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Word Tricks & Propaganda

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The mainstream media carry out their propaganda service on behalf of the corporate and political establishment in many ways: by choice of topics addressed (government rather than corporate abuses, welfare rather than Pentagon waste, Kadaffi rather than Guatemalan state terrorism), by their framing of issues (GDP growth rather than distribution, Fed policy effects on inflation and security prices rather than on unemployment), by their choice of sources of information (heavily depending on officials and think tank flacks), and by their use of language, among other practices.

I want to focus here on the tricks of language that serve propaganda ends, although it should be recognized that biased word usage is closely tied to the other modes of bias. Heavy reliance on officials allows the officials to frame the issues and to use words in ways that serve their agenda. The word "terrorist" is applied to the target enemy (Iran), or the enemy of our friend (Hamas, the PLO, the Kurdish PKK), not the "constructively engaged" governments of Colombia, Israel, Turkey or, back in the 1980s, Savimbi and the apartheid government of South Africa. The examples below will show how story framing and word usage are essentially two aspects of a single process.

The integration of word usage, framing, and source selection points up the fact that language is an arena of conflict and struggle. Word meanings, connotations, and applications are fluid and change in the course of struggle. For example, labor has long fought to have the word "strike" mean a legitimate labor tactic and part of the institution of collective bargaining, whereas

management has always tried to get the word to symbolize labor violence, inconvenience to the community, and damage to the GDP and balance of payments. Management has been pretty successful in getting the word interpreted with negative connotations. Similarly, "welfare" has taken on negative connotations as part of the 25 year long corporate and rightwing attack on the welfare state. This same campaign has seen the word "government" become a word of derogation. Politicians run against "Washington" and "government." At the same time, interestingly, as the right wingers like killing (except fetuses) and are fond of the military establishment, they have succeeded in making the word government applicable only to the government in its civil functions; in denouncing the "government," we are not denouncing the Pentagon.

Words are regularly transformed in the service of the powerful. "Terrorism," originally used to describe state violence, as in the French Revolutionary "reign of terror," has evolved in modern times to focus mainly on anti-government, anti-establishment forms of political violence. "Political correctness," originally an ironical left term for the standards of comrades prone to sectarianism, was seized by establishment spokespersons for a broad-brush castigation of the academic left. "Freedom" has been subtly transformed in the New World Order from political to economic liberty (including liberty for GE, GM, Exxon, and Royal Dutch Shell), just as "democracy" has lost its substantive qualities in favor of adherence to electoral forms. "Entitlement" has taken on negative connotations as the dominant class has succeeded in identifying it with claims of the weak, as in "Social Security entitlements" (there are no military-industrial complex "entitlements," only "procurement," service contracts, and occasionally acknowledged "subsidies").

"Reform" is the classic of word revisionism in the service of power, transformed from meaning institutional and policy changes helpful to the afflicted and weak to moves away from the welfare state and toward free markets, thus helping the afflictors and strong. In an Orwellian twist, "reform" that frees the poor and weak of their "entitlements"—pushing them into a labor market kept loose by Alan Greenspan—is referred to as "empowerment."

Let us review some of the common word tricks of the servants of power in the media and think tank-academic community, taking examples from recent press usage.

PURRING. Purr words are those with positive and warming overtones that create an aura of decency and

virtue. Reform, responsible, accountability, choice, jobs, growth, modernization, flexibility, cost-benefit analysis, national security, stability and efficiency are all prime purr words. The "reformers" are always having their "patience tested," while never testing the patience of others ("Labour costs test patience at US Airways," *Financial Times* [FT], April 14, 1997). And they are invariably moderate, centrist, courageous, daring, and proud. The *New York Times*' (NYT) Leslie Gelb spoke of Aspin, Solarz, and Al Gore as "courageous" for having broken ranks and supported George Bush's decision to bomb Iraq rather than pursue any less violent course of action (March 10, 1991). A NYT headline of April 11, 1997 reads "Proud but Cornered, Mobutu Can Only Hope." Mobutu is one of the great thieves and scoundrels of modern times, but having been installed by the CIA and protected by the West until 1997, even now he is accorded the purr word "proud," which the paper would never apply to Kim Il Sung or Saddam Hussein.

