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SEMANTIC GYMNASTICS

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Is this children's nursery rhyme accurate? Not when it comes to politics. One need only remember how George Romney's presidential hopes were dashed on the word "brainwashed."

If one listens carefully to the semantics used by the national media, one discovers that they often choose words whose emotional overtones serve the goals of advocacy journalism. As expert practitioners in the craft of wordsmanship, they know that connotations can be more important than definitions.

"Liberal" is such a nice sounding word; the L's in any word have a lulling, soothing effect. Liberal is used by the media as a word of praise, even adulation; it's affectionately applied to media favorites such as Ted Kennedy.

Those who call themselves "liberal" in modern politics are really those who are liberal with other people's money. Today's liberals always want to raise taxes so that government bureaucrats and the social welfare apparatus can spend more of your money for purposes they deem more important than the ways you would spend your own money.

Anyone can choose the name he wants to be called, even Gary Hart, and the media can't be faulted for accepting self-designations. The trouble is that most of the media won't give the activists on the other side of the political spectrum the right to choose their own label.

The people who believe that the American people should be permitted the freedom to spend a maximum percentage of their own money for the purposes of their choice, with a minimum of taxes, would like to call themselves "conservatives." But most of the media won't let them use that label.

The media insist on designating them as "ultra-conservatives" or "ultra-rightists." "Ultra" has such a negative sound; it sounds like "ugh" and is used like an epithet. But if Jesse Helms is an "ultra-conservative," why isn't Ted Kennedy an "ultra-liberal?"

The media consistently tell us that the liberals have the image of being

"compassionate." That tender word connotes the notion that the person loves his neighbor as himself, is generous to the less fortunate, would tithe to his church for charitable and missionary work, and would be a big donor to the United Fund, do-good projects, and local charities.

Funny thing, though, the liberals don't seem to be compassionate with their own money. Last year, Gary Hart gave only $320 to charitable causes out of an income of $125,474. Jesse Jackson gave only $500 to charitable causes out of $115,109 income. It's a puzzlement how anyone with a straight face could call them "compassionate." Their alleged "compassion" always involves spending someone else's money.

Then there is that obnoxious phrase, the "non-working wife," which conveys the image that the homemaker-wife is a do-nothing parasite. When the media want to be particularly derogatory to the wife in the home, they even refer to her as "sitting" at home. All the homemaker-wives I know work very hard, and do a great deal less "sitting" than women in offices.

Every now and then, the anonymous media personnel who choose labels in pursuit of their advocacy journalism make a mistake. "Comparable Worth" started out as a warm and positive word. It was chosen to promote the changeover to a controlled economy in which wages are set by "comparing" the "worth" of workers.

When people began to realize that those doing the "comparing" start from the premise that blue-collar workers are "worth" less in "comparison" to office workers, they discovered that the phrase "Comparable Worth" is an election-year liability.

Now they are desperately trying to have their radical idea "born again" under a new name. A House Committee recently passed a "Comparable Worth" bill from which the label "Comparable Worth" had been scissored out, while the effect of the bill remains the same.

When President Reagan launched his plan to build a defensive system to shoot down enemy missiles, the media could have respectfully called it a system to defend American cities, or an anti-missile defense. Instead, the media labeled it "Star Wars" in an obvious attempt to ridicule it as science fiction.

However, the anti-Reagan journalists didn't understand the meaning of "Star Wars." It really connotes success in science and entrepreneurship, victory in war, and a moral imperative for the forces of good to confront and defeat the forces of evil and darkness.