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The language we choose has helped shape U.S. energy debate

The power of words

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By Elwin Green, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When President George W. Bush delivered his 2006 State of the Union address, some observers were struck by his declaration that America was "addicted to oil."

After all, "addiction" typically carries the implication that the addictive substance is inherently bad. It also can imply the addict is a victim or lacks willpower.

"It makes it seems as if the consumer has the means to discontinue using gas or oil, as if the responsibility were solely in our hands," said Deborah S. Bosley, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina Charlotte and a member of the board of directors for the Center for Plain Language in Washington, D.C.

"I could quit using heroin, but could I quit using gasoline? Not likely."

Welcome to the rhetoric of energy, in which a commodity is spoken of like a drug, geographical designations become pejoratives and new phrases gain currency without ever being clearly defined.

"Words are chosen because of political and economic agendas," Ms. Bosley said.

There's evidence that the way in which issues are framed influences how people think about them, said Michael Wagner, assistant professor in political science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"A lot of times something happens in the world, and then the frame that gets discussed the most seems to be one of crisis."

The 1973 Arab oil embargo provided such a crisis, and President Richard Nixon responded with a call for a new national goal: "By the end of this decade, we will have developed the potential to meet our own energy needs without depending on any foreign energy sources."

In announcing his Project Independence, Mr. Nixon unveiled a matched pair of rhetorical swords still being wielded today.

The first is the use of "foreign" as a pejorative. The word "foreign" simply means that something is not produced domestically, but calls for a reduction in foreign oil often are linked with phrases such as "nations that would do us harm."

Such a description might not apply to the leading source of imported oil, Canada. Or to second-place Mexico. While the U.S. government is regularly at odds with third-place Venezuela, that country is generally not viewed as a threat.

"'Foreign' is code for the Middle East," Ms. Bosley said.

"Language is code because words always mean more than they appear to mean," she said. "The minute you put 'Middle East' in there, then it evokes visions of terrorists."

The fact that the leading Middle Eastern supplier of oil, Saudi Arabia, is only fourth among foreign suppliers "takes a lot of steam out of the issue of our dependency on the Middle East," she said.

Mr. Nixon's second gift to energy rhetoric is the term "independence" as the overarching goal of national energy policy.

While Americans may respond well to the word "independence," energy independence is not an entirely realistic idea or premise to start with, said Alison Taylor, director of government affairs-environment, Siemens Corp.

Even if one assumes energy independence as a goal, descriptions about the paths toward that goal differ.

"Energy policy can be tilted three ways," said John C. Wohlstetter, a fellow at the Discovery Institute, a conservative think tank.

"'Security' would end imports from unfriendly countries who spend petrodollars in ways harmful to our national interest. 'Efficiency' stresses lowest economic cost, which perpetuates sending dollars to such countries but keeps lowest cost in a very weak economy. 'Clean' energy focuses on environmental concerns, such as clean air, water and climate change."

President Barack Obama's tilt may be guessed from the title of a bill that he wants to see passed, "The American Clean Energy and Security Act."

One provision of the House bill, introduced by Democrats Henry Waxman, of California, and

Edward Markey, of Massachusetts, is the establishment of a "cap-and-trade" regime for greenhouse gases.

Ms. Bosley described "cap-and-trade" as "an interesting phrase, because it sounds very playful in a way.

"It's almost like I'm gonna trade marbles or I'm gonna trade stories."

Opponents to the plan want to change the language about it.

A year ago, Washington Post columnist Robert J. Samuelson said, "Let's call it by its proper name: cap-and-tax." Republicans now use that phrase to describe the Waxman-Markey bill but it has not gained widespread currency. Which illustrates one of the great challenges of contemporary politics: to find language that resonates with voters.

When voters are unsure about what they want, the challenge grows.

"People have conflicting views, right?" said Mr. Wagner. "They would love to have cars with great gas mileage ... so long as they have as big a car as they want.

"I don't know that the debate that energy policymakers have is doing a good job of helping people to sift through those values."

One term that has gained currency is "green," a word that Ms. Bosley said, has now been sort of co-opted and applied to everything.

The problem, Ms. Taylor said, is that there's not a great definition of "green" out there.

The U.S. Green Building Council has gone to great lengths to define criteria for awarding certifications for "green" buildings, but in many other areas such criteria remain vague or entirely absent.

Businesspeople have struggled for decades to craft messages that combat the image of business as environmentally dirty.

Ms. Taylor acknowledged industry seems to be losing the battle of perceptions in at least one arena: namely, regarding the efforts to either contain or reduce emissions produced in mining or burning coal, by using "clean coal technology."

The Reality Coalition, a consortium of environmental groups, has lampooned the concept of clean coal technology with satirical ads that share the tag line, "In reality, there's no such thing as clean coal."

"If we tried to run an ad to explain to the world the technology behind 'clean coal,' it would bore everybody to death and wouldn't do any good," Ms. Taylor said. "I think at the moment the campaign against coal and the campaign against clean coal is winning out."

Beyond that, she sees signs of hope for a consensus between businesspeople and environmentalists.

Over the past three or four years, she said, "They've been more willing to talk to each other, which is a new phenomenon, given that they usually talk to each other on the courthouse steps."

One result of that new conversation is the emergence of a word that may trump "green" in shaping policy.

"A lot of these groups talk commonly about sustainability," she said, an idea that goes beyond short-term strategies, even green ones, to take a long-term view.

For instance, she said, "Part of our sustainability plan is looking at education opportunities, how to bring future generations into energy education."

In an April 22 speech on energy, Mr. Obama spoke, predictably, of "reducing our dependence on foreign oil" and "energy independence." But he also upped the ante by referring to "the next energy revolution," "a new era of energy exploration" and "a new, clean energy economy," phrases that go beyond independence or security to evoke one of his primary campaign themes, newness.

The conclusion of the speech was nearly utopian:

"That can be our legacy. A legacy of vehicles powered by clean renewable energy traveling past newly opened factories; of burgeoning industries employing millions of Americans in the work of protecting our planet; of an economy exporting the energy of the future -- instead of importing the energy of the past; of a nation once again leading the world to meet the challenges of our time."

Even Mr. Obama's eloquence may be outmatched by a culture in which voters choose to take in only news that reinforces what they already believe, Mr. Wagner said.

"It's harder and harder for presidents in the modern era to affect public opinion," he said.

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