We can put up a large list of purr words from names of congressional bills, always designed to express positive values, even if in substance they threaten enormous pain: New Jersey's "Family Development Initiative Act" (stripping benefits from the poor); the "National Security Revitalization Act" (more boondoggle money); the August 1996 "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act" (which includes five purr words in a single Orwellian classic of doublespeak). Republican pollster and deception manager Frank Luntz carefully tested the "resonance" of words in advising Gingrich and company on the language to be used in the Contract With [sic] America. He was quite open that you include purr words even if it misrepresents intent, yielding the deception masterpiece "Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act," for a proposal whose core content was sizable cuts in capital gains taxes.

The use of "flexibility" in "Democrats Show Flexibility On Capital Gains Tax Cut" (NYT, Feb. 23, 1997), illustrates how word usage and framing are integrated—"flexibility" gives a positive resonance and tacit approval within a frame stressing political compromise. The paper could have used words like "cave in" or "weakening" and framed the issue as one of Democratic acceptance of a further regression in the tax structure.

For the *New York Times*, spokespersons for the military-industrial complex like Sam Nunn, the late Henry Jackson (Senator from Boeing), and the recently retired Republican Senator Alan Simpson are "moderates" and automatically get words expressing approval—an article by Claudia Dreifus on Simpson is titled "Exit Reasonable Right" (June 2, 1996), and in an interview she allows Simpson uncontested justifications for his "rough" usage of Anita Hill and

assailing Peter Arnett's Gulf War reporting as traitorous. A column on Jeane Kirkpatrick, by Barbara Crossette was titled "A Warrior, A Mother, A Scholar, A Mystery" (*NYT*, Aug. 17, 1994). Kirkpatrick was most memorable as a "scholar" for her view that "totalitarian" regimes like those in the Soviet bloc can never open up; and as a humanist she was perhaps best known for alleging that the four American nuns raped and murdered in El Salvador in 1980 had asked for it.

For the *Times*, the Arab world is "split into a clearly moderate, pro-Western camp led by Egypt..and a fiercely nationalistic anti-Western coalition gathered around Iran..."(Aug. 12, 1990). Moderate and pro-Western are synonymous and sources of "stability," as in "In Uneasy Time, Saudi Prince Provides a Hope of Stability" (Jan. 19, 1996). Pro-Western moderates like Saudi Princes, or Suharto, are never "dictators" or "tyrants" like Fidel Castro, and if they are not explicitly tagged moderates, approval is expressed by references to their economic accomplishments in "growth"—as regards Suharto, for example, "even his critics [specifics unmentioned] acknowledge that he has brought growth and prosperity to this country of 190 million people" (*NYT*, July 28, 1996).

A moderate program is one approved by the western establishment, whatever its impact on the underlying population, as in "Jose Maria Aznar was appointed prime minister [of Spain] on a moderate platform, promising strict austerity to put the economic house in order" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 1996). As noted earlier, those implementing approved programs are accorded other purr words—they are bold, courageous, slay ogres, and they do things "quietly" (Thomas Friedman, *NYT*, "Mexico's quiet revolution," Dec. 17, 1995), never noisily and recklessly. These purr words often not only express approval but mislead as to substance. Thus, James Sterngold says that "Nafta is all about corporate efficiency" (*NYT*, Oct. 9, 1995), which is completely untrue—it is about corporate bargaining power, corporate rights to invest abroad, etc. If "moderates" carrying out neoliberal programs do this in violation of election promises, this is itself courageous and meritorious for the dominant Western media. Politicians must "stay the course" and avoid "pandering to fears" (translation: do what the electorate wants; *NYT*, ed., entitled "Why Poland Can't Flinch," Oct. 26, 1991), which displays the triumph of media class bias over the nominal commitment to democratic processes.

