



Some words can make a war cry foul

By smh.com.au · 3 min

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As words of shock and awe, "weapons of mass destruction" may have served their purpose for a while, particularly as the weapons are proving hard to find in Iraq.

The Fairfax company's Newslink facility, a record of published stories, enables us to plot the development of "weapons of mass destruction" from a reasonably sober working phrase used by the arms control community to a rapidly rising mantra of the Bush Administration's holy war on the axis of evil: Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

Newslink shows the number of times the phrase has been used in Australian publications since 1986, with the *Herald* being only a small but highly representative sample of the phrase's use across all media.

In 1987 it appeared once in the *Herald*, in an article describing how terrorist activity was focused on Europe and the Middle East. The Pan Am disaster over Lockerbie failed to excite usage of the phrase,



The spike in 1998 coincided with the bomb attacks on United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which were sourced to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Usage retreated again during the final years of the Clinton administration when the news was dominated by the Wall Street boom, corporate mergers and acquisitions and bubble words like "new era" and "beyond history" and "globalisation".

The use of the WMD phrase in its present meaning took off after September 11, 2001, becoming a vital part of the Bush Administration's rhetoric of confrontation and the basis for the pre-emptive strike against Iraq.

A similar look on Newslink at the use of the word "globalisation" provides a counterpoint to WMD. "Globalisation" was oversold during the stockmarket boom four years ago and is now in a heavy bear market. A similar fate may await "weapons of mass destruction". The phrase appears to have been first used in *The Times* in 1937 after the German Luftwaffe practised the strategic bombing of cities during the Spanish Civil War. Conventional dictionaries have yet to catch up with WMD. According to the web encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*, during the Cold War WMD referred only to nuclear weapons.

The current use of WMD to refer to chemical, biological and nuclear weapons was defined by UN Resolution 687 and later by US law.



and acts of terrorism and which continued to do so in the latest pre-emptive strike on Iraq.

The shock and awe inspired by WMD stem from fear of the unknown, or little known. This was dramatically shown by the world panic which followed the "anthrax through the mail" episode soon after September 11, 2001. Fear is a big electoral trump card for the politician in office.

The resemblance of the rise and fall of the use of both phrases to stockmarket bubbles is not surprising. Stockmarket bubbles, like word bubbles, or fevers, occur when the normal, reasonable discourse of markets becomes irrational as a boom develops, driven by a kind of rising mass hysteria which finally implodes on the emptiness of its own rhetoric.

The pathology of market manias was famously analysed 150 years ago by Charles MacKay in his *Memoirs of Extraordinary Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. Modern media can spread extraordinary delusions with unprecedented speed. Anyone with a radio or a mobile phone is part of a crowd. Words and phrases, and the spin doctors who use them, now have a power undreamt of when MacKay's contemporary, E. G. Bulwer-Lytton, wrote his aphorism about the pen being mightier than the sword. WMD may yet turn out to have been words of mass delusion.



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