Critical Analysis
Abuse of Words, Words of Abuse
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In the 12 April New Yorker, Philip Gourevitch cites Republican consiglieri Grover Norquist's view of his countrymen:
"Americans don't care about the rest of the world. If they mess with us, go blow them up, and don't bother me, y'know - don't sit and talk about it all day. You went out and blew up the nice Taliban. Good. O.K. Next. What are you doing for me?"

With countrymen like that, particularly in power, who need search for enemies .. surely they'll find us. That level of narcissitic self-absorption is reflected in our choice of language and how we use it.

In Peace and Conflict, The Metaphor-to-Myth Transformation1 (with Special Reference to the 'War on Terrorism'), Theodore R. Sarbin, UC Santa Cruz argues that the words we choose to use provide in their subtext the motivation for our decisions to act.

Consider the words 'freedom', 'interests' and 'fight'. Of Franklin Roosevelt's four freedoms, two were explicitly 'from':
- freedom from want and freedom from fear
- The other two were cast in the 'of' form, freedom of worship and of speech and expression. The latter were clearly, like the former freedoms, passive, involving the being and self of the individual without imposing on others. Without doing violence to their intent, they might have been cast in the 'from' form as freedom from religious oppression and freedom from verbal and expressive limitation.

A freedom 'of' or 'from' is quite different from a freedom 'to'. George Orwell wrote, "If freedom means anything, it is the freedom to tell others what they don't want to hear".

Telling is a passive act, requiring only a hearer, not a listener; implicitly the former is accorded the freedom to ignore the teller. Compelling others really to listen, to attend, to consider and comprehend, requires the imposition of an expectation on those others that mitigates their freedom from the speaker.

Today, the word 'freedom' appears more and more in the context of an active 'right' to impose ourselves upon others. The freedom to exploit others, the freedom to dictate to others how they shall be, the freedom to take from others with or without their consent, the freedom to expropriate and ravage the commons, to exploit the environment for individual gain. Freedom has become not so much a 'from' or 'of' but a 'to', not intransitive and passive but transitive and active, something done to another or things.

Consider the effort of our 'leadership' to bring 'freedom' to Iraq. Does our government really wish or condone a 'free' Iraq, NOT necessarily in our own image, NOT necessarily subservient to our own selfish national
'interests'? It seems increasingly evident the real intent of our invasion and occupation was NOT democracy for Iraqis or their freedom, in the Rooseveltian sense, from us, but the imposition of a government that would allow our corporations to have their way with Iraq's available resources for our national benefit. Since the vast majority of Iraqis see quite clearly through that charade, it is hard to see how any attempts to 'help' the Iraqis regroup and reconstruct their brutalized, descreted country will be met with other than the sort of rejection that al Sadr, Falluja and Najaf represent.

Similarly the word 'interests' is currently used as justification for any number of offensive acts from personal indignities to military atrocities. 'National interests' are said to justify subjecting other peoples to our will: invading their countries, terrorizing, slaughtering their populace, imposing our ethics, morals, and governmental procedures on them and consuming their resources, for our own sakes.

A mugger approaches you on the street. Although his interests are served by robbing you, or worse, it is unacceptable in 'civilized' society for his interests to supersede yours; others' interests stop where your person begins. Similarly a thug's, rapist's, cheat's, charlatan's or scoundrel's 'interests' may well be served by their physical, fiscal or emotional assault upon your being or person. Yet at the individual level that assault is an unacceptable act. Why then are such assaults legitimized and accepted among nations by 'national interests' when individuals' 'interests' generally are not? When individuals' 'interests' are in conflict, how is it decided whose shall prevail? In 'civilized' societies, police, the courts and clerical mediators assist in attempting to arrive at 'fair', just or equitable resolutions: something for everyone. An individual who disregards the police or courts becomes an outlaw.

Between states, the United Nations or the World Court provide means for obtaining solutions respectful of the competing 'interests' of individual countries. But necessary to the effectiveness of such agencies is the condition that states work cooperatively within these agencies' framework toward a resolution. When a nation or its military, defying the UN or the World Court, contemptuously acts pre-emptively regardless of the 'interests' of other nations, is that not also the behavior of an outlaw state? Might makes, not right but, a mockery of fairness or justice! What has become of our country's founding principles for which it was once so widely admired?

Whither comes the prevalence of the violent metaphor, 'fight'? The word is used in our language in ways and places that are totally inconsistent with resolution by physical violence; we fight disease, fight addiction, fight ignorance, obesity, even laziness. Fighting is deemed an appropriate response for virtually any challenge. Yet fighting is about combat, battle, injury, death and destruction; fighting is physical violence in the perpetration of, or resistance to, physical assault. What about more temperate, thoughtful, pacific, even constructive reponses to challenge such as to resist, to struggle against, to contend with, to prevent, to oppose or even circumvent? Metaphors matter! Kinds of assault or insult other than physical are best deflected or resisted by other
means. However painful and injurious, sticks and stones break physical things, skin, bones, bodies and other objects; use of 'fighting' to describe non-physical violence blurs the differences and contributes to desensitization to the causes and consequences of physical assault and corporeal resistance.

In "Fights by girls more frequent, more intense", an Associated Press story by Wiley Hall published 27 April 2004, Phil Leaf, director of the Center for Prevention of Youth Violence at Johns Hopkins suggests that this result is the effect "of children growing up in a world without adults"; but is it modeling on the behavior of adults that prevents violent behavior, or the linguistic environment that adults, the media, whether 'news' or 'entertainment' provides that sanctions violence implicitly and explicitly by the violent metaphors they use and project? Surely our political leadership, the daily parade of macho, hyper-testosterized generals' posturing before the cameras at press briefings from Iraq, provide role-playing that is inconsistent with constructive adult solutions to adult problems.

Sarbin argues that the language we choose to use matters. By mythologizing with metaphor we desensitize ourselves to the consequences of our acting out the mythology of our metaphorical language. The language we use, the language we think with, the language we justify our behaviors with to ourselves and others, both predicts and foredooms the actions we take.

Reference
(1) Theodore R. Sarbin, UC Santa Cruz, Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 9(2), 149-157
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