

POLITICAL LANGUAGE

Words That Succeed
and Policies That Fail

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Academic Press NEW YORK SAN FRANCISCO LONDON
A Subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

This book is one of a series sponsored by the Institute for Research on Poverty of the University of Wisconsin pursuant to the provisions of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

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ACADEMIC PRESS, INC.
111 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003

United Kingdom Edition published by
ACADEMIC PRESS, INC. (LONDON) LTD.
24/28 Oval Road, London NW1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Edelman, Jacob Murray, Date
Political language.

(Institute for Research on Poverty monograph series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sociolinguistics. 2. Political psychology.
3. United States—Social conditions. I. Title.
II. Series: Wisconsin. University—Madison.

Institute for Research on Poverty. Monograph series.

HM291.E3 320'.01'4 76-52710

ISBN 0-12-230660-0 (cloth)

ISBN 0-12-230662-7 (paper)

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

81 82 9 8 7 6 5 4 3



National Crises and "Public Opinion" as Political Symbols

Two forms of problematic political categorization are critical in shaping beliefs: the definition of particular opinions as "public opinion" and the labeling of a set of events as a "crisis." Both these terms seem to be based on objective criteria and they appeal, respectively, to the most cherished common political hope (that the will of the people will prevail) and to the most feared common threat (that the polity is endangered by developments outside its control); hence, their evocative potency.

The Political Uses of National Crises

The word "crisis" connotes a development that is unique and threatening. When applied to a set of political events, the term is a form of problematic categorization because the development it highlights can also be perceived as recurring rather than singular and as an instance of arbitrary labeling. What events mean for policy formation depends on whether they are defined as exceptional or, alter-

natively, as one more set of incidents in a world that is chronically in crisis.

National crises, therefore, have their uses in shaping opinion, just as routine politics and chronic problems do. The twentieth century has seen economic, military, and social crises succeed one another and overlap with one another, and the foreseeable future will not be different. A worldwide food crisis is imminent, as are mineral shortages.

The controversies of each emergency mask the impact on our lives of continual crises. How does it influence politics that people are cued to see each crisis as unexpected and distinct?

The language in which each crisis is discussed is selective in what it highlights and in what it masks. To call a set of events a "crisis" implies certain beliefs that are also stressed in everyday political discussion:

1. This event is different from the political and social issues we routinely confront, different from other crises, and it occurs rarely.
2. It came about for reasons outside the control of political and industrial leaders, who are coping with it as best they can.
3. The crisis requires sacrifices in order to surmount it.

In the course of any crisis, these propositions look reasonable enough. They justify the actions of leaders and the sacrifices leaders demand of others. But a different picture emerges for some who self-consciously question the common assumptions regarding crises and examine their origins and impacts. It then appears that the recurrence of crises is predictable because they flow from inequalities in economic and political power; that the burdens of almost all crises fall disproportionately on the poor, while the influential and the affluent often benefit from them; and that they are closely linked to the social problems we define as normal.

This alternative set of beliefs about crises is put forward as a counterpoint to the conventional assumptions, and the challenge is ambivalently accepted. The two sets of cognitions comprise contradictory mythic explanations of crises, in the same way that there are contradictory myths about chronic social problems, and with the same political result: the ability to tolerate personal doubts and yet maintain integrity by turning to one or the other explanation as the need arises; general willingness to accept sacrifices rather than

resist; and an adequate, though changing and ambiguous, level of support for the regime that presents itself as coping with the crisis. The presence in our political culture of conflicting beliefs, some justifying leaders' handling of crises and others holding leaders responsible for the burdens they impose, permits both governmental regimes and the mass of citizens to live with chronic crisis and with themselves.

The Labeling of Crises

The word "crisis" connotes a threat or emergency people must face together. More powerfully, perhaps, than any other political term, it suggests a need for unity and for common sacrifice. Yet each crisis is uneven in its impact, typically bringing deprivations for many, especially those who are politically and economically weak, and often bringing benefits to some who have the resources to deal with the new situation. As is often the case with controversial political issues, the language conventionally used to describe a crisis helps people to adapt to it by evoking a problematic picture of the issue. Wars are always presented as responses to foreign threats, and the response involves disproportionate susceptibility to military drafts and disproportionate sacrifice of living standards for the poor. The energy crisis of the early seventies, portrayed as a consequence of foreign decisions and a worldwide increase in demand, produced a profit bonanza for oil companies¹ and steep price increases that imposed burdens in inverse ratio to ability to pay. Crises flowing from fears of internal threats to security, such as the McCarthy years of the fifties and the Palmer Raids after World War I, impose severe burdens on liberals, reformers, and radicals, while realizing many conservative objectives. Economic crises that take the form of depression or serious recession hurt a large part of the middle class but strike most damagingly at unskilled workers and those whose jobs are marginal. While political rhetoric evokes a belief in a critical threat to a common "national interest," the impacts of each crisis inevitably reflect internal conflicts of interests and inequality of sacrifice.

