

Devil's Dictionary of the Bush Era

Posted by

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Tomdispatch.com, Posted on March 29, 2005: When asked if he would like to submit a Bush-era definition or two, Noam Chomsky replied, "I suspect that I'll have to fall back on Mark Twain's despair when trying to satirize General Funston: 'No satire of Funston could reach perfection, because Funston occupies that summit himself. ... [he is] satire incarnated.'" (Gen. Frederick N. Funston was a commander of part of the American expeditionary force that crushed the Philippine independence movement as the 20th century began.)

www.alternet.org/story/21615/ For the last few years we have been ruled by lexicographers. Never has an administration spent so much time creating, defining, or redefining terms, perhaps because no one (since George Orwell) has grasped the power and possibility that lay hidden in plain sight in the naming and renaming of words. In a sense, our post-9/11 moment began with two definitions: The Bush administration named our global enemy "terrorism" and called the acts that followed a "war," which was soon given the moniker "the global war on terror" (later reduced to the acronym GWOT, also known as World War IV), which was then given an instant future ? being defined as a "generational struggle" that was still to come. All this, along with "war" itself, was simply announced rather than officially "declared."

Given that we were (by administration definition) at war, it should have been self-evident that those we captured in our "war" on terrorism would then be "prisoners of war," but no such luck for them, since their rights would in that case have been clearly defined in international treaties signed by the United States.

So the Bush administration opened its Devil's Dictionary and came up with a new, tortured term for our new prisoners, "unlawful combatants," which really stood for: We can do anything we want to you in a place of our choosing. For that place, they then chose Guantanamo, an American base in Cuba (which they promptly defined as within "Cuban sovereignty" for the purposes of putting our detention camps beyond the purview of American courts or Congress, but within Bush administration sovereignty ? the sole kind that counted with them ? for the purposes of the Cubans).

In this way, we moved from a self-declared generational war against a method of making war to a world of torture beyond the reach of, or even sight of, the law in a place that (until the Supreme Court recently ruled otherwise) more or less didn't exist. All this was then supported by a world of pretzeled language constantly being reshaped in the White House Counsel's office, the Justice Department, and the Pentagon so that reality would have no choice but to comply with the names given it.

The way gunmen once reached for their six-guns, so the various legal and other counselors of this administration reach for their dictionaries. The lawyer-authors of the various tortured memos about torture that came out of the White House Counsel's office and the Justice Department, for instance, expended much effort acting as if they were part of a panel for a new edition of some dictionary.

It seems they sat surrounded by the Webster's New International Dictionary (sometimes the

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1935 edition, sometimes later ones), the American Heritage Dictionary, and the Oxford English Dictionary, medical dictionaries, and who knows what else, as they decided just how much pain wasn't actually pain for the benefit of the Pentagon, the CIA, and the president.

This unfortunately is but part of our unfinished journey through the language of the Bush era. To take but a single example, the newest National Security document out of the Pentagon redefines the category of Weapons of Mass Destruction or WMD (which itself blunted the world-destroying impact of nuclear weapons by sweeping them into a larger category of potential weaponry) with a new acronym WMD/E: The term WMD/E relates to a broad range of adversary capabilities that pose potentially devastating impacts. WMD/E includes chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and enhanced high explosive weapons as well as other, more asymmetrical 'weapons'. They may rely more on disruptive impact than destructive kinetic effects. For example, cyber attacks on U.S. commercial information systems or attacks against transportation networks may have a greater economic or psychological effect than a relatively small release of a lethal agent.

Soon, in addition to going to war with "terrorism" (al Qaeda) and "rogue nations" (Iraq), it seems that we will be able to go to "war" with cyber-hackers, a generational battle which will undoubtedly be known as the Global War on Computer Hackers (GWOCH)

Recently, Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of *The Nation* magazine, has been focusing on Bush-administration-speak in the online columns she writes at her Editor's Cut weblog. She's been attempting to demystify what she calls "a veritable Orwellian Code of encrypted language." Her definitions are amusing, biting, and on target. ("Neoconservatives, n. Nerds with Napoleonic complexes.") At some point, she opened her column up to Nation readers and now plans to put together a Republican Dictionary out of the various definitions that are coming in.

I thought that we at Tomdispatch might lend a hand and so asked a number of our writers if they would contribute their own Bush-era definitions. Should Tomdispatch readers care to enter the fray and submit definitions for possible use in The Nation's future book, Katrina vanden Heuvel suggests that you send them to webeditor@thenation.com. (put "GOP dictionary" in the subject line.)

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Herewith, then, entries (or are they entrees?) for a modern Devil's Dictionary (with a small bow to Ambrose Bierce).

TOM ENGELHARDT

Homeland n: A term successfully used by the Germans and the Soviets in World War II, less successfully (and in the plural) by Apartheid-era South Africa. It means neither home, nor land,

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has replaced both country and nation in American public speech, and is seldom wielded without the companion word "security." It is the place to which imperial forces return for R&R.

Homeland Security: synonymous with Homeland insecurity.

Homeland Security Department: The new Defense Department, known for declaring bridges yellow and the Statue of Liberty orange.

Homelandism n: a neologism for love of the Homeland Security State as in, "My Homeland, 'tis of thee, sweet security state of liberty..."

