

Charles McCabe

Himself

Watergatespeak

BACK in the days of the Harry Truman Administration, the chief press officer of the State Department was a shrewd, white-haired Irish-American gent named Mike McDermott.

I recall vividly one of his press briefings. A U.S. mission had been sent to Berlin for some purpose which at the time seemed important. Mike had called the press meeting to tell us of the results.

He read a statement about three paragraphs long, written in standard soggy State Department prose. He awaited questions.

"Mike, how would you characterize the tone of that statement?" asked one of the wire service boys.

"I think you could safely call it a blunt statement," said Mike.

"And what," asked a smart-arse from one of the dailies, "is the difference between a sharp statement and a blunt statement?"

"None whatever," replied Mike, with a broad smile.

Even in those distant days, political language had a lot to answer for. It was in those post-war days that George Orwell had his say on the matter.

"Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from conservatives to anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."



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THE WATERGATE episode was instructive in more ways than one. Watergate was, as we well and bitterly know, the penultimate civics lesson. More than that, the episode demonstrated the paucity of language of our leaders. If you think paucity of language equals paucity of thought, go ahead.

Watergate gave us such numbing locutions as "coverup," "at this point in time," "scenario," "game plan," "telegraphic communication," and of course "inoperative."

Out of the White House came "expletive deleted" and my favorite contribution of all, "stonewalling." Stonewalling turns out to have meant persistent, continued and unremitting lying. This was thought to be a virtue by the callous crew who used it.

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BEFORE the Nixon resignation, Professor F. Richard Friedman, an Oregon English teacher, said: "When a White House spokesman is asked to comment on the current legality of an act and gives an answer which says in effect, 'Well, it seemed the appropriate thing to do at the time,' he is avoiding the question — he's offering instead the answer of expediency.

"If you have language that is so weakened and corrupted that you cannot hear within it the seeds of truth or the seeds of dishonesty you've lost a basic tool in relation to your fellow men I think the situation is enormously dangerous today."

Precision in political language is not only possible, it is an entirely honorable American tradition. The serious corruption of political language is recent, like from the time of FDR. If people really wished to be spoken to clearly by their politicians, they could force clarity. Alas . . .

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THE BIG WORD nowadays is inflation. It is a word as difficult to define as legal pornography. It is simply meaningless to both speaker and hearer, in its present state. Recession can mean a dip, a slump, or a drop. It has also been defined as "an extended, substantial, and widespread decline in aggregate economic activity but one less severe than earlier 'depressions'." More horrendously still, it has been called "stagflation."

This sort of cant will not do. The first thing I was taught in logic class at school was "define your terms." No problem could be solved unless there was an agreed and coherent definition of the words being used. It is not politically wise to call a recession a depression, when that is what in fact it is; but it might be financially and even morally wise to acknowledge what the hell we are talking about.