SNARLING. Snarl words are those that induce negative reactions and feelings of anger and rejection, like extremist, terrorist, dictator, dependency, welfare, reckless, outlaw, and snarling itself. Moderates never

snarl, nor can they be outlaws, terrorists, dictators or reckless. Established institutions like the Pentagon and large corporations don't suffer from "dependency" or receive "welfare payments." There is "waste" in social budgets, so assassins of the welfare state pretend that that is what they seek to contain in budget cuts (along with "dependency" and immorality). They can count on the mainstream media not making comparisons of waste in social and military budgets.

Fidel Castro runs an "outdated police state" (*NYT*, March 8, 1990). Leslie Gelb speaks of the "vicious dictator" of North Korea in an article entitled "The Next Renegade State" (*NYT*, April 10, 1991). There is no "outdated police state" or "vicious dictator," let alone renegade, among the "commercially engaged" countries of the world. The *NYT* has never used "vicious dictator" to describe Pinochet or the Argentinian generals of 1976-83 who, in the words of an Argentinian truth commission, brought to Argentina a terrorism "infinitely worse" than what they were allegedly combatting.

Environmental "extremists" using "junk science" are now frequently encountered in the mainstream media, especially with the numerous industry mouthpieces like ABC reporter John Stoessel and the editors of the *Wall Street Journal*. This reflects the intensified corporate assault on environmental regulation, which feeds into the media through corporate funded think tanks (see "A Million For Your Thoughts: The Industry-funded Campaign Against the FDA by Conservative Think Tanks," Public Citizen, 1996). For the industry-think-tank-media complex, extremism and junk science are, simply and crudely, oppositional positions and data. Vigorous counter-positions, however, have been advanced by the Union of Concerned Scientists ("Is junk Science Trashing Our Planet?," *Nucleus*, Winter 96-97) and in Peter Montague's *Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly* as well as other publications, so that there is a struggle over who perpetrates junk science, but the monied interests have an edge in the mainstream media.

PUTDOWNS. These are less aggressive words of denigration that chide rather than snarl. Leftists are "noisy" ("Latin Leftists Make a Noisy Comeback," *WSJ*, Jan. 2, 1997), whereas those pursuing neoliberal ends like Zedillo, as noted, are "quiet." Leftists are victims of dogmas ("German unions dump left-wing dogmas," *FT*, Nov. 16-17, 1996), whereas those pursuing neoliberalism are showing courage and realism in advancing what by implication are true principles. And when leftists are not noisy but recognize their setbacks and need to adapt, they are "chastened" ("A Chastened Latin Left Puts Its Hope in Ballot," *NYT*,

July 29, 1996). That they may be chastened by systematic state terror that decimates their ranks need not be mentioned.

PLAYING DOWN VIOLENCE. Economic "reforms" are "tough" and toughening ("Tough reforms bring rewards," *FT*, Dec. 16, 1996; Latins are "Toughened by experience," *FT*, Feb. 10, 1997). Our own managers of terror abroad are "tough" ("Tough Guy For Latin Job" [Elliot Abrams], *NYT*, May 1, 1985), and our client state leaders who kill and torture are not ruthless killers and torturers but "tough" (Argentinian General Robert Viola, *NYT*, Oct. 6, 1980) or merely "forceful" (Israeli General Ariel Sharon, *NYT*, Feb. 11, 1983). Their massacres are muted into the use of "disproportionate" force ("EU criticizes Israel's use of disproportionate force," *FT*, Oct. 2, 1996) or "repression" ("Mr. Clinton made the requisite complaints about Indonesia's repressive tactics in East Timor," *NYT*, 10/3/95); their torture is "physical force" ("Israel Allows Use of Physical Force in Arab's Interrogation," *NYT*, Nov. 16, 1996) or "harsh interrogation" (*NYT*, Nov. 17, 1994). After each Israeli invasion of Lebanon—referred to as an "incursion"—the *NYT* refocuses attention away from the killed, wounded, and dispossessed victims to the "new opportunities" for diplomacy ("Shock of War Could Improve Opportunities For Diplomacy," July 11, 1982; "U.S. Sees Opportunities and Risks In Mideast After War in Lebanon," Oct. 31, 1982).

