

**The Impact of Politics on Language:
The Cold War, Vietnam, Watergate, and American English**

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Acknowledgements: Thanks are due to Ingrid Creppell, Zsuzsa Csergo, Robert Goldfarb, and Carol Sigelman for their helpful criticisms and suggestions on an earlier draft, and to Richie Wilcox and David An for research assistance.

Abstract

Political scientists have long recognized the myriad ways in which language shapes politics, but our understanding how politics shapes language is less advanced. After considering several theoretical and empirical perspectives on whether and how newly coined words diffuse into broader usage, we focus on popularity and durability of new words associated with three major episodes in recent American history: the Cold War, the Vietnam conflict, and the Watergate affair. After observing that existing theoretical and empirical accounts do a poor job of accounting for the patterns we observed in these three cases, we outline what we take to be the most promising elements in explaining why some new words that are triggered by political developments prove so much more successful than others.

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...language is an integral facet of the political scene: not simply an instrument for describing events but itself a part of events, shaping their meaning and helping to shape the political roles officials and the general public play. In this sense, language, events, and self-conceptions are a part of the same transaction, mutually determining one another's meanings (Edelman 1977, 4).

The need for new words is both pragmatic and aesthetic. Pragmatically, when there are new things to talk about, we need new words to name them. Or sometimes we want to talk about old things in a new way. Changes in society, whether material or intellectual, call for new words; and the more intense the social change, the more need we have to name new things or rename old ones. Thus invention, discovery, exploration, war, commerce, and revolution all breed neology (Algeo 1991, 14).

The debate over whether waterboarding during the Bush administration was a form of “torture” or merely an “enhanced interrogation technique” is only one recent skirmish in an ongoing linguistic war involving expert practitioners of the political uses of language. The idea that the words we use impart meaning to the political phenomena we perceive or experience can be traced back at least to ancient Greece -- most notably to Aristotle's focus on rhetoric. In modern times, linguists have documented the distinctive ways in which users of different languages experience the world. This linguistic relativity principle (Sapir 1983; Whorf 1956) received dramatic expression in the thought control a totalitarian regime exercised through mandatory use of “Newspeak” in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. More recently, analyses of the political impact of metaphors (e.g., Lakoff 2001) and a massive wave of research on “framing” effects in attitude formation (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007) have helped advance our understanding of the myriad ways in which language shapes politics.

Recognition that words matter politically is seriously incomplete, however, without a complementary understanding of the impact *of politics on language*. Language is “a fundamentally mutative phenomenon” (McWhorter 2003, 16) in which lexical change is an integral component. New words are born, existing ones take on new meanings, old ones die. The words we use do not materialize out of thin air. Rather, they are products, in part, of cultural changes, including changes in the political order.¹ As Richard Primus puts it,

¹ Note especially the inclusion of “in part” in this sentence. McWhorter emphasizes that “Language change is a culturally determined phenomenon only to a marginal extent. Culture appears central to the process within our life spans, because new words and expressions specifically indexed to cultural changes appear and disappear by the month. However, ...

“The constituent relationship between [politics and language] is reciprocal. Precisely because language and politics are closely interconnected and therefore difficult to analyze sophisticatedly in isolation from each other, it is hard to imagine language as a separate and antecedent sphere that influences politics while remaining itself untouched. Language does shape politics, but politics shapes language as well” (1999, 1-2). We acknowledge the validity of Primus’s point and applaud the contributions that political scientists have made to unraveling this knotty tie, but much remains to be done to inform our understanding of the impact of politics on language, and in particular of the manner in which political trends and events affect the words we use in everyday discourse. Thus, the manner in which political developments shape lexical ones constitutes the subject matter of this paper.

Perspectives on the Spread of New Words

Influenced by thinkers as diverse as Quentin Skinner (1978) and Raymond Williams (1976), many scholars working in the fields of the history and methodology of political thought have interpreted conceptual and ideological change as responses to political developments. The present study, though far more limited in scope, owes much to such work. Still, we should acknowledge two differences at the outset. First, whereas Williams, Skinner, and their followers have sought to situate arguments and ideas in relation to the larger historical environment in which they occur as well as the discourse already in play, we focus more narrowly on the impact of specific triggering events on word use patterns. Second, whereas their attention centers on the evolution of broad *concepts* across historical epochs, ours centers on the use of specific *words* over years or decades, not centuries or millennia. Our more limited time frame follows directly from our interest in the impact of specific triggering events, but the distinction between concepts and words requires some clarification.

Of course, concepts and words are not, of course, unrelated, but neither is there a one-to-one correspondence between them. Concepts underlie the discussion of various topics, but the words used to describe those concepts vary considerably over time. In the hard sciences, for example, subjects such as *atomic physics* and *neuroscience* have long been prominent parts of scholarly discourse, but the language used to

culture only drives a sliver of the whole of the change that any language is always undergoing. ...Language evolution ... is largely a matter of chance, like the eternal transformations of that clump of lava in a lava lamp” (2003, 48, 44).

describe those ideas has undergone substantial transformation (Blei and Lafferty 2006). Skinner's consideration of the nature and limits of the connection between concepts and words warrants careful consideration:

It cannot be a necessary condition of my possessing a concept that I need to understand the correct application of a corresponding term. Suppose, for example, that I am studying Milton's thought, and want to know whether Milton considered it important that a poet should display a high degree of originality. The answer seems to be that he felt it to be of the greatest importance ... But I could never have arrived at this conclusion by examining Milton's use of the word *originality*. Although a history of the word *originality* and its various uses could undoubtedly be written, such a survey would by no means be the same as a history of the concept of originality. ... What then is the relationship between concepts and words? ... I think we can at least say this: the surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possessing of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency. ... The possession of a concept will at least *standardly* be signaled by the employment of a corresponding term. As long as we bear in mind that 'standardly' means neither necessarily nor sufficiently, I think we may legitimately proceed (1989, 7-8; see also Farr 1989).

As this paper progresses, we shall see that some words in effect become concepts, by which we mean that they acquire new denotations and connotations and thus a wider range of applicability than the one for which they were originally intended; this is what we will refer to as the process of genericity. For now, though, let us begin by considering the development of new words.

Every year, thousands of new English language words are coined. Most of these "nonce-words" fade quickly away, unnoticed and un lamented.² Some go on to achieve enough popularity, at least temporarily, to have their existence acknowledged in dictionaries, at which point they are recognized as "neologisms." However, even these successes are apt to be short-lived, for it is unusual for neologisms to be integrated into and persist within the common vocabulary of a language (Fischer 1998, 7): almost two-thirds of the new words that debuted in dictionaries between the mid-1940s and the mid-1970s had been dropped by the late 1980s and early 1990s (Algeo 1993).³

² "Sometimes we invent a word on the fly during a conversation and the word is extinct by the end of that conversation" (Adams 2009, x).

³ Estimates of the birthrate of new words, their lifespan, and the total number of words in use are notoriously unreliable, for there is no widely accepted understanding of what a "new word" is, no feasible way to determine which or how many words are actually in use, or even any shared understanding of what "in use" means. Reflecting the simultaneous absences of an established definition of "new words" and of a comprehensive and constantly updated census of words in use, linguists have greeted with derision a well publicized attempt (Payack 2009) to estimate the number of words in the English language and to forecast the date when that number would reach one million (e.g., Zimmer 2009).

Over the years, social scientists have advanced theories and speculations that bear generally, and in a few cases specifically, on the question of how new words spread. Perhaps the most prominent of these comes from sociological treatments of changing fashions in art, architecture, clothing, and other forms of expression. The classic statement of this perspective is Simmel's:

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole style of human expression, are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion – *i.e.*, the latest fashion – in all these things affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on (1957 [1904], 545; see also Robinson 1961, 382-383).

As seen from this perspective, fashions spread from the “top” of society downwards in a contrapuntal interplay of imitation and differentiation.⁴ For new words, it follows that success or failure should depend upon transferability from the discourse of the cultural elite to that of the masses.

From a second sociological perspective, changing fashions may move upward from the bottom of society or inward from the periphery to the core (Meyerson and Katz 1957), with tastemakers who straddle these realms acting as the prime movers. Importantly, rather than assuming that new fashions generally flow either upward or downward through a social hierarchy, Meyersohn and Katz emphasize that they are “perhaps borrowed from a fringe group within the society, or even outside it, and touted as an ‘esoteric’ discovery.” These bottom-up or outside-in interpretations contrast sharply with Simmel’s “trickle-down” perspective.

Whereas these two perspectives highlight the segments of society from which changing fashions emanate and to which they spread, other perspectives focus on why fashions change *when* they do. Instructive in this regard is the notion that when more of an idea’s “associated cues are present in the environment, people may retrieve it successfully; when its associated cues are not present, people may fail to retrieve it” (Berger and Heath 2005, 197). In other words, when environmental cues become more common which prime people to think about an idea and to conclude that that it may be relevant to others, the idea itself will be used

⁴ “Some behaviors are such that people will perform them once they see some minimum number of others do so, but stop once some maximum number is passed. Such effects can be imagined for riots, for the decision about whether to remain at some social occasion, or for the wearing of clothing styles” (Granovetter and Soong 1983, 172).

more frequently. The more prominent a term becomes, the more people think about it and talk about it – in short, the more they gravitate to it, because they generally prefer to establish common ground by talking about information they share with others, thereby reinforcing the prominence of the term (Fast, Heath, and Wu 2009).

Where do such “environmental cues” originate? Berger and Heath treat them as unexplained givens, but Lieberman takes the crucial next step when he argues that changing tastes are reflections of changing social conditions (2000, 69). He grants that popular tastes can be affected by idiosyncratic events, pointing, for example, to the rising popularity of the name *Herbert* after Herbert Hoover was elected president in 1928 and to *Herbert*'s even more rapid decline when the U.S. entered the Great Depression early in the Hoover administration. He argues, though, that tastes change more predictably as a consequence of social change: “It is as if each social change affects relevant tastes, which then continue until another social change leads to new fashions. The external societal influences are myriad: political, social, economic, normative, technological – to say nothing of wars and domestic conflicts” (Lieberman 2000, 69). One example is the change, as the feminist movement took hold, from identifying women as adjuncts of their husband (*Mrs. John Smith*) to identifying them without reference to marital status (*Jane Smith*); another is the increased use of novel names for African American children during the 1960s and 1970s. Lieberman acknowledges that “Some of the most important social developments have at best a minimal impact on tastes,” but he concludes more broadly that “It is difficult to think of any area of taste, ranging from architecture and public monuments to movies and personal items, that is immune from the impact of social change” (2000, 81-82). It follows that the more closely a new word is associated with a major social change, the greater are its prospects for popularization.

