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## NEUTRAL OR NEGATIVE, ACCURACY OR APPEASEMENT: NOUNS OF CHOICE IN THE IRAQI CONFLICT

WILLIAM J. DRUMMOND\*

News media have profoundly influenced the public's attitudes toward this country's military conflicts throughout history, and the war in Iraq is no exception. But that influence is not manifested in the way most people expect. It is not the brazen viewpoints expressed on the editorial pages, nor the slant of the straight news stories, nor the signed opinion columns, nor even the stentorian pronouncements of the television and radio news anchors, whether from the pro-Bush partisans at Fox News or from the ostensibly objective voices at the somewhat discredited CBS News.

It all goes back to the building blocks of communication—the choosing of nouns, the game of linguistic small-ball, the tagging, the shorthand, and the labeling of the combatants on the other side of the conflict. These nouns pound the public 24/7, day-in and day-out, whatever the context of the story. The key issue in influencing the public perception is whether the default choice of a noun is neutral or negative.

Nouns can effectively dehumanize the enemy and are potentially a more potent weapon than the Bradley armored vehicle. For example, recalling World War II, consider the use of the term “Jap,” which was an accepted shorthand term for the Japanese used in newspapers and radio reports throughout the war. Never mind that it was also a racial slur. Ernie Pyle was the most renowned war correspondent of his time. On April 12, 1945, he wrote this dispatch: “Those Jap pilots must have thought the world was coming to an end to fly into a lead storm like that only

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ten hours after we had landed on Okinawa. All three were shot down.”<sup>1</sup>

Calling them Japs made it easier for the U.S. high command to firebomb Tokyo, an action that took a huge civilian toll. The journalism school library here in Berkeley used to have on display a framed copy of the front page of the *San Francisco Examiner* from August 1945. The headline read, “Japs Surrender.” It was taken down some years back because many people found it patently offensive. A new generation did not want to be reminded of the harsh linguistic steps that had been taken to prosecute a war.

Depending on which choices the news media make, they are establishing the very vocabulary we use to talk about events. They are putting words into our mouths and, thereby, setting up a framework inside our heads. News media adopted the term “civil rights” to describe the movement to eliminate legalized segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. How would the struggle have turned out if the news media had instead adopted the term “Negro rights” movement?

In wartime, if the noun of choice is antithetical to a government’s policy, the repetition of that term over a day-in and day-out news cycle can prove to be the death-of-a-thousand-blows to policymakers’ hopes. Many people in power watch these choices of nouns with an eagle eye, although the disputes rarely come to public attention. A recent example was the decision last September by the *National Post*, Canada’s leading conservative newspaper, to insert the word “terrorist” into several news stories the paper had received from Reuters, the British news agency. In an editorial defending its actions, the *National Post* said that Reuters’ use of terms such as “militants” or “insurgents” “merely serves to apply a misleading gloss of political correctness . . . [W]e believe we owe it to our readers to remove it before they see their newspapers every morning.”<sup>2</sup>

Reuters wanted the *National Post* and the twelve other papers in the same ownership chain to delete the Reuters credit line on any articles that were so altered. Reuters’ position was stated by its global news managing editor David A. Schlesinger: “Our editorial policy is that we don’t use emotive words when labeling someone. Any paper can change copy and do whatever they

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1. ERNIE’S WAR: THE BEST OF ERNIE PYLE’S WORLD WAR II DISPATCHES 410 (David Nichols ed., 1986) [hereinafter ERNIE’S WAR].

2. Ian Austen, *Reuters Asks a Chain To Remove Its Bylines*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 20, 2004, at C9.

want. But if a paper wants to change our copy that way, we would be more comfortable if they remove the byline.”<sup>3</sup>

The importance of these seemingly small verbal jousts was brought home to me in the 1970s when I was posted to Jerusalem as the *Los Angeles Times* bureau chief. My tour of duty followed the Yom Kippur War but ended before the Camp David Accords. It was a period of no-war, no-peace. The *Intifada* had not yet erupted, but Palestinian commandos had staged raids into Israeli territory, often resulting in the loss of civilian lives. The danger of hidden explosives in civilian areas was ever-present, although not on today’s scale.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry kept a close watch on what all the foreign correspondents were writing. Every story sent from Israel had to pass through official censorship before it could be transmitted. The Foreign Ministry spokesman, Benjamin Navon, was an urbane, soft-spoken career diplomat who smoked Rothman cigarettes one after the other, and we got on well. In my two-year hitch in Jerusalem I wrote my share of critical stories about the Israeli occupation of Arab lands. The only time Beni Navon ever read me the riot act was when I referred to Palestinians as “guerrillas.” An armed group paddled ashore on the beach in Tel Aviv one night and took over a tourist hotel and several civilians were killed and wounded. The Israeli Defense Forces stormed the hotel, killing all the attackers, save one.