Back in 1982, U.S. officials brought to the United States a Nicaraguan officer allegedly captured in El Salvador who "confessed" that Nicaragua and Cuba were aiding the Salvadoran rebels. In a press conference in Washington, he declared that his confession had been extracted under torture. The *New York Times* article describing this was entitled "Recanter's Tale: Lesson in Humility for the U.S." (April 2, 1982). The use of "humility" allowed the story to be framed around U.S. official embarrassment at the failure to properly assess the Nicaraguan's shrewdness and ability to "hoodwink" us, and away from the fact that our clients torture. This kind of trick helps explain why torture was so readily institutionalized in the U.S. provinces under U.S. training. We should be "humble" in expecting torture payoffs.

OBSCURING APPEASEMENT OF CLIENT STATE TERROR<MS>. Key phrases serving this function include "quiet diplomacy," "commercial diplomacy," and "constructive engagement," which are intended to suggest that the appeasing administration is really bargaining hard for human rights rather than putting a

public relations face on its appeasement.

We also "de-link" commerce and human rights, which implies that we merely separate the two rather than that we attend to the former and ignore the latter. With commercially important client states it is notable how often relations are "complex" and negotiations with them "delicate" ("The American relationship with Saudi Arabia is complex and delicate...", *NYT*, ed., Jan. 29, 1997), in contrast with our dealings with say Cuba where words and action can be rough. This language covers over the fact that material interest causes us to appease and even aggressively protect regimes that grossly exploit and deny basic rights to their populations.

FACILITATING INNUENDO. Words and phrases like "linked" and "it is reported" and "officials claim" permit connections and actions to be presented without verifiable evidence. The headline "Link to Iran suspected in Saudi blast" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 3, 1996) illustrates an important mode of disseminating propaganda; and the more the allegation fits existing biases the easier it is to pass it along without supporting evidence. Only the powerful can play this game on a regular basis.

The way this system manifests bias can be seen by comparing Eric Schmitt's "Few Links in Church Fires, Panel Is Told: Official Sees Racism but No Sign of Conspiracy in Firebombings" (*NYT*, May 22, 1996), and William Broad's "Unabomb Case Is Linked to Antiwar Tumult on U.S. Campuses in 1960s" (*NYT*, June 1, 1996).

The *Times* has always treated the 1960s resistance with hostility, so here Broad "links" the accused Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski to the antiwar movement simply because some of his teachers and fellow students opposed the Vietnam War and urged peaceful resistance, even though Broad admits that "by all accounts he was cool to the antiwar unrest."

Broad could have "linked" Kaczynski's alleged violent acts to the actual violence of the war itself, which was the source of the peaceful protests that he "links" to Kaczynski. Broad also could have said there is no evidence tying Kaczynski to any groups advocating violence, but that would have precluded making use of the thin and even ludicrous link that allows trashing the 1960s antiwar movement once again. In the case of the Church bombings, the *Times* chose to play down the linking possibilities. It is evident from the subhead given above that the paper could have "linked" the church bombings to racism, but instead it chose to deny a link to a "conspiracy." This makes the bombings

sound less ominous and pernicious than if they were "linked" to something. The bombings of the black churches didn't offer the paper any links they were eager to make, as in the case of the Unabomber.

PERSONIFICATION AND USE OF COLLECTIVE

WORDS. Personification of groups and nations and the use of collective words are other devices commonly employed to get over preferred positions not supported by evidence. The use of "Brazil" in "Faith in reform buoys Brazil" (*FT*, Feb. 24, 1997) is based entirely on attitudes expressed by Brazilian bankers and securities market professionals, who constitute less than a quarter of 1 percent of the Brazilian people.