At a more abstract level, the popularization of new words can be viewed from the perspective of epidemiological modeling (see, e.g., Hethcote 2000) or, more informally, models of growth, of which the best known synthesis in the social sciences is probably Rogers's (1962) work on the diffusion of innovations. Rogers's most enduring observation was that when the adoption of an innovative practice is plotted over time, it forms a normal curve -- or, for a cumulative plot, a sigmoid curve (1962, 152). Others before Rogers had already noted this tendency and had tried to account for it:

Continuous growth at a constant rate ...is rare in nature and even in society. Indeed it may be stated that within the realm of common human experience all growth must run into eventually declining rates of growth. As growth proceeds, the growing object must eventually run into conditions which are less and less favourable to growth. ...It is not surprising, therefore, that virtually all empirical growth curves exhibit the familiar 'ogive' shape, the absolute growth being small at first, rising to a maximum, and then declining eventually to zero as the maximum value of the variable is reached (Boulding 1956, 66-67; see also Rapoport 1956).

A strikingly similar account emerges when the focus narrows from growth models in general to processes of language change in particular:

The process of institutionalization takes place as follows. At the beginning, the item is hardly known ... It may only be used within certain fields or varieties. Due to topicality, it is suddenly or steadily increasingly used. ...The concept the item refers to becomes the theme of articles. The items may also be used in headlines. The process of institutionalization is initiated and the degree of institutionalization of the item gradually increases. Then a peak or a kind of saturation point occurs, where the topicality reaches its climax. After that, a slow decrease follows. ...The process of institutionalization comes to an end (Fischer 1998, 174-175).

Fischer's characterization of language change helpfully recognizes the inappropriateness of assuming, as many general growth models implicitly do, that once an innovation has been adopted it stays adopted. In the case of new words and phrases, that assumption is problematic, for after reaching their maximum popularity they may fall into disuse, from which they may or may not subsequently recover – presumably, as Lieberman would have it, as a consequence of new social changes that enhance or undermine their applicability. This sudden rise of certain terms, followed by their gradual decay, is a process well known to computer scientists who apply sophisticated techniques of data mining to large bodies of documents. Studying similar texts over extended periods of time reveals evidence of “word bursts,” topics that abruptly appear and gradually wane before being abandoned (Kleinberg 2002).

In a popularized presentation of many of these perspectives, Gladwell (2000) argues that ideas, products, messages, and behaviors spread like viruses (2000, 7) until they reach a “tipping point.” “When an epidemic tips,” Gladwell continues, “when it is jolted out of equilibrium, it tips because something has happened” (2000, 18). One of the most basic things that can happen is that the idea becomes “sticky,” by which Gladwell means that “you can't get it out of your head.” “There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible,” Gladwell concludes. “All you have to do is find

it” (2000, 132).

But how to find it? Gladwell is silent on this point, but in an extension of Gladwell’s analysis Heath and Heath (2007) argue that stickiness depends on an idea’s simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotionality, and story-likeness (2007, 15-18). That checklist (which Heath and Heath dub the six “SUCCEs principles”) does not follow from any coherent body of theory or any well documented set of empirical results, but it may nonetheless help clarify why some new words and phrases take hold and others do not.⁵

The Present Study: Three Case Studies of the Diffusion of Political Language

Which, if any, of these theoretical perspectives, empirical assertions, and outright speculations best account for the ways in which political terms spread? To address this issue, we analyze major political developments that spawned distinctive new vocabularies. The challenge is to try to understand the extent to which these vocabularies, each originally confined to a few people, diffused into the broader culture of speakers of American English, and the manner in which these diffusion processes played out over time. More specifically, we focus on two key components of the diffusion process: the degree of popularity that these terms attained, and the durability of their popularity over time. It is beyond the capacity of this paper to launch definitive empirical tests of the perspectives outlined above, but the data that we consider enable us at least to touch on certain of these issues, and in some instances to address them directly.

We selected three post-World War II cases for analysis based on their distinctive combination of duration and intensity: the Cold War, which began at the end of World War II and did not end until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, providing the backdrop for, and often constituting center stage of, international politics for more than four decades; U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, from the build-up of

⁵ That is more than can be said of an ill-conceived attempt by linguist Alan Metcalf (2002) to develop a system that can predict the success or failure of new words. The key factors in Metcalf’s system are the frequency with which a word is used; the unobtrusiveness of the word; the diversity of users of the word and of situations in which they use it; the extent to which the word lends itself to new forms and meanings; and the endurance of the phenomenon for which the word stands. This system is problematic in several respects, by far the most pressing of which is its circularity: It confounds what is being predicted – the (undefined) “success” of a new word – with the factors that are said to predict success. To be deemed successful, a new word would surely have to be in frequent use, and its use should not be confined to a narrow segment of the population or to a single situation. Note, however, that Metcalf treats a new word’s frequency and breadth of use not as *measures* of its success, but rather as *predictors* of success, and by so doing renders his system circular.

the mid-1960s through the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975; and the Watergate affair, which was triggered by the June 17, 1972 break-in at Democratic national headquarters and ended with President Ford's pardon of Nixon a month after Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974..

The Cold War, the Vietnam conflict, and the Watergate affair did not occur in isolation. Rather, they (along with other developments not analyzed here) collectively comprised a complex system of parts that simultaneously moved in various directions at various speeds. This point comes through clearly in Figure 1, as do the differential duration and intensity of the three developments, as indicated by the annual number of appearances that the terms *Cold War*, *Vietnam* (or *Annam*, as it was called during the French colonial period), and *Watergate* made in the *New York Times*).⁶ To judge from these timelines, for most of the post-World War II period *Cold War* was a virtual constant in the flow of news to which Americans were exposed. The prominence of the *Cold War* metaphor, however, mushroomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as East-West relations were thawing. This reflected the onrush of developments in the international system, though the persistence of the metaphor testifies to its continuing dominance in the way international affairs are understood; tellingly, the ensuing period has carved out no generally recognized identity of its own except that of the *post-Cold War* era. From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, references to *Cold War* were greatly overshadowed by those to *Vietnam* and, for a brief period during the 1970s, *Watergate*. Before the early 1960s, *Vietnam* was *terra paene incognita* in the American media, including the *Times*, but it skyrocketed into the news in the mid-1960s before fading rapidly after American withdrawal. The *Watergate* timeline closely resembled that of *Vietnam*, albeit within a more compressed time frame.

(Figure 1 goes about here.)

In terms of their peak intensities (i.e., the number of references to each during its peak year), the Cold War paled by comparison to both Vietnam and Watergate. Thus the Cold War can be characterized as a long-duration, low-intensity development, Vietnam as a medium-duration, high-intensity development, and

⁶ *Watergate* had appeared in the *Times* prior to the break-in, but only very occasionally and in reference to the building itself. "At the time of the break-in, 'Watergate' was understood by those few who recognized it as a reference to a building in Washington, DC. By the time of the 1972 presidential election, it was sufficiently dissociated from the building to be usable and widely used as a summary reference, with significant emotional overtones, to a complex of unresolved issues involving integrity in government" (Brunner 1987, 54).

Watergate as a short-duration, high-intensity development.

Numerous commentators have noted the rich linguistic legacies of the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate. In his detailed deconstruction of Cold War terminology, Chilton (1985, 1996; see also Fowler and Marshall 1985) catalogues numerous instances of the shaping of public discourse by an officially crafted vocabulary (“Nukespeak”) whose most conspicuous components were euphemism and jargon (especially bureaucratic gobbledegook and mystificatory acronyms). Even though American military involvement in Vietnam did not last nearly as long as the Cold War, it also generated an extensive vocabulary, combining the ponderous language of policymakers and the earthy argot of military personnel on the ground. Of course, the Watergate period was even shorter, but its characteristic words and phrases were such noteworthy innovations that the Watergate era has been hailed as “a Golden Age of Political Coinage” (Safire 1978, 90) and castigated as “a cornucopia of cant for satiric recycling” (Rank 1974, 3).

Data and Methods

Any attempt to trace word-use patterns in American English at frequent intervals encounters a seemingly insurmountable hurdle. Although dictionaries and lists of neologisms abound, they provide no information about how often the words they contain are actually used. What would be required for such an accounting are a standard body of textual materials (a corpus) and estimates of the frequency with which each term appears in the corpus. However, even the existing corpuses that provide word-frequency information (e.g., Kučera and Francis 1982) are not useful for present purposes because they lack a third essential: Being confined to a particular and often unspecified time period, they are unsuitable for analysis of language change, especially for the two dimensions of language change upon we focus: the degree of popularity that various words and phrases have attained and the durability they have displayed.

In light of these circumstances, the key to our analytic approach was recognition that most people experience large-scale political developments as spectators rather than participants. They draw upon images and information that the mass media convey, whether directly to them or indirectly through their family, friends, coworkers, and others (Behr and Iyengar 1985). Before a new event, a proposed policy, a fresh candidate, or even an unfamiliar word can become known to them, then, it typically must appear in the

media; and the more often it appears there, the greater are its prospects for penetrating their consciousness. In the linguistic realm, there is no guarantee that a new term will catch on in the general population even if it is frequently bandied about in the media; in politics as in other realms, many – perhaps even most – new terms never make their way into mass usage. However, if a new term does not get extensive media play, then it seems highly unlikely that it will suddenly begin cropping up in daily conversations among ordinary people. Frequent appearances in the media, though not sufficient to ensure the broad diffusion of a new term, are necessary for such diffusion to occur; as advertisers and political propagandists have long understood, repetition is the key to getting a message across.

Thus, in what follows we trace the spread of new political terms over time in the media -- and more specifically in the *New York Times* – because appearances in the media are how new words and phrases reach people and affect their political perceptions and actions.⁷ We rely on the *Times* for two reasons. First, it is widely regarded as the nation’s “newspaper of record” – more authoritative and, in terms of political coverage, more comprehensive than any other media source. Second, every article published in the *Times*, from the paper’s debut in 1851 through 2006, is electronically searchable in the ProQuest *New York Times* (Historical) archive.

