

Euphemisms and doublespeak on parade



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COMMENTARY

Word games seem to have been with us forever. In recent years the spin machine has become an integral part of the modus operandi of government, military and big business.

The intent is clearly defined. Establish defense mechanisms to calm fears and make unpleasant realities more acceptable. In short, appease the audience. Whether providing damage control or applying carefully crafted euphemisms and doublespeak, creating perceptions through skillful language is always at work.

Recall the potent, "We are at war" declaration delivered by former President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the Sept. 11th massacre. It constituted the strongest and most direct proclamation issued by a chief executive in many years.



An overwhelming amount of Americans regarded those four, short, single syllable words as the appropriate response during a time of national mourning. Bush's address escalated with a decree to "smoke them out of their holes" and assert that bin Laden's fate would be sealed in a manner akin to the old West "Wanted, Dead or Alive" poster.

The extreme vernacular uttered by the former President was uncustomary within the current context of how information is disseminated in our politically correct society. For instance, traumatized veterans after World War I were considered to be suffering from "shell shock." The diagnosis would later change to "combat fatigue" after World War II and then subsequently be referred to as "post-traumatic stress disorder" in the wake of the Vietnam War. With respect to the war effort, the U.S. government changed the name from the "War Department" in the 1940's, to the "Department of Defense."

The word "euphemism" is derived from the Greek for "good speech." Such expressions are not always used to cloud issues through deliberate deception, but rather can provide tactful language. The terms "disability" and "physically challenged" for instance have replaced handicapped; and "persons with a visual impairment" is now suggested for blind folks. Robert Burchfield, a former editor of The Oxford English Dictionary made a case for this diction by remarking, "a language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication."

Not everyone has been as enamored with obscure, expressive verbiage. In his landmark essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell, the English journalist and novelist, asserted that the "mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing."

William Lutz, Professor Emeritus of English at Rutgers University, carries on Orwell's ideas in his books, "*Doublespeak*" and "*The New Doublespeak*." He states "Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable."

In the span of a few minutes most of us could probably assemble a number of mild or vague substitutes in exchange for their harsh, explicit counterparts. Why not give the word game a try at the next family get together?

The possibilities are endless. The individual composing the most doublespeak from a select category will be declared Spin champion. Consider using the following topics: Military; History; Politics; Health Care; the Economy and Education. Here are a few responses that may surface: "friendly fire casualties" for shooting our own people; "state of armed conflict" for war; "ethnic cleansing" for genocide; and "collateral damage" for civilian casualties. Look for some others beyond the battlefield: "revenue enhancement" for higher taxes; "negative profit" for loss; "reassessment" for flip-flop; and "downsizing" for layoffs and firings.

Everyone's top ten lists should presumably include: "diversity" for race; "gender" for sex; "intimacy" for sexual intercourse; and the "golden years" for old age. Rounding out the lists you can also expect the following old standbys: "inebriated" for drunk; "abuser of controlled substances" for drug addict, "correctional institution" for prison; and "inner cities" for the slum areas of big cities.

In March 2009, the Washington Post reported that the Obama administration appeared to be backing away from the

phrase "global war on terror," a signature label adopted by the Bush administration after the Sept. 11 attacks.

In a memo sent from the Defense Department's Office of Security to Pentagon staffers, members were told, "this administration prefers to avoid using the term 'Long War' or 'Global War on Terror' [GWOT.] Please use 'Overseas Contingency Operation.'"

This shift in terminology suggests an attempt to minimize the threat of terrorism by employing a new political euphemism. This is apparent when considering the Merriam-Webster online definitions for "contingent" and "contingency" include: "possible; unpredictable; an event (as an emergency) or condition that may but is not certain to occur; something liable to happen as an adjunct to or result of something else." This is in stark contrast to the outright use of the word, "War."

In the ensuing years, it has been debated whether the former President's shoot-from-the-hip approach was the correct way to address the nation on the government's terrorism initiative. There is little quarrel that his decision not to mince words was certainly well received by many Americans at that time. Likewise, it is open to debate whether the current administration's decision to change the existing label for the war overseas was an attempt at political correctness or ultimately serves as a weak pronouncement of our current military engagement.

It is becoming more apparent that most Americans today are no longer misled by such discourse. This has become most evident by the low turnout at election polling booths, which demonstrates that voters are disenchanted with the political system. The underlying reason may be a belief that the candidates are not telling the whole truth, or concealing the facts. The spoken word is not always to be believed.

In hindsight, there must be a recognition that while appeasement through language poses certain hidden dangers, so does too much rage. The best application of rhetoric may have been delivered by one of Bush and Obama's predecessors, Theodore Roosevelt, who once said, "Speak softly, but carry a big stick."

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