

## ESSAY

# ‘Surge,’ Meet ‘Escalation’

The fight for clarity in language: a case study

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Nothing has the capacity to frame political debate more successfully than a good turn of phrase, characterization, or metaphor; nor can anything do more to pervert democratic discourse than inaccurate, imprecise, or misleading language. George Orwell understood the game and called its bluff more than sixty years ago. In words that offered an eerie forecast of the rhetoric of Vietnam, he noted that “defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification.”

He understood, too, that political advocates trade in the use of language. Since there is “no agreed definition” of the word democracy, Orwell noted, “the defenders of every kind of régime claim that it is a democracy.” This is one area where the world has not really changed since 1946, when Orwell wrote “Politics and the English Language.” Nor, indeed since a quarter of a century before that, when Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion* described the role of “the publicity man”

who shapes images for reporters, acting as “censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers,” presenting the truth “only as it accords with the employers’ conception of his own interest.” But while political advocates and press agents have always had every right (and every incentive) to peddle their own version of the truth, and to spin their own clever phrases and metaphors, journalists should not blindly parrot their words. And once in a while, they don’t.

In late November 2006, when NBC News first used the words “civil war” to describe events in Iraq, the network took the unusual stand of defying the government in defining the war. The phrase had been employed for years by some observers inside and outside of government. But NBC’s public (and publicized) action moved the words to the forefront of public discourse. In doing so, the network demonstrated one of the most important functions of the mainstream media. Usually without much internal deliberation or thought, the major press outlets effectively define the terms of America’s public discourse. But the careful choice of language—of the words used to describe ourselves, our adversaries, our choices, and our debates—is a core responsibility of the press.

The decision to call events in Iraq a “civil war” provides an excellent case study. As early as 2004, some cia officers had been using that phrase, as had some congressional leaders, including Senator Joseph Biden. During the next two years, much of the American public came to the same conclusion. In March 2006, a *Washington Post* poll found that a majority of Americans was afraid that the fighting between Sunni and Shiite Muslims would lead to a civil war. That summer, a number of analysts and news outlets reported that there was a debate brewing in the administration over the issue—with the CIA calling for a more honest assessment and the White House resisting. President Bush made the administration’s views clear. In March 2006, Iyad Allawi, who was once Iraq’s interim prime minister, used the term.

“Do you agree with Mr. Allawi that Iraq has fallen into a civil war?” a reporter asked the president at a news conference. The response was unequivocal: “I do not.”

Meanwhile, various news organizations were struggling with terminology.

“Sectarian violence” seemed too soft. “Civil war” seemed too definitive—and too politically sensitive. As Bill Keller, the executive editor of *The New York Times*, later explained to Brooke Gladstone on National Public Radio’s *On the Media*: “One of

the reasons for not using it was, you know, honestly, a concern that because the White House has contended that this is not a civil war, that using the phrase amounted to a kind of unnecessary political statement.” So the *Times* used qualifiers, Keller explained, quoting other sources or modifying the harshness of the term “civil war” by describing Iraq as “on the brink of civil war.”

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In the late fall of 2006, the *Los Angeles Times*, without fanfare, started to use the term “civil war,” but those words, and their implications, did not fully become national news or enter the national consciousness until late November. Then, after a particularly bloody few days in Iraq, NBC News decided to act. Richard Engel, an NBC reporter who has been in Iraq longer than any other American television correspondent, had long felt that the country was in a civil war. On Sunday, November 26, Alexandra Wallace, who was a vice president of NBC News, consulted Engel and anchor Brian Williams, as well as a group of military leaders and historians, in an effort to determine where “sectarian violence” ends and “civil war” begins. Their view was unanimous. NBC knew that its position would be controversial. But the news division was convinced that Iraq had become a civil war.

The next morning, host Matt Lauer announced on the *Today* show that NBC had made a formal decision to use that term. Recreating some of the elements of the discussion from the previous day, Lauer engaged in a lengthy on-air dialogue with retired general Barry McCaffrey, in which they discussed NBC’s decision, the meaning of the phrase “civil war,” and the arguments for and against applying that term to events on the ground in Iraq. Predictably, the White House protested. “While the situation on the ground is very serious,” a spokesman for the National Security Council told reporters on Air Force One as it was taking the president to meetings in the Middle East, neither Prime Minister Maliki nor the Bush White House “believe that Iraq is in a civil war.” Some conservative media critics went further, repeating the familiar charge that the press was really against American troops. “You have violent, out-of-control chaos, not civil war,” Fox’s Bill O’Reilly

protested. “Of course, the American media is not helping anyone by oversimplifying the situation and rooting for the USA to lose in Iraq.”

