We live in a world saturated with divisive political language—a world of metaphors and adjectives that conjure up archetypal images of good and evil, of impending war and celestial conquest. Embedded into our national discourse are centuries of hyperbolic appeals to save our civilization before it is overrun with heathens that lurk ominously at our national door. Political language tells its readers that it is their duty—both moral and patriotic—to drop their family obligations and march off to foreign countries to fight and die. It tells them that they must cease being “sunshine patriots” and respond to the “imminent threat” that looms ominously over the horizon. Indeed, as George Lakoff has suggested in many of his writings, words can construct a reality or “frame” that justifies a carnage that might not otherwise be embraced by Americans. “Metaphors are more than language; they can govern thought and behavior,” wrote Lakoff in a *New York Times* editorial (“Staying”). Or, as he argued in 2003, in the waning days before the invasion of Iraq, “metaphors can kill” (“Metaphor”).

Added to this dilemma is the lack of substantive discourse that our politicians provide for our scrutiny. Instead of speaking in genuine terms about an issue, they resort to sound bites and code words to distort reality and avoid answering a question. We have George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” and Obama’s “Fast and Furious.” In both cases, words create general images, precluding a more precise and logical analysis of government actions and the reality behind its behavior. And if our opposition is evil—as our language always tells us—our government must be good, blameless, sacrosanct. Capitalism is good. Socialism is bad. Communism, despite our collective ignorance as to what it means, is universally nefarious. Words, when used with metaphors and in a repetitive context, can create a reality that serves politicians, while undermining genuine progress. It is the false consciousness, the act of artifice mentioned by Gramsci (in Storey 64), that makes political language the quintessential art of deception, demanding that students study its essence. Often, it begins with diction, phrases, buzzwords, visceral depictions, and fear. And when politicians can successfully design simplistic dichotomies for their constituents to consume, they have used language as artifice rather than communication. It is emblematic of George Orwell’s caveat when he discussed the “reduced sense of consciousness” that “if not indispensable is at any rate favorable to political conformity” (564). Geoffrey Nunberg puts it slightly differently when he adds that “language is a kind of informal plebiscite: when we adopt a new word or alter the usage of an old one, we’re casting a voice vote for a particular point of view” (3).

Last semester, my first-year composition class explored the world of political language from a
linguistic and political perspective. We aspired to learn about the words, symbols, and phrases used to persuade us, while becoming more adept at understanding the way language becomes propaganda. This endeavor is relevant to both college and high school students in its emphasis on processing a language that leads to recruitment in deadly, protracted wars—wars that often involve people in students’ lives. At no time in our existence has war and violence become more romanticized, so it is incumbent upon us as teachers to provide students with the knowledge and savvy to combat this deceptive and seductive language. Our students must understand that wars are not always “good” or necessary and that their nation has filled their history books with a discourse often designed to deceive them into both accepting and even volunteering to fight. As Eric Alterman has argued in discussing the most recent conflicts with Iraq and Afghanistan, “the case Bush made to convince the nation to embark on its first ever ‘preventative’ war was riddled with deception from start to finish” (297). And yet, our nation dove into the conflicts, singing patriotic songs and deriding those who opposed them. Clearly, it is essential that students understand that language is ideological, that it is socially constructed and imbued with the aspirations of disparate groups of people. Perhaps Orwell said it best when he argued that “all issues are political issues. Politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, and folly, hatred, and schizophrenia” (565).

From an educational perspective, such a unit is especially germane to Ira Shor’s idea of problem posing and the notion that democratic learning is predicated on active investigation. In his book Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change, Shor suggests that critical thought is only attainable when students engage in issues and participate in every aspect of the process. Central to any student empowerment is a careful study of the language that is part of the political discourse that swirls around us and seeps into our consciousness. Each day, we are subjected to words such as terror, freedom, democracy, and insurgent. In this blitz of provocative diction, it is easy to believe that certain words are the domain of certain nations or people—that patriotism is only possible among people who look like us. Without a careful and critical ability to scrutinize this language—and the way it is manipulated to deceive—we are likely to become poisoned by the language we consume.