A classic of this genre was David Sanger's "Jittery Asia Has Visions of a Nuclear North Korea" (*NYT*, April 7, 1991); the generalization to Asia was apparently based on statements of three individuals, two of them officials, one Japanese, the other South Korean. David Rosenbaum's "The Tax Break America Couldn't Give Up" (*NYT*, Oct. 8, 1989), illustrates the use of a collective term to confuse an issue. He claims a generalized feeling among Americans of being overtaxed, but this overlooks class differences in attitude toward specific taxes. It is possible that ordinary Americans feel overtaxed but would be pleased to see higher taxes on the affluent and corporations. "America" could not give up these tax breaks because ordinary citizens have little weight in national policy making. Rosenbaum effectively obscures such consideration by his use of "Americans."

FALSELY IMPUTING BENEVOLENT MOTIVES. My current favorites are "risk" and "gamble," as these are now being applied to the savage welfare "reform" bill of August 1996. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* asserts that "Congress and Clinton are gambling that many poor Americans won't need a safety net to land on their feet" (Aug. 4, 1996). The *New York Times* editorialized on the "gamble," and their house economist, Peter Passell, quoted a think-tank analyst that the bill was taking a "risk" that the people thrown off welfare might not find jobs (Aug. 8, 1996). The use of these words implies that Clay Shaw, Gingrich, McIntosh, and Clinton are really concerned about those poor folks being pushed out on the streets and no doubt weighed the costs and benefits in some kind of humanistic calculus. This is apologetic nonsense. These politicians weren't taking any risks or gambles; they were completely unconcerned, if not actually pleased, about any pain the victims would suffer.

It is of course absolutely standard media practice to assume that their own country has good intentions as it ravages in its backyard or other parts of the world (e.g., in the Persian Gulf or Indochina). We always strive for "democracy" and resist somebody else's aggression, but never commit aggression ourselves. Even when we have destroyed a democracy, as in Guatemala in 1954, the U.S. mainstream media uniformly found this justifiable in view of "the threat of communism," which was entirely concocted (although conveniently internalized) and a cover for the pursuit of the interest of United Fruit and a determination to get rid of a seriously reformist leadership that wouldn't take orders. The power of media rationalization of U.S. aggression reached its limit in the Vietnam War where, despite the U.S.'s exclusive reliance on force, and official recognition that our agents could not compete with the "enemy" politically, in James Reston's classic of apologetics we were in Vietnam to establish the principle "that no state shall use military force or the threat of military force to achieve its objectives" (Feb. 26, 1965).

REMOVING AGENCY. Where we or our allies have done terrible things, watch for the resort to the passive voice and other modes of removing agency. Thus the *New York Times* subhead for the article on the ending of the Guatemalan civil war (Dec. 30, 1996) is "After 100,000 dead, the peace ceremony is more solemn than celebratory." Actually, the numbers are well above 100,000 dead, but note the failure to say who did virtually all the killing or what government in 1954 displaced a non-killing elected regime with the regime of terror whose violence is supposedly now ending? In its Indonesia reporting, also, the *Times* has trouble identifying an agent: "More than 500,000 Indonesians are estimated to have died in a purge of leftists in 1965, the year Mr. Suharto came to power" (April 8, 1997). Actually, the "purge" went well beyond "leftists," including several hundred thousand peasant farmers, and there is no doubt who did the purging and what great power supporting the purge viewed it as a "gleam of light in Asia" (James Reston, *NYT*, June 19, 1966).

These are just some of the modes by which words are manipulated to serve bias and propaganda. In many cases the process entails passing along the word usage and frame of the originating source. But the media claim to be seeking truth and serving the public (not corporate and elite) interest. That should be the standard by which we evaluate and criticize them as we seek to shrink the immense gap between their own proclaimed ideal and actual performance.

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