We began by preparing lists of more or less prominent words and phrases associated with the Cold War, the Vietnam conflict, and Watergate. Several available glossaries provided initial inventories of Cold War and Vietnam words and phrases, though many of the terms on these lists were so obscure that we immediately dropped them from consideration. For Watergate words, fewer glossaries were available and they contained far fewer entries, reflecting the relative brevity of the Watergate period itself.⁸ Thus our starting list

⁷ For somewhat similar prior efforts, see Jakobson and Lasswell (1949) and especially Fischer (1998). Fischer’s rationale for relying on trends in media usage to analyze the institutionalization of neologisms is worth noting: “As a result of its diverse influence, the language of the media has an effect upon the introduction of new word-formations into the standard language. Many new word-formations are first made available to the general public through the press. The press serves two functions here: a) adopting and using new word creations which have already been institutionalized and thereby reflect the existing linguistic norm; and b) introducing completely new word forms. . . . in this respect, the press contributes considerably to the institutionalization of words and thereby affects the language norm” (1998, 68)

⁸ Especially useful sources of Cold War terms were Dickson (1998, 2004), Mann (2002), and the “Cold War Glossary at <http://tutor2u.net/history/glossary/coldwar/terms.html>. For Vietnam conflict terms, the Dickson (1998, 2004) volumes were again invaluable; an even more comprehensive source is “Vietnam Veteran’s Terminology and Slang” at <http://www.vietvet.org/glossary.htm> and the “Glossary of Military Terms and Slang from the Vietnam War at http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Glossary/Sixties_Term_Gloss_A_C.html, “The

of Watergate terms, based on the available glossaries and on numerous contemporary and historical accounts, consisted of dozens of terms, rather than the hundreds that the Cold War and Vietnam inventories contained. From these lists we removed the names of places and persons as well as a few words and phrases that would have been deemed unfit to print in the strait-laced *Times*. To ensure that that the remaining terms were actually “new,” we dropped any term on the Cold War list that had appeared in the *Times* on more than a few scattered occasions before 1946 and did the same for pre-1965 words on the Vietnam list and pre-1972 words on the Watergate list. Thus, the terms that remained in play were a mixture of fresh coinages and near-coinages (terms that were not literally new but had very rarely appeared in the *Times* prior to the period in question).

The exclusion of words and phrases that predated the Cold War, Vietnam, or Watergate disqualified many prominent terms from those eras. For example, common phrases borrowed from legal proceedings, such as *Did there come a time when...*, *At that point in time...*, and *To the best of my recollection ...*, were repeated time and again during the Senate Watergate hearings, reflecting the quasi-judicial character of the hearings and the legal backgrounds of the committee members.⁹ Similarly, even though the hearings helped popularize *Oval Office* as a shorthand reference to the president and his closest advisers, that term had been appearing in the *Times* since the 1930s. Much the same can be said of several other conspicuous components of the Watergate lexicon, e.g., *deep-six* (a nautical term that Nixon aide John Ehrlichman used in directing White House counsel John Dean to dispose of incriminating documents) and *sinister force* (which White House chief of staff Alexander Haig posited as the cause of an 18-1/2-minute gap in a key White House tape). Similarly, some words and phrases whose popularity soared as a consequence of their association with the Cold War (e.g., *national security* and *collective security*) or the Vietnam conflict (e.g., *hearts and minds*, *pacification*, and *quagmire*) were already in fairly widespread use before the Cold War or Vietnam caused their popularity to spike dramatically.

In all, 55 terms -- 21 from the Cold War, 18 from Vietnam, and 16 from Watergate -- survived the

Glossary of Vietnam Terminology” at http://www.tomahawks.us/vietnam_slang.htm, and the “Glossary of Some of the Words Used During the Vietnam War” at <http://www.1stcavmedic.com/glossary.html>. For Watergate, our main sources were Genovese (1999), Rawson (1997), Safire (2008), and the “Watergate Glossary” at <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/gen/resources/watergate/glossary.html>.

⁹ On *point in time* in particular, see Brewer (1985).

process of elimination we have just described.¹⁰ These terms are listed in Table 1 in order of their peak annual appearance frequency (the number of *Times* articles in which the term appeared during its peak year per every 1,000 articles that the *Times* published that year).¹¹

(Table 1 goes about here.)

Results

How great an impact did Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate words have on American English? We address that question by considering the intensity of their usage at its height, i.e., their peak popularity, and the length of time for which they remained popular, i.e., their durability.

Peak popularity

The obvious standout among the 55 terms listed in Table 1 was *Cold War*, a metaphor so powerful that it came to symbolize a major period of American and world history. During its peak year, 1992, *Cold War* appeared in 943, or 14.5 of every 1,000, of the 64,952 articles that the *Time* published in 1992, easily surpassing the peak frequency of any other term considered here. The lineage of *Cold War* is not entirely clear; it is frequently attributed to financier Bernard Baruch or his speechwriter, Herbert Bayard Swope, but sometimes to Walter Lippmann and more persuasively to George Orwell. What is abundantly clear is that *Cold War* was an instant success, quickly establishing itself as the standard way of referring to the confrontation between the U.S.- and Soviet-led blocs that began at the end of World War II and dominated international relations for the next four and a half decades. Indeed, the Cold War metaphor continued to define international relations even after the circumstances that gave rise to and sustained it had passed into

¹⁰ In almost every instance, the term that we entered in the ProQuest search engine was exactly as identified in Table 1. In a few instances, we also entered closely related variants of a term: *domino theory* as well as *domino effect*; *expletives deleted* as well as *expletive deleted*; *plausibly deniable* or *plausible denial* as well as *plausible deniability*; *toughing it out* or *tougbed it out* as well as *tough it out*; and *turning slowly slowly in the wind* as well as *twisting twisting slowly slowly in the wind*. The *-gate* suffix had to be treated differently, for it was not feasible to search for every word that ended with *gate*. Thus, we entered *Bilbygate*, *Filegate*, *Irancontragate*, *Irangate*, *Koreagate*, *Monicagate*, *Nannygate*, *Travelgate*, *Troopergate*, which seem to have been the primary coinages involving of the Watergate-based suffix. The search engine automatically locates terms ending in *s* in searches for their base term (e.g., *unindicted co-conspirators* as well as *unindicted co-conspirator*).

¹¹ We normed appearance frequencies to the total number of *Times* articles in a year rather than using raw appearance frequencies because of the precipitous decline in the number of articles per year. The ProQuest search engine provides no direct means of determining the total number of articles in the *Times* in a given year, so we approximated that number by searching for articles that contained *a* or *the*, on the assumption that it would be very unusual for an article not to contain one or the other of these two words (for a similar tactic, see Cohen 2008). By this measure, the total number of *Times* articles fell from roughly 145,000 per year during the 1940s to approximately 69,000 per year since 2000. The correlation between the number of articles published in a year and the year of their appearance, 1940-2006, is $-.92$.

memory.

The only serious rival to the popularity of *Cold War* was *Iron Curtain*, which peaked at 7.1 appearances per 1,000 articles in 1953, during the early years of the Cold War era. Although this term is widely thought to have been coined by Winston Churchill for his Fulton address in 1946, it had cropped up intermittently in high-level diplomatic discourse long before Churchill “projected the phrase into the wider public domain” (Chilton 1996, 163). Strictly speaking, then, *Iron Curtain* was a near-coinage of the Cold War era rather than a coinage, but no matter what it was, Churchill propelled it into general usage, in which capacity it helped construct and sustain the imagery of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. rivalry as a battle between an open, democratic system and a closed, totalitarian one.

Closely bunched but well below *Cold War* and *Iron Curtain* in peak popularity were another Cold War term, *containment* (2.47), and two from the Vietnam era, *Vietnamization* (2.58) and *Silent Majority* (2.51). *Containment* emerged as the guiding concept of American foreign policy during the Cold War after serving as the centerpiece of George Kennan’s (1947) vastly influential “X-article” in *Foreign Affairs*. *Containment* provided U.S. policymakers with a readily understandable and broadly appealing framework within which to carry out a more aggressive foreign policy approach than the U.S. had traditionally pursued: “No longer is one merely building the defensive walls around the shining city, or the circle of wagons around the camp fire; the perimeter has to spread outward, become concave and somehow encircle the threatening adversary, perceived as expanding inexorably outwards in all directions” (Chilton 1996, 134). *Vietnamization*, for its part, was a Nixon administration coinage denoting gradual U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Had it been expressed in so many words, this policy would have left the administration open to charges of cutting and running from its oft-stated commitment to turning back communist advances in Southeast Asia and worldwide. Instead, framed as relying increasingly on South Vietnam to defend itself, *Vietnamization* was widely hailed as a step forward. At the same time, Nixon, faced with mounting calls for the cessation of hostilities, proclaimed that his newly announced policy enjoyed the full support of the *Silent Majority* of Americans, by which he meant, as an unnamed White House source explained, “a large and normally undemonstrative cross-section of the country” that habitually “refrained from articulating its opinions on the war” (“Nixon Declares ‘Silent

Majority' Backs His Speech" 1969). Nixon's rhetorical coupling of *Vietnamization* and *Silent Majority* in effect branded opponents of the war as out-of-touch extremists bent on precipitous withdrawal under less than honorable circumstances.

Of the remaining terms, those that attained the highest peak popularity were *collateral damage* (1.48), *smoking gun* (1.44), *-gate* (1.37), *overkill* (1.23), and *Agent Orange* (1.13). *Collateral damage*, a Cold War near-coinage referring to unintended damage inflicted by military operations, often served as a euphemism for civilian deaths.¹² The origins of *smoking gun*, by contrast, can be traced back to an 1893 Sherlock Holmes mystery, but it was not until the Watergate hearings that the term "blazed its way into dictionaries" (Safire 2003, SM18) during the debate over whether proof positive existed of Nixon's guilt. Perhaps the main linguistic legacy of Watergate, though, was the suffix *-gate*, which since Watergate has been appended to a seemingly endless procession of scandals (e.g., *Irangate*, *Koreagate*, *Debategate*); the most prominent reincarnation of *Watergate* was *Monicagate*, designating the fallout from the sexual relationship between President Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Of course, *-gate*, which has been characterized as "the most obvious contribution of Watergate to the language" (Schudson 1992, 150) was not devised until well after the Watergate period itself – a pattern to which we will return in due course. *Overkill*, another in a long line of cold-blooded Cold War terms, referred to the capacity to destroy an enemy many times over, a goal both sides avidly pursued during the nuclear arms race. Finally, rounding out the top ten terms in order of peak appearance frequency was *Agent Orange*, the defoliant that the U.S. military sprayed throughout Vietnam for a decade in order to reduce enemy cover and clear sensitive areas, thereby exposing both civilian populations and military personnel to severe health risks (see *collateral damage*, above).

