Two-page version

WORDS ABOUT WAR *MATTER*

A LANGUAGE GUIDE FOR DISCUSSING WAR AND FOREIGN POLICY

Discussions of war and foreign policy are full of dehumanizing euphemisms, bloodless jargon, little-known government acronyms, and troubling metaphors that hide warfare's damage. This guide aims to help people write and talk about war and foreign policy more accurately, more honestly, and in ways people outside the Washington, DC foreign policy "blob" can understand.

The word "defense," for example, can be a particularly misleading, Orwellian word used to describe warfare, budgets, and other things that often have little if anything to do with defense. Just because someone says something is "defense" doesn't make it true. In most cases "war," "Pentagon," or "military" are more accurate. Rather than "defense spending," say "Pentagon spending" or, following the *AP Stylebook*, "military spending." Rather than "Department of Defense," use "Pentagon." The former name, "Department of War," was more honest.

Please use and share this guide and adapt it to local contexts. A full-length version of this short guide includes explanations of the suggestions, as well as additional guidance. When quoting please cite: "Words about War Matter: A Language Guide for Discussing War and Foreign Policy," ver. 2, May 2025, www.wordsaboutwar.org.

AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES
all-volunteer force	all-recruited force, post-draft military
boots on the ground	troops, combat forces, military personnel, soldiers, Marines, sailors, Air Force personnel
casualty	killed and wounded
collateral damage	civilian killing, deaths, murders, injuries, displacement, other destruction
defense… budget, spending, contractor, contracts, industry, analyst, expert, strategy	Pentagon, military, war, weapons… budget, spending, contractor, contracts, industry, analyst, expert, strategy
Defense Department, Department of Defense	Pentagon, the military
Defense Secretary, Secretary of Defense	Pentagon chief, Pentagon Secretary, Secretary [name]
enemy noncombatants	civilians
hawks and doves	Don't use. Say what someone supports: war, bigger military budgets, etc. or diplomacy, cutting military budgets, peace, etc.
intervention	war, invasion, attack
kinetic	describe the actual military violence: bombs, bullets, missiles, or other instruments of death
military aid/lethal aid	military funding, weapons shipments

AVOID	BETTER ALTERNATIVES
military exercises	war maneuvers, war training, war exercises
military footprint	military occupation, military bases and forces
military sites/locations/facilities	bases, military bases; also, military installations
national interest	Avoid. Often means corporate interests. Be specific about whose interests are served and whose are not.
national security threats	Avoid. Often used to scare. Be specific about the threats.
neutralize	kill, murder, assassinate
overseas contingency operation	war (in some cases: invasion, combat)
power projection	troop deployment, military deployment, bases and troops, overseas bases and troops, bases and troops abroad
precision bombing/airstrike, precision-guided munitions	bombing, airstrike, bomb/missile attack (if evidence shows they are guided: guided munitions/bombs/missiles)
targeted killing	assassination, extrajudicial assassination, killing, targeted assassination, murder
terrorism	acts of mass violence, attacks on civilians
terrorists	Avoid propagandistic labels and instead name the actions of groups.
war on terror, global war on terror	post-9/11 wars, post-2001 wars, so-called war on terror

MORE GUIDANCE

Use clear, accurate, descriptive language: Describe war's effects directly and honestly.

Avoid jargon of all kinds: military, foreign policy, Congressional, bureaucratic. Use clear, simple, descriptive language.

Avoid acronyms/initialisms: Like jargon, they exclude outsiders and obscure what's going on.

Avoid Pentagon, military, and Congressional language almost always: It also excludes and obscures. Find the clearest, most accurate language.

Avoid sports metaphors: War is not sport. Sports metaphors hide war's human damage.

Avoid medical metaphors: War is not medical practice. War is never surgical or hygienic.

Avoid war, gun, and other violent metaphors: For example, "rally the troops," "on the frontlines," "pull the trigger," "smoking gun," "you killed it."

Share alternatives gently: Shaming people's language is unhelpful. Explain. Discuss. Share the guide as a resource. Invite conversations about how words shape how we perceive the world and thus war and foreign policy.

Use these suggestions consistently, in all settings: Changing language can feel hard, even if it's more accurate. The more we use accurate language, the easier it becomes.

The full-length version of this guide is at www.wordsaboutwar.org

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