Beni insisted that armed men attacking civilians was an act of terrorism, and the perpetrators should be labeled as such. My choice of “guerrillas” was certainly not perfect and was tendentious in its own way. The word “guerrilla” entered the language during the Napoleonic wars and described irregular Spanish resistance fighters opposing the Grand Army of France. That is hardly the comparison the Israelis would welcome.

Actually, “guerrilla” was not my first choice. I wanted to use “*fedayeen*,” an Arabic word that the Palestinians used to describe themselves. It means “men of sacrifice.” The problem was that the copy desk at the *L.A. Times* would have none of it, arguing that readers do not like foreign words and phrases. So, the result was “guerrilla.” I was not happy, but “terrorist” would have been even more emotional and politically loaded. Obviously, in quoting Israeli spokesmen or witnesses, if they used “terrorist,” I used that term as a direct quotation in my copy. But the key was the choice of which noun to use during the main narrative of the story.

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3. *Id.*

Whether a journalist goes to a graduate school to learn the craft or picks it up on the job, one theme underlies all the training: Err, if you must, on the side of understatement rather than the opposite. Nearly all of the reputable journalism training programs follow this rule. A corollary of this rule is to rely on words that are not inherently sensational. Most mainstream news organizations strive to adhere to this practice. Sometimes journalists fall off the wagon, however. For example, it is now standard to say "brutal murder." I find it hard to imagine any other kind. The term "Kent State Massacre" became the boilerplate reference for the events on an Ohio campus on May 4, 1970, and, likewise, "My Lai massacre" for the events of March 16, 1968. Although the use of "massacre" stretches the boundaries of the understatement doctrine, it became the consensus term in describing those events. Similarly, "terrorist attack" became the consensus for the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that left 169 people dead.

Whatever the doctrine says, the day-to-day decisions are made by human beings. One would expect to find variations and inconsistencies. With these lessons in mind, I launched an inquiry into what the "consensus" term is these days for the combatants in the struggle in Iraq.

How to go about this? The most mainstream of all the news media is the Associated Press, the worldwide news giant owned by its members. Its clients include newspapers, magazines, broadcast, and cable, and it has to please the widest cross-section of news organizations. The editors and managers at the AP, in their collective wisdom, provide the best laboratory for monitoring the noun choices that come into play.

But the AP produces billions of words in the course of a week. How can one narrow down such a huge inventory into something manageable in order to detect significant tendencies? My study focused on a relatively small part of the AP's huge output: the archived photographs and accompanying captions. The AP distributes hundreds of photographs and captions every day. A subset of these is digitized for the online archive. However, that AP archive is searchable. It contains thousands of images going back decades.

Using AccuNet, the Associated Press' online archive,<sup>4</sup> I conducted a few test runs to see if I could detect tendencies from previous conflicts based on the content of the captions. The searches bring up captions encompassing the specific search

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4. AccuNet is available by annual subscription at <http://ap.accuweather.com/apphoto/>.

terms. They are not necessarily side-by-side, but they are included in the same context. This method has all the weaknesses of Boolean searches. Your net captures a great deal of inedible fish. But it gives you a gross sampling of the overall fish population.

