

Words

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It's been a year filled with charges of everything from media bias to fake news and outright lies. At times, I was reminded of my training as an intelligence officer, specifically, in how to detect propaganda. What I will share is not new, but we should all be reminded of it from time to time so that we can avoid falling prey to misinformation and disinformation.

Propaganda is really a rather straightforward process. It's all in the words: mostly the adjectives. One of the most recent examples was how the media treated Atty General Barr's statement regarding voter fraud. What he said was that there was no "widespread fraud." The media reported that he said that there was no fraud. Even when the video was played and the word widespread was included, the reporter would comment that there was no fraud. The same thing occurred in printed media.

Other common adjectives that were used were "unfounded" and "baseless" when referring to claims of fraud. Another of my favorites was the common reference to "false" theories. The events being qualified by these adjectives were not proven or disproven, making the use of the words the opinion of the reporter, shading the news.

Beyond the adjective, there is the verb. When reporting on the President's pursuit of vote recounts and investigations, the words "overturn" and "reverse" were used when referring to the election. At the time, the election process was incomplete, making the use of these verbs inappropriate. The outcome was certain, but the use of the terms painted a different picture than that had the words "validate" or "verify" been used to refer to the pursuit of accuracy in the final count.

The reason this is important is the same one that lies behind the use of the adjective "alleged" when referring to a criminal. We see video tape of crimes being committed and the perpetrator is still the "alleged" robber or murderer. That adjective makes it clear that the person has not yet been convicted.

The use of the adjectives gives the consumer the impression that the issue is settled. In fact, at the time that the President's claims were referred to as baseless, the issue was not settled. The issue of fraud still isn't settled, even though the election outcome has been finalized. One reporter went so far as to say that the President was "continuing to tell the lie."

One last example of how word choice can be used to alter the impression of what happened is the report on the incident that occurred at the Capitol on January 6th. On the 7th, the reporter said that "four people were killed." The use of the word "killed" instead of "died" is misleading. A more accurate representation would have been that one person was killed and three others died due to unrelated health reasons. In fact, a fifth person died the next day.

If the purpose of the news is to inform the public, the choice of words must be more selective and accurate. If the purpose of the news is to mold the opinion of the public, then things seem to be going as planned.