



# War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11

By Sandra Silberstein

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**War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11** By Sandra Silberstein

In a media age, wars are waged not only with bombs and planes but also with video and sound bites. *War of Words* is an incisive report from the linguistic battlefields, probing the tales told about September 11th to show how Americans created consensus in the face of terror. Capturing the campaigns for America's hearts, minds, wallets and votes, Silberstein traces the key cultural conflicts that surfaced after the attacks and beyond:

- the attacks on critical intellectuals for their perceived 'blame America first' attitude
- the symbiotic relationship between terrorists and the media
- (mis)representations of Al Qaeda and the Taliban used to justify military action
- the commercialisation of September 11th
- news as 'entertainment' when covering tragic events.

Now featuring a new chapter on the Second Anniversary and Beyond, including: the war in Iraq, the backlash against former 'heroes' and accusations of presidential mendacity.

A perceptive and disturbing account, *War of Words* reveals the role of the media in manufacturing events and illuminates the shifting sands of American collective identity in the post September 11th world.

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## War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11 By Sandra Silberstein Bibliography

- Rank: #2706805 in Books
- Published on: 2004-07-24
- Released on: 2004-07-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.80" h x .49" w x 5.08" l, .54 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 216 pages

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### Editorial Review

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Linguist Silberstein argues persuasively that 9/11 was not just about events but also about the words that shaped our understanding of and response to them. She carefully dissects America's renderings of the terrorist attacks in presidential speeches, media texts, and eyewitness accounts. Before a single bomb was dropped on Afghanistan, words had made an "act of terror" a "war" (this generation's "Pearl Harbor"), turned New York into "America," and rendered dissent "un-American." President Bush, speaking of a nation "under God" pitted against "evildoers," rose to the position of national pastor. Publicity campaigns, Silberstein shows, rhetorically re-created national identity ("I am an American") while conflating "patriotism and consumerism in a dance of political/economic codependence." Silverstein finds altruistic strains in America's post-9/11 discourse, but her study also suggests how times of national crisis make us vulnerable to verbal posturings--our killing is "collateral damage," theirs "mass murder"--and how we suffer a loss of liberties in the name of "fighting for democracy." *Philip Herbst*

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#### Review

"...a compelling analysis of the way language was used in the political construction of the horrifying historical events of September 11th. Silberstein's analysis gives us a fresh look at the juggernaut of world politics as it is constructed in the linguistic actions of the media, of world leaders, and of the ordinary people who experience world events." - Ron Scollon, Georgetown University

"The brief study, *War of Words*, by Sandra Silberstein, an 'applied linguist,' offers shrewd analysis of the language used after September 11. She shrewdly analyzes how the comments by Peter Jennings while broadcasting the service on September 14 at the National Cathedral helped define the event as one of the 'great national occasions.'" - *Columbia Journalism Review*

"This isn't exactly foreign policy, but close enough. Sandra Silberstein...examines how language has been torqued since the terrorist attacks. The president, formerly the butt of jokes, becomes the commander-in-chief, to give just one example. She concludes that the national tragedy has been manipulated into a consumer opportunity--a charge from which the proliferation of 9/11 books is not exempt." - *Vancouver Sun*

#### About the Author

Sandra Silberstein is a leading name in applied linguistics, and Professor of English at the University of Washington, Seattle. She is widely published, and has written articles on a number of politically sensitive topics, including the OJ Simpson trial, the Gulf War, AIDS and the Inauguration of George Bush.

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