

# Letter

To the Editor: As I read Rebecca Patterson and Jodi Vittori's article titled "Why Military Officers Should Study Political Economy" in *Joint Force Quarterly* 75 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2014), I reconsidered my own understanding of the term *political economy*. At one time I was admittedly unsure of its precise meaning, although I could make some informed guesses, and thankfully the authors do a good job of giving readers many opportunities to understand what it means based on context in various passages.

However, this chance encounter with a phrase that field-grade officers might not see regularly in their professional reading brought to mind the entire topic of language and its challenges. I have seen a phenomenon up close and personal here at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, particularly in some of the readings we historians assign to our students in books such as *Makers of Modern Strategy*. I can vaguely recall being a bit miffed the first time I chanced across the word *particularism*, but then I looked it up and turned the tables on my own ignorance.

So-called big words, words such as *misanthropic*, *heuristic*, and *epistemological*, too often serve as a convenient way for the intellectually insecure to withdraw from the battlefields of words and ideas and retreat to the safer ground of simple, monosyllabic conversation. There is a unity and beauty to such conversation that is admirable and even desirable in writing and speaking, but big words are not without value. They add texture, richness, and nuance to writing and speaking if not misused—which is often how we see and hear them used *if* we are honest. At other times, people use big words to confuse, obfuscate, and intimidate.

When midgrade officers encounter unknown words, they should act like Napoleon or Nelson and treat them the way they might treat a difficult military

problem. *Solve it*. What do I mean? I mean *do not* regard big words as an enemy. Instead, regard *your own ignorance* of their meanings as the enemy and the writer or speaker as an unwitting or even intentional ally of your adversary (although withhold judgment for a moment on that last part). Do some intelligence preparation of the battlefield. Perform some reconnaissance (another big word, but one military professionals are comfortable with). In other words, find out what the word means, not only in its primary sense (usually the first definition in a dictionary), but also in its secondary or idiomatic (normal use in conversation) sense if these are provided. This will further allow you to accomplish three useful things.

First, you have now added that word to your own "force," so it is no longer in support of the "enemy" (the unknown, ignorance). Secondly, learning the meaning of a word will allow you to evaluate its importance to what is being said and perhaps further clarify an unclear thought. Finally, it can help you understand the strength, or more often weakness, of a person's argument. If he misused the word, you can now engage in dialogue, debate, conversation, and even criticism. A word on criticism: I do not use this word in the sense of your wife, husband, father, mother, or boss nagging at you (or you nagging at them). Criticism in the intellectual world involves exchange and testing of ideas, skepticism, challenge, and response, and ultimately a better understanding of the problem or situation at hand. That sounds like something military professionals should engage in, does it not? Finally, you may get to a point where you actually *enjoy* running across a big word precisely because you have mastered enough of them that running across one becomes a rarity.

Bottom line (which is what I am told majors and lieutenant commanders crave): going after all those big words

is an *opportunity*, not an occasion for "feeling stupid" or being made to feel stupid by someone else. It is a great way to develop critical thinking and expand your vocabulary. Smart officers learn big words even if they would not speak or write them. But do use with care.

**DR. JOHN T. KUEHN**  
General William Stofft Chair for  
Historical Research  
U.S. Army Command and  
General Staff College