¹ See p. 96.

It is very likely our ambivalence about this fact that makes it politically necessary to accept each crisis as unique, unexpected, a blatant deviation from the usual state of affairs, though crisis is the norm, not the exception. The forms of crisis already mentioned have occupied most of the years since World War I, and there were many others as well. Besides recurring wars, recessions and depressions, and internal security scares, the years between 1920 and 1975 saw: Teapot Dome, the international fascist threat of the thirties, the cold war, the civil rights disturbances of the late fifties and sixties, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, the political assassinations of the sixties, the urban riots, the environmental crisis, and Watergate—to name only a cross-section.

This impressive catalogue was neither a series of accidents nor the result of conspiracies. It was the response of rational people to opportunities to make use of their economic and political resources. Stock market traders took advantage of credit opportunities in the twenties, and oil companies of their control over supply, distribution, and international trade and tax arrangements in 1973. In the same way political, military, and law enforcement officials, who draw power and status benefits from popular fears of internal or external enemies, naturally perceive, fantasize, publicize, or exaggerate the threat from alleged enemies.

The long-term developments that make it possible for strategically located groups to precipitate a crisis, unintentionally or deliberately, are always complex and ambiguous. People who benefit from a crisis are easily able to explain it to themselves and to the mass public in terms that mask or minimize their own contributions and incentives, while highlighting outside threats and unexpected occurrences. The divergence between the symbolic import of crises and their material impact is basic to their popular acceptance.

Ambiguity about the nature and meaning of crises is concurrent with conflicting incentives to accept them as unpreventable and to suspect them as part of a political or economic power game. There is, accordingly, always a sense in which the labeling of a set of events as a crisis is arbitrary and problematic. Mass acceptance of the label is necessary even if the acceptance is ambivalent. Consider the conditions under which such acceptance comes about. Many crises are precipitated by an event that rather suddenly makes clear the serious consequences of activities that have been going on for a long time without occasioning much concern. Limitations on refining capacity

and long-standing tax and price arrangements among American oil companies and Middle East oil-producing countries set the stage for an energy crisis long before the sudden declaration in 1973 that oil was in short supply. Before every war there is a long sequence of incidents, tensions, and psychological influences upon public opinion, to which a declaration of war or an outbreak of fighting gives new meaning. Before every economic recession there are banking, corporate, and industrial relations decisions that eventuate in production cuts, serious unemployment, and a label that calls public attention to a threatening situation, so that they retrospectively come to be seen as precursors of a crisis.

A second kind of crisis is precipitated when people who have passively suffered grievances for many years begin to resist collectively, and so define the situation as critical rather than acceptable. The civil rights protests of the late fifties and early sixties, the urban riots of the late sixties, the environmental crisis, and Watergate were all crises of this kind. In the case of Watergate the activities ultimately defined as a national threat were deliberately concealed. Urban ghettos and ecological damage were apparent enough for many decades to anyone who was interested, but few took much notice until the late sixties, when everyone began to notice.

A third form of national crisis is created semantically and self-consciously by groups who engender widespread anxiety about an alleged threat that may or may not be real. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the "missile gap" of 1960 are pristine examples. History is filled with instances of governments publicizing and exaggerating allegedly threatening movements by potentially hostile countries. The Kennedy administration did not see the maintenance of American missiles in Turkey, a few miles from the borders of the Soviet Union, as creating a crisis, but chose to define Russian missiles in Cuba as an intolerable threat. Any regime that prides itself on crisis management is sure to find crises to manage, and crisis management is always available as a way to mobilize public support.

