

From 'civilisation' to 'WMD', words are weapons

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When George Bush, soon after September 11, referred to a "crusade" against al-Qaida, he helped persuade Muslims that they were under renewed attack from the Christian world. In the context of a possible "conflict between civilisations", Bush's use of language was not only insensitive but extremely reckless. Bush has avoided the word "crusade" ever since. But he still regularly talks about the need to defend "civilisation" and "the civilised world" against "dark forces". He never explains which part of the planet is the "uncivilised" or "dark" bit. Perhaps he means Kandahar in Afghanistan or Eastbourne in England. It is unclear.

Words can define how a people sees itself: the US declaration of independence is one obvious example. Modern-day Palestinians also see themselves involved in a struggle for "independence" and "freedom" from external oppression. Words such as "imperialism", "emancipation", "self-determination" and "liberation" define how history is written, how the future will be shaped. Terrorism is an obvious example. In the abstract, "terrorism" is a terrible thing; nobody likes it; nobody supports it. Why then is there so much "terrorism"? Because people cannot agree on its definition. It depends where you stand. Terrorism is a word that is often misused.

For Donald Rumsfeld, for example, the recent helicopter attack at Falluja was simply the

work of "terrorists". To the oppressed of the world, however, the men of violence are militants, freedom-fighters, guerrillas, insurgents, heroes, martyrs. The real terrorists belong to the "other side". Yet "state terrorism" is a concept that the oppressors do not recognise. Which brings us back to Bush. When Bush declared his global "war on terror", he encouraged autocratic rulers all over the world to do their worst in the name of "security". From Chechnya to Colombia, Pakistan to the Philippines, the anti-terror "war" has grown with Bush's approval.

In this carelessly used language, such people, whether killed or locked up in Bagram or Guantanamo or a thousand other hell-holes, are by definition "evil". The latest addition to political-speak, to the modern leader's essential vocabulary, is WMD, or weapons of mass destruction. Everyone has heard of WMD and they are now a reason why civil liberties are under attack everywhere, why military budgets are rising, why the developing world is not developing, and why your opinion is ignored. Developed countries have their own WMD, of course, but their weapons are somehow regarded as acceptable. WMD in developing countries or "rogue states" (whatever that means), on the other hand, are unacceptable. These WMD are regarded as a threat.

There are certain words that the West's leaders carefully avoid. These include "resistance", which is too positive a word to use when describing those people in Iraq

who attack the American forces. And then there is "occupation". Occupation, as in Iraq, is a no-go word; liberation is much better. Occupation makes it sound as if the US has entered somebody else's country illegally and refuses to go away. It makes Iraq sound like Palestine, Tibet, Afghanistan or even Vietnam. That really is careless talk.

Politicians and the media need to be more sensitive in their use of language. They should avoid ambiguity and words with politically and culturally charged, multiple meanings. As ever in human communication, there is truth and there is propaganda. It is important to be able to tell the difference. Before passing the ammunition, pass the word.

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