“I wanted students to be active and thoughtful,” writes Shor in discussing his problem-posing curriculum. “A participatory class begins with participation. A critical and empowering class begins by examining its subject matter from the student’s point of view and by helping students see themselves as knowledgeable people” (37). Essential to Shor’s premise is the notion of critical inquiry, of personally active engagement in one’s life and their place in it as dynamic political beings. Shor does not want students to learn fealty to a doctrine but to question it from a rebellious, curious position. “I wanted them to take, from day one, a critical attitude toward their knowledge, their writing habits, and their education” (37). Before this can happen, however, students must do a careful study of the language that permeates their lives and how images are employed to stir specific emotions. Too often we, as Americans, are told that we are civilized and those who oppose us are savages. Any opposition to our endeavors constitutes an attack on an advanced or “blessed” people. In my class, I wanted students to deconstruct this often ethnocentric language and contemplate its motives and veracity. “Participatory learning,” adds Shor, “also opens the possibility of transforming the students’ powers of thought” (22).

Additionally, a critical examination of political language is imperative if students are going to become active players in their own formation as humans. It was Bakhtin who suggested that a people’s relationship with culture helped create their global paradigm or what Bakhtin called “ideological becoming” (384). Especially important are the various discourses that an individual is subjected to and the negotiated power struggles that are an endemic part of a person’s formation. For Bakhtin, it is essential that students be immersed in competing discourses and be allowed to scrutinize them in a nurturing context, one that permits a critical dissection of “authoritative discourses” (341). When students are asked to examine the political speech in their world and write about the linguistic strategies
being employed, they are encouraged to be critical thinkers and approach language as thoroughly ideological—a must if they are to be reflective citizens in a flourishing democracy.

Again, I consider such a unit to be particularly important because of the relative naiveté of many students—both high school and college—and the prodigious amount of politically charged speeches that pervade their world. Most of my students enter class with a rather complacent or disaffected attitude toward politics. While many are quick to echo the political slogans they hear on TV, few are able to explain the essence of those messages or interrogate their veracity, validity, or irony. Even fewer are able to appreciate the way metaphors and other elements of language work to create images in their mind. "Metaphors," wrote Lakoff, "are more than language; they govern thought and behavior" ("Staying"). Lakoff goes on to recall a University of Toronto study that "demonstrated the power of metaphors that connect morality and purity." Lakoff tells us that "people who washed their hands after an unethical act were less troubled by their thoughts than those who didn’t." Clearly, symbols and their meaning to our culture affect our perception of people and language.

The Class Begins

And so, with a political election looming in front of my students—and with political ads saturating the prime-time airwaves—I made our research project about political language and the question of propaganda in American discourse. I began the unit by having students read Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” and devoted an entire week to the notion that political discourse is unique in its propensity to use words and symbols to move listeners in certain directions. In many cases, I suggested, political discourse uses time-honored symbols to galvanize a population to do or believe something. “Language can be used,” I told them, “to create a reality that might be very different from what is actually being experienced.” Their goal in this paper was to consider the writings of Orwell and others and explore the ubiquitous use of language to persuade them to believe something about their society. I wanted them to interpret the “spin” or the emotional aspect of the language aimed at them and others. I wanted them to appreciate the use of words and symbols to evoke a certain response.

Orwell refers to political language as consisting “largely of euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them” (564). Because, in the end, “political language—and with variation this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” (568).

As we read Orwell’s scathing attack on the deceptive language of politics, we considered the actions of politicians in the past. Orwell suggests that “the decadence of our language is curable” but argues that it is imperative for audiences to take action and to embrace a rebellious, independent perspective that challenges the status quo. “Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style” (564), writes Orwell in considering the language of various parties and bureaucrats. It is essential, Orwell tells us, to be aware of language and demand a clearer, more precise communication. He is urging his readers to actively question the status quo.

As students considered Orwell’s caveat to make political language better before it makes our thoughts “foolish,” they examined some of the speeches used by venerable people from our past and ruminated on the way language was orchestrated to create a specific effect. After reading Orwell’s indictment of “Politics and the English Language,” we read short excerpts from famous speeches and considered the agenda of the speaker or writer and how language was employed to make that agenda a certainty—even if it was crafted to sound like something quite different from what was being said.