Even more common than the semantically created crisis is the semantically masked crisis. Many problems that impoverish or ruin millions of lives are not perceived as crises because we attach labels and "explanations" to them that portray them as natural and inevitable, or as caused by the people who suffer from them rather than by outside, unexpected threats. We see poverty, crime, sickness, emotional disturbance, carnage on the highways, and similar dis-

asters as chronic social "problems" rather than as crises, though they hurt more people more severely than any of the crises do. Those who suffer from problems that are never solved typically accept the prevailing view, including a demeaning conception of themselves, rather than seeing their problems as crises calling for drastic and resolute national action.

The various crises are sometimes closely linked to one another, even though each crisis is experienced as unique as it comes upon us. Internal security scares are predictable after major wars; the anxieties of the last war and anticipation of future ones engender fears of internal enemies and often justify austerity budgets, hard work, and low pay as well. The onset of a new crisis often saves some groups from the effects of a previous one. The energy crisis dramatically weakened the curbs on corporations stemming from the environmental crisis. Wars frequently end economic depressions and recessions.

Past crises become symbols whose meanings affect later developments. It is said that Richard Nixon saw Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis as the epitome of great national leadership and that he more easily decided on the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1969 and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972 because he equated those actions with Kennedy's heroic risk-taking respecting Cuba. The Great Depression of the thirties has repeatedly been used both to arouse suspicion of governmental intervention in economic affairs and to arouse suspicion of governmental passivity.

The lesson of all this is fundamental for understanding both the wide discretion enjoyed by governmental regimes and the willingness to tolerate that discretion while continuing to believe in popular sovereignty and the rule of law. Because the contradiction is built into our accepted modes of seeing and explaining public affairs, we rarely notice that it *is* a contradiction. Whether precipitated semantically or by some group's seizure of an opportunity for enhanced income or power, each crisis is perceived as unique and as reason for accepting special sacrifices. At the same time we look forward to a return to a state of affairs in which the normal rights of citizens and the normal restraints on governmental discretion will again prevail, hopefully forever after. In the meantime the belief in a crisis relaxes resistance to governmental interferences with civil liberties and bolsters support for executive actions, including discouragement or suppression of criticism and governmental failure to respond to it.

The recurrence of crises is bound to encourage less critical acceptance of governmental actions that would otherwise be resisted. That the various crises are of different kinds, intermingled with one another in what seems to be a random fashion, manifestly bolsters their psychological impact and makes it easier to perceive them as temporary and unavoidable departures from a "norm" of popular control over governmental discretion that in fact rarely exists.

While the perception of a crisis largely depends upon governmental cueing, the cueing is patterned, not random. Incumbent political regimes consistently minimize social and economic problems but are alarmist about threats to security, whether from abroad or from internal enemies and deviant people. Both these courses of action flow from political temptations that are always present. Every administration finds it politically useful to claim that its economic and social policies are working: that a monthly rise in unemployment or prices is an aberration, not a long-term trend; that "next year will be a very good year," for popular concern about these issues means votes against incumbents. Alarm about external or internal enemies, by contrast, makes people eager for resolute action and willing to entrust wider powers to leaders so that they can act effectively. There is, accordingly, a systematic deflation in governmental rhetoric of the developments that call attention to unequal distribution of goods and services and a systematic inflation of the forms of threat that legitimize and expand authority. The latter are defined as crises, the former as problems. As crises recur and problems persist, so does a governmental dramaturgy of coping.

Public Opinion

Any reference to "public opinion" calls to mind popular beliefs that influence public officials and inhibit politicians who try to oppose it. But there are conflicting opinions whenever there is an issue, by definition, and opinions shift with the social situation in which people find themselves, the information they get, and the level of abstraction at which the issue is discussed. There can be no one "public opinion" but, rather, many publics. Some opinions change easily, while others persist indefinitely.

To define beliefs as public opinion is itself a way of creating opinion, for such a reference both defines the norm that should be

democratically supported and reassures anxious people that authorities respond to popular views. In short, "public opinion" is a symbol whether or not it is a fact. It is often nonexistent, even respecting important questions. Most of the population can have no opinion regarding thousands of technical, economic, professional, military, and other decisions. Pressure groups and government officials can usually cite public opinion as a reason for taking or avoiding action with confidence that they will not be proven wrong. If they define the public will at a high enough level of generality, they cannot be wrong.

