
Words, war and terror

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The lexicon of war in the twenty-first century

Excerpt from Geoffrey Hughes, *Words of War* (ET17, 1989)

THE MAJORITY of wars nowadays are undeclared acts of concerted or randomly organised 'military intervention' or 'armed aggression', to use the standard euphemisms. 'Rebels', 'government forces', 'paramilitary units' and 'super-power surrogates' clash by night in bloody theatres of war which enact Matthew Arnold's prescient nightmare. States like modern Israel, Mozambique and Angola have been in a state of undeclared war or internecine conflict since their inception or independence. Today it is estimated that there are about 25 of these conflicts grinding on all over the world. One hundred years ago, by contrast, war was 'declared' as, say, the Crimean War (1854–5), the American Civil War (1861–5), and the Boer War (1899–1902).

The change in the style of war extends beyond the name to cover every aspect of the activity. The fundamental change in the form has been from the classic 'chequer-board' set piece (conducted with elegance like a symphony or ballet, with different stages and movements) to the modern engagement, which is ambiguous, confusing, part institutional, part guerrilla, clandestine, haphazard and (like much modern art) has no rules or framing conventions. The new style includes the notion of total war (Von Clausewitz's category of 'absolute war'), initiated in modern times by Sherman in his annihilating March to the Sea in 1864, but formulated semantically later. It ruthlessly obliterates the distinction between military and civilian personnel, which had previously been scrupulously and chivalrously preserved. Indeed, *civilian* is a term which has definition only by virtue of its militarized opposite.

The accompanying panel, 'The semantic field of war', is a word field built on the model of lin-

guistic archaeology to illustrate the accumulated catalogue of principal terms over the centuries. Each new conflict reflects some refinement or increase in the capacity for slaughter as armies have changed in constitution from being feudal levies in medieval times, then professionals and finally conscripted civilians. The basic territorial impulse for war has also developed differing motives, being predominantly religious in the Middle Ages, nationalistic in the 19th century and strategically expansionist in the 20th.

Although the field contains many technical terms, it omits those no longer current, such as the medievalisms *arbalet*, *trebuchet*, *francisca*, *scramasax* and *pavise*. Many words (such as *shell*, *mine* and *tank*) are metaphorical extensions of common words; some, like *fighter* and *missile*, are specializations from within the field, as technology has evolved from earth via air to space. The more recent layers of the vocabulary corroborate the observation of Von Clausewitz that 'war is a mere continuation of policy by other means'. The dismaying richness of the field also bears out Eric Partridge's com-



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The semantic field of war

ANGLO SAXON	<i>bow, arrow, sword, shield, spear, fight, weapon</i>
MIDDLE ENGLISH	<i>castle, army, navy, battle, war, peace, enemy, fighter, ambush, armour, artillery, cross-bow, lance, pike, pole-axe, hauberk, buckler, mace, gun, admiral, skirmish, archer, soldier, spy, chivalry (cavalry)</i>
c. 1500–1549	<i>wench, longbow, ordnance, redcoat, cannon, armada, arquebus, salvo, hussar</i>
c. 1550–1599	<i>mortar, bomb, bombardier, pistol petard, infantry, fireship, calibre, volley</i>
c. 1600–1649	<i>grenade, musket, missile, rocket, carbine</i>
c. 1650–1699	<i>bayonet, blunderbus, shell, recruit, grenadier</i>
c. 1700–1749	<i>armament, howitzer, salute (artillery), blockade, press gang</i>
c. 1750–1799	<i>uniform, civilian, manoeuvre, grapeshot rifle, martinet</i>
c. 1800–1849	<i>guerrilla, torpedo, shrapnel, diehard</i>
c. 1850–1899	<i>balaclava, cardigan, raglan, jingoism, Gatling gun, machine gun, mine (naval), magenta, solferino, war widow, Maxim gun, mauser, Red Cross, Tommy (Atkins), battleship, submarine, hand grenade</i>
c. 1900–1949	<i>concentration camp, khaki, majick, submarine, destroyer, sam browne, tank, air-raid, bomber, fighter, strafe, depth charge, anti-aircraft, aircraft carrier, D-day, atomic bomb, camouflage, zeppelin, U-boat, flame-thrower, poison gas, rocketry, Hitler, scorched earth, total war, blitz, flak, ack-ack, pang, fire bomb, doodlebug, guided missile, ground/air to air missile, brett, sten, snafu, napalm, nuclear bomb, warhead, ground zero, paratroop, G.I. Joe, holocaust, Quisling, Resistance</i>
c. 1950–1988	<i>Cold War, Iron Curtain, bazooka, silo, defoliation, air-support, pacification, Exocet, heat-seeking missile, Stalin organ, neutron bomb, chemical warfare</i>

ment that ‘War is the greatest excitant of new vocabulary.’

