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## Our Tortured Language of War

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Words go to war as surely as soldiers do. They can be used to inspire troops, strike fear into the heart of the enemy or persuade neutral parties. "You know what words can do to soldiers," Napoleon once wrote to one of his generals. And since 9/11, language has been a central battlefield in the global war on terrorism.

The recent confirmation hearings for Alberto R. Gonzales, President Bush's attorney general nominee, highlighted the uses and abuses of words in war. Gonzales was asked to explain a Justice Department memo, addressed to him, which said torture "covers only extreme acts" involving pain "equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function or even death." Before any prisoners were abused at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay, the definition of torture had to be contorted.

Immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the Department of Defense designated the military response as "Operation Infinite Justice." Muslim groups protested, saying that Islam teaches that Allah alone can provide "infinite justice." The military campaign was quickly renamed "Operation Enduring Freedom." Similarly, when Bush described the war on terrorism as "a crusade," he came under criticism because of the evocation of medieval wars between Christendom and the Islamic world. He dropped the term.

And there are the changing names for the enemy in Iraq. U.S. military spokesmen first referred to them as "dead-enders" or "Baathist holdouts." When the insurgency turned out to be undeniably widespread and well organized, its members were "former regime loyalists." Then, when it was pointed out that "loyalty" generally has a positive connotation, the term mutated to "former regime elements."

Official Pentagon news releases continue to avoid the more neutral "guerrilla" or "militant" in favor of "terrorist" and "anti-Iraq forces." Last summer, when the Pentagon insisted that its quick victory over Iraq's conventional forces was not deteriorating into a guerrilla war, a reporter confronted Donald Rumsfeld with the Defense Department's own definition of the term — "Military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held or hostile territory by irregular, predominantly indigenous forces."

Rumsfeld stubbornly insisted that "guerrilla war" was not an appropriate description. He would later rush to a dictionary to defend his own use of the word "slog" in a memo on Iraq. He cited the obscure meaning "to hit or strike hard" rather than the more accepted "hard, dogged march or tramp."

The careful selection of words in war is almost always a calculated attempt to manipulate perceptions. Whether an act of violence is called a "suicide bombing" or a "homicide bombing" depends more on the politics of the speaker than on any sincere attempt to describe objective reality. Even when the language of war is mechanical or colorless it may be deliberate, an attempt to shield both civilians and soldiers from the horrors of modern conflict.

"Battles are won through the ability of men to express concrete ideas in clear and unmistakable language," concluded Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall, who studied soldiers in combat in World War II. Before the coalition's recent attack on enemy forces in Fallouja, the American commander there changed the rules of engagement from "capture or kill" to "kill or capture." He sought to

communicate to his troops that they were shifting to the offensive and to instill the aggressive posture needed for success in combat.

Every conflict spawns its own vocabulary. World War I produced "tank," "dog tag" and "doughboy." The Cold War could have filled a dictionary with terms such as "mutually assured destruction." The purported New World Order following the demise of the Soviet Union yielded "hyperpower," "military operations other than war" and "ethnic cleansing."

Like a verbal Rorschach inkblot, words come to be inescapably associated with a particular conflict: "Body count," "quagmire" and "search and destroy" immediately evoke the Vietnam War. The war in Iraq has long since entered the language, with "shock and awe," "IEDs" and "weapons of mass destruction."

Our military commanders and political leaders must be careful that in using language to deceive the enemy, to propagandize or to persuade, they do not obscure their own thinking. That is what appears to have happened with the Justice Department's twisting of the definition of torture.

Language is a powerful weapon, but like friendly fire, it can lead to self-inflicted wounds. As the French playwright Jean Anouilh warned, "Propaganda is a soft weapon: Hold it in your hands too long, and it will move about like a snake, and strike the other way."

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