



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on February 17, 2010

Weasel Words — E.g. “Clearly Constitutional”

A “Google” search of the phrase “clearly constitutional” yields over 38,000 hits. Not surprisingly, few if any of these results highlight the use of that phrase in a way consistent with its true meaning.

Rather, on almost every occasion, this debate-framing phrase is typed by thousands of journalists and bloggers across the country describing everything from ObamaCare to the recently proposed changes to the federal “No Child Left Behind” educational scheme. The phrase is an example of “weasel words.”



The origin of the expression “weasel words” derives from the way a weasel devours the contents of an egg, leaving the shell empty, but seemingly undisturbed to a casual observer. That is to say, weasel words are used to buttress claims that are meant to be beyond dispute, but upon more minute inspection are discovered to be hollow and of no true substance. According to the *Macmillan Dictionary of Contemporary Phrase and Fable*, the expression first appeared in Stewart Chaplin’s short story *Stained Glass Political Platform* (published in 1900 in *The Century Magazine*), in which it was referred to as “words that suck the life out of the words next to them, just as a weasel sucks the egg and leaves the shell.”

These malicious linguistic sleights of hand (including other equally noxious adverbial phrases such as “obviously,” “of course,” “inarguably,” etc.) merit the appellation “weasel words” because of the insidious way they communicate the author’s biases without tipping off the reader that anything despicable is going on between the lines.

Using these deceptive terms is an especially popular practice in the context of the sacred principles that undergird our Constitution. Americans unfamiliar with the very specific and limited enumeration of powers in our founding document are susceptible to the subtle subterfuge devised and deployed by those commentators who falsely proclaim that such-and-such acts of Congress and the President are “inarguably” constitutional. Soon the uninformed person believes the federal government can rightly do most anything, and our constitutional protections are as good as gone.

The subtlety and regularity of such attacks are perhaps the most perfidious aspects of the strategy of constitutional misinterpretation. There is an impressive army of reporters, essayists, historians, and hosts guilty of unscrupulously participating in and knowingly perpetuating the empowerment of the government and the disregard of the Constitution.

Competent writers and wary constitutionalists will readily spot the use of these weasel words when reading reports of the extraordinary expansion of presidential or legislative power. When a news item lists the controversial elements of the proposed healthcare “overhaul” and then parenthetically appends the “although clearly constitutional” coda to the exposition, the reader can be sure that the determined furtherance of an anti-constitutional agenda is likely hiding in plain sight.



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In fairness, the use of these weasel words perhaps has become so second nature to those commenting on constitutional issues that those journalists and pundits who use them may be doing so subconsciously and not purposefully as a weapon of mass deception. Perhaps.

It is possible that the literary runoff from the numerous fiction factories continuously belching forth errant articles, programs, posts, and punditry contrary to the tenets of good government and their expression as contained in the Constitution has seeped into the journalistic ground water, and otherwise honest reporters are unwittingly imbibing the poison and regurgitating it.

That scenario is possible. However, what is more likely is that the writers and producers willingly offer their pens and pocketbooks in the effort.

What, then, is the answer to this despicable project of sucking life out of the Constitution while leaving its shell intact? How can the average American combat a foe whose forces are so innumerable and so fierce?

The most available and most potent weapon in the arsenal of Americans enlisted in the defense of the Constitution is the text of the document itself. Read the Constitution. Make a study of the tenets of Republican government set forth therein.

Next, once you have familiarized yourself with the true and timeless content of the text of the Constitution, move to a meticulous research into the words and opinions of the wise men who built the firm framework upon which our limited government is built. *The Federalist Papers* is a series of articles supporting the ratification of the Constitution. This collection of treatises on core constitutional principles written by the men who were witnesses at the creation of our Republic and the midwives of our system of restrained government should be prominent in the library of every concerned and educated constitutionalist.

Finally, thus armed and alerted, we will not be deceived by the weasels and the words they use to subtly siphon the vitality of the Constitution. We will pack our quivers with the wisdom of the Founders and employ those weapons in the vigilant defense of our Constitution and limited Republican government.



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