The contributions of the 20th century emerge as refinements in the gruesome. Principal among these has been the growth of terms anticipating mass death in a nuclear holocaust. The awesomely confident formations like *overkill*, *megacorpse* and *megadeath* (to denote a million dead) have become part of the strategic discourse since the last war. *Holocaust* itself reflects man’s inhumanity to man by extending from the original Greek sense of ‘a whole animal sacrifice’ to ‘a great slaughter or massacre’

in the last century. Its application to the mass-murder of the Jews seems to date only from 1965.

Genocide has been practised by many nations, though the word itself was coined only in 1944, in the War Crimes tribunal which brought the Nazis to justice. But perhaps the most notable semantic development in the face of these literally indescribable horrors has been the wholesale euphemisation of the terminology of war into the neutral latinisations of *defence*, *operations*, *devices*, *incidents*, *incursions*, *engagements* and *terminations*. □

THE MAJOR development since this article was published (1989, the year that the Berlin Wall came down) was the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, now styled ‘9/11’. This used a stupefyingly original strategy of attack-

ing the heart of America’s capitalist and military establishment with the unconventional weapons of civilian aircraft and kamikazi pilots. Indeed, the bombing was a more ruthless variation of Pearl Harbour, being a hijack, less damaging in terms of hardware, but far

more devastating in its effect on national morale and its propaganda impact. On a smaller scale, suicide bombings have now become relatively common.

The Twin Towers attack resuscitated *ground zero*, but in a shockingly unexpected locale, and launched the 'War on Terror', which has been effective as a propaganda cypher, but has proved too generalised a target for proper focus. A number of press commentators noted a broader semantic feature: words like *obscenity*, *outrage*, *atrociousness* and *massacre*, which were commonly used two decades previously, were absent from the headlines. The mysterious eminence of Osama bin Laden, who claimed responsibility for the outrage, is seldom sighted but continues to send out televised messages laden with the hate speech categories of 'infidels', 'crusaders' and 'Zionists', the first two ironic revivals and reversals of the medieval war against the heathen. Equally fundamentalist in its categories, *Axis of Evil* was coined by George W. Bush in his State of the Union address in January 2002.

The article concluded by discussing genocide and the holocaust, since they were relatively new terms assumed to represent the absolute and unrepeatable nadir of inhuman brutality. However, in the interim, genocide has continued in Rwanda and in Bosnia, where it generated the infamous euphemism *ethnic cleansing* (1991, a translation from Serbo-Croat). Further, there has emerged the extraordinary phenomenon of 'Holocaust denial' indulged in not merely by individuals, but now by governments such as that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which seeks to downgrade immense suffering of 'the Final Solution' to the level of a propaganda ploy.

The Gulf War and its successor, the Iraq War, have made the global public very aware of the propaganda influences of reporting, especially through the acknowledgement in 2003 of *embedded journalists* used by US television chains. Previously *war correspondents* were generally assumed to be reasonably unbiased. Yet the obverse dynamic, namely the suppression of facts about war crimes, continues, notably concerning comment on the massacre of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians by the Turks in 1915. This prohibition continues to have legal status in modern Turkey, where it falls under the category of the crime of 'insulting Turkishness'.

Winston Churchill remarked with prescient

pessimism that: 'When the war of the giants is over the wars of the pygmies will begin.' These have turned out to be no less murderous. In addition, there have been signs of an unholy alliance between terrorism and business, shown in forms like *atomic mafia*, denoting those who buy, steal and smuggle nuclear-weapons-grade material from the former Eastern Bloc for sale elsewhere. The relationship between political leadership, the armed forces and crime is often alluded to as the *Colombian syndrome*, although the most powerful recent example was that of the erstwhile Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic.

'War is the greatest excitant of new vocabulary', commented Eric Partridge (1948), a generalization still largely true. The article sought to put the huge array of semantic evidence accumulated over the past thousand years in a cogent frame, of which the visible sign is the panel titled 'the semantic field of war', arranged on the model of linguistic archaeology. The article proceeded to analyse the evidence, relating it to social history and to make various semantic discriminations.

The words selected are 'the survivors', so to speak. This criterion can obviously distort the evidence by favouring the most recent entries. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon contingent seems rather meagre, mainly because many interesting forms have died away. These include *wælstowe*, 'the place of slaughter', a poignant kenning (poetic compound) for a battlefield, and the two terms for an armed force, *fyrd* for the local levies and *here* for the invaders. Similarly, the field omits technical terms no longer current, such as the medievalisms *arbalet*, *trebuchet*, *francisca*, *scramasax* and *pavise*.

