

Of Words and War

Teaching brings many rewards and almost daily surprises, sometimes from the most unexpected sources. Several months ago, in a class discussion concerning the late unlamented Cold War, a not too sophisticated student asked where the phrase "Iron Curtain" came from. Unfortunately, at this point, no one properly "Miranda-ized" me. Not that it would have mattered. I certainly had the right to remain silent, but pedagogical hubris smugly led me to inform the young man that the phrase was the product of Winston Churchill's fertile mind. I proceeded to explain Churchill's famous 1946 speech at Westminster College in which he described "an iron curtain stretching from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic." After the class, however, the question stayed with me and I began to wonder about the origins of other war-related words and phrases, especially those coming from the Second World War. A somewhat prolonged visit to the Oxford English Dictionary provided considerable food for thought.

For my generation World War II visually arrived in the form of movies, and I carry a vivid recollection of an actor - John Wayne perhaps - belligerently exclaiming, "Tell that to the marines!" The expression, as it lingers in my mind, implied that the marines would not put up with much, and that in dealing with them you had better watch your step. The expression, however, actually has a long history and a very different meaning. During the 17th and 18th centuries, an English warship carried a detachment of foot soldiers, called marines, to take part in necessary landings. . .as well as to protect the ship's officers from the not infrequently mutinous crews. For this and other reasons, some tension usually existed between sailors and marines. Sailors considered marines rather stupid, particularly when it came to nautical matters. So, if a sailor told an improbable

yarn, he was advised to tell it to the marines as real sailors wouldn't believe it. Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott both used this expression in the 1820s, but Samuel Pepys attributed its earliest use to King Charles II, who disbelieved the English diarist's description of flying fish. When a marine officer supported Pepys, the king supposedly retorted, "Henceforth ere ever we cast doubts upon a tale that lacks likelihood, we will first tell it to the marines." Quite possibly John Wayne fumbled his lines.

Another expression involving marines is "Gung ho," also the title of an eminently forgettable 1943 movie. The phrase in Chinese, kung ho, literally means work together and was a shortened version of the name of left-wing Chinese industrial cooperative societies in the 1930s. Colonel Evans Carlson of the U.S. Marine Corps admired the way these groups fought the Japanese, especially when compared to the more feeble efforts of Chiang Kai Shek's Nationalist units. Carlson, commanding officers of the Second Raider Battalion, operating behind Japanese lines in 1942, organized "gung ho" meetings for his own men, and in short order the name was attached to his unit. After Hollywood picked up the phrase, it spread throughout the armed forces to mean energy and zeal. Some twenty years later its meaning shifted again. In a less popular war, military personnel in Vietnam used "gung ho" to mean someone whose eagerness and enthusiasm might easily get comrades killed.

The word "boondocks" provides another linguistic gift from the Orient, and again the Second World war popularized its usage. American troops stationed in the Philippines were sometimes sent into mountainous regions. In Tagalog, the principal language of the islands, the word "bundok" means an out of the way place. Thus, in military jargon, to be sent to any remote or undesirable place was to be sent to the boondocks, or more likely shortened to the "boonies."

Other wars and other times have also enriched our language, and with the help of the OED I was off and running. Many of you will recall Hamlet, chortling over his plan "to catch the conscience of the king" by means of a play, remarking that "'tis the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard." The engineer in question was a military engineer, one who constructed and destroyed fortifications, and a petard was a small explosive device, similar to the modern hand grenade. The metaphor implies that one may be destroyed by one's own device, a not uncommon result for early engineers. The word petard is itself a metaphor. It comes from the Italian "petardo," a type of artillery, but literary a "farther" - perhaps a bit of barrack's humor that.

The military hand grenade has its own peculiar origin - the tropical fruit, pomegranate. The Romans called it pomum granatum, or apple with seeds. Spanish soldiers transferred their Latin derived word "granata" to a hollow iron sphere filled with explosives, since it resembled a pomegranate, although with far deadlier seeds. This eventually became the English grenade, and soldiers equipped with them became grenadiers. During the First World War the American hand grenade, already descended from one fruit, because of its shape and surface texture, became a pineapple.

Two more examples are belfry and tattoo. Medieval German soldiers used moveable wooden towers called "bergfrieds," literally shelter sheds to protect them when laying siege to a town. Other armies borrowed both the device and the word. In England, "bergfried" gradually became "berfrey," and finally "belfry." The English also increased the height of the towers in order to benefit their fabled archers. As the name altered so did the tower's function. After gunpowder made the towers obsolete, the name was applied to watch towers, and since the watchman required bells to sound an alarm, belfry quickly came to mean a bell tower, and eventually to a spiritual home for bats. But the phrase "bats in your belfry," pertaining to oddity or

craziness, did not emerge until 1907. Tattoo, a drum roll calling troops to quarters, comes from Medieval Dutch. For centuries soldiers and taverns in Holland had a warm and comfortable relationship, and tattoo - originally "taptoe," meant "the tap is closed." In 1644 a Colonel Hutchinson announced to the garrison at Nottingham, England, "if anyone shall be found tipplinge or drinkege in any tavern, when Tap Toe beats, he shall pay 2s 6d." Tap Toe soon became tattoo and has nothing to do with skin markings, a Polynesian word and custom introduced into England by Captain Cook's crew.

