

“Words Surpass Reality”
Old Chinese Expression

The Lexicon of War and Violence
Charley Trujillo

War is the “good guys” against the “bad guys.” It is easy to identify the “good guys,” they are, of course, the ones on your side. I often hear statements made in U.S. military personnel video clips from Iraq referring to the “bad guys”—such as, “The bad guys are hiding in those buildings.” Objectivity from the media, politicians and other purveyors of political culture should be a given. One would expect the information reported by them to be unbiased, going beyond the notion of “good guys” vs. “bad guys,” but such unfortunately, is not the case. After reading numerous magazine and newspaper articles, and after listening to a copious amount of political rhetoric, I have detected a selective and prejudiced use of lexicon in the Iraq war. Objective use of vocabulary is now a rare occurrence rather than the norm, is that what we want, or should expect from the media and politicians?

Words can invoke strong emotional and psychological cues to help steer the populace into accepting the unacceptable morality of killing. For instance, when the “bad guys” are accused of possessing weapons of mass destruction, objectively it would be appropriate to read a newspaper headline, “Department of Defense Increases Its Weapons of Mass Destruction Program.” Instead, the headline usually reads something like, “The Department of Defense Increases Its Weapons Program.” This deletion of the word *destruction* seems to imply that the nuclear, biological or chemical weapons possessed by the United States are not harmful or destructive and that only the weapons possessed by the “bad guys” are destructive. This notion of WMD is so powerful that in the case of Iraq their weapons are extremely destructive, even when none are present.

Logic would have it that any nuclear, biological or chemical weapon is destructive to human life, the environment and more importantly to some, property, no matter who possesses or uses it. By deleting the word *destruction*, it implies that weapons used by the United States have somehow hyper physically metamorphosed into something constructive. Within this reasoning, it is now constructive destruction. We can thus have such logic as, “We destroyed the village in order to save it,” or even the idea that there is such a thing as “friendly fire.” Words do not change the lethal outcomes of weapons, no matter the moral intentions of the “good guys.” Weapons do not have morals; they are thoroughly objective and destructive. One would think that any type of killing is savage and brutal, regardless of what type of weapon is employed or by whom.

The selective use of lexicon is also evident when it is the “bad guys” who use violence, while the “good guys” use the euphemism: force. Yet force in Iraq has brought about tens of thousands of dead and wounded, the majority civilians, with no end in sight. The salient belief behind this is that force is not violence because civilized people are not violent. A recent subheading of a headline from a major newspaper concerning United States international relations with Europe over the Middle East read, “Analysis: Deep Strains Over Use of Force, Diplomacy.” It read *force*, instead of *violence*. What is the difference from a physical point of view? Conventional and mainstream rhetoric usually answers this in moral terms, not in the reality of the act and its physical consequences.

In my travels around the country, I have often heard people from myriad backgrounds shrug the war off by simply saying, "People get killed in a war, you know." This biased use of lexicon has a history in U.S. history and its conflicts. For example, when the Indigenous People of the United States defeated the U.S. military on the battlefield, it was called a massacre; however, when the U.S. military won, it was a victory—and it's usually glorious.

Ironically, although Iraq is often touted as part of the cradle of Western Civilization, according to many politicians and the media, Iraqis are a barbaric people. For example, decapitations are savage acts when committed by the Iraqi resistance, which they certainly are, but not when people are decapitated, blown apart or literally vaporized by laser-guided missiles and other high technological, destructive weapons. According to this thinking, technology brings about clean and surgical casualties. This is refined killing brought about by surgical strikes, precision bombing and patriot missiles, as well as other civilized weapons.

To test if my assertions are valid or accurate, apply them to future newspaper or magazine articles you read or to the political rhetoric you hear.

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