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More Word Games in the United States Presidential Campaign: Intervention and Isolation

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Abstract. This article highlights a corruption of language in public discourse related to the United States (US) presidential campaign.

Public discourse on the interventionist and isolationist tendencies of the main US presidential candidates seems to reveal a significant corruption of language. The biggest corruption involves the very natures of interventionism and isolationism. Public discourse suggests that the two are polar opposites with the former denoting engaging the world and the latter withdrawing from it. However, both may involve continuous engaging because the choices of acting or not acting in particular situations are all choices of type of engagement. Yet, both may involve continuous withdrawing because the choices of acting or not acting in particular situations are necessarily noncontinuous, discrete choices. Only a small, finite number of such choices can be made. Thus, withdrawal seems to occur much more often than engaging. Still, interventionism and isolationism may involve the intentional and/or unintentional nurturing of a script and image of engaging or withdrawing that may be most tenuously linked to acting or not acting. Thus, both might be temporally, spatially, and even causally associated with acting or not acting at various points in time regardless of what the terms may denote.

So interventionists support engaging with the People's Republic of China. Yet in an era of globalization-- viz., facilitated telecommunications and interactions of strategic, ethical, and even domestic interests-- isolationists inevitably must generate policy that engages as well. Moreover, isolationists are not isolationists because they may be very suspicious of intervention with the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, but only because they may reject some interventions for other interventions.

Another example involves a statement by the Republican candidate: "I'm not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, 'This is the way it's got to be." Is not the role of any government to affect the world as much as possible in its own interests? Is this not trying to influence the world "the way it's got to be?" Again, all governments say the world has got to be a certain way and have the motivation to do so, but some just have the ability more than others. To do otherwise is to engage in one's own self-exploitation and self-abnegation.

Still another example involves pros and cons about the appropriateness of nation-building interventions. Nation-building is discussed by supporters as necessary based on combinations of intended humanitarian consequences and security benefits. Opponents discuss nation-building as independent of security. But in an era of globalization and increasing interdependence, how can nation-building not have security implications?

Yet another example, involves the degree of specificity communicated about an intervention. Discourse on the appropriate degree often revolves around definitions of "vital national interests," throwing down the gauntlet about how long military forces or sanctions may be in place, and what else may have to occur for an intervention to be terminated or replaced with some other intervention. Supporters of specificity postulate that the more specific one is, the more likely one is a coherent, strategic, efficacious intervener. The less specific, the less one is characterized by these attributes. However, a multicultural

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analysis of classic strategy suggests that specificity or generality may be the more appropriate dependent on yet other parameters and variables.

A final example might be the notion of how to intervene if any component of an ongoing intervention seems to be failing. If Russia fails to comply with certain weapons proliferation agreements or corruptly implements privatization, if China exacerbates human rights violations, does one pull the plug on engagement? Those who argue in the affirmative seem to espouse a deontological ethical stance. Some others of the affirmative stance insist that only overwhelming, global, and noxious consequences can occur once any component of an agreement is violated. Those who argue not to pull the plug argue that consequences can be quite positive overall even with violation of agreement components.

At bottom, public discourse on intervention and isolation is most likely a tapestry that is but an outgrowth of competing weltanschauungs themselves but distorted expressions of human psychological conflict dynamics. These weltanschauungs are extremely resistant to disconfirming information because of the various psychological needs they serve. This makes the word game of campaigning a most serious game indeed. (See Gamson, W. A., & Herzog, H. (1999). Living with contradictions: The taken-for-granted in Israeli political discourse. Political Psychology, 20, 247-266; Miller, L. J. (2000). The poverty of truth-seeking: Postmodernism, discourse analysis, and critical feminism. Theory and Psychology, 10, 313-352; Sanger, D. (October 30, 2000). Rivals differ on U.S. role in the world. The New York Times, p. A1, A16; Sillince, J. A. (1999). The role of political language forms and language coherence in the organizational change process. Organization Studies, 20, 485-518; Wilson, R. W. (1997). American political culture in comparative perspective. Political Psychology,18, 483-502.) (Keywords: Intervention, Isolation, Language, Public Discourse.)