

## Society for Linguistic Anthropology

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### What's In a Name? Or What Defines a "Civil War" and Who Makes the Definition?

By James Stanlaw (Illinois State U)

As is well known by now, the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) released on February 2, 2007, came as close as any US government agency ever has to calling the violence in Iraq a civil war. Saying that while it "does not adequately capture the complexities of the conflict ... [n]onetheless, the term 'civil war' accurately describes key elements of the Iraq conflict, including the hardening ethno-sectarian identities, a sea change in the character of the violence, ethno-sectarian mobilization and population displacements." NIE's are significant documents, and are the "most authoritative written judgments concerning national security issues ... regarding the likely course of future events" by the director of National Intelligence, the head of the US intelligence community and principle advisor to the president and the National Security and Homeland Security Councils.

However, as early as last fall—if not sooner—much of the mainstream media threw their previous caution to the wind and began to ask if the current administration was in a state of denial. On November 27, Matt Lauer on NBC's *Today Show* announced that the Iraq conflict fits its description of a civil war and would call it such: "[A]fter careful consideration, NBC News has decided the terminology is warranted. ... We didn't just wake up on a Monday morning and say, 'Let's call this a civil war.'"

### Is Iraq in a Civil War, as Compared to the US Civil War?

	US Civil War	Iraq Conflict
months of war	52	40 (as of 7/06)
war deaths	618,000	655,000
initial population size	34 million (c 1861)	25 million (c 2003)
deaths per capita per month	1.06	0.95

CNN's Michael Ware seconded this opinion saying, "If this isn't a civil war, I don't know what is." The *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* followed days later.

No one, however, gives an operational definition of exactly what a civil war might be. In March 2006 Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi told the BBC that "It is unfortunate that we are in civil war. We are losing each day as an average 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more ... If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war is." If so, these figures are even higher than the 37 deaths per day in the civil war in Algeria or 23 deaths per day in El Salvador (though lower than the 185 deaths per day in Bosnia-Herzegovina). An exhaustive study by Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health states that between March 2003 and July 2006, approximately 655,000 Iraqi deaths were caused by wartime violence. If this is accurate, a comparison to America's Civil War in the 19th century is very enlightening (taking commonly accepted figures for other numbers, see below).

That is, when population size and duration is considered, the rates of death due to warfare in the US Civil War and the Iraqi conflict are quite similar (though the majority of Iraqi deaths are non-combatants). It would appear that by most standards the Iraq war qualifies as "civil."

But who makes the call? The president told reporters on August 7, 2006, "You know, I hear people say, 'Well, civil war this, civil war that,' ... [but] the Iraqi people decided against civil war when they went to the ballot box ..." White House spokesperson Tony Snow explained that the situation in Iraq is really not a civil war because the various sectarian factions are not unified, having disparate goals and agendas. Other Bush Administration officials are loathe to use the term even hypothetically.

Polar-opposite linguistic pundits George Lakoff and Frank Luntz from our last January's column completely understand why. Lakoff says that liberals are doing a good job of framing Bush's troop surge as an "escalation" and the conflict as a "civil war." Iraq being Bush's "central front on the war on terror" is suspect when the dispute seems more of a local power struggle than an ideological turning point. And what family wants to send their son or daughter to fight in a foreign family feud? Even the conservative pollster Luntz says the US "needs a linguistically frank president," suggesting that even some of the more nuanced language in his recent speeches "for most Americans is too little and too late."

Speaking again of that conflict from 1861 to 1865 in the US, it has historically been called many things, including the War Between the States, the War for Southern Secession, the Second American Revolution, Mr Lincoln's War, the War for Southern Independence and the War to Save the Union. But in the end there has been one enduring name used overwhelmingly in both the scholarly community and the mass media: The Civil War. Sometimes history and

events take nomenclature out of the hands of individuals.



Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw (stanlaw@ilstu.edu) and Mark Peterson (petersm2@muohio.edu).

## Society for Medical Anthropology

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### MASA Dissertation Award Competition

In 2006, the SMA inaugurated the Medical Anthropology Students Association (MASA) to recognize and serve student members of the society. Students make up one-third of SMA's membership and represent the future of our discipline. The SMA executive board is pleased to announce the establishment of the MASA Dissertation Award, which has been created to recognize an outstanding dissertation in the field of medical anthropology, broadly defined.

The MASA Dissertation Award will be given on an annual basis to a scholar whose dissertation is judged to be the most significant and potentially influential contribution to medical anthropology. Dissertations will be judged on the basis of: 1) scope and excellence of scholarship, including ethnographic research; 2) originality of subject matter; 3) effectiveness and persuasiveness of arguments; and 4) writing quality. Dissertation research of exceptional courage and difficulty will be given special consideration.

The MASA Dissertation Award Committee strongly encourages submission of nominations for the 2007 competition. The MASA Dissertation Award will be publicly announced during the 2007 SMA awards ceremony, held during the annual AAA meeting in Washington DC. The winner will receive a \$500 cash award and a plaque.

Submissions must be dissertations approved, accepted and filed as the final version with the candidate's university within the calendar year 2006. The candidate's dissertation advisor should attest that this is the copy submitted. Dissertations should be submitted with a title page that does not identify the author or his/her university affiliation, with all acknowledgment pages removed, and with any text or bibliographic references that would identify the author, advisors or institutional affiliation removed. Dissertations with any identifying information will be disqualified from competition, which will entail a blind-review process.

Candidates for the award need not have received their PhD degrees in a department of anthropology, nor in a North American university. However, letters of nomination must clearly state why the dissertation contributes to the field of medical anthropology. Two letters of nomination, one from the candidate's dis-