr. Edhi as a "symbol of Pakistan's shrivelled secular tradition". It was this part of his personality that so irked groups such as the Taliban and the LET, which often issued death threats against him and labelled him a "kafir".

In January last year, Hafiz Saeed, a cleric wanted in India for masterminding the Mumbai attack, attempted to set up a rival foundation in Karachi with a fleet of 15 ambulances. Mr. Edhi shrugged off the challenge.

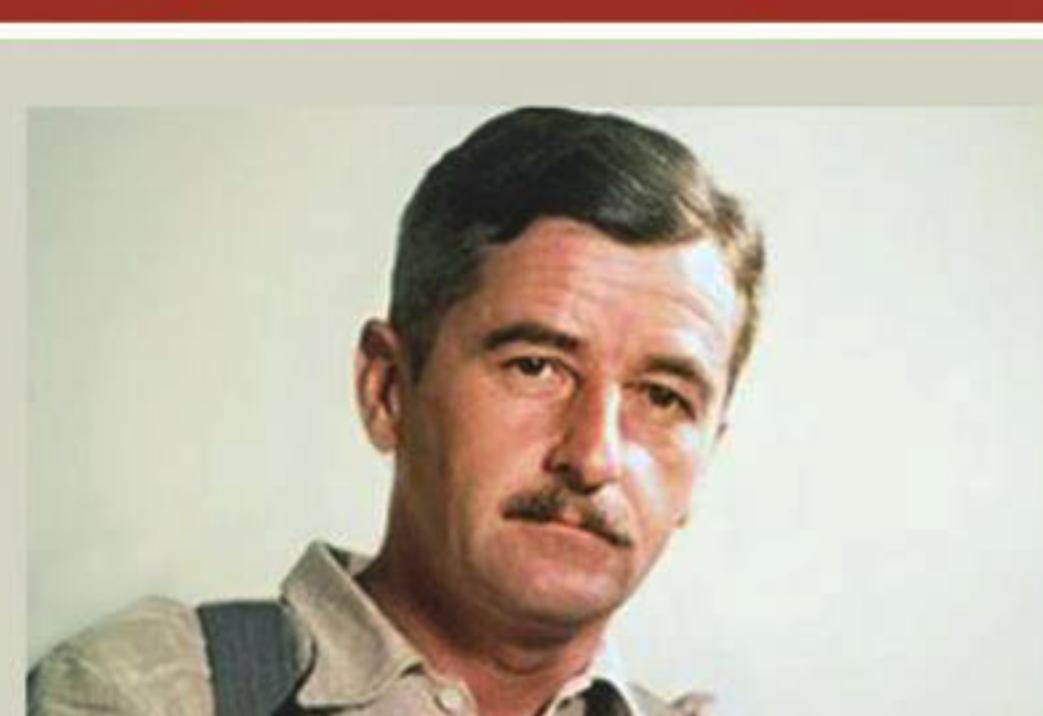
The full-bearded Mr. Edhi was once asked why he was prepared to help people from all faiths, without prioritising Muslims over others. His response was "because my ambulance is more Muslim than you".

As the world braces itself for terror attacks in this festive period conducted in the name of Islam, his life and work are a useful reminder about the true essence of the Islamic faith.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Straits Times*, Singapore. E-mail: velloor@sph.com.sg

This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers across the region.

QUOTABLE Quote



WILLIAM FAULKNER

AMERICAN WRITER AND NOBEL PRIZE LAUREATE

Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world...would do this, it would change the earth.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Thin cookie
- 6 Match in value
- 11 Wed without fuss
- 12 Sudden swell
- 13 Was bold
- 14 Tendon
- 15 Checked out
- 17 Cargo unit
- 19 Films, slangily
- 20 Essence
- 23 Concord
- 25 Prudent
- 26 Bedtime utterance
- 28 Massage target
- 29 Church donations
- 30 Fixed
- 31 Producer's hope
- 32 Attempt
- 33 Native currency
- 35 November birthstone
- 38 Bridge utterance
- 41 Full of energy
- 42 Jazz pianist Chick
- 43 Push away
- 44 Kicked, in a way

DOWN

- 1 Unite
- 2 Imitating
- 3 Two weeks
- 4 Fencing sword
- 5 Jupiter feature
- 6 English county
- 7 Brit's pound
- 8 Ornate planter
- 9 Wisdom bringer
- 10 Actor Ayres
- 11 Dickens boy
- 12 Sport fishes
- 13 In reserve
- 14 Sleep disturber
- 15 Broadway worker
- 16 Ross of flag fame
- 17 That lady
- 18 Quibble
- 19 Surfer's ride
- 20 Atop
- 21 Road goop
- 22 Flamenco cry
- 23 Card spot
- 24 Behold
- 25 Greenish brown
- 26 Surfer's ride
- 27 Card spot
- 28 Greenish brown
- 29 Road goop
- 30 Flamenco cry
- 31 Surfer's ride
- 32 Attempt
- 33 Native currency
- 34 November birthstone
- 35 Bridge utterance
- 36 Full of energy
- 37 Jazz pianist Chick
- 38 Push away
- 39 Behold
- 40 Blue

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES



by Kirkman & Scott