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D-Day
By Thomas B. Sawyer

For most Americans, June 6, 1944 is remembered as D-Day.

For me, it's August 10, 1949.

Far more meaningful to me in terms of America's long-term history – largely because the results of what happened that day continue to reverberate – it's anniversary will, not at all surprisingly, once again pass virtually unnoticed.

On that day in 1949, a vitally important semantic change took place in Washington – the arguably brilliant substitution of a single word that would have awesome, far-reaching significance for our country, of how we citizens perceive ourselves and the conduct of United States of America.

Because on August 10, 1949, the Department of War, which had existed under that name since 1778, became the Department of Defense.

And in the President's Cabinet, the Secretary of War became the Secretary of Defense.

Think about that.

Not War – with all those nasty, distasteful connotations and the grotesque images they summon.

Defense.

Consider how very much more easily that word goes down for modern, socially responsible, civilized ears such as ours. How incredibly more politically correct it is. How comfortingly it reminds us that in military terms, our Truly Modern, Invariably Good-Guy America *only* employs warfare in its own defense.

As in Korea. And Vietnam. And Grenada. And Iraq.

Think about how enabling it is. How warm-and-fuzzily, for instance, we can tell ourselves – and believe – that those 58,000 names etched into that wall in Washington, D.C. died *not* waging an aggressive war that *only* benefited our national economy, but rather, they were killed Defending their Country. And how easy it becomes, on those rare occasions when anyone even thinks about it, for us to dismiss the 3.5 million Southeast Asian deaths we

inflicted during that Defensive Action.

Or today, how soothing it is to be told – and to accept – that GI's in Iraq are dying or being maimed in our Defense.

That one, simple-yet-anything-but-simple word-change was a choice, astutely made by people who by the end of WWII had recognized that, as tedious as that war had become, it had – with its attendant need for the tools to fight it, and the nifty sidebar that those items required steady, urgent replenishment – finally got us out of the worst economic depression in our history – what had been, really, the total collapse of the “free market” concept, the heart and soul of capitalism. At last they had found The Answer: the Perpetual Wartime Economy.

Sadly, it's entirely consistent with our penchant for self-deception and denial in such areas as Oil and Global Warming and AIDs, to mention a few, all of them companion-pieces in a fundamental malaise: a National Refusal to question ourselves, our history, our behavior as occupants and abusers of this remarkable planet that has so willingly and accidentally supported us – along with birds, fishes, lizards, cats, dogs, ants and their fellow citizens.

That we buy into such labels as “Department of Defense” is far from new. One has only to recall Manifest Destiny, or The War to End Wars – or more recently, Operation Enduring Freedom (irony unintended, I'm sure – if the people who coined it had had a sense of humor – and the intelligence that connotes – we would probably not be in Iraq in the first place).

That we never seem to Get It is even older.

But most distressingly, that particular small but momentous switch in verbiage has evolved into a *key* element of a curve that daily pulls us downward at an ever-steeper, ever more final angle, in the direction of our destruction as a society.

I mean, I *know* just how difficult it is to suddenly – or even gradually – admit we've been wrong. On any level.

But – there's wrong – and then there's *wrong*...

So, how about we give it a try before it's too late?

We can start by remembering August 10, 1949.

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