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Government by Euphemism

by Sheldon Richman

People live by political euphemisms. Sometimes they die by them, as when civilians are bombed in the name of liberating them. There are less lethal euphemisms, but since all of them embody dishonesty (the word “euphemism” itself is a euphemism), they all have bad consequences. Those that do not kill may “merely” make us poorer and less free.

Most politicians speak in almost nothing but euphemisms. Their success depends on our not translating those phrases into more honest terms. For example, when a candidate for office advocates “helping the middle class,” he usually means he plans to use the mighty force of government to take money from wealthier, super-productive people in order to give it to others. No candidate has ever made a campaign promise that he intended to fulfill from his own bank account. I await the day that a candidate says, “If elected I promise to command the armed personnel of the federal government to compel those who make over a million dollars a year to surrender a higher portion of their money than they already surrender. After skimming off an appropriate amount, I will have the remainder distributed to the people whom I am counting on to vote for me.”

Wouldn't that be refreshing?

Another popular euphemism is “the right to medical care.” This is particularly seductive because, since everyone will need medical care at some point, people like to believe there is such a right. But there can be no such right. Medical care consists of other people's labor, not only of doctors and nurses, but of all those who produce medical instruments and equipment, drugs, buildings called offices and hospitals, and so on. Strictly speaking, the right to medical care has to mean the right to demand other people's labor. Stripped of euphemism, that's called slavery. Moreover, since the supply of medical care falls short of demand and therefore must be managed, in practice the alleged right to it must mean the power of government to distribute it. What started as a benign individual right ends up as a life-and-death power of bureaucrats. That's what euphemism can accomplish if you're not careful.

Political euphemisms don't issue just from politicians and candidates. Other advocates of greater government power have been a rich source as well. An example was published recently by the *Washington Post*. In an op-ed, Robert E. Wittes, physician in chief at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, decries the high cost of new anti-cancer drugs. Wittes writes that Avastin and Erbitux (the latter being the drug made by the company whose stock Martha Stewart got in trouble for selling) "have been marketed at such extraordinarily high prices that many people will simply not be able to afford them." I have no doubt that's true — for now. Drugs are expensive to develop and, once developed, patent laws prohibit competition from generics for a while. Drug companies naturally try to recapture their costs and earn a profit from their sales. If they didn't anticipate doing so, they wouldn't invest in drug production in the first place. Rather, they'd invest in lines of production that were likely to pay a better return. Prices are not arbitrary numbers. They are generated by supply and demand. An arbitrarily high price invites competition.

So drugs often come on the market at high prices. Government aggravates this through unnecessary Food and Drug Administration requirements and other regulations. One way to cheapen drugs would be to eliminate the bureaucrat management. We also should remember that many products that were introduced at high prices became much cheaper in a short time. That's the way of the market when it's allowed to work.

Wittes sees none of this. He concludes that the drug companies "are effectively daring the government to impose price controls. This the government must do if the drug industry fails to come to its senses quickly."

There's the euphemism: price controls. Government can't control prices. It can only control people in the use of their own rightful property.

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