The results proved illuminating. Consider Vietnam. Conveniently for journalists, the main hostile forces in the news stories came with their own embedded nouns: U.S. forces were fighting either the North Vietnamese Army or the Viet Cong. I searched for "Viet Cong guerrillas." I got thirty-one image hits. The captions used terms such as "Viet Cong soldiers," "Viet Cong POWs," and "Viet Cong Attack." Here is a typical caption from one of these photos, this one depicting U.S. servicemen under fire: "During an ambush by Viet Cong guerrillas, an officer shouts orders as a wounded American soldier awaits evacuation near Saigon during the Vietnam War, 1969. The soldier is attended by a medic as they seek cover beside an armored troop carrier."<sup>5</sup>

I searched for "Viet Cong terrorist." The result was: "Your search did not match any records." How can one explain the absence of "terrorist"? It had not yet entered the news coverage language. The term came into news usage after the Palestinian takeover of the Olympic village in Munich in 1968 in which eleven Israeli athletes were killed. In addition, Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford did not usually characterize the enemy in Vietnam as "terrorists." Perhaps it never occurred to them.

In retrospect, however, U.S. administrations who sought to prosecute the war in Vietnam lost considerable ground in the propaganda war because they were not able to label the enemy with a term of their own that would stick. Although official spokesmen used "aggressors," it never caught on. It was a propaganda term. "Aggressors" was too loaded ever to gain traction as the everyday news usage. Into this vacuum came journalists whose consensus term was "guerrilla," which was, relatively speaking, a positive term. We know from the ample literature that emerged from the war that the lingua franca of the foxhole described the enemy as "gooks," another racial slur. As opposed to the choice of words by World War II journalists, correspondents and editors in the Vietnam era did not adopt the term.

The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars were a cohesive, disciplined enemy. Contrast that to the present situation in the Middle East. I searched the term "Islamic militants." I got

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5. Oliver Noonan, photo, ASSOCIATED PRESS.

1799 hits, spanning the globe from Algeria to Indonesia. One example of the captions includes:

Covered with a flag of the Islamic militant group Islamic Jihad, the body of Hamas militant Mohammed Jabari is carried for burial along the streets of Gaza City Wednesday Aug. 18, 2004. The Israeli military set off an explosion in an olive grove near the house of Ahmed Jabari, a senior Hamas militant, killing his brother Mohammed and four other Palestinians, at least three of them also militants. Ahmed Jabari, the main target of the attack escaped with light injuries.<sup>6</sup>

A search of "Islamic terrorist" found only 432 image hits. The AP preferred the term "militant" to "terrorist" by a 4-to-1 margin. "Militant" is considerably the blander term.

Nevertheless, the occasions when "terrorist" was used held particular significance. Consider this caption: "President Bush stands with Islamic leaders during a visit to the Islamic Center of Washington, Monday, Sept. 17, 2001, to try to put an end to rising anti-Muslim sentiment in the wake of last week's terrorist attacks."<sup>7</sup>

The AP had made a decision to refer to the September 11 hijackings as "terrorist attacks." The adoption of this term represents a major achievement for the administration's viewpoint. Terrorism and September 11 thereby became locked together in boilerplate fashion in American journalism and, thus, in the minds and hearts of most Americans.

The fact that the hijackings struck New York City hardest had profound repercussions for the news business. Manhattan Island happens to be the centralized base for virtually all the major news organizations in the country. The city was traumatized, and so were the reporters, editors, producers, executives, and all their families who live there. The emotional impact diminished the further one got from the East Coast.

I cannot help but think that the "shock and awe" of September 11 affected news judgments, and these decisions reverberated throughout the country because of the disproportional influence New York has on the news business. I would even venture to say that many journalists experienced post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the hijackings and the aftermath. The *New York Times* has, in effect, admitted to lapses in judgment in its coverage during this time, but it has never offered an expla-

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6. Hatem Moussa, photo, ASSOCIATED PRESS.

7. Doug Mills, photo, ASSOCIATED PRESS.

nation as to why. I would suggest that perhaps the editors were uncharacteristically susceptible to the administration's line because they were personally and collectively in a state of shock.

In any event, the die was cast, and September 11 will forever be recalled as a terrorist attack, just as Pearl Harbor has been known throughout history as a "sneak attack." I have often asked myself, "Isn't the element of surprise a virtue in warfare?"

