

Commentary by Keith R. Herrmann

The War of Words

Whenever one thinks of the intersection of war and language, perhaps the first things that come to mind are Rambo's grunts or Robert Duvall saying, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." War, however, has had a far greater impact on the English language than merely providing the heroes and villains that are the stuff of movies, novels, and poems. It is surprising to discover how widespread the impact of war on language has been.

Many words and phrases that were originally used on the battlefield to describe some type of military activity have become part of everyday speech. In many cases, these words have often become disassociated with warfare, and it's become difficult to recognize their origins. If I said, for example, that I started this essay off "on the wrong foot," then I would mean I had made a mistake in the opening sentence. This metaphor traces its origins back to a military drill. In a given exercise, if the rule is to begin by moving the left foot first and a soldier moves the right foot instead, then he or she is out of step with the rest of the soldiers from the start and has thereby stepped off "on the wrong foot." ("Great Scott!", I heard you proclaim in amazement, although you may not realize that now you are making a reference to the Mexican War hero General Winfield Scott.)

Dozens of soldiers' last names later worked their ways into everyday speech. Standing in this illustrious gallery are the ostracized Captain Boycott, the murderous Captain Lynch, the explosive General Shrapnel, the lustful General Hooker, and the bewhiskered General Burnside (whose name underwent a curious inversion when the term used to describe the unique arrangement of his hair became "side burns.") Both the casserole dish Beef Wellington and the pastry, the Napoleon, are named after the contenders at the Battle of Waterloo. The Earl of Cardigan gave his name to the knitted woolen front-buttoning sweater he favored. It was Cardigan who led the doomed Charge of the Light Brigade.

Staying in the world of fashion but moving from sweaters to neckties, the original cravats were scarves worn around the necks of Croatian mercenary soldiers serving in Austria some four centuries ago. The word itself was originally *khrvat*, which meant a native of Croatia. In 1636, the French army set up a

regiment of light cavalry, dressed in elegant imitation of the Croatians' uniforms, including fancy cravats. The fashion was quickly adopted by the fancy dressers of Paris—and men have been doomed to wear cravats, or neckties, ever since.

The case of the word “bikini” offers a clue as to how the human race preserves its sanity. In 1946 Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Marshall Islands was the scene of a series of atomic bomb tests. Also during 1946, a French designer invented the bathing suit now called the bikini. Originally called *le minimum*, the swimsuit was then the smallest possible body covering that could still be legally considered as clothing.

No one can say for certain how the word bikini made the transition from the site of the atomic bomb blasts to the swimwear. It is possible that the scientific definition of the word atom, which was then the smallest conceivable unit of matter, reasserted itself. The costumes indigenous to Bikini may have been mistakenly identified with the newer design; newspaper photographs of the evacuated natives of Bikini Atoll depicted scantily clad women. Or maybe there is some jump from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other, between the nightmare of an A-bomb blast and the vision of a woman dressed in a bikini? Beautiful women have been called “bombshells.” Recent changes in the French penal code have resulted in a further evolution of the word: the French now refer to the more essential lower half of a bathing suit as a *monokini*. Linguists in the future may well spend long hours debating the precise meaning of a *kini*.

Vocabulary from the trenches of WW I has established itself quite firmly in our modern-day consciousness. The source of “entrenched” is obvious. “Lousy” originated from the ubiquitous infestations of lice that plagued the soldiers fighting on both sides. British soldiers, after spending several years in France, brought back the French word *souvenir* to replace the English word keepsake. Socioeconomic terms such as the “private sector” and “rank and file” were appropriated from the Great War. Even an expression that is innocently used on public radio stations, “Help our fund drive over the top,” owes its imagery to soldiers climbing out of trenches and plunging into no-man’s land.

There are accounts from WWI in which British soldiers preceded a charge by kicking a soccer ball toward the opposing German trenches. This kind of action quickly lost its luster in the face of machine guns, tanks, and poison gas. However, language from warfare has entered the wide world of sports. *Scrimmage* comes from the Middle English word for *skirmish*, or unimportant battle. During a football game, when the defense calls for a *blitz*, they are echoing the strategy of the German panzer divisions. The echoes of aerial warfare can be heard whenever a quarterback throws a bomb.