¹² Like many of the other terms considered here, using *collateral damage* rather than some related term is not a politically neutral choice: "Collateral damage' means civilians in the enemy's country die while terrorist attacks are when civilians in an allied country die" (Zicklin 1991). More generally, Lakoff argues that "Human beings are social animals, genetically hard-wired to feel compassion toward others. Under normal conditions, most people find it very difficult to kill. But in war, military recruits must be persuaded that killing other people is not only acceptable but even honorable. The language of war is intended to bring about that change, and not only for soldiers in the field in wartime, language must be created to enable combatants and noncombatants alike to see the other side as killable, to overcome the innate queasiness over the taking of human life. ... The terrors and uncertainties of war make learning this kind of language especially compelling for soldiers on the front. But civilians back home also need to believe that what their country is doing is just and necessary that that the killing they are supporting is in some way different from the killing in civilian life that is rightly punished by the criminal justice system. The use of the language developed for military purposes by civilians reassures them that war is not murder" (2004, D3).

Why did *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, and the other highly ranked terms in Table 1 lead the way in peak popularity? What did they have in common that could explain how readily they were incorporated into American English?

This question takes us back to, and casts doubt upon, Heath and Heath's (2007) stickiness "principles." Consider, for example, the principle of "unexpectedness." Can terms like *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, *Silent Majority*, and many others that achieved great peak popularity fairly be said to have been more unexpected than many bottom-of-the-list entries? What could possibly have prepared ordinary citizens for the onslaught of strange, even bizarre, new terms like *mutual assured destruction*, *Big Enchilada*, and *modified limited hangout route*? And yet the latter terms, along with many others that could not possibly have been anticipated, never gained much traction. So unexpectedness clearly was no guarantee that a term would "stick" – far from it, for it would be more accurate to say that terms that virtually came out of nowhere consistently failed to make a great impression on public discourse.¹³

Closely related to unexpectedness in Heath and Heath's "SUCCEsS formula" is the extent to which a word or phrase tells a story, a quality that is supposed to make it memorable and therefore facilitate its use. *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, *Silent Majority* and many other terms that became extremely popular certainly did conjure up vivid images and encapsulate complex phenomena in a bare minimum of words. But so did many terms that never reached a tipping point, e.g., *nuclear winter*, *twisting slowly slowly in the wind*, and *third-rate burglary*. Another stickiness principle is simplicity: the simpler an idea is, the more easily it can be retrieved from memory and put to use. *Vietnamization*, *containment*, and *-gate* are good examples of simple terms that succeeded. But for every simple term that succeeded, another one failed, e.g., *first-strike capability*, *tough it out*, and *third-rate burglary*. Many terms that were deliberately crafted to evoke a strong visceral response, consistent with Heath and Heath's emotionality principle, never "stuck," e.g., *balance of terror*, *long national nightmare*, and *cancer on the presidency*. That does not mean that emotionality was a kiss of death, for some highly expressive

¹³ Indeed, Metcalf points to expectedness, not unexpectedness, as a harbinger of the success of a new word: "A successful new word flies under the radar. It camouflages itself to give the appearance of something we've known all along. ...If a word seems familiar rather than new, it will insinuate itself into our vocabulary, as a cowbird insinuates its look-alike eggs into the nests of other birds, who then raise the chicks as their own" (2002, 155, 167).

terms like *overkill*, *Evil Empire*, and *nuclear holocaust* all achieved fairly widespread usage. Rather, it simply means that some emotionally evocative terms fared very well, but others not so well. Nor did concreteness, another stickiness principle, raise several terms from the lower rungs of Table 1, e.g., *kitchen debate*, *medevac*, and *kill ratio*, even though several other concrete terms ranked considerably higher, e.g., *Agent Orange*, *unindicted co-conspirator*, and *body count*.

The remaining element in the SUCCEs formula, credibility, refers to the prestige of the source or sources from which a word or phrase emanated. Here again, it is difficult to detect any general tendencies in Table 1 that bear out this idea, but two specific trends do seem consistent with it. First, whereas several Vietnam terms ranked fairly high in terms of their peak frequency, almost all the Vietnam terms that were drawn from the argot of military forces on the ground ranked low, e.g., *sorry about that*,¹⁴ *free-fire zone*, *medevac*, *firebase*, and *boonies*; this seems consistent with Edelman's (1971, 72) contention that metaphors that are not "officially" devised or disseminated usually operate at a disadvantage. Second, with just one exception (Gerald Ford's characterization of Watergate as *our long national nightmare*) the Watergate terms that failed to catch on were utterances by discredited members of the Nixon White House: *tough it out* (the term Nixon's top advisers used to express their determination to weather the crisis), *third-rate burglary* (press secretary Ron Ziegler's casual early dismissal of the importance of the Watergate break-in), *Big Enchilada* (John Ehrlichman's way of describing Attorney General John Mitchell as the leading target in the investigation), *twisting slowly slowly in the wind* (Ehrlichman's recommendation about how to treat L. Patrick Gray, the administration's nominee as FBI director, in order to distract attention from Watergate), *cancer on the presidency* (John Dean's characterization of Watergate in a one-on-one session with President Nixon), and *modified limited hangout* (Ehrlichman's suggested strategy of intermixing bits of factual information and misinformation in response to inquiries by the Watergate investigators).

Except for the two trends just mentioned, Heath and Heath's stickiness principles are not especially helpful in pinpointing the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate terms that achieved a fairly high peak level of

¹⁴ *Sorry about that* was, according to several accounts, the single most popular phrase among American soldiers in Vietnam. "It seems to capture the impotence of the enlisted man in the face of war and officers, and it is the required rejoinder to all tales of confusion, frustration and woe" (Apple 1965; see also, e.g., Treaster 1966).

usage. It is possible that the key to stickiness lies in some non-obvious *combination* of the six SUCCESS principles. Clearly, though, no single explanation – at least none of those proposed by Heath and Heath – goes very far toward accounting for why some of these terms diffused broadly into American English, at least for a short time, but others did not.

Durability

Peak popularity cannot stand alone as an indicator of the overall impact of a new word or phrase. After all, a term that catches on immediately and goes viral could turn out to be a mere flash in the pan, skyrocketing into widespread use before fizzling into disuse. By contrast, a term that diffuses slowly but steadily might display impressive staying power, continuing to influence American English usage for decades to come. To examine these possibilities, in Figure 2 we array 27 of the 55 timelines, omitting those whose appearance frequencies failed to reach 0.50 during their peak year; so many of these sparsely populated timelines were distorted by a few idiosyncratic spikes that we considered their signal-to-noise ratios too low to be reliable.

(Figure 2 goes about here.)

Each of the first nine terms in Figure 2 got off to a fast start and peaked either immediately or within just a few years. The first two, *Vietnamization* and *White House plumbers*, stand out clearly from the rest. What distinguishes them is that their vertical dimension is almost completely confined to the very brief period immediately following their introduction, after which they essentially dropped out of sight. Their disappearance is not all that difficult to understand. *Vietnamization* was, after all, a short-term strategy for American withdrawal, and when the circumstances that had given rise to the strategy no longer pertained, the term, lacking any broader applicability, passed quickly from the scene. Similarly, as soon as the focus of attention during the Watergate period shifted from the break-in itself to the cover-up, the phrase *White House plumbers* (designating the special White House investigative unit tasked to plug security leaks) took on a purely historical meaning, rarely invoked in more recent circumstances.

By contrast, the next seven terms – all of which were also rapid starters -- held on longer. Leading

the way was *Iron Curtain*, which debuted at the highest level of any term considered here.¹⁵ Its growth curve climbed steadily for several years before peaking and then beginning a gradual descent. It finally flattened out in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the level it has occupied every since, where it remains available for historical allusions but is seldom applied to ongoing or new developments.

The timelines for *massive retaliation*, *missile gap*, *credibility gap*, *Silent Majority*, *expletive deleted*, and *unindicted co-conspirator* all fit the same general pattern as the one for *Iron Curtain*: these terms debuted at a high level or reached their peak within just a few years of being introduced, and then declined (sometimes precipitously) over a protracted period. Whereas *Vietnamization* and *White House plumbers* have for all intents and purposes disappeared, the next seven terms remain in use long after their initial appearance – and, indeed, long after they had fallen into declining use. To judge from the first nine timelines, then, there was no general tendency for words and phrases that caught on rapidly to become flashes in the pan, a fate that befell only two of the nine.

In stark contrast to the first nine terms, none of the next nine made an immediate splash. Rather, they all gathered momentum at a more measured pace, building slowly and in several instances not peaking until several decades after their initial appearance. Indeed, two of these terms – *domino effect* and *smoking gun* – were still gaining popularity during the first decade of the twenty-first century, some forty or fifty years after their earliest appearances. *Domino effect*, a Cold War coinage, represented the idea that if one neutralist or Western-allied country fell to the communists, neighboring countries would soon follow suit. During the 1960s that metaphor served as the rationale for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, and its sharp spike in 1975 shows that the prospect of such an effect was a major preoccupation when the South Vietnamese government finally fell. Since then, the term has been applied to an ever-increasing range of political, economic, and other developments, and its popularity has shown no sign of decline. The progression of *smoking gun*, a Watergate near-coinage, has also been steady, albeit with occasional upward spikes, as in 1987, when attention was riveted on President Reagan's knowledge of an arms-for-hostages deal in Iran, and even more dramatically in 2003, during the unsuccessful search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. These two

¹⁵ Note that the scaling of the vertical dimension of each timeline is pegged to the peak frequency of the timeline in question rather than being fixed across timelines.

timelines cast doubt on the idea that what goes up must eventually come back down; perhaps they simply have not yet reached that point, but for the moment there is no sign that a reversal is at hand.