In reading Thomas Jefferson’s inaugural address (qtd. in Kennedy), we reflected on the deferential style, the use of passive voice, and the many images of unity that seem to belie the bitter election contest that had transpired between Jefferson and his opponent John Adams. Jake, a student in my class, noted the passive voice in the first lines of the address and the constant request for assistance from the people around him. “You would think that this guy didn’t run for political office but was just chosen because of his humility,” said Jake with
In particular, Jake was referring to Jefferson’s opening words, where he says: “Called upon to undertake the duties of the first executive office of our country, I avail myself of the presence of that portion of my fellow citizens which is here assembled to express my grateful thanks for the favour with which they have been pleased to look toward me, to declare a sincere consciousness that the task is above my talents, and that I approach it with those anxious and awful presentiments which the greatness of the charge and the weakness of my powers so justly inspire” (qtd. in Kennedy 41).

“You’d think he really didn’t want to do it but only honor and the love of his honorable friends were motivating him,” added Tamika. “In truth, he fought and used pretty shadowy tactics to win this job.” Other students noted the parallel structure that is so often a part of political language. “He uses the word ‘greatness’ and parallels it with ‘weakness’ to praise the office he is assuming,” revealed another student. “He does this to be deferential and win over the opposition.”

As a class, we examined the self-effacing tone, the constant flattery of the audience, and the call to “duty” that is mentioned often in the piece. “He makes people believe that this is something he is doing for them—that he is just one of many people who have a higher good to enforce.”

In other political addresses and speeches, we found similar uses of language. When looking with a critical eye, and with a knowledge of how words create a certain image in the situation and speaker, we began to consider speech from a more political and critical perspective. “It’s easy,” said another student named Cindy, “to get ensnared in the words and lofty ideas. Political language is meant to sweep you away.” In supporting her position, she referred to Jefferson’s diction in using words such as encouragement, guidance, and support in appealing to the audience for assistance. “He makes others feel powerful when in fact he is assuming the ultimate power,” she said with a grin. “He is saying one thing but meaning something quite different.”

Contemporary Critics

A second reading that helped to animate my students was Robert W. McChesney’s criticism of media and its ties to politics. McChesney, who has written prolifically on media and its integral connection to democracy, contends that Americans do not live in a democracy because of the monopoly control of media outlets by transnational corporations. For McChesney, the shrinking number of independent sources for information is a reason to question democracy since alternative points of view are gradually being stymied by transnational corporations that promulgate an agenda that is congruent with their political agenda. According to McChesney, “the corporate media cement a system whereby the wealthy and powerful few make the most important decisions with virtually no informed public participation” (281).

McChesney goes on to argue that “critical political issues are barely covered by the corporate media, or else are warped to fit the confines of elite debate, stripping citizens of the tools they need to be informed, active participants in a democracy” (281). In the end, he concludes, “the prospects for making the United States a more egalitarian, self governing and humane society seems dim to the point of non-existence” (281).
I typically present students with a spectrum of critical voices on language and politics, helping them to see the concern many leading writers have about communication and the health of our democracy. In doing this, I have found Howard Zinn’s *Artists in Times of War* to be an indispensable work on both the hegemony that exists in our culture and the need for burgeoning writers and activists to take action. “But the artist can and should do more,” writes Zinn early in his work. “In addition to creating works of art, the artist is also a citizen and a human being” (8). Zinn goes on to lament the failure of many of us to become active in political discourse because of the language that is crafted, a language that is carefully tailored to make us silent and passively loyal. “It’s exactly at such times when we need dissenting voices. The irony,” writes Zinn, “is that it’s exactly in times of war—when you’re dealing with life-and-death matters—that you’re not supposed to speak. So you have freedom of speech for trivial matters but not for life-and-death matters” (54–55).

Projects
Students are free to write about virtually any aspect of political discourse. The goal of the unit is to invite them to explore this unique kind of language and approach it from a more analytical, more inquisitive position. Most students in introductory writing classes believe that political language is plausible because it is filtered through rigorous questioning by media forces. They think that politicians are kept honest by a free and independent press. However, after reading McChesney and about the consolidation of power—and how media forces often act to silence the voices of people—they are more able to conduct their research from a realistic position.

One of the most popular topics was the war on terror and the language used to create a context for its acceptance. In the fall of 2012, when this project was completed, the national climate had turned sharply against former President Bush’s wars. Unlike years earlier, when many argued vociferously for a united front against the “Axis of Evil,” many participants now wondered why they had been seduced by the lies and deceptions and how it could be avoided in the future. Added to this conundrum was the active involvement of many of my students’ friends, who were serving in the military and risking their lives for a struggle they no longer understood. “How did we get here?” asked one of my students as we began our research. “It seemed so real a few years ago.”