The word "Fabian" also comes to us from warfare, albeit a much older conflict. Hannibal, the great Carthaginian general, handed the Romans a series of defeats during the Second Punic War. In desperation, Quintan Fabius Maximus raised another army, but, aware that another defeat would be catastrophic, divided his force and harassed Hannibal's supply lines. Although much criticized, the strategy paid off. Hannibal was forced out of Italy. Seventeen hundred years later English writers began using the word "Fabian" to mean any strategy that avoided direct confrontation in favor of continued pressure. In 1889 Beatrice and Sidney Webb, joined by other social reformers, established the Fabian Society, which rejected social revolution in favor of constant pressure for reform.

The very American word "bulldozer" emerged from the aftermath of war as well, in this case the American Civil War. In the troubled racial climate that pervaded the South during Reconstruction, southern whites intimidated black voters with a "bull-dose," a dose of the bullwhip, a long, heavy leather lash sometimes made from a bull's penis and made popular by Texas cattle drovers. From "bull-dose" comes bulldozer, one who wields the whip, or, therefore, intimidates through superior power or strength. The word gained popularity as a political term in the 1880s. Later, the word was transferred to the mechanical tractor that can coerce or over-power almost

anything in its path, thus we have the curiosity of a bull's penis becoming a cat.

And then there is "hooker," another word with Civil War connections. Several years ago the Hooker family of Conklin, NY, requested license plates "1-Hooker" and 2-Hooker." The Department of Motor Vehicles, always alert to moral decay, objected. The Hookers argued that their ancestor, General Joseph Hooker, who now resides comfortably in Spring Grove Cemetery, was a much-decorated Civil War officer, so how could their name be offensive. They won their case. But the oft-held opinion that ladies of the evening were known as hookers from the Civil War general is probably erroneous. The word dates at least to the 1840s and comes from Corlear's Hook, a part of Manhattan where prostitutes were known to ply their trade. However, General Hooker is not entirely free from association with the word. Following his disastrous attack at Chancellorsville, "Fighting Joe" was demoted to a divisional command and stationed in Washington, D.C. Later he earned a well-deserved reputation for personal misconduct. The distinguished Charles Francis Adams called him "a man of blemished character" whose headquarters "can only be described as a combination of bar-room and brothel." In his honor, Washington wags christened the city's notorious red-light district, "Hooker's Division."

The Crusades introduced a word that has taken on a special significance in recent years, particularly in the Middle East where it originated. In the last 12th century, a young Persian student, Hassan ben Sabah, set himself up as the leader of a murderous Islamic sect. During its several hundred-year existence, the group gained a reputation for unflinching obedience to its leaders and extraordinary cruelty to its enemies. Initially they preyed on Christians (pun intended). When that supply dwindled, they turned their energies towards other Muslims. As a reward and as an inducement for their obedience, so legend has it, their leaders liberally supplied them with a drug. Marco

Polo described the process thusly: "a certain potion which cast them into a deep sleep, and when they awoke, they found themselves in a garden, all full of ladies and damsels, who dallied with them to their heart's content. . ." The potion was supposedly hashish, and the killers were known as hashishan, or eaters of hashish. Europeans turned the world into assassin.

Saxon encounters with Norse raiders brought another word associated with irrational behavior. According to Norse mythology, there was a Viking warrior who disdained all body armor, rushing into battle protected only by a bear's skin and his own ferocity. It is said that he fought with such power that he assumed the strength of his bear shirt. The Norse word was "berserker." His twelve sons also carried the name "Berserker" and carried on the family tradition for wild behavior and ferocious strength. From this legend we get the word "berserk," to mean out of control or amuck. Speaking of "amuck," this word crept in from Malaysia, by way of Portuguese traders. It was observed that Malays, probably due to the opium, which had been introduced into the islands in the thirteenth century, sometimes went into a state of frenzy, even to the point of killing people. The Malay word "amoq" described this fierce, frenzied condition.

By the time I had accumulated all of this irrelevant information, several weeks had passed and already I had visions of a budget paper. I also kept thinking how the phrase "Iron Curtain" had precipitated all this. Then, and only then, did I decide to check on Mr. Churchill. As it turned out, my smug answer to the student was not quite accurate. The original phrase "iron curtain" comes from the English theatre where a curtain of iron had long served as an impenetrable fire barrier between stage and audience. The metamorphosis of this phrase to a historical metaphor began as early as 1819 when the Earl of Munster, describing a journey across India, referred to a just-crossed river as an iron curtain against death. Eighty-four years later, in The Fool of the Gods, H.G.

Wells described a character held incommunicado by the police as being unaware that "an iron curtain had dropped between him and the outer world." Although occasionally used by military writers as an apt description for World War I artillery barrages, the phrase acquired a political context in the 1920s. Ironically it involved the Soviet Union. Writing of her first visit to Bolshevik Russia, a Mrs. Snowden described her border crossing as going behind the iron curtain at last. However, Churchill probably appropriated the phrase from Sir Stephen Trowbridge who, in an October, 1945, article for the Sunday Empire News, described the Soviet Zone of Germany as being behind "an iron curtain of silence." The phrase then appeared several times in London newspapers, and at least once in the House of Commons, before Churchill added it to our Cold War vocabulary.

There is a footnote to all this. Late in February, 1945, following the Yalta Conference, Nazi Minister of Propaganda Josef Goebbels wrote, "If the German people should lay down their arms, the agreement between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin would allow the Soviets to occupy all Eastern and Southeastern Europe, together with the major parts of the Reich. An iron curtain (eiserner Vorhang) would at once descend on this territory. . ." In this instance Goebbels was an amazing prophet - but I would rather leave Sir Winston with credit for such an apt phrase.

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