

# THE LINGUISTIC LEGACY OF WATERGATE

## IT'S TIME TO FIND A BYWORD FOR SCANDAL, WRITES GORDON CAMERON

Fifty years ago, a pair of journalists in Washington D.C. uncovered a story so big that its repercussions are still being felt half a century later.

Watergate forever changed how journalists cover governments and how citizens see their representatives.

At its best, it's led to reporters working in the public interest to go the extra mile to uncover what those in power want to keep hidden.

At its worst, it's led to cynicism and a loss of faith in those we've democratically elected to make decisions on our behalf.

However, there's also one linguistic artifact that has become so ubiquitous that I'm sure many of us no longer even make the



**GORDON CAMERON**  
Column

connection between it and Woodward, Bernstein and Nixon — the use of the suffix "-gate" as a byword for seemingly any and every scandal.

The first time "-gate" was used, it likely seemed fresh, clever and a little cheeky. Now, it has about as much zing as a plain tofu sandwich.

That's not to say that it can never be the mot juste, (Hamilton's Sewergate comes to mind, but it involved an actual gate) rather that it's often a sign of lazy writing.

What's more, because "-gate" has become synonymous with

malfeasance, merely using it editorializes in such a way that implies that there's not only smoke, but fire to whatever claims are being made.

When we in the media can prove the allegations in question, it becomes a scandal. If we run it anyway, that becomes a scandal. (Just ask Dan Rather about Memogate.)

While much less serious, it's also uninspired writing to continue to add "-stock" to the name of any large gathering or concert.

Like Watergate, Woodstock itself is much less of a cultural touchstone 53 years later than it was even when I was a teen. In many ways, "-stock" is becoming a lost reference, where people know what it means, but not why it means it. (And no, this gripe isn't born out of the fact that I missed SARSstock because I was living in Alberta at the time.)

A big part of my problem with both examples isn't that they

continue to be used, but rather that they're used so freely and in ways that devalue the original.

Watergate involved criminality at the highest level of political office, destabilized the entire American political system and had long-lasting, worldwide repercussions.

Does letting the air out of some footballs really even come close to that level of severity?

I admit, the shorthand offered by "-gate" or "-stock" can be helpful in getting your point across, but like so many other formerly familiar writing staples, it's perhaps time to say good bye to our old friends and use our imaginations to come up with something new.

Just if we decide to do it at a conference, please don't refer to it as "Suffixstock."

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## LEST WE FORGET

This year marked the 78th anniversary of D-Day, June 6, 1944. On this day, the fate of the free world hung in the balance of the success or failure of this invasion.

Thousands from Canada, Great Britain, America and other free nations stormed the beaches along Normandy France to defeat Nazism and Fascism. They knew that they might never see their loved ones again.

The invasion was a success, but not without many, many lives lost. Our world today is far from perfect, but we owe those who stormed the beaches of Normandy our continued thanks, respect and remembrance.

Had the invasion failed, our world today would look sadly much different with almost little freedom and hope.

Please pause for a few minutes and think what those soldiers did on the morning of June 6, 1944 and how our lives would be different if Nazism and Fascism won. Lest we forget.

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# SCHOOL BOARD CHOOSES SECRECY OVER TRANSPARENCY

**WE WILL CONTINUE THE FIGHT FOR REPORT'S RELEASE, WRITES GORDON CAMERON**



**GORDON CAMERON**  
Column

I shouldn't have been surprised, and yet I was. I should have been mad, but all I could manage was a heavy sigh.

Without a word of discussion, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board voted to break its promise (again) to make public a secret report that led to the sanctioning of Stoney Creek trustee Carole Paikin Miller for the third time this term.

In a feat