Intelligence n: What Dick Cheney wants and the CIA must provide ? or else. (See, Iraq, weapons of mass destruction)

Nationalism n: How foreigners love their country (when they do). A very dangerous phenomenon that can lead to extremes of passion, blindness, and xenophobia. (See, Terrorism)

Oil n: 1. Black gold. 2. (*defunct acronym*) Operation Iraqi Liberation or OIL (name changed to Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF, without explanation). 3. What the Bush administration wasn't after in Iraq and isn't after in Iran. (See, *Democracy*)

Patriotism n: How Americans love their country. A trait so positive you can't have too much of it, and if you do, then you are a super-patriot which couldn't be better. (Foreigners cannot be patriotic. (*See, Nationalism*))

Pentagon n: Formerly, the Defense Department, but since we now have a new defense department (see, Homeland Security Department), soon be renamed the Global Forward Deployment Department or GFDD (Ge-Fudd). Its forward-deployed headquarters will be established in a two-sided building, the Duogon, now being constructed in Bahrain out of sand imported from the beaches of Texas by Halliburton subsidiary KBR. From there, it plans to rule the known world.

ARLIE HOCHSCHILD

Environmental Protection Agency: Economic Predators Inc.

Homeland Security Advisory System: Color-coded program for emotional destabilization.

Leave No Child Behind: Social class divide maintenance system

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Senate n: Exclusive club, entry fee \$10 to \$30 million.

House of Representatives: Exclusive club, entry fee \$1 to \$5 million.

Washington Press Corps: Extension of White House and Pentagon press offices.

CHALMERS AND SHEILA JOHNSON

Stuff Happens: Donald Rumsfeld as master historian.

March of Freedom Around the World: John Negroponte's career.

Shock and Awe: A classic combination like "surf and turf"; special effects produced at missile point by the U.S. military. *(See, State Terrorism).*

BILL MOYERS

"Burning Bush": A biblical allusion to the response of the president of the United States when asked a question by a journalist who has not been paid to inquire.

JONATHAN SCHELL

Republican Party: A party that assails the foundations of the Republic, attacking the balance and separation of powers *(See, Assertions of Untrammelled Presidential Authority ? to violate domestic and international laws forbidding torture*

); habeas corpus

(See, Assertion of Right to Lock Away "Enemy Combatants" Forever ? without due process of law);

and federalism

(See, Legislative and Executive Rampage ? to overturn state court decisions in the Terri Schiavo case).

ORVILLE SCHELL

Strategic Competitor (China branch): Containing China militarily while using it as an industrial park for outsourcing low-paying and often polluting industries.

MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

Democracy n: A country where the newspapers are pro-American.

Public Opinion Polls: Progress reports for spin doctors.

STEPHEN SHALOM:

Checks and Balances: The system whereby the campaign checks of the few balance the interests of the many.

Free Speech Zone: The area to which those who differ from the administration are confined should they be so audacious as to wish to exercise their right of free speech.

Free Press: 1. Government propaganda materials covertly funded with a quarter of a billion dollars of taxpayer money but given out for free to the press and then broadcast without any acknowledgment of the government's role in their preparation. 2. Newspapers that obscure the truth on behalf of corporate and government interests for free.

Town-hall Meeting: A meeting in a hall in a town where all the participants have first been vetted for loyalty to the Bush administration.

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Mandate: 1. The opinion expressed by about a quarter of the eligible voters. 2. The opinion reflected in an electoral-vote margin smaller than in any 20th century election other than 1916 and 2000. 3. The opinion expressed by the smallest popular vote margin obtained by a sitting president since 1916.

REBECCA SOLNIT

China: See Wal-Mart.

Death n: An increasingly rare phenomenon, no longer occurring among soldiers of the U.S. army or civilians in affected countries. However, the media reports that death is still caused by lone gunmen and over-consumption of saturated fats as well as natural disasters.

Democracy n: 1. A product so extensively exported that the domestic supply is depleted. 2. When they vote for us. (See, tyranny: When they vote for someone else.)

Liberal adj: Widely used after the words progressive, radical, left, revolutionary, and insurrectionary were banned from the mainstream media, having the double benefit of making moderates seem vaguely dangerous and making revolutionaries seem vaguely embarrassing and ineffectual.

Liberal media: Ted Koppel and anarchist zines.

Negroponte, John: Good diplomat, in the sense that Pol Pot is a good family-planner.

Ownership Society: You no longer own your national parks, your public transit, your commons, your government, your Bill of Rights, or your future, but you may purchase a Burger King franchise or some stocks with your Wal-Mart earnings.

Peace n: What war is for.

Security n: Something to be applied to the homeland but not to the social.

Social Security: A good idea except for two problems: Social verges on socialism and guarantees of security violate a free market.

The Marketplace of Ideas: Buy low, sell high.

Wal-Mart: The nation-state, future tense.

NICK TURSE

Abuse n: Modern word for what was once referred to as torture. An interim term, soon to be replaced by "tough love" (which, in turn, is expected to be replaced by "freedom's caress").

Mullah n: 1. (*archaic*) Religious teacher or leader, a title of respect in Islamic countries, pronounced "mull-a." 2. (*informal*) In the modern presidential vernacular, a title of disrespect (pronounced "moo-lah") in reference to Muslims deemed too fanatical to be

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bought-off by American "moo-lah."

Rummy (slang): 1. (*archaic*) A person so drunk he can't recall a thing. 2. (*modern*) A SECDEF so drunk on power that he refuses to remember anything.

Support the Troops: A mandatory mantra which need no longer be mouthed since full "support" can be offered with a simple \$1 investment in a magnetic yellow ribbon to affix to the back of your SUV.

CHIP WARD

Healthy Forests: Forests made safe from the ravages of nature, i.e. bugs and fires, by removal to pulp mills and lumber yards.

Wilderness n: 1. Publicly owned former habitat for wildlife, often endangered, where private corporations go wild drilling for oil and gas, grazing cattle, logging, and building roads. 2. Off-road vehicle theme parks characterized by abundant stumps, oil slicks, tire tracks, flattened owls, and coughing caribou.

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