

Virginia Viewpoint

April 2002 • No. 2002-11

The Age of Newspeak

By Lee Congdon, Ph.D.

Summary

The PC police understand very well that those who control language and history also control people's minds and the future.

Main text word count: 778

When President Clinton finally admitted to what, in standard English, was adultery, he said only that he had had an "inappropriate" relationship with Monica Lewinsky. This was rather like saying that he once used the wrong fork at a state dinner.

Although some Americans dismiss "political correctness" as an aberration, its purveyors have succeeded in replacing standard English with a form of "Newspeak," the language of totalitarianism that George Orwell invented by taking verbal trends of his day to their logical conclusion. "It was intended," he wrote in Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), "that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak [standard English] forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc [English socialism]—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words." The politically correct know that they can control thought by framing contentious issues in language that predisposes others to see things their way.

They never, for example, use "right" or "wrong" when, as often happens, one of their own has been compromised. The word to be employed in such an embarrassing event is "inappropriate." When President Clinton finally admitted to what, in standard English, was adultery, he said only that he had had an "inappropriate" relationship with Monica Lewinsky. This was rather like saying that he once used the wrong fork at a state dinner. It was a way of making light of immoral behavior and of avoiding words that would implicitly have recognized the authority of a traditional morality that, because it is rooted in Judaism and Christianity, upholds standards that are not relative to their political utility.

Should the subject turn, as it often does, to abortion, PC advocates choose their words with particular care. No one who works in the media would risk his career by letting slip the word "pro-abortion," because it is likely to place too many consciences on alert. Everyone, therefore, speaks of "pro-choice," which has a more appealing ring and can make black seem white. (One bumper sticker I have seen read: "Pro-choice and therefore pro-child." It reminded me of the Party slogans in Nineteen Eighty-Four: "WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.") At the same time, of course, no one dares refer to the "pro-life" movement. Here the politically-correct term is "anti-abortion," which sounds negative and conveys the impression that religious fanatics are attempting to prevent young women from exercising a "human right"—never defined, but best understood as something that the PC crowd endorses.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, not the "events" (vague and passive) or the "tragedy" (a killer earthquake is a tragedy), PC regulars have

continued

mounted a massive media campaign to persuade people that those who express doubt concerning the peace-loving impulses of Islam are vile slanderers guilty of “crimethink” (in Newspeak). When confronted with a series of suicide bombings, media reporters are careful to avoid the word “terrorist.” They prefer “militant” because it evokes an image of a courageous and uncompromising freedom fighter.

If anything I have said thus far makes you feel “uncomfortable,” you have only to say so in order to gain the upper hand. This is a favorite tactic of those who would prefer not to engage in reasoned debate and who therefore attempt to silence opposition by insisting that any contradiction of their beliefs is tantamount to criminal assault on their psyche. The great advantage of such psychological claims is that they are almost always subjective and hence exempt from challenge.

In the right circumstances, making someone “uncomfortable” may rise to the level of a “hate crime,” a term that fits nicely into the vocabulary of Newspeak. A hate crime may be no more than an opinion that the politically correct seek to discredit. “Hate speech” is the stating of such an opinion. Universities have attempted to impose speech codes in order to outlaw language that makes some students “uncomfortable” or that contradicts doctrines that, because they are difficult to defend in argument, must be insulated from criticism. One of the strategies here is to find a real crime that can be turned to ideological advantage. Thus murder a homosexual, but rather than call for their trial and execution (though here opposition to the death penalty loses its voice), the politically correct seize the opportunity to silence opposition to homosexual practices by proclaiming that its expression “creates an atmosphere” that leads directly to criminal violence. In other words, anyone who questions the public acceptance of homosexuality is a party to murder.

Orwell used the Soviet Union as the model for “Oceania,” though he was aware that the English left also hijacked language in order to advance its causes. One wonders, however, if he ever envisioned the kind of linguistically-constructed surreality that now forces Western minds into desired channels. One thing remains certain: were he alive today he would be among the leading defenders of Oldspeak.

#####

(Lee Congdon is professor of history at James Madison University, and a member of the Board of Scholars of the Virginia Institute for Public Policy, an education and research organization headquartered in Potomac Falls, Virginia. **Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliations are cited.**)

Universities have attempted to impose speech codes in order to outlaw language that makes some students “uncomfortable” or that contradicts doctrines that, because they are difficult to defend in argument, must be insulated from criticism.

Attention Editors and Producers

Virginia Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available at www.VirginiaInstitute.org or on disk. Please contact:

John Taylor
Virginia Institute for Public Policy
20461 Tappahannock Place
Potomac Falls, Virginia
20165-4791

Phone: (703) 421-8635
Fax: (703) 421-8631

www.VirginiaInstitute.org
JTaylor@VirginiaInstitute.org

**Virginia
Institute**
for Public Policy