

## Doublespeak: Official language of D.C.

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The government's annual accounting of hunger in America reported no hunger in its last outing. Instead, it found "food insecurity."

Likewise, no one is even considering retreating from Iraq. "Redeploying" the heck out of there is, however, an option.

In Washington, words are a moving target that conceal at least as much as they reveal. Doublespeak runs through the discourse on Iraq, terrorism and domestic matters to a point where it's hard to tell what is going on.

The libertarian Cato Institute recently took on the rising tide of fuzzy words in the fight against terrorism, arguing that whatever people think of what the government is doing, it would help to understand what the government is doing.

That is no easy task when the administration offers tortured definitions of torture, describes suicide by captives as "self-injurious behavior incidents" and labeled at least one suspect an "imperative security internee" when it became constitutionally questionable to hold him as an "enemy combatant."

Interrogations are debriefings.

Propaganda is a struggle "for hearts and minds."

The estate tax is the death tax.

The right to an abortion is the right to "choose."

And can anyone oppose the Patriot Act and still be a patriot?

"By corrupting the language, the people who wield power are able to fool the others about their activities and evade responsibility and accountability," Cato's Timothy Lynch argues in his polemic against doublespeak — an outgrowth of the doublethink and newspeak of George Orwell's "1984."

But nefarious "War is Peace" Orwellianisms are not the only impulse at work, by a long shot.

Some of Washington's bland euphemisms are calculated mainly not to offend. Just as Dead End signs have been replaced in some communities by No Outlet ones, congressional oversight investigators tend these days to find "challenges" in the behavior of agencies, as they politely put it, and not quite so many "problems" — how rude.

Marketing sensibilities long ago infiltrated, if not took over, the debate in Washington, a progression most vividly seen in catchy titles given to legislation. These are the same sensibilities that, in the marketplace, prompted rapeseed oil to be sold as canola oil and a delicate fish named slimehead to come to the dinner table as orange roughy.

Republicans came to power in the 1990s offering the American Dream Restoration Act and the Common Sense Legal Reforms Act. President Clinton pitched his Middle Class Bill of Rights. President Bush this decade defied anyone to stand against something named No Child Left Behind.

Republicans pitch elimination of the "death tax" because it sounds more populist than giving rich people a break by getting rid of the "estate tax" — the same thing.

Democrats will go to the wall in defense of abortion rights without uttering that unpleasant word, abortion. Instead, they are champions of "choice" or, in a less guarded moment, "reproductive choice." (The cause is advocated by progressives, formerly liberals.)

The wish to be technically accurate was behind the decision of the Agriculture Department this year to squeeze "hunger" out of the equation when considering how many people go hungry.

Hunger, in the words of advisers whose recommendations were accepted by the department, is "an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity."

The word "should" refer to a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation."

In other words, it's not just the munchies.

The department reasoned it cannot truly measure hunger because it surveys households, and households do not get hungry — people do.

The terms "low food security" and "very low food security" replaced the old descriptions of "food insecurity without hunger" and "food insecurity with hunger."

The fight against terrorism brings its own evolving vocabulary and semantic arguments, starting with the question of whether the war in Iraq is

part of it, as Bush says, or a distraction from it, as his critics contend.

The notion of "homeland security" was foreign to American ears until the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and formation of a department with that name. Now it is an accepted distinction from the foreign-based military and intelligence matters that come under the mantle of national security.

The White House was less successful branding suicide bombers as "homicide bombers," an Israeli euphemism meant to emphasize the murderous nature of the act and deny the "martyrdom" claimed by those who blow themselves up. The term hasn't stuck.

And there is no more "stay the course" on Iraq. Bush found himself on the defensive when a phrase meant to convey a resolute stance came to be seen as inflexibility in the face of chaos. The rhetoric, at least, changed course.

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