The timelines for *containment*, *nuclear holocaust*, *overkill*, *survivability*, and *light at the end of the tunnel* tell a different story. Each of these terms took two or three decades to reach its peak, generally advancing in small annual increments. Then, after arcing consistently upward, the popularity of each began to fall. On occasion, a sudden upward spike intervened, as occurred in the early 1980s for *nuclear holocaust* and *survivability*, whose popularity soared during the Reagan administration's massive arms buildup. Again, though, the broader dynamic of these terms was a gradual rise followed by a gradual decline. So even if the timelines for *domino effect* and *smoking gun* give us pause about concluding, at least for now, that sooner or later "new" political words and phrases will progressively fall out of favor, that has generally been the case for the words of the Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate.

Collateral damage and *Agent Orange* were also slow starters. What distinguishes these two terms is their virtually total invisibility during the period in which they originated. *Collateral damage*, a Cold War term, did not achieve any appreciable presence until the 1991 Gulf War, when it was hauled out of mothballs to refer to the deaths of noncombatants and the destruction of civilian property. It then receded for a decade until the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the Iraq War brought it back. Similarly, *Agent Orange* was almost entirely unused for nearly a decade after the defoliation in Vietnam had ceased. It surfaced only when the health impact of the defoliation began to be widely recognized and lawsuits were filed against the chemical companies that had produced it. Both *collateral damage* and *Agent Orange*, then, were "delayed-reaction" or "sleeper" terms, seemingly still-born until events substantially postdating their appearance brought them to life.

Each of the remaining timelines traces a more irregular path than the 18 previous ones.¹⁶ Some of the perturbations in these timelines were little more than noise – fluctuations stemming from unpredictable convergences of idiosyncratic forces. For example, the uptick for *space race* in 1978 and 1979 was due primarily to a children's television program titled "Yogi's Space Race," and the term's surge in 2001 stemmed from

¹⁶ We have already described the *Cold War* timeline in conjunction with Figure 1 above.

announcements of new exhibits at New York's Intrepid Sea-Air Space Museum – hardly major developments on the American cultural scene. *Enemies list* surged temporarily on several occasions as a consequence of publicity surrounding new books by, television programs about, or deaths of individuals named on the Nixon administration's roster of adversaries. *Deep Throat* was, of course, the pseudonym that *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward assigned to his key Watergate informant, borrowing the name from the title of a recently released pornographic movie. Separating out articles that referred to Woodward's source from those that mentioned the pornographic movie, as we have done in Figure 2, does much to clarify the popularity of the term in its Watergate manifestation. Its early surge was due entirely to the movie, and it was not until three decades later, when the identity of Woodward's informant became the subject of numerous articles and books and was finally revealed, that the term peaked. That mystery having been solved, *Deep Throat* immediately began to fade from sight.

There is much more in the remaining timelines than idiosyncratic fluctuations. Much of their seeming irregularity really consists of a series of echoes – some close, others distant, some faint, others strong – of the original term. For example, *body count* and *search and destroy*, familiar terms during the Vietnam conflict, faded rapidly after the cessation of hostilities, only to re-emerge as armed conflicts flared up later in other parts of the world. Similarly, *brinkmanship*, a Cold War term closely associated with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, resurfaced periodically over the years, e.g., in several tense domestic and international confrontations in 1995 and in a series of North Korean provocations in 2003. *Evil Empire*, President Reagan's condemnatory characterization of the Soviet Union in a March 8, 1983 speech, quickly peaked and began to decline, mimicking the timelines of *Vietnamization* and *White House plumbers*. Ironically, though, the phrase took on new life when Reagan publicly disassociated himself from it in a conciliatory mid-1988 speech in Moscow, where he dismissed it as the product "of another time, another era." Notwithstanding Reagan's disavowal, the term lived on, enjoying a revival in 2002 in conjunction with President George W. Bush's branding of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "axis of evil" and popping up periodically in unflattering references to institutions like the Microsoft Corporation (e.g., Gabriel 1996) and the New York Yankees (e.g., Chass 2002).

The most interesting timeline may be that of *-gate*. The *-gate* suffix has popped up at irregular but

frequent intervals ever since Watergate itself, reflecting the media's proclivity for likening virtually every political scandal, major or minor, to Watergate (e.g., *Billygate*, *Debategate*, *Filegate*, *Irancontragate*, *Koreagate*, *Monicagate*, *Travelgate*, and *Troopergate*); "so powerful has the word Watergate been that *-gate* alone implies scandal and cover-up" (McArthur 1987, 187). Although most of these *-gate*-suffixed terms have long since faded from memory, the zigzagging *-gate* timeline bears testimony to the lasting political imprint of that troubled period. Many of these new linguistic formations "were ephemeral, of no intrinsic interest. But they showed how rapidly a new suffix can come into widespread use, they were highly topical in American society, and many exemplified a spirit of play that has as much claim to being a central function of language as any of the more sober purposes usually set forth as humanity's reason for talking" (Algeo 1991, 3).

The Inadequacy of Existing Perspectives

Do the various perspectives on the spread of new words that we sketched out earlier help us understand the patterns we have observed? Do these patterns suggest the need to rethink some of the perspectives?

Two patterns stand out in the data we have examined. First, most new words and phrases failed. They never became popular enough to cause more than a ripple, or, if they did, they ebbed soon after cresting. That characterization becomes all the more compelling when it is recalled that the first step in our selection process consisted of discarding hundreds of terms that we considered too obscure to warrant attention. The early demise of most Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate words and phrases is entirely consistent with what linguists have observed about the life cycle of new words in general and therefore requires no special, specifically political, explanation.

Second, the popularity and durability of new political terms reflected the circumstances that gave rise to them. The coinages and near-coinages that achieved the highest peaks in usage and proved to be most the durable were, as a group, those from the Cold War, by far the longest-running of the three political developments considered here. At the other extreme, the Watergate affair, which lasted just three years from start to finish, introduced relatively few terms that have had a major or lasting impact on American English. To be sure, exceptions are not difficult to find: some Cold War terms (e.g., *balance of terror* and *mutual assured destruction*) never really caught on, and some Watergate terms (e.g., *smoking gun* and *-gate*) did. For the most

part, though, our data suggest that a political situation that comes and goes is likely to beget words and phrases that themselves come and go, but a situation that lasts is likely to contribute more durable terms to the language.

Some hints of a third pattern can also be gleaned from noting which terms stood out as the most successful. The most conspicuous successes, as indicated by their combination of popularity and durability, were *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, and *containment*. Each of these terms surfaced early in the Cold War and retained its popularity for an extended period as the conditions that had given rise to it in the first place persisted; indeed, after those conditions gave way to new realities the *Cold War* metaphor became even more popular than it had been during the Cold War itself.

The bits and pieces of theory and speculation that we considered earlier about the spread of fashions in general and the diffusion of new words in particular do not provide much help in understanding these patterns.

- Although the data analyzed here provide a very limited basis for assessing the applicability of the top-down interpretation of changing fashions championed by Simmel or Meyersohn and Katz's bottom-up or outside-in interpretation, the limited data that do bear on these interpretations provide mixed evidence, at best, in support of them. The failure of terms initiated by enlisted soldiers and draftees rather than by their military superiors or high-ranking civilians runs against the grain of a bottom-up or outside-in interpretation; on the other hand, the popularity and durability of many Cold War terms indicates that terms first employed by high-level government officials, policy analysts, and the like, can diffuse from the top down.
- Lieberman's argument that changes of fashion are driven by a combination of idiosyncratic factors and social change explains both too little and too much. It cannot account for why old fashions often survive for lengthy periods in the face of large-scale social change or, for that matter, why new fashions often fail to emerge as society changes. At the same time, it is so broadly drawn as to be compatible with the circumstances that gave rise to virtually any conceivable change of fashion that does occur.

- Models of growth and the diffusion of innovations, by contrast, yield a specific prediction: plotted over time, the spread of a reversible practice (i.e., one that can be discarded after being adopted) should resemble a normal curve – starting low, starting to grow, gathering positive momentum, eventually peaking, starting to decline, gathering negative momentum, and eventually bottoming out. The problem with this account is simply that it does not fit the great majority of the terms in Figure 2. Just two of the 27 timelines (those of *survivability* and *nuclear holocaust*) come anywhere close to normality.
- As for explaining why some terms are more likely than others to succeed, we have already noted the poor performance of Heath and Heath’s SUCCEs principles.

Toward a More Adequate Account

Changes in the political environment

Our remaining challenge is to parlay the empirical patterns we have glimpsed into a broader understanding of the impact of political developments on lexical change. This is a largely, but not entirely, inductive undertaking – largely inductive because it draws upon the data, but not entirely inductive because its starting point is a simple yet potentially powerful idea that we have already encountered in passing. That idea, extrapolated from the work of Berger and Heath (2005, 197), centers on the role that environmental cues play in leading people to retrieve certain words or phrases from memory. Consider, for example, the displacement of horse-drawn carriages by automobiles early in the twentieth century. As that transformation occurred, Americans – a small band of enthusiasts at first, but gradually the public at large – confronted a new set of realities, initially strange or even bewildering but increasingly familiar and even routine. As these realities took hold, those who lacked even the dimmest understanding of the new technology and had no need to master odd, technical terms like *carburetor*, *crankshaft*, or *magneto* would have found it nearly impossible to avoid recognizing and even using a wide assortment of other new terms (e.g., *flivver*, *roadster*, or *rumble seat*). At the same time, as the horse and buggy faded into increasingly dim memory, once-popular terms like *buggy whip* atrophied into disuse. In condensed form: as flivvers became more prominent, *flivver* became more pertinent; and as buggy whips passed out of use, so did *buggy whip*. In like manner, when the environmental and human

devastation wreaked by the use of chemical defoliants in Vietnam emerged as a headline story in the 1980s, the popularity of *Agent Orange*, a rarely used term during the 1970s, shot dramatically upward; but when Agent Orange, the defoliant, again began to vanish from view, so did *Agent Orange*, the term.