It is to be expected that the word-field reflects the evolution of English society by being predominantly Anglo-Saxon in the first phase, then Norman French and classical from the Renaissance onwards. However, the huge variety of Latin and Greek terms can be used in very different ways: thus *torpedo*, *destroyer* and *submarine* are literal, whereas *concentration camp*, *air support*, *collateral damage* and *rendition* are all institutionalised euphemisms.

The method of using of word-fields as evidence can be traced back Jost Trier (1931) and was refined through the basic distinction advanced by Georges Matoré (1951) between 'key words' and 'witness words' (or *mots clés* and *mots témoins*). Key words reflect cultural values, while witness words reflect technical

developments. It is in the nature of the field that witness words should predominate, since technological advances are commonly exploited to increase the capacity for slaughter. Indeed, among the very few key words are *press gang*, *Resistance*, *jingoism* and *chauvinism* in its original sense of extreme patriotism. Categorization is not always simple. Where, for example, to place *terrorist* or *collaborator*? As one goes further back in time, so the relationship between *chivalry*, a key word, and *cavalry*, a witness word, becomes closer. The complexities of *Catch 22*, originally an ironic 'war word' in Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, present similar difficulties.

Major concepts can 'escape the net', as it were, or prove difficult to interpret. Thus 'national security' has been fundamental to American foreign policy from the beginning: the formula appears historically in written form from George Washington onwards, but its tone and application vary. Similarly, ever since the Monroe Doctrine was formulated in 1823, what was originally an essentially defensive concept has been increasingly interpreted in an aggressive fashion.

Significant contributions to the analysis of the language of war have in the main come from philologists and lexicographers, such as Eric Partridge, or those passionately involved in the humanities, such as George Steiner, or gifted novelists cum journalists, among whom George Orwell is still pre-eminent. The insights of these writers have not really been superseded. Few have written as eloquently as Steiner about the Holocaust and about 'the relations of language to the murderous falsehoods it has been made to articulate and hallo in certain totalitarian régimes' (1967:11). Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) is still a master class in political and martial euphemism, while his creation and dissection of 'Newspeak' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is perennially relevant. It is significant that his ironic formation *pacification* for 'brutal suppression' should have developed its cynical institutional sense, just as *liberate* has taken on the sense of 'subject to a new tyranny'. Such shifts have been termed 'Orwellian' since 1952. It is entirely 'Orwellian' that erstwhile ministries of *war* have been restyled ministries of *defence*, since the two concepts have become increasingly confused and melded.

Of the major scholars in linguistics, Noam

Chomsky, is the principal participant in the controversies over American military involvement, notably in his studies *Acts of Aggression: Policing 'Rogue' States* (1999) and *9/11* (2001). In the first study he noted the prevalence of 'doublespeak': 'When the United States bombed Libyan cities in 1986, the official justification was "self defence against future attack"' and that a missile attack on Iraq in 1993 was similarly rationalised as 'self defence against armed attack' (1999, p. 26). These substitutions generate a fair amount of ironic comment in the public domain, especially in America by writers such as William Safire and Geoffrey Nunberg.

The concept of the *rogue state* has received increasing attention and redefinition since the formula was first applied to Syria in 1973 (*Washington Post*, 8 May). The term is applied by some theorists to states which are considered to be a threat to world peace on the bases of being authoritarian, sponsoring terrorism and encouraging the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear arms). However, the list has tended to reflect US foreign policy considerations: originally (in the late 1990s) it included Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Iran and North Korea, but after various invasions and alliances only the last two are currently so considered. However, both Chomsky and Blum (*Rogue State*, 2000) have argued that the US itself is a rogue state.

So far as cultural involvement is concerned, the Great War was memorialized principally by those still known as the war poets, such as Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Laurence Binyon and Siegfried Sassoon. But Theodore Adorno's comment, 'After Auschwitz no poetry', has become a prediction. The more recent conflicts have yielded or provoked comparatively little major literature.

War continues to be defined largely by technical terms which are opaque, or propaganda terms which are emotive and inflammatory. Interspersed are horrific euphemisms such as *Iraqi manicure* and *bodywash*, or the standard euphemisms such as *inappropriate* and *unacceptable*, which are regularly applied to anything from torture to minor infractions. Hence the word-field is an odd melange of forms like *WMD*, *the War on Terror*, *F16*, *Desert Storm*, *attrition*, *MX missile*, *Shock and Awe*, *CBW* (chemical and biological warfare) and *Mission Accomplished*. ■

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