Their own statements and actions, moreover, help generate the opinions on which they rely for support. Whenever a welfare administrator justifies the paring of welfare rolls on the ground that the public demands the elimination of chiselers, his statement triggers anxiety about fraud and laxity. Opinion polls help create the opinions they count when they incorporate evocative terms in their questions, as is inevitable if the questions deal with controversial matters.² In common with words like "democracy" and "justice," statements about "public opinion" help marshal support for particular policies. The term connotes a force independent of government, but a large part of it echoes the beliefs authorities deliberately or unconsciously engender by appealing to fears or hopes that are always prevalent, including suspicions of the poor and the unconventional.

Some people hold fairly stable opinions on issues that directly influence their public esteem and income. It is not chance that generals seldom advocate unilateral disarmament, that workers want high wages, or that college professors usually look with more favor on academic freedom than FBI agents do. This is a different phenomenon from the mass reactions to changing information and situations discussed in the last paragraph; but the term "public opinion" is applied to both of them and so confuses their separate functions. Authorities and pressure groups, like everyone else, can define, and so perceive, any belief as a parochial reflection of a narrow private interest, as held by the population generally, as transitory, or as stable, whichever of these categories suits their current interests. As a result, it is all the easier for public officials credibly to assert that

² Lee Bogart, *Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1972), pp. 99-140.

they are responding to opinion when they have created it; or to believe that a group they oppose is advancing its own narrow interests when that is the picture political adversaries always present to their opponents.

"Public opinion," then, is an evocative concept through which authorities and pressure groups categorize beliefs in a way that marshals support or opposition to their interests, usually unself-consciously. Public opinion is not an independent entity, though the assumption that opinions spring autonomously into people's minds legitimizes the actions of all who can spread their own definitions of problematic events to a wider public.

A public administrative organization comes into being to reflect a particular body of opinion. The agencies that last represent a continuing interest that wields some political clout.³ The Bureau of Indian Affairs, for example, represents the local groups with a continuing interest in controlling the social and economic activities of Indians more consistently than it reflects the diffuse liberal concern that Indians be protected and their problems ameliorated. An administrator or executive tries to survive by taking account of the conflicting interests that swirl around his policy area. Sometimes one or more of these interests is well-organized and damaging if resisted. Often there is a widely shared interest, like that of consumers, that is readily appeased through symbolic reassurance. And there are occasional waves of strong sentiment, such as ideological witch-hunts and revelations of official corruption, that sweep through large groups of people, but subside after a few months or a few years.

In these sometimes troubled waters, a public official is not a helpless boat at the mercy of currents and passing storms, for officials help stir up the currents that move them. In all the ways that authorities have at their disposal to build cognitive structures, officials shape mass opinion and only then reflect it, even while the socialization of citizens into the belief that executives and administrators exist to carry out the will of the people maintains a modicum of public support. Organized groups with political resources must be appeased; mass beliefs can be created, even if unintentionally.

Administrators categorize public issues so as to further the inter-

³ Cf. Herbert A. Simon, "Birth of an Organization: The Economic Cooperation Administration," *Public Administration Review* 13 (Autumn 1953), pp. 227-38.

ests of the groups that gave birth to their agencies and that serve as their continuing patrons. They often define one controversial view as "public opinion" and so dismiss others as trivial or nonexistent. The school administrator who encourages teachers to offer bland courses and reading assignments so as not to offend "public opinion" is classifying one segment of opinion, usually a parochial one, as the universe; but it *is* likely to be the most vociferous view, the one that safeguards influential local interests, and it may be the opinion the administrator personally finds most congenial. To respond to it is certainly his or her least risky course. Such problematic categorization is typically not noticed or criticized, for it is defined as professionalism; while the occasional teacher who offends conservative opinion by introducing students to controversial views or information is likely to be noticed, brought into line, or dismissed.

In the same way, the mental health professionals routinely cite popular fears of the mentally ill and bias against them as a reason they must exercise strict controls over doubtful cases. Yet studies of opinion on this issue repeatedly show that in taking this view the professionals are influencing the attitudes of the general public rather than reflecting it. "A number of major studies have found society to be understanding and sympathetic toward its mentally ill members."⁴ Several studies have found laymen defining many behaviors as normal that professionals defined as pathological.⁵

This research doubtless oversimplifies. Few laymen are likely to have clear and consistent opinions; but latent popular fears of pathology, illness, and inadequacy are certainly incited and reinforced by the warnings and categorizations of the helping professionals; they coexist with the recognition that children can be defined as deviant or backward when they behave and speak in school in ways that are normal at home, especially if "home" is a working-class or slum neighborhood.

For administrators the least risky strategy is so clear and so bene-

⁴ Herzl R. Spiro et al., "Who's Kidding Whom," *Mental Hygiene* 56 (Spring 1972): 36-38.

⁵ Elaine Cumming and John Cumming, *Closed Ranks* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 68-69. For a bibliography of other studies and a summary of their findings, see H. R. Spiro, I. Stassi, and G. Crocetti, "Ability of the Public to Recognize Mental Illness: An Issue of Substance and an Issue of Meaning," *Social Psychiatry* 8 (February 1973): 32-36.

ficial to themselves that they doubtless see it as rationality rather than strategy. The stable interests of the middle class are "public opinion," for the respectable can hurt recalcitrant officials. The interests of the poor and the insecure should be defined by experts and professionals who know what is best for them; for in spite of their large numbers they can be inadequate, and are typically sanctionless, ambivalent, and controllable. "Public opinion" regarding normality, competence, and deviance usually becomes what legitimate authority defines it to be, and that definition in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, while "professionalism" complements the process by rationalizing the regulation of the unconventional and the poor.

The selective perception of public opinion has practical consequences. Because the middle class demands it, "relief agencies are . . . compelled to invent rituals of degradation and to subject their clientele to them," say Piven and Cloward, referring to requirements that relief recipients and their children answer questions about their personal habits, sexual practices, and housekeeping routines.⁶ Clients have sometimes been deterred by threats from their caseworkers from participating in civil rights protests, complaining about discrimination in housing, employment, or education, and even from voting in ways that displeased the agency.⁷

Schoolteachers and counselors also usually perceive merit in terms of conformity to middle-class opinion and norms. In a school studied by Cicourel and Kitsuse, all but three of fifteen students from the upper middle class were classified as "excellent" in achievement. But in assessing achievement the counselor subtly took account of other matters:

Belonging to the "in-group" may be given greater weight than grade-point average in classifying a student as an "excellent student," or "getting into a lot of trouble" may be more important than "performing up to ability level" in deciding that a student is an "under-achiever."⁸

⁶ Frances F. Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor* (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 166.

⁷ *Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, Appendix I, quoted in Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*, p. 168.

⁸ Aaron Cicourel and John I. Kitsuse, *The Educational Decision-Makers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 71.

The same form of influence of social class upon perception holds for authorities responsible for prosecuting crime:

This prejudice in favor of "our own kind" can be seen at its most blatant in the suggestion made in standard reference works on criminal procedure that prosecutors wisely refrain from prosecuting in cases of law violation where the offender comes from a "respectable background."⁹

In short, officials and public administrators are likely to perceive either as "public opinion" or as "professionalism" those opinions that they share personally or that can hurt their organizations. Few concepts are more ambiguous or more potent in shaping public policy than these two. Together, they enable officials to merge and confuse pride in doing competent work, class biases, concern for their own status, and fears about an adequate budget and to express them in terms that marshal wide support. "Public opinion" and "professionalism" perform all the functions of political condensation symbols. A class-based bias in policy appears in many different public organizations; but the subtly expressed posture of responsiveness to the public will and of a monopoly of specialized knowledge minimize criticism based on anxiety about bureaucratic arbitrariness and about the social problems with which the agencies deal.

The divisions in interests, fears, and hopes that permeate society also win a great deal of discretion and diffuse support for authorities. When officials define some people as dangerous, undeserving, or inadequate, they gain the support of all who share this view or who need a scapegoat to rationalize their own failings or guilt. The beneficiaries of existing economic and social institutions need to be assured that those institutions are sound, that their own success reflects merit, and that the failures have chiefly themselves to blame. People who are hurt by some public policies typically support the government in other areas and are ambivalent even about the acts that hurt them. The overall result is almost always a large net balance of support. The evocation of beliefs that encourage competition and distrust is a classic political recourse, though condensation symbolism usually prevents it from becoming a conscious strategy or from being perceived as one.

⁹ American Friends Service Committee, *Struggle for Justice* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), p. 107.

Clearly, "public opinion" does have consequences, but rarely of the kind that promote the interests of the poor in a substantial way; for the term refers to a method of influencing popular demands, not necessarily of reflecting them. Rather than curbing a regime, "public opinion" as a symbol enlarges official discretion by immobilizing potential opposition.