However, this is only part of the story. If *Agent Orange* went the way of Agent Orange, why did the same fate not befall, say, *domino effect*? Whereas *Agent Orange* began going out of fashion as soon as the circumstances that had sustained it passed, *domino effect* outlived the Cold War and Vietnam and has continued to grow in popularity. One part of the answer is that the circumstances that caused a term to become popular in the first place sometimes recur. For example, the strategy, first employed by the U.S. military in Vietnam, of searching out enemies in hostile territory, eliminating them through a combination of ground and air attacks, and then withdrawing without attempting to occupy the territory was subsequently reintroduced in a series of other combat settings; hence the periodic resurgence of *search and destroy*, as shown in Figure 2. Or, to cite a variation on the same theme, postscripts to the original circumstances can revitalize an inactive term, as occurred in 2005 when former FBI agent Mark Felt outed himself as *Deep Throat*. In instances like these, the same term, understood in the same way, is applied to the same, or at least extremely similar, circumstances; this dynamic is purely environmental in that it is because of some new political development that the term enjoys a new vogue.

Of course, that, too, is only part of the story. Some words and phrases acquire longevity not simply because their originating circumstances keep recurring. Rather, they acquire a conceptual life of their own by helping people make sense of the world, by providing provide a capacity for clarification that goes beyond any particular set of circumstances. To anticipate a portion of the interpretation we are about to offer, we can say that they thrive because they become generic rather than being tied to a particular type of circumstantial stimulus.

Lexical considerations

Omitted from an account that centers exclusively on political dynamics are the characteristics of a new political term that, given auspicious political developments, contribute to or detract from the term's success. To close this gap, we will consider four factors that appear, on the basis of the patterns observed here, to be

especially important: a new term's actual or potential genericity, its metaphorical richness, its co-optability, and its threatening or menacing character.

Genericity. When a word or phrase that means X comes to stand for the broader class to which X belongs, it has been genericized. Two familiar cases in point are *band-aid* (meaning “adhesive bandage”), which began life as *Band-aid* (the brand name of an adhesive bandage marketed by Johnson & Johnson) and *kleenex* (meaning “facial tissue”), which was originally *Kleenex* (Kimberly-Clark's brand of facial tissue).

We know of no well developed theory of why a charmed few terms become generic and the great majority do not, and we have no well developed theory of our own to offer. We do, however, have a simple observation: Some coinages begin life with built-in genericity advantages, and others do not. Consider, for example, the following terms:

- *Kitchen debate*, which refers to a face-to-face confrontation between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who disputed the merits and demerits of the capitalist and socialist systems in the kitchen of a model home at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow on July 24, 1959.
- *Vietnamization*, which surfaced publicly in Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's June 9, 1969 expression of hope that direct American military involvement could be phased down and American troops withdrawn at regular intervals – a process that continued until the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973.
- *White House plumbers*, which refers to a small group of operatives, including most famously E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy, who had been secretly commissioned by the White House to shut off the leakage of classified information to the media.

Now consider *smoking gun*, *overkill*, and *credibility gap*. Whereas *kitchen debate*, *Vietnamization*, and *White House plumbers* each explicitly refers to a particular set of historical events, bounded in space and time, from their very inception *smoking gun*, *overkill*, and *credibility gap* were unbounded, and therefore potentially applicable to a wider array of phenomena than the specific events to which they were initially intended to refer. Anyone seeking conclusive evidence of anything – not just the Senate Watergate committee probing Richard Nixon's

impeachability -- could be said to be looking for a smoking gun; anyone behaving in an extremely aggressive manner – not just the U.S. and U.S.S.R. by building massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons -- could be said to be engaging in overkill; and anyone widely deemed untrustworthy – not just Lyndon Johnson -- could be said to be experiencing a credibility gap.

To be sure, references to particular historical events can acquire broader meanings. There is no necessary reason, for example, why *kitchen debate* could not have evolved into a term meaning “an informal verbal confrontation,” why *Vietnamization* could not have come to mean “gradual withdrawal from active involvement in military conflict” and lived on (as *balkanization* did after World War I), or why *White House plumbers* could not have been genericized to mean “units charged with conducting illicit undercover operations.” Rather, the point is that terms like *smoking gun*, *overkill*, and *credibility gap* enjoyed a substantial head start toward enduring popularity. Having been, in a manner of speaking, born generic, they lend themselves to being used in many different contexts, including some far removed from the one in which they originated. Many of these new contexts are likely to be explicitly political. In such situations, these terms can serve as connective tissues, fitting a new set of circumstances that are not yet well understood into a familiar pattern. The simple expedient of attaching the *-gate* suffix to a new event, for example, immediately identifies the event as a serious case of malfeasance in high places.¹⁷ On the other hand, many of the new contexts to which these terms are applied may have little or nothing to do with politics; for example, in just the first month of 2006, *overkill* appeared in the *Times* in contexts far removed from the stockpiling of nuclear weapons, including the bundling of low-priority services in cellphone contracts, the enforcement of new rules regulating acne treatments, the marketing of five-bladed razor blades, and the placement of too many pillows on hotel beds.

Metaphorical richness. A key to possessing broader applicability from birth or to acquiring it as time passes appears to be a term’s metaphorical richness. To grasp this point, compare the following two sets of words and phrases: first, *Cold War*, *domino effect*, *Iron Curtain*, *light at the end of the tunnel*, and *smoking gun*;

¹⁷ As is so often the case with political language, this linkage function is rarely politically neutral. Attaching *-gate* to a term can be a helpful way to put a confusing new set of circumstances in some understandable context, but it can also be an excellent way to establish guilt by association.

second, *expletive deleted*, *kill ratio*, *medevac*, *unindicted co-conspirator*, and *Vietnamization*. The vivid imagery of the terms in the first set contrasts sharply with the sterility of those in the second set. Whereas vividness helps make words and phrases memorable and therefore more likely to be used, sterility makes them forgettable and thus likely to fall into disuse. In one's mind's eye, one can easily envision an iron curtain or a smoking gun, but envisioning a deleted expletive or a kill ratio is much more challenging.

Importantly, the terms in the first list are not only more vivid than those in the second; they are also more metaphorical. *Unindicted co-conspirator* and *expletive deleted* mean exactly what they say, and no more, but *domino effect* can be applied to any chain reaction or series of consequences, and *light at the end of the tunnel* is applicable to any sign of progress. More broadly, *domino effect*, *light at the end of the tunnel*, and the other first-list terms can be extended to an extremely wide range of subjects, but the substantive range of *expletive deleted*, *unindicted co-conspirator*, and the other second-list terms is extremely narrow – perhaps confined to the particular context for which they were originally coined.

Co-optability. Just as some newly developed terms have metaphorical potential for future use, a number of terms have a previous existence, lingering within the lexicon at only a shallow level before being co-opted into political discourse. If a particular term is already in modest use within the language, it may be bolstered and given currency by its use in the discussion of politics. Terms like *containment*, *smoking gun*, *survivability*, and even *light at the end of the tunnel* were all in existence at least since the nineteenth century, and yet they constituted no meaningful part of political speech until the middle of the twentieth century. In a sense, they are what paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould referred to as “spandrels.” As such, these terms were not created specifically for discourse on public affairs. Instead, just like the triangular shapes above the arches that buttress the domes of cathedrals, they were languishing unused until their applicability and usefulness became obvious (Gould and Lewontin 1979). That a particular term already exists within human consciousness naturally facilitates its subsequent use.

By contrast, terms such as *Iron Curtain*, *credibility gap*, and *massive retaliation* reflect adaptations of language, brand-new terms derived specifically to describe a novel set of political circumstances. The story of evolution is, of course, largely one of adaptation to changing environments, but when those environments no

longer necessitate a particular adaption, it may fall dormant. Seen in this way, spandrels --- existing but little used terms that may be co-opted into political discourse --- stand a fair chance of becoming a regular component of society's description of politics. Adaptations, however, may be useful only as long as they are necessary. This is especially likely when, as we have argued, such terms lack genericity.

Threat. *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, and *containment*, the most successful of the 55 terms considered here, penetrated to the very core of the existential threat that was widely seen as confronting Western societies during the years after World War II. "Security," as Murray Edelman put it, "is very likely the primal political symbol, for threats engage people intensely in news of public affairs" (1977, pp. 4-5).¹⁸ For millions of Americans, *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, and *containment* served as daily reminders of the perils of their collective existence. To be sure, *containment* does not pack the emotional wallop of *Cold War* or *Iron Curtain*. In the context of the times, though, as exemplified in movie-house newsreels in which a rapidly reddening world map marked the global march of communism as one country after another toppled before the onslaught, the *containment* metaphor took on a life-and-death urgency of its own; it provided a parsimonious and ominous but simultaneously somewhat reassuring framework for making sense of the menacing international situation and the government's response to it.¹⁹ By contrast, no matter how serious they were, neither Vietnam nor Watergate posed an existential threat to the United States, and the great majority of the terms that emerged from them did not express anything approaching the forebodings of doom that were so prominent in the Cold War lexicon. Indeed, many Watergate-era terms, e.g., *Big Enchilada*, *modified limited hangout route*, and *White House plumbers*, amounted to no more than momentary, frivolous diversions – fun to say but easy to forget as soon as attention turned to other matters. Vietnam and Watergate also constituted major failures of American power and identity, and perhaps the collective American psyche is ill-suited to dealing with episodes of failure rather than success; consistent with that speculation, many of the Vietnam and Watergate terms that are still

¹⁸ Bearing out Edelman's point, the peak annual number of *New York Times* articles per thousand referring to *national security* exceeded the peak number for any of the 55 terms analyzed here or, for that matter, any other term that was seriously considered for inclusion here but was ultimately rejected in accordance with the standards outlined earlier. *National security* mentions peaked in 2006 at 19.98 per thousand articles, well above the peak for the closest contender, *Cold War* (14.52). This was no fluke, as from the 1970s onward the annual figure for *national security* has more often than not topped 10 per thousand.

¹⁹ "Metaphors ... are devices for simplifying and giving meaning to complex and bewildering sets of observations that evoke concern. Political events and trends are typically complex and ambiguous, and they become foci of anxiety" (Edelman 1971, 65).

in use are typically employed sarcastically, as terms of disapprobation, rather than analytically or even positively. The Cold War, however, was so central to – such a defining characteristic of the post-World War II American experience – that *Cold War* quickly passed from coinage to concept, and indeed into such a powerful one that the mere utterance of the phrase is capable of conjuring up an unusually rich set of associations.

Why, then, were some terms that seem no less threatening than *Cold War*, *Iron Curtain*, and *containment* so much less successful, e.g., *balance of terror*, *long national nightmare*, and *cancer on the presidency*? There may be no systematic way to explain why a particular term goes viral while a very similar term fails to catch on. That possibility is consistent with Gladwell's sense that "If you look closely at epidemic ideas or messages, as often as not the elements that make them sticky turn out to be ... small and ... seemingly trivial ... The line between hostility and acceptance, in other words, between an epidemic that tips and one that does not, is sometimes a lot narrower than it seems" (1999, 95-96, 131-132). In such circumstances, minor, idiosyncratic differences can become determinative.²⁰ However, the idea that minor idiosyncrasies that cannot be anticipated or explained often matter does not provide a very solid foundation for understanding the impact of politics on language. A more promising approach, while acknowledging that the line between success and failure is often faint, would begin with the idea that the new political words and phrases that succeed are likely to be those that are generic, metaphorically rich, co-optable, and threatening..

Conclusion

When a new political situation arises, participants and spectators alike often concoct new terms – the former to help deal with it, the latter to help understand it. The more novel the situation is, the more numerous the new words and phrases are likely to be, because the established lexicon may fall short at conveying the novel aspects of the situation and because idiosyncratic aspects of the new situation (e.g., the fact that the Nixon-

²⁰ That is essentially Granovetter's explanation of why the propensity to become involved in a riot may diffuse, and a riot therefore occur, in one city but not in another city where the conditions are very similar: "In cities where a fairly constant distribution of riot thresholds exists the outcome of one crowd may nevertheless differ radically from that generated by another ... for reasons that have nothing to do with differences between the occasions of intervening events but involve only sampling variability. This will occur if the underlying distribution yields an equilibrium which is easily disrupted by changes. It then follows that in two cities which have the same underlying distribution of riot thresholds one may experience a large riot and the other not, for reasons which do not reflect intercity differences" (1978, 1431-2).

Khrushchev debate took place in a kitchen) give rise to new terms. An unusually momentous event (e.g., the onset of war) or a particularly sensational one (e.g., a scandal) should be expected to overcome the general public's normal inattention to political affairs, and the words and phrases associated with such an event should therefore diffuse especially rapidly and widely.

Most political developments, however, do not penetrate the consciousness of members of the general population very deeply or hold their attention very long. As a consequence, even when a new political coinage serves a useful purpose for a limited number of people and/or a limited period of time, the great majority of new political terms do not spread widely or last long. Most new political words and phrases quickly vanish, virtually without a trace. Some new political terms remain in fairly widespread use for as long as the event that precipitated them lasts, or even linger for a while after the event has passed, but then fade away. A few – especially the most vivid ones among the discards -- live on as relics lovingly preserved by word mavens (e.g., Safire 2008) but rarely used by anyone else. The exceptional few make their way into general usage and flourish there. They become linguistic staples, their applicability continually refreshed by an ongoing flow of new political developments that bear some familial resemblance to the circumstances surrounding their coinage. Some of them even take on meanings that extend well beyond the political realm. It is this exceptional few that are the true successes insofar as the impact of politics on language is concerned.

Figure 1. *New York Times* Articles Referring to *Cold War*, *Vietnam*, and *Watergate*, 1940-2006

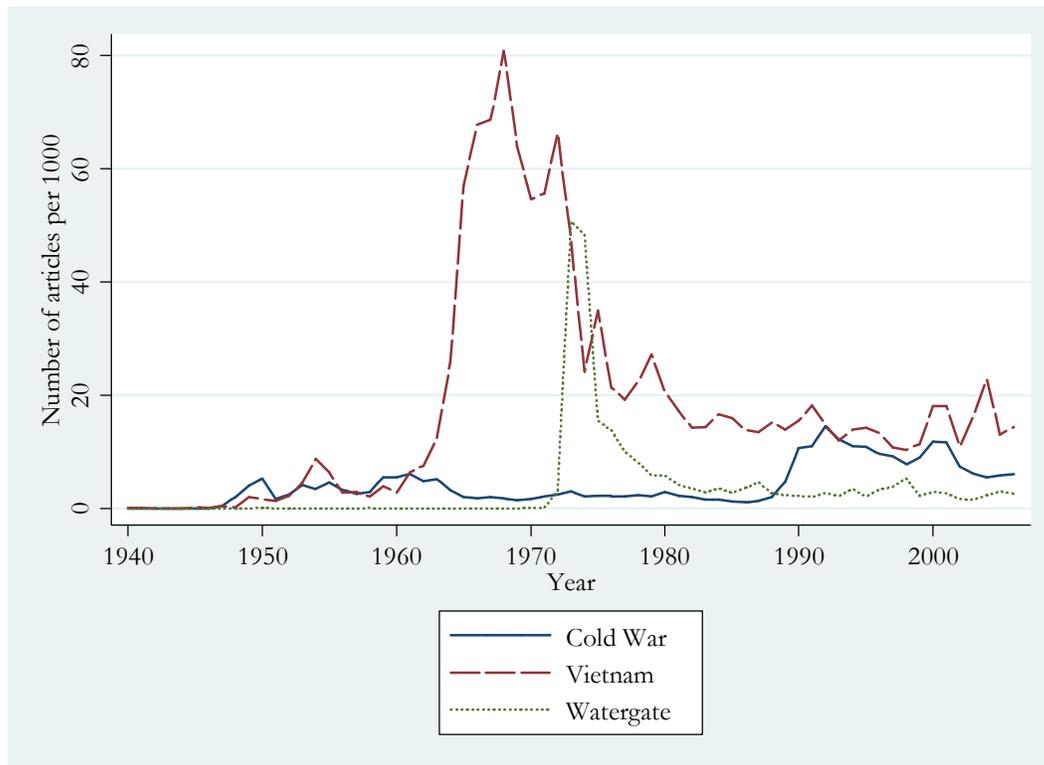


Table 1. The Peak Frequency of Articles Mentioning Cold War, Vietnam, and Watergate Terms per Thousand Articles

Term	Peak annual frequency		
	Cold War	Vietnam	Watergate
<i>Cold War</i>	14.52		
<i>Iron Curtain</i>	7.09		
<i>Vietnamization</i>		2.58	
<i>Silent Majority</i>		2.51	
<i>Containment</i>	2.47		
<i>Collateral damage</i>	1.48		
<i>Smoking gun</i>			1.44
<i>-gate</i>			1.37
<i>Overkill</i>	1.23		
<i>Agent Orange</i>		1.13	
<i>White House plumbers</i>			1.07
<i>Evil Empire</i>	1.04		
<i>Unindicted co-conspirator</i>			0.96
<i>Nuclear holocaust</i>	0.96		
<i>Credibility gap</i>		0.84	
<i>Deep Throat</i>			0.82
<i>Body count</i>		0.82	
<i>Massive retaliation</i>	0.71		
<i>Domino effect</i>	0.71		
<i>Expletive deleted</i>			0.64
<i>Enemies list</i>			0.60
<i>Survivability</i>	0.58		
<i>Space race</i>	0.52		
<i>Light at the end of the tunnel</i>		0.50	
<i>Brinkmanship</i>	0.48		
<i>Search and destroy</i>		0.48	
<i>Missile gap</i>	0.46		
<i>Saturday night massacre</i>			0.39
<i>Go nuclear</i>	0.35		
<i>Nuclear winter</i>	0.35		
<i>White House horrors</i>			0.33
<i>Sorry about that</i>		0.31	
<i>Balance of terror</i>	0.27		
<i>First-strike capability</i>	0.27		
<i>Tough it out</i>			0.27
<i>Checkpoint Charlie</i>	0.24		
<i>Free-fire zone</i>		0.24	
<i>Fat city</i>		0.22	
<i>Hanoi Hilton</i>		0.18	
<i>Long national nightmare</i>			0.16
<i>Medevac</i>		0.15	
<i>Firebase</i>		0.14	
<i>Short-timer</i>		0.14	
<i>Mutual assured destruction</i>	0.13		
<i>Debriefing</i>		0.12	
<i>Nattering nabobs</i>		0.12	
<i>Third-rate burglary</i>			0.12
<i>Kill ratio</i>		0.11	
<i>Big enchilada</i>			0.10

<i>Kitchen debate</i>	0.10		
<i>Boonies</i>		0.09	
<i>Twisting slowly slowly in the wind</i>			0.05
<i>Cancer on the presidency</i>			0.03
<i>Modified limited hangout route</i>			0.03
<i>Plausible deniability</i>	0.02		

Figure 2. Timelines for 27 Terms

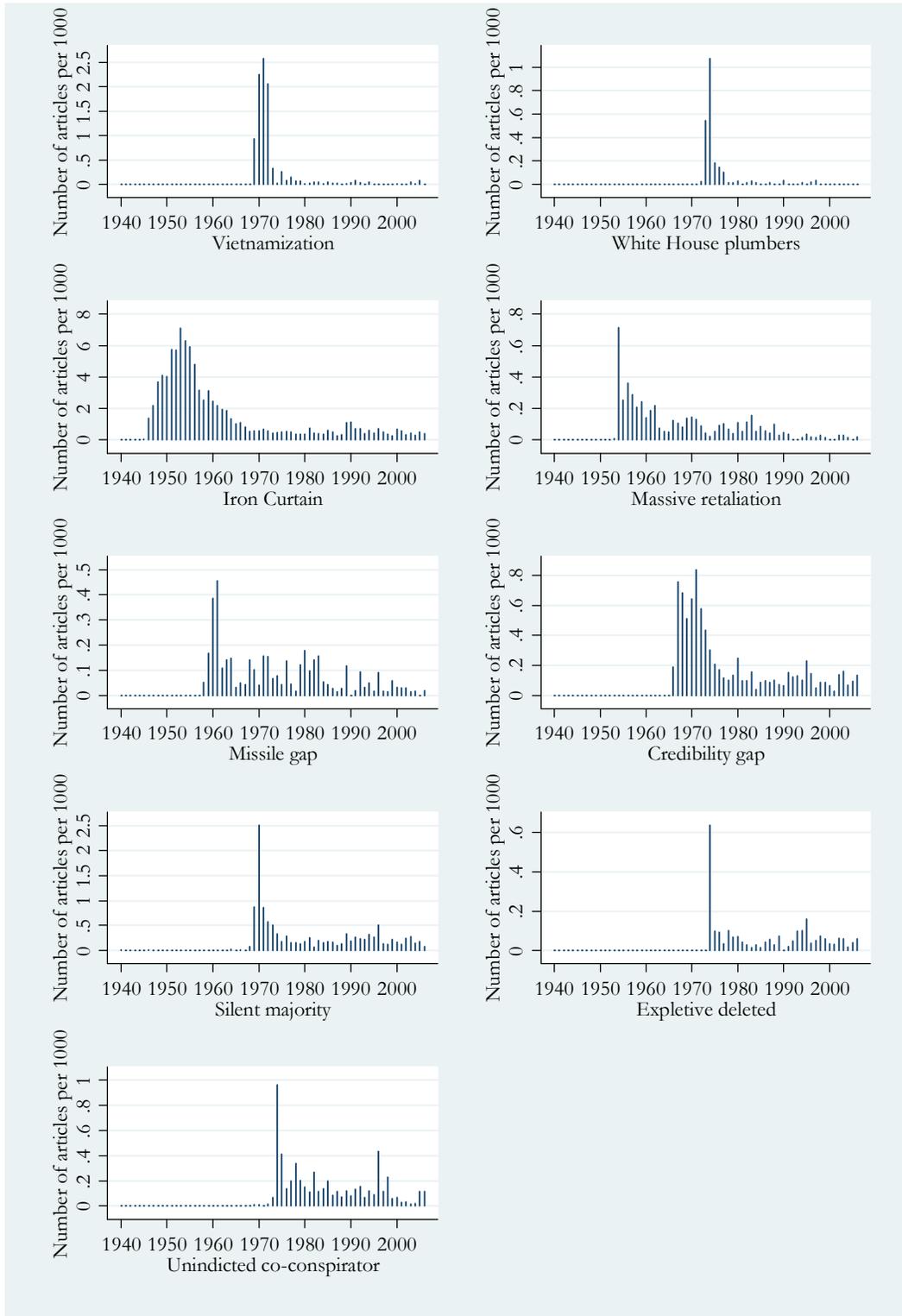


Figure 2 (continued)

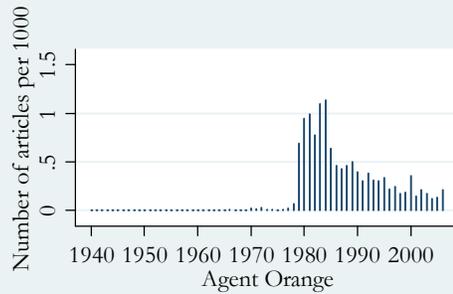
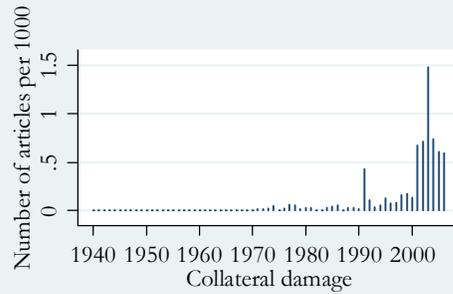
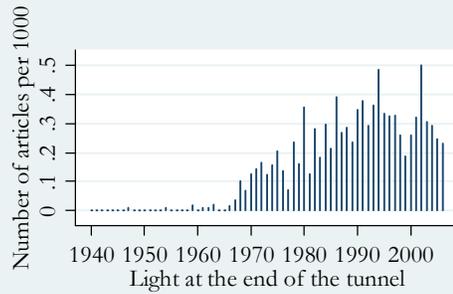
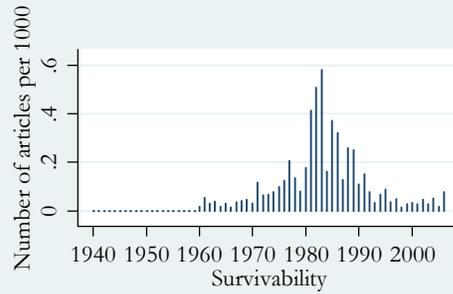
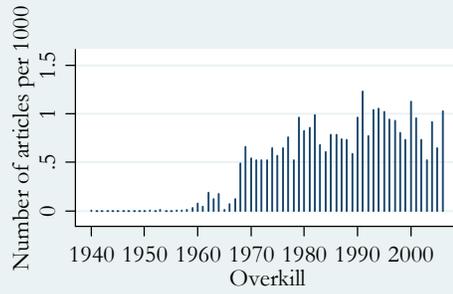
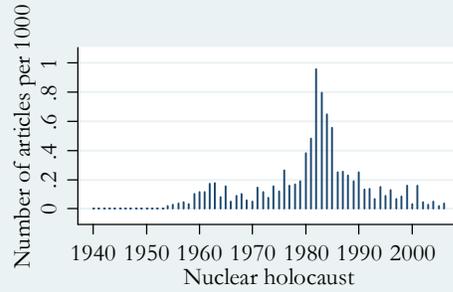
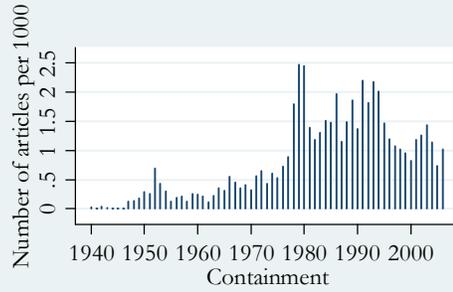
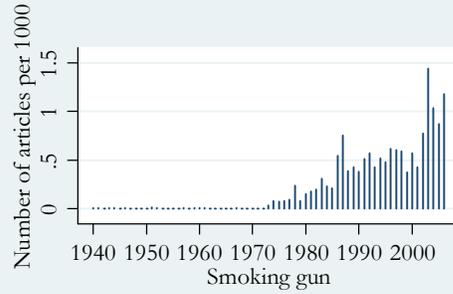
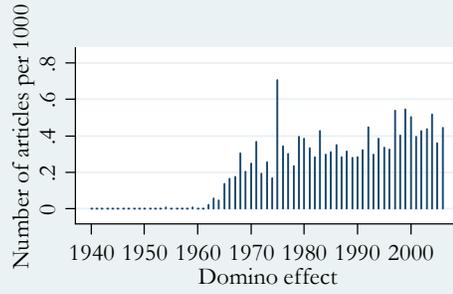
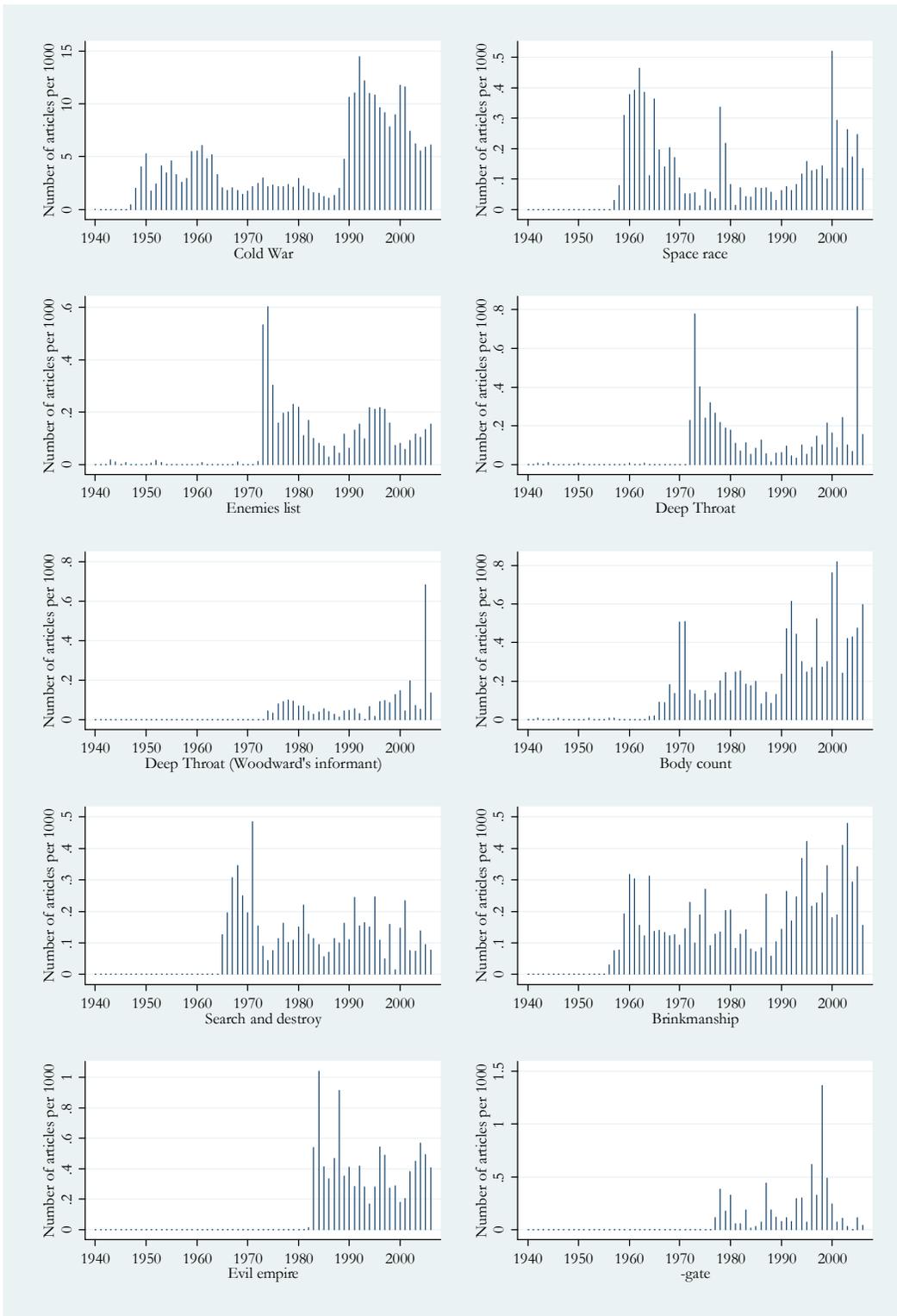


Figure 2 (continued)



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