Many students sought to uncover the linguistic machinations of their political leaders, to unravel the words and symbols that exhorted them to do something that they now were sure was a deadly mistake. One of the most interesting papers came from Carl, who wrote about the repetition of certain words and the power of instilling a certain emotion in the national psyche. For his paper, Carl looked at the use of language to create a symbolic evil in an entire population of people and the impact of this campaign. Carl, an African American, began by looking at the way language had been used to demean and ostracize the black person in America. He referred to an essay by Ossie Davis where the writer and actor discusses the way language is employed to sully the image of an entire race of African Americans.

“The word blackness has 120 synonyms, 60 of which are distinctly unfavorable, and none of them even mildly positive” (52), argues Davis. He then goes on to list the many pejorative synonyms and argues that it is virtually impossible for a culture to have a positive perception of black people when they are deluged with negative words and the perceptions that go with them. Davis concludes his essay by suggesting that “any teacher good or bad, white or black, Jew or gentile, who uses the English language as a medium of communication is forced willy-nilly, to teach the Negro child 60 ways to despise himself and the white child 60 ways to aid and abet him in the crime” (52).

From this, Carl looked at the manner in which language was used to lump the Iraqi nation with their leader Saddam Hussein and the way language was employed to make a nation culpable for the crimes of their leader. To do this, Carl examined...
many of the speeches and declarations made by the Bush administration in the weeks and months leading to the invasion of Iraq. Over and over, he found that speeches and statements were crafted to make Iraq the evil other rather than pointing to the person who was actually responsible for the crimes. In January, three months before the invasion, Vice President Dick Cheney was one of a chorus of voices who told Americans that their lives were threatened by Iraq.

On January 30, 2003, Cheney told Americans that “Iraq threatens the United States of America.” On the same day, he suggested that “Iraq poses terrible threats to the civilized world,” and the next day, Cheney argued that “Iraq is a serious threat to our country, our friends, and our allies” (for more information see http://www.americanprogress.org). The cumulative effect of this, argued Carl, is to hold the Iraqi people responsible for the sins of their leader and to stigmatize an entire people to a category of savage or, as Cheney implied, “uncivilized.” Such broad generalizations make it easier to hate an entire race of people, an entire nation, wrote Carl. “It makes their deaths less significant.”

Other papers focused on the term Axis of Evil and the implications of such language for our national perceptions. As many students declared, it is easier to wage war on “evil” than to kill and destroy individuals who are probably a lot like us. Ilham, a student from Syria, argued that words like evil are misleading in their broad brushing of an entire people. “When you say entire nations are evil, you wash your hands of any crime when you bomb and inflict pain on the families and children of those nations,” she said. The word choice makes this into a holy war—God against Satan—and negates the consideration of people who might not be different from us.

Her essay focused on the extreme, monolithic language used by US politicians and pundits in the wake of the war. “These are words meant to create dichotomies in our minds,” she said with passion. “When he says you are either with us or against us, he is using language to create no alternative. You are either good or bad, moral or evil.”

Dustin authored a powerful paper on the use of language to goad people into fighting, exhorting them to do their moral duty before it is too late. Key to the paper was Dustin’s careful look at speeches from the past and the ways guilt and duty are mixed with references to God to create a recipe for war. Dustin looked at Thomas Paine’s Common Sense argument and his employment of insults to foster a sense of guilt in the reader. When Paine calls the reader a “sunshine patriot” or “summer soldier” he is implying that certain citizens are only willing to fight when the task is easy. He suggests that this is a “test of manhood and even morality.”

Dustin compared Paine’s speech to George Bush’s description of the enemy. In it, Bush refers to the opposition as the “enemy” seven times and asks Americans to defeat this enemy that “hides in the shadows” and “preys on innocent and unsuspecting people, then runs for cover” (qtd. in Snow 58). In short, argued Dustin, the language blends images of darkness with the moral need to dispose of this darkness monster before it becomes too powerful. “The language of both speeches,” argued Dustin, “remind us of some Biblical struggle.”

