

# The Fearless Spectator

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## Waffling

THE BRITISH have this great word, waffling. To waffle, according to my dictionary, is "to talk incessantly and nonsensically, to waver." It is said to have originally derived from the slang of printers and to have meant "twaddle, gossip or jaw."

In practice, the verb has been taken over by the political area, where it means an official explanation which explains nothing. Yards of waffling get excreted daily from the White House and 10 Downing street. You can find vintage samples of the stuff in your newspaper any day in the week. Waffling, in fact, is the language of politics.

The other day the Marin grand jury put out a report touching on the odious Sausalito police department practice of setting up arrest quotas for cops, and of staking out bars before closing time to run up fine totals for drunk driving. Everybody who has ever had a beer with a Sausalito cop knows these practices exist. The cop leadership denies it. Here is how the Grand Jury reported: The Sausalito police leadership, "unequivocally denied that they have ever promulgated or authorized departmental quotas or production expectation." While they did not authorize or promulgate, the top cops admitted that a quota system did exist and was "permitted."



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THIS IS quite a good example of waffling. It is an attempt to explain something that cannot be officially explained. If a thing is clearly untrue, there is a simple form of denial: No. If the explanation begins to run into wordiness and wooliness, the wafflers are at work.

The process has been memorably rendered by the distinguished British word man, Ivor Brown. "The flabby, flaccid, flustered politician," he says, "possibly so flummoxed as to be flabbergasted, is floundering in a fix and seeks to escape with a flux of fluffy, flatulent flap-doodle."

We have, of course, achieved new heights of waffling in our communiques announcing our peculiar and lethal doings in the Southeast Asia war. A recent survey of Pentagon officialese reveals that napalm has become "selective ordnance." To uproot a village is to engage in "population resettlement." The destruction of food crops is called "defoliation." Crop poisoning is "resources control."

And the noblest euphemism yet to come out of the war. To execute a person unofficially is to "terminate with extreme prejudice."

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OUR NATIONAL inability to simply call a rose a rose, and let it go at that, is an index of the level of anxiety in the country. There are so many terrible things around us that we are afraid to call them by their real name. The television has changed fat and sweaty to "midriff bulge" and "underarm wetness." We don't want to be informed. We want to be protected, and to be comforted. When catastrophe hits a person, what words come to mind. In my case, I usually stroke an arm, and say "now, now" until the inane words seem to have some calming effect.

Waffling is really a self-defeating game, though. If a euphemism is used long enough, some of its original, unpleasant meaning will begin to shine through again. "Protective reaction" is getting to sound like plain old aggressive bombing again. We need have no fear that the slogan artificers of the Pentagon will come up with an adequate substitute. Perhaps a "friendliness incursion."

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THE CURE for waffling, if it were really wanted, might simply be Mark Twain's way: "An average English word is four letters and a half. By hard, honest labor I've dug all the large words out of my vocabulary and shaved it down till the average is three and a half . . ."

"I never write metropolis for seven cents, because I can get the same price for city. I never write policeman, because I can get the same money for cop."