

Language and Knowing

Leonard Cassuto, Fordham University

I used to teach a core course at Fordham University called “Language and Knowing.” It was during an evening meeting of that class early in 1991 that I first heard that “Operation Desert Storm” had begun—by which I mean that the United States and its allies started dropping bombs on Iraq and occupied Kuwait in preparation for a troop invasion of the area. The fighting part of the Gulf War began that night, and my students and I spent most of that evening’s class meeting talking about it. Many were adults of about my age at the time (I was thirty) or a bit younger, which made them old enough to recall the Vietnam War in vague terms, but without a full sense of having lived through the turmoil. We discussed how it felt to be at war, and what it meant. The talk that night was, I remember, mostly about politics. I remember that one young man who had done development work in Central America was particularly outraged at the American action. Many of his classmates supported the war, and he argued with some of them that night. I remember that the students were agitated, but not unmoored— which was a fair description of how I felt myself.

I did some good teaching that term. I added war stories, such as Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*, to the syllabus of another core course, “The Study of Literature.” I also had my students read George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” an essay which changed my life when I encountered it for the first time as a college student. Orwell wasn’t the first writer to suggest to me that language and knowing were inseparable; I trace that insight to Strunk and White. But Orwell showed me just how high the stakes were. Today, as we enter a future of undefined and open-ended war, those stakes are even higher.

If you don’t pay attention to what you say and to what’s being said to you, says Orwell, you open yourself up to being taken over, first in mind and then in body. “If thought corrupts language,” he says, “language can also corrupt thought” (Politics, 137). Orwell’s greatest virtue as an observer and writer lay in his ability to penetrate linguistic subterfuge and ferret out the motives—which were often nefarious—lying beneath the blank surfaces of lazy, conspiratorial, or devious language. “All issues are political issues,” he insisted, and it follows that all writing is political writing (Politics, 137). Responsible members of all societies need to remain alert, never passive, to the way that sloppy language can make pudding out of sharp differences, or as Orwell puts it, allow words to fall “upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details” (Politics, 136-137).

On the day in 1991 that we discussed the Orwell essay, I brought in two graphics from the previous Sunday’s *New York Times*. One was a capsule comparison of military hardware. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was a summary of why our tanks kicked the asses of the Iraqi tanks (“Facing Off”). The other graphic was from the sports section, a preview of the upcoming Super Bowl matchup between the New York Giants and the Buffalo Bills (“Team Comparison”). The first was a picture of two tanks facing each other, the second of two football helmets (with team logos) arranged the same way. The comparison was direct and unavoidable: the two figures had the same graphic style, layout, and visual oppositions. The parallels between these two diagrams scared the hell out of me, and I wanted them to scare the hell out of my students too. I suppose I had always been aware of the link between sports

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and war (the connection is bound to occur to anyone who knows the rules of football), but I realized that I had been suppressing the converse, that war was also being linked to sports. And yet here it was: the Gulf War was being covered as an away game for Team USA.

These graphics reveal some of the ways that Americans like to think about power, but more important, they show the potential range of guises that the display of power can take. It felt satisfying to show my students some of that range, and to suggest to them just how important it is for every writer to take the time to write clearly and well. One reason I've always valued my job as an educator is because it makes me feel that I'm an important shareholder in the public trust. That semester, I felt that I was justifying that trust.

I'd like to say that I taught well after the events of September 11th, but I don't think I did. Oh, I got through my courses and received good student evaluations for them, but I don't think I responded to what happened with anything like the initiative and creativity that marked my teaching during the Gulf War.

It was a lot harder for me and my students this time around. The Gulf War was happening half a world away, but I teach just a few miles from what is now called Ground Zero. The Thursday after the attack, while firefighters were searching for survivors amid the smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center, I walked into classes full of traumatized students who wanted and needed to talk. The students were themselves survivors, and they were clearly wounded. Though physically whole, they had taken a direct hit to the part of them that harbored America's special brand of willful innocence, an innocence that resists learning from the experience of others and so gets renewed every generation.

One of my students remarked that her life expectancy had been lowered by what has happened. Statistically, this is essentially not true. But something had indeed changed, and I would call that change "life expectation." Americans have been fortunate to enjoy some of the higher life expectancies in the industrialized world, but that's just a statistic. We've been much more fortunate, I think, in our possession of a secure expectation that nothing would disrupt the natural course of our lives, or our choices about how to live them. A relief worker once told me that one of the reasons HIV infection is so hard to prevent in Africa is because many African men don't feel secure about postponing today's pleasures (such as those offered by unsafe sex) until a tomorrow that may never arrive for them. They don't expect to live a long time, and behave accordingly--thus creating a tragically self-fulfilling prophecy. My students' life expectancies may be intact, but one of the reasons that they're so anxious is because they've lost their life expectation, and they know they'll never get it back.