Business is another venue that attracts war terms, especially with the recent emphasis on competitive strategies, marketing warfare, and the leadership secrets of Sun-Tzu and Attila the Hun. During 1994, business writer Richard Luecke wrote a book entitled *Scuttle Your Ships Before Advancing: And Other Lessons from History on Leadership and Change for Today's Managers*. The cover art depicted Cortez in a business suit and armor with his ships burning behind him. Military-to-business books continue to remain popular. Last year saw the publication of *The Marine Corps Way* that applies maneuver warfare—the war fighting doctrine of the United States Marine Corps—to business. A couple of phrases from war that are often heard in the office include big brass, which alludes to the gold braids on the hats of officers, and head honcho, which was first widely used by American service personnel in occupation forces in Japan after WWII. *Honcho* is the Japanese word for squad commander.

Several expressions from the arts are derived from the experience of warfare, and vice versa. To explode originally meant to drive an actor off stage by means of clapping and hooting. It is this original definition that we are referring to when we say that we are exploding, or exposing as false or unreliable, a hypothesis. There is often a lot of noise associated with either type of explosion. The original free lancers were soldiers, mounted on horses and armed with lances, who during the Middle Ages offered their services as mercenaries. The original *avant garde* was the foremost division of troops in an army. The phrase “a forlorn hope” also referred to that same front part of the army. An anglicized form of the Dutch words *verloren hoop* (meaning literally a lost troop), this was the picked body of men, detached to the front, who were to begin an attack. Both the *avant garde* and the *verloren hoop* were often among the first casualties during a battle.

War words are often used in the field of debate as well. In a debate, the contenders will be at loggerheads with one another. The first loggerheads were large metal cups with long handles used to melt tar over an open fire. During the Middle Ages, sailors would heat tar in loggerheads and then toss the contents at attacking ships. One of the participants in a debate might fire off a verbal blast at his or her opponent in the form of a tirade. This is literally correct, as tirade comes from the Italian *tirara*, which means a volley of fire. If his opponent has a “fall back position,” then he has previously prepared a position to be resorted to if strategic retreat is necessary. If, on the other hand, his opponent refuses to back down, then retreat is no longer an option. He will then be “fighting with his back against the wall,” or in a situation where he has “burned his bridges behind him.” And if he remains firmly constant to his opinions, then he is someone who will “stick to his guns,” as a brave artillery man does however heavily he is attacked.

Certain war words have been adopted into English as words of praise. In this category is an accolade, which was the light blow upon the shoulder given with the flat of a sword that a medieval knight received in the act of being raised to the rank of mounted soldier. To a knight, an accolade would surely be a “feather in his cap.” This metaphor, too, comes from war: it was a custom among some Native Americans of adding a feather to one’s headgear for each enemy killed. The word admiral is borrowed into English from the Arabic *amir*, which means a lord or a commander. The word admire is based on the same Latin verb, *mirari*, to wonder at, that is also the root for the words miracle and mirror. So originally, an admiral was anything so outstanding as to be marveled or wondered at. Since shortly after its adoption into English, admiral has been largely restricted to designating leaders of fleets (and the loss of the connection between admire and admiral has nothing to do with the Tailhook scandal).

Other words and phrases that at first glance might seem to be war-related actually have no military origins at all. For example, one separates the kernel, and not the colonel, from the chaff. When Shakespeare’s Hamlet said, “’Twas caviar to the general,” he meant that a play that he admired failed at winning popular acclaim, and he was not disparaging the likes of Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, and Omar Bradley. More to the point is that blackguard originally referred to the kitchen helper who scraped soot from pots, the term “battle royal” is borrowed from cockfighting, and “sudden death” is the term coined by Mark Twain to describe rotgut whiskey. And the first “conscientious objectors” were not draft card burners after all. They were those who legally swore that their consciences prevented them from being inoculated against disease after the English Parliament passed the Compulsory Vaccination Act in 1898.

All together, the list of war words is quite extensive, and there are more than 500 military words and expressions that have gained currency in everyday English. Ironically, it is also a military hero who was the first to be laconic, or terse and concise. In ancient Greece, the native land of the militaristic Spartans was Laconia. On one occasion Philip of Macedon threatened to invade Laconia, and he said: “If I enter Laconia, I will level Sparta (the capital city) to the ground.” The Spartan military leaders, who were already noted for their succinct speech, replied with a message of one word: *If*. For the Greeks, this was a fighting word. Angered by the Spartan’s brief reply, Phillip subsequently invaded and burnt down Sparta. The laconic Spartans learned first hand that just as words can be used to declare war, so too can war declare the existence of new words.

Suggested further reading

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