Editor’s Corner

by Mackubin T. Owens

In These Pages

Recently, the United States lost one of its great public servants and FPRI lost one of its closest associates. The death of soldier-statesman Alexander Haig saddens us all. FPRI president Harvey Sicherman begins this issue with a tribute to the life and service of this remarkable man.

Also in this issue, Bill Martel of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University addresses the need for a new U.S. grand strategy and makes the argument for a controversial grand strategy approach that he calls “restrainment.” Tom Fedyszyn also offers a controversial argument, suggesting that NATO, to more effectively implement its current operations on behalf of collective and cooperative security, should forego the Article V collective defense provision that has served as the Alliance’s foundation since its inception in 1945. David Bolgiano uses the concept of “lawfare”—“the strategy of using – or misusing – law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve an operational objective”—to warn against the dangers of subordinating U.S. interests to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Mehran Kamrava examines what he believes is the truly revolutionary impact of the 2009 elections in Iran, pointing out how they have changed the “rules of the game” in the Islamic Republic, as well as the balance of power among the various parties to the Iranian political bargain. Matthew Levitt discusses how al Qaeda’s commitment to the “Palestinian cause” is much more rhetorical than operational. Tally Helfont examines the emergence of a new fault line between moderates and radicals in response to Egypt’s construction of an underground steel wall on the Egypt-Gaza border that interdicts the flow of material into the latter.

Frank Hoffman, who has been instrumental in developing the concept of “hybrid conflict,” now seeks to apply the concept to the maritime environment, contending that the U.S. Navy needs to dust off “lessons learned” from its last experience in the Persian Gulf in the late 1980s to better prepare for a more challenging future. Finally, Christopher Harmon analyzes a number of cases from contemporary
history to derive certain principles for the successful use of force in countering terrorism.

This volume concludes with Thomas Wright’s review essay of three books on the alleged relative decline of American hegemony in the world. The theme of these works is that in the future, the United States will share leadership of the international order with other major powers.

With this issue, we welcome our new book review editor Michael Horowitz, assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Michael completed his Ph.D. in the Department of Government at Harvard University, where his dissertation examined the diffusion of military power and the consequences of international politics. His primary research areas are international conflict and security issues. We thank Will Hay for his years of excellent service as book review editor and assistant editor of Orbis. We welcome him to our Board of Editors.

Impromptus and Asides: Linguistic Obfuscation and National Security

Many observers have noted that, in an effort to distance himself from his predecessor, President Barack Obama has sought to rename the challenges the country faces while often quietly leaving the substance of the Bush administration policy intact. In this rhetorical regime, the administration criticized President George W. Bush for his “illegal” policies with respect to the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, and claimed that the detainees themselves were “tortured during the Bush years,” yet that facility continues in operation.

And while renouncing the term “enemy combatant,” the Obama administration acknowledges the reality that no matter what we call those detained at Guantanamo, the detainees are still not entitled to prisoner-of-war status because they have violated the laws of war by killing civilians and fighting out of uniform. Instead of calling the detainees enemy combatants, the administration has opted to refer to them as “individuals captured in connection with armed conflicts and counterterrorism operations,” or “members of enemy forces,” or “persons who [the president] determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, and persons who harbored those responsible for the September 11 attacks.”

Although it continues to prosecute the “war on terror,” the Obama administration now officially refers to it as “overseas contingency operations.” Fortunately, “man-caused disasters” as a euphemism for terrorist attacks has been laughed out of public discourse.

Although these changes might seem superficial, the fact is that words mean something and how we use them matters. No matter how much we may embrace nominalism, changes in terminology reflect substantive shifts. In the case of the previous examples, they signal a return to the policy mindset that existed before 9/11.
The obfuscation continues. The *National Security Strategy* document issued by the Bush administration before it left office states that “the struggle against militant Islamic radicalism is the great ideological conflict of the early years of the 21st century.” However, the Obama administration recently announced that it will ban all references to Islam in such national security documents as the *National Security Strategy*.

According to the Associated Press, “President Barack Obama’s advisors plan to remove terms such as ‘Islamic radicalism’ from [its version of the *National Security Strategy*] and will use the new version to emphasize that the U.S. does not view Muslim nations through the lens of terrorism, counterterrorism officials say.” This new obfuscation violates the most cited aphorism of the ancient Chinese “philosopher of war” Sun Tzu: “know thy enemy.” Not only does this suggest that we refuse to know our enemy, but even to acknowledge our enemy.

Of course, the use of terms such as “Islamic radicalism” in no way indicates that the United States views “Muslim nations through the lens of terrorism.” The fact is that the United States can use the term “Islamic radicalism” to apply to Islamic radicals without simultaneously viewing all Muslims “through the lens of terrorism.” If the United States is to maintain its security, it must be able to identify its enemies and adversaries, just as we did in the past.

The Obama administration’s linguistic lack of clarity is not limited to terrorism and Islamic radicalism. With the publication of the administration’s new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), this obfuscation has been extended to nuclear deterrence, as well. For deterrence to be effective a potential aggressor must believe that the deterring power possesses the capability to retaliate in response to aggression and the will to do so. He must also understand that uncertainty is always at work when an aggressor “rolls the iron dice.”

During the Cold War, the United States was able to deter aggression on the part of the Soviet Union because the latter understood that the former possessed the capability and will to respond to aggression. By extending the “nuclear umbrella” to our allies, especially our NATO allies and Japan, the United States also deterred major conventional war.

The logic of deterrence survived the end of the Cold War. During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq fired 88 Scud missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia and Israel. Although Iraq possessed large stocks of chemical and biological weapons, none were used. Most analysts believe that the reason for this was that Saddam Hussein understood that if he employed such weapons, the United States might well respond with a nuclear strike. Despite the fact that arms inspectors discovered 25 missile warheads and 166 bombs armed with biological weapons, Iraq refrained from using them even in a war it was bound to lose.

But the new NPR states that the United States will not threaten or use nuclear weapons in response to
a chemical or biological attack by a nonnuclear state. Such language undermines the ability of the United States to accomplish what it did against Iraq in 1991. And while stressing the goal of nuclear nonproliferation, the language of the NPR invites it. By moving toward a smaller, aging, and therefore less reliable and less credible nuclear force, the NPR will increase the incentive for proliferation and for other states to rely more on nuclear weapons. The world will become a more, not less, dangerous place.

What all of these cases have in common is the false belief that words can be modified at will without affecting their underlying meaning. But knowledge and language are inextricably linked. Precision in language is necessary if we are to understand the true nature of the security environment and the character of our enemies. Obfuscation in matters of national security is the enemy of sound thinking about how to protect the United States and materially harms U.S. security.