On closer examination, the Iraqi conflict has a number of nouns in wide usage. "Iraqi gunmen" turned up 188 hits; "Iraqi insurgents," 825 hits; and "Iraqi militants," 513 hits. "Iraqi terrorists" got 156 hits, and many of those "terrorist" references dealt with the killing of hostages. One such example includes:

Following the early morning announcement that Iraqi terrorists had killed a South Korean national outside of Baghdad, a protester holds a portrait of U.S. President George W. Bush with the Korean word "Murder" in protest of the South Korean government's involvement in post-war Iraq near the U.S. Embassy in downtown Seoul, Wednesday, June 23, 2004. The captors beheaded Kim Sun-il, a 33-year-old South Korean working for a supply company in Iraq, after Seoul refused to meet their demand to cancel its deployment of 3,000 troops to the war-torn nation. The South Korean government on Wednesday reaffirmed its plan to send troops to Iraq despite the killing of Kim.<sup>8</sup>

The noun choices in describing the hostiles in Iraq display some ambivalence. "Gunmen" and "terrorists" are certainly negative. "Insurgents" and "militants" are more neutral. The AP preferred the more neutral terms ninety percent of the time in the captions.

An interesting comparison can be made with the coverage of Palestine. "Palestinian gunmen" turned up 710 hits; "Palestinian insurgents," 3 hits; "Palestinian militants," 2480 hits; "Palestinian terrorists," 257 hits; "Palestinian guerrillas," 194 hits; and "Fedayeen," 51 hits.

Palestine has been a staple in the news diet far longer than Iraq has been. A rough calculation would indicate that the AP is loath to use either a pro-Palestinian term "Fedayeen" (1% of the usages) or a pro-Israeli term "terrorists" in relation to Palestine (7% of the usages). "Militants" is the term of choice by a wide margin.

Policymakers, especially the President, try to influence the word choices. The President is the most pervasively covered man

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8. Lee Jin-man, photo, ASSOCIATED PRESS.



in the world, so his words have a huge reverberation in the news. “Bush Terrorists” turned up 733 hits; “Bush insurgents,” 33 hits; and “Bush militants,” 26 hits. The captions prove how crafted the President’s message is. He has more than a ninety percent tendency to appear in a caption context that is associated with “terrorist” as opposed to the blander terms. Nevertheless, the use of the bully pulpit has failed to change the AP’s tendencies to be cautious and to understate.

Many lay people and political partisans have no patience for journalistic pussy-footing around. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the AP is striving to keep its choice of nouns in the neutral area. “Insurgents” or “militants” are clearly the terms of choice. The “terrorist” label appears to be specifically reserved for those who execute hostages. As for administration policy, the AP’s approach indicates a resistance to accepting the government’s term of art.

The accusation against journalists of falling prey to political correctness rings hollow because society simply adheres to different standards today. In this day and age of identity politics, it is unthinkable that a news organization would resort to a racial slur to characterize an enemy. It is unthinkable that a government official or a political leader would do so. I have a strong suspicion, however, that these terms are in common usage among U.S. military forces and “contractors” (who came up with that one?) in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Our sensibilities are such these days that “camel jockey,” “rag head,” and the many other synonyms used by the troops will never make it into the parlance of the news, which has so far pursued almost self-conscious moderation.

This approach is a manifestation of how great the emotional distance has become between journalists and war. Not since the Second World War have journalists identified with this country’s goals in a military conflict. One need only look again at the Ernie Pyle dispatches to see the contrast. In March 1945, Pyle was aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Cabot that was involved in bombing operations against Tokyo and Iwo Jima. Pyle and the other journalists could discern the effect of the raids by monitoring Japanese broadcasts from the mainland:

We went to the radio room to listen. The usual Japanese programs were on the air. We watched the clock. Suddenly—at just the right time—the Jap stations all went off the air.

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9. See ANTHONY SWAFFORD, *JARHEAD: A MARINE’S CHRONICLE OF THE GULF WAR AND OTHER BATTLES* (2003) (vivid memoir by former U.S. Marine recounting his experiences in the first Gulf War).

There was silence for a few minutes. And then the most Donald Duck-like screaming and jabbering you ever heard. The announcer was so excited you had to laugh.

We knew our boys were there. After that, for us on the ship, it was just a matter of waiting, and hoping.<sup>10</sup>

Today, the goal in journalism is neutrality, taking no side in a conflict between belligerents. While it is easy to justify professionally, it is hard to defend publicly in the face of mounting violence and daily outrages.

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10. ERNIE'S WAR, *supra* note 1, at 399.