Examining political language from different eras can help students to appreciate the common threads that bind campaigns from one age to another. Samantha delved into the political speeches of Theodore Roosevelt and common linguistic tactics shared with politicians who use terror as a weapon of fear. In his speech of 1896, Roosevelt campaigned for future President William McKinley, using many of the same linguistic strategies used by Dick Cheney in persuading Americans to reelect George W. Bush. In describing McKinley’s opponent, William Jennings Bryan, Roosevelt compared him to Robespierre and other “leaders of the Terror of France,” declaring that Bryan and his companions were like “the leaders of terror in mental and moral attitude” (116). Later, Roosevelt
resorted to the metaphor to argue that Bryan and his team were rallying around a “dark and mean hostility and envy felt for all men of ability by those unworthy men who care more to see their brethren fail than themselves to win success by earning and deserving it” (116). Finally, Roosevelt argued that Bryan was opposed to every form of “enterprise and thrift” that constitutes “civilization” (116).

In her paper, Samantha compared Roosevelt’s allusions to civilization, darkness, and terror—all provocative words—to the speeches of Dick Cheney and George W. Bush, who harangued Americans with the notion of terror and imminent danger. Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden were symbols of darkness and threats to civilization. Americans were forever deluged with various alerts as to the degree of danger they were under. In the same way that Roosevelt made Bryan the enemy to civilization, Bush and Cheney made any opposition to war an attack on freedom and safety. In her paper, Samantha referred to Mark Crispin Miller, who argues that “one of the oldest tricks in the book used against democracy or republicanism has been to terrify people, has been to create a crisis and to provoke a war. At that moment, sad to say,” adds Miller, “people cease to become capable of reason” (206).

How important is a research unit on language and propaganda? Perhaps the best way to measure its significance is to consider our national endeavors throughout history to silence those who spoke truth to power. In the incipient years of our nation, John Adams, the venerable second president, was responsible for the Alien and Sedition Act, making it a crime to speak against the nation or its leaders. Adams’s goal was to muzzle the journalists and citizens who questioned his handling of the war between England and France and America’s position in it. One century later, Woodrow Wilson was responsible for dozens of people being imprisoned for speaking against World War I when he supported the Espionage Act, leading to the deportation of Eugene Debs.

And today, five decades after the McCarthy era, one feels the same chill in looking at the treatment of the Dixie Chicks, the intrepid trio who dared to speak against their president on the eve of the war. How can one forget the willingness of Dan Rather and other journalists to line up and support the invasion, the firing of comedian Bill Maher, and the various songs recorded simply to silence dissent?

In her book *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech, and Opinion Control since 9/11*, Nancy Snow argues that Americans have long been “easily manipulated” (33) by slick and deceptive propaganda. The problem, argues Snow, is that Americans are “ignorant of the way political language is orchestrated. We don’t have the necessary tools to counter the propaganda” (33), she laments. What seems clear, many years after the invasion of Iraq and the exposure of lies and political machinations, is that Americans need to study language and propaganda. It is essential to our liberation in a real democracy.

Works Cited
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**READWRTETHINK CONNECTION**
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Propaganda Techniques in Literature and Online Political Ads,” students analyze propaganda techniques used in pieces of literature and political advertisements. They then look for propaganda in other media, such as print ads and commercials. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/propaganda-techniques-literature-online-405.html

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**Stick-Gluing the American Dream**

I tell them to envision the American Dream, happy or sad, good or bad, in a collage.

“How big?” “On poster board?” “Can I do a PowerPoint?” “How many points is it worth?” “Do you want an explanation?” “Is nudity okay?” “Why are we doing this?” “Can I write it out?”

Next day, in roll two-seater Porsches, Oprah-sized mansions, feather-wake yachts, bikini models, cartoon cash, Trump’s trophy wife stick- or spray-glued to everything from fringed notebook paper to shellacked three-quarter inch plywood.

Each student stands to defend/explain his dream or nightmare, most buying the fantasy, but some cloak their America darkly: The bearded, homeless vet, the doomed downtown Detroit, and the pair of Great Depression eyes standing before a shack black as the pupils trapped inside what must have been a beautiful iris.

—Richard Holinger

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**Richard Holinger**'s fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *The Southern Review, The Iowa Review, Boulevard,* and elsewhere. He has received three Pushcart Prize nominations. His short fiction collection, *Not Everybody’s Nice,* won the 2012 Split Oak Press Flash Prose Chapbook Contest. He has taught English at Marmion Academy in Illinois’s Fox Valley for more than 30 years.

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