But it seems arid to say this about other people without including myself. The fact is that I lost some of the same expectations that my students did. I also lost a student in the twin towers, an adult member of a seminar I had taught the previous spring. Her name was Patricia Cody. I had enjoyed having her in my class, and I know the feeling was mutual; she had been planning to take my senior seminar the following year. I may have felt less surprised than my students that the United States was attacked, but I still catch myself hoping that we can somehow restore the comfortable stability we used to have--even as I recognize that hope as somewhat naive, and built on some faulty assumptions to start with. And I still find myself missing Pat Cody.

For all of these personal reasons, teaching meaningfully in the wake of September 11th has been damnably hard. But the greatest difficulty in teaching this crisis, I am convinced, lies outside of personal trauma. It lies in the impoverishment of public discussion and debate. It lies in the muzzling of words and the straitening of ideas. It lies, in short, in language and knowing.

The historian Robert Dallek, writing in *The Washington Post*, has called for "a rational domestic debate" over questions of war. The virtues of such a debate might seem obvious, but not these days.

Today's Republican leaders, Dallek observes, "appear to have a tenuous grasp on the virtue of public debates about American wars" (3), and they deride any challenge to the president's judgment in wartime as "unpatriotic." Tom Tomorrow pretty much sums it up in a political cartoon in which every dissenting question is answered by, "Why do you hate America so much?" The most disturbing thing about this commentary may be that it's not too gross a satire. Public debate is being suppressed. Though the president describes himself as a plain-speaking man, little of consequence emerges from the White House until it's been massaged to smothering smoothness, a process performed with exhausting effectiveness by a press secretary who speaks what has been described as "a sort of imperial court English, in which any question, no matter how specific, is parried with general assurances that the emperor is keenly aware and deeply concerned and fully resolved and infallibly right and the people are fully supportive and further information should be sought elsewhere" (Kinsley). But this evasiveness has a harsh side too: the same presidential press secretary, Ari Fleischer, warned shortly after the attacks that Americans "need to watch what they say."¹ Though Fleischer has publicly regretted the comment, it hangs in the air still. In his explanation of "Why I Write," Orwell gives as his first reason "to get a hearing" (Why, 315). No one opposed to the party line is getting much of a hearing in discussions of American foreign policy today.

One might argue that I'm engaged in partisan criticism, but I'm detailing an issue that crosses the political spectrum. I'm obviously not hiding my own politics, but concerns like mine are not limited to the political left. Some conservatives have complained, for example, about the way that public debate over racial profiling and the like has suffocated people's expression of their real fears of certain racial and ethnic groups in the wake of September 11th. Or to put it more plainly: they're angry because people aren't allowed to say publicly that they suspect Arabs and Muslims of being terrorists just because they're Arabs and Muslims.²

Norman Mailer recently said in an interview that "fascism thrives on the debasement of language," and thus, "for a democracy to survive, language must flourish" ("Zelda," 33). By that measure, I think our democracy is in deep trouble right now. Even though an immense flood of words (including these) continues to issue forth on the subject of terrorism, talking about it remains hard because language is literally being suppressed. Last spring, for example, a news item appeared describing a tempest at Harvard over a student commencement orator's decision to use the word "jihad" to describe his struggle to live morally and to "do the right thing." The speaker, Zayed M. Yasin—who is a Muslim—decided after testy public debate (and a petition drive against him) on a compromise of sorts: he agreed to make the phrase "American Jihad" the subtitle of his speech rather than the title. University officials promptly announced that subtitles would not be included in the commencement program.³

Such suppression was immediate and powerful in the wake of the attacks. A signal example centers on the use of the word "coward." When Susan Sontag called courage "a morally neutral virtue" and declared that the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon "were not cowards," she drew a hail of public criticism. The comedian Bill Maher, host of the late-night talk show "Politically Incorrect," said much the same thing as Sontag and found himself suddenly infamous, losing his job a few months later.⁴

As this swirl about a word suggests, Americans wear our collective need for Manichean absolutes as a set of ideological blinders. Dallek compares the fight against terrorism to the fight against communism, "in which countries are either for or against us" (3), and the analogy to an earlier time of polarized public morality is all too apt. Stanley Fish, writing a month after September 11th, points out that even the name we've given to our action—a war on terrorism—reflects absolutism. Terrorism, observes Fish, is simply a form of hostility—a repugnant methodology. How can we make war on a method? The answer to this question, suggests David Luban, is ominous. In a "war on terrorism," there is no one to negotiate with. Terrorism can't negotiate and terrorism can't surrender, for there's

no one authorized to do either. The only way to declare the war over, then, is to kill all terrorists—which is impossible. “It follows,” says Luban, “that the War on Terrorism will be a permanent war. It requires a mission of killing and capturing, in territories all over the globe, that will go on in perpetuity” (13).

The months since Fish published his essay have confirmed some of the inherent contradictions that accompany this mission. For example, President Bush announced in February, 2002 that Taliban soldiers would be treated according to the rules of the Geneva Convention, while Al Qaeda fighters need not be.⁵ That is: although the United States is at war with terrorism (putting aside the fact that war has not been officially declared), terrorists would not be considered official wartime adversaries. If this weren’t hard enough to parse, it has long been obvious that there exists considerable overlap between the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Not only did they fight side by side, their membership rolls may also be inextricably intertwined. (And to discuss the contorted American government responses to Israel’s own declared war on terrorism and Russia’s professed anti-terrorism in Chechnya would require a whole separate article.)

Of course the focus has since shifted to Iraq and beyond. The shibboleth of the first Gulf War, retailed by the first President Bush, was “sovereignty.” His son has dropped that rationale into the dustbin of history, substituting “regime change,” a phrase which suggests that making the world safer may be compared to replacing the filter in the swimming pool whenever it gets dirty. The phrase “weapons of mass destruction” has been invoked so many times that one might forget to ask what it actually means (it used to apply to nuclear weapons).

In light of this semantic torture, we would do well to remember Clausewitz’s definition of war (a curricular commonplace at West Point) as the continuation of politics by other means. And we might again turn for guidance to Orwell, who says that there’s nothing wrong with admitting your self-interest in your own political cause. Rather, in a statement that anticipates the postmodern suspicion of universal positions, he argues that you should always declare where you’re coming from. “The more one is conscious of one’s political bias,” says Orwell, “the more chance one has of acting politically” without loss of integrity (Why, 314). We may be in a life-and-death struggle for our beliefs, but admitting our own positions can only help us as we conduct it.

It falls to teachers to lead this struggle within the struggle—where we try to talk about the world with intellectual honesty and clarity of meaning. Gerald Graff has written persuasively about the inherent value of “teaching the conflicts,” but the tension and anxiety that surrounds us all today makes teaching this particular conflict into a fraught enterprise. Perhaps not since the McCarthy era—when tenured professors lost their jobs because of their political beliefs and affiliations—have teachers found themselves under such pressure to conform.

The backlash against those professors who have refused to do so clearly draws some of its momentum from the breakdown in trust between town and gown that has been under way in the United States for some time. In one well-publicized cautionary tale, the University of South Florida voted in late 2001 to fire a tenured engineering professor, Sami Al-Arians, whose criticism of Israel has brought him death threats. The university president, Judy L. Genshaft, claims to “respect [and] value academic freedom.” She said that Al-Arians is being fired because “his outside activities adversely affected the university” (Walsh, A12, A11). Acting on her recommendation, the trustees of the university voted to fire Al-Arians at 9 a.m. on December 19th, 2001—after faculty, staff, and students had left campus for winter break. The meeting was nominally public, but it had been announced for the first time at 4 p.m. the day before. This kind of secrecy brings to mind a Stalinist execution.

The twist to this story is that AlArians may actually be a terrorist. He was arrested in February, 2003 and charged with transferring money secretly to known terrorist groups. The justice department, in

an unusual move doubtless prompted by Al-Arians's status as a cause celebre, released transcripts of telephone conversations that have neatly and persuasively convicted the defendant in the court of public opinion. His university has eagerly supported that verdict. Al-Arians's "use of this educational institution for improper, non-educational purposes will no longer be tolerated," declared Genshaft after his arrest. "No longer will he be able to hide behind the shield of academic freedom" (Smallwood).

Maybe Sami Al-Arians is a terrorist, but it's beside the point if he is. His university began trying to fire him long before he was arrested, and the reasons for his dismissal had nothing to do with terrorism. Sami Al-Arians was fired because of what he had to say in public, and the fact that the school administration didn't like being associated even remotely with it. Al-Arians's notoriety as an accused felon will now dominate the stories about him, but we should remember that no one at the University of South Florida tried to get rid of Sami Al-Arians because they thought he was a criminal. Instead, the record suggests that the president and administrators of Al-Arians's university sought to override his tenure and terminate his professorship simply because its administration found his ideas to be disagreeable.

The Al-Arians affair highlights the need to maintain open lines: between teachers and students, between the university and the community. Professors need to embrace the duty not so much of dissent as of intellection and real education. Yes, it's hard to do: academic freedom is on the line in ways that we may not yet fully appreciate. But professors-the public face of the university-need to show what good can come when thinking people refuse to be overwhelmed by passion, especially passionate hatred. Maintaining composure is the duty of the university, and we must claim that duty especially when it's most difficult for that's also when it matters most. Using words to communicate ideas is hard enough in the best of times. It's harder still when so many words and ideas are tabooed, charged, muddied, and otherwise compromised. But hard work can be the most satisfying kind.

The work of higher education begins in the classroom, and the classroom is where it must ultimately be measured. Clear thinking, as sage Orwell says, is the "necessary first step toward political regeneration" (Politics, 128). I don't think we have much choice. The alternative is a classroom displaying the motto "Ignorance Is Strength."

That Orwellian slogan might make a good epitaph for the marketplace of ideas in the United States. The breathtaking speed with which our country switches enemies-most recently from Al Qaeda to Iraq-without breaking stride brings to mind the scene from "Hate Week" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in which "the great orgasm was quivering to its climax," to be marked by the public hanging of 2000 Eurasian war criminals ("Oceania is at war with Eurasia. Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia"). Then the crowd suddenly learns that Oceania is actually at war with Eastasia. "The next moment," writes Orwell, "there was a tremendous commotion. The banners and posters with which the square was decorated were all wrong!... There was a riotous interlude while posters were ripped from the walls, banners torn to shreds and trampled underfoot.... But within two or three minutes it was all over....The Hate continued exactly as before, except that the target had been changed" (148-150). This scene is so familiar that I can't contemplate it without a feeling of vertigo. In fact, as Frank Rich has noted, Ari Fleischer's dire 2001 warning (that Americans would have to "watch what they say") mysteriously disappeared from the transcript of his press conference on the official White House website until reporters discovered it was missing and pressed for its restoration. (The White House claimed a "transcription error," and corrected it only days later.)

"If there is hope," writes Orwell's Winston Smith, "it lies in the proles" (60). We might say today that the hope lies in the students. "Study war no more," the folk song exhorts - but that's bad advice for today's world. We need to study war closely - and teach it. Call this a hortatory polemic from someone who also needs to follow it himself: we need to bring the world into our classrooms in all of its

complexity, and then use that complexity as something to learn from. Today, as we brace for our next military adventure, we teachers must ourselves fight, to keep language and knowing from coming apart.

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Notes

1. Fleischer said this on September 26th, 2001 in response to comments made by Bill Maher on his show, "Politically Incorrect," about which I will have more to say presently. For a transcript of the full press conference, see "Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer."

2. Conservative talk show host Michael Savage has been a particularly vocal proponent of this position. See, for example, “Left Wing Censors Go After Michael Savage.”
3. See Ferdinand, “At Harvard, Jousting Over Jihad” and “Harvard Student Gives Speech Citing ‘Jihad.’” Yasin’s emended title for his oration was “Of Faith and Citizenship: My American Jihad,” and in it he decried the “corruption” and misinterpretation of the term (“Harvard Student”).
4. Conservative cultural critic Dinesh D’Souza, who was a guest on the show that evening and agreed with Maher, also found himself facing stiff criticism from an unlikely source for him: his usual cheerleaders. Despite a desperate apology by Maher, “Politically Incorrect” never recovered its irreverent balance after this controversy; it lost some main sponsors, and ABC canceled the program about half a year later. A transcript of the brief exchange between Maher and D’Souza (which took place on September 17th, 2001) appears as a sidebar to Kirn’s “The End of the Affair.” Maher’s on-air apology was broadcast on September 19th.
5. See, for example, Mintz and Allen, “Geneva Conventions to Cover Taliban, but Not Al Qaeda.” Thus far, the American military—almost certainly to avoid world disapproval—is treating Al Qaeda captives according to the Geneva Conventions, but American officials insist that they are not required to do so. David Luban describes the status of al-Qaeda suspects imprisoned in Guantanamo as “emblematic of [a] hybrid war-law approach to the threat of terrorism. In line with the war model, they lack the usual rights of criminal suspects—the presumption of innocence, the right to a hearing to determine guilt, the opportunity to prove that the authorities have grabbed the wrong man. But, in line with the law model, they are considered unlawful combatants, because they are not uniformed forces, and therefore they lack the rights of prisoners of war. Neither criminal suspects nor POWs, neither fish nor fowl, they inhabit a limbo of rightlessness” (10). For an attempt to confront this ambiguity right after September 11th, see Cassuto, “The Power of Words.”

Contact Information

Leonard Cassuto
 Department of English
 Fordham University
 Lincoln Center Campus
 113 West 60th Street, Room 924
 New York, NY 10023

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