But while the fight over the phrase “civil war” was largely treated as a political debate, and in some quarters as a political decision, it was, in fact, much more than that. In deciding what words to use to identify the conflict, NBC was helping to insure that its reporting was accurate.

Indeed, there are times when good journalists need to be as concerned with the accuracy of their language as they are with the accuracy of their facts. Unless the mainstream press uses the correct language to describe issues of public policy, then readers, viewers, and government leaders are unlikely to understand, discuss, and analyze them honestly and meaningfully.

Speaking on *Meet the Press* six months later, on June 10, 2007, former secretary of state Colin Powell offered an unapologetic appraisal of the situation when he declared: “I have characterized it as a civil war even though the administration does not call it that. And the reason I call it a civil war is I think that allows you to see clearly what we’re facing. We’re facing groups that are now fighting each other: Sunnis versus Shias, Shias versus Shias, Sunnis versus al Qaeda. And it is a civil war.” Secretary Powell went on to explain how the choice of words we use to understand the situation in Iraq relates directly to the policies we employ when he combined two particularly controversial rhetorical phrases—“civil war” and “surge”—in the following observation: “The current strategy to deal with it, called a surge—the military surge, our part of the surge under General Petraeus—the only thing it can do is put a heavier lid on this boiling pot of civil-war stew.”

Whereas a number of politicians and pundits were unprepared to engage in linguistic debate early in the war, by early 2007, when President Bush announced that he was planning to launch a “surge” in Iraq, they were ready to enter the rhetorical fray. As Jim Rutenberg reported in *The New York Times* on January 10, 2007, the day of Bush’s announcement: “This week has ushered in a new political battle over the language of the war: ‘Surge,’ meet ‘escalation.’”

The Democrats introduced the latter word to portray President Bush’s expected proposal for a troop increase in Iraq in a negative light. Those making the case for “escalation” included Senator Ted Kennedy, who reminded listeners that “the

Department of Defense kept assuring us that each new escalation in Vietnam would be the last. Instead, each one led only to the next.” And Nancy Pelosi, in her first week as Speaker of the House, used the words “escalate” and “escalation” six times during an interview on the CBS News program *Face the Nation*. The next day, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argued with Chuck Hagel, Republican senator from Nebraska, about the proper choice of words. “I don’t see it, and the president doesn’t see it, as an escalation,” she told Hagel. The exchange continued:


*Hagel: Putting 22,000 new troops, more troops in, is not an escalation?*

*Rice: Well, I think, Senator, escalation is not just a matter of how many numbers you put in. Escalation is also a question of, are you changing the strategic goal of what you’re trying to do? Are you escalating...?*

*Hagel: Would you call it a decrease, and billions of dollars more that you need for it?*

*Rice: I would call it, Senator, an augmentation that allows the Iraqis to deal with this very serious problem that they have in Baghdad.*

Interestingly, White House Spokesman Tony Snow provided a particularly appropriate analysis. At a press briefing, when reporters pressed him about the proper terminology, he noted that the terms of the debate were being framed by “focus groups.” Then he urged reporters to make their own judgment. “This is your challenge,” he said. “You guys do words for a living. Figure out—rather than trying to ask Democratic or even Republican lawmakers what the proper descriptive term is, you figure it out.”



There was a case to be made on both sides. The Bush administration could claim that the concept of a “surge” had been identified and embraced by the Iraq Study Group, which was somewhat true. (The Baker-Hamilton report said: “We could, however, support a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad...if the U.S. commander in Iraq determines that such steps would be effective.”) But looking at that same language, critics could argue that the words “short-term” and “surge” are inextricably intertwined and that what the administration was proposing was not short-term, and therefore could not be properly labeled a “surge.” Faced with that linguistic debate, the press overwhelmingly decided to use the word “surge” rather than “escalation.”

But Tony Snow was right: reporters “do words” for a living. There are times when it is as important for the press to be as accurate about the use of language as it is about the reporting of facts. As Orwell pointed out, there are those who would argue that the “struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism....” But Orwell felt that it was a struggle worth waging in the aftermath of the experience of World War II; and it is at least as worthwhile today. The power of the mainstream media may, as some have argued, be on the decline. But as NBC so recently proved, it still has the ability to help define or shape debates and to help determine what language we use. Rather than allowing any political figure or administration to define the terms of public discourse, reporters and editors should examine the issue for themselves and reach an honest conclusion.

As Orwell might have noted, readers, viewers, and listeners—and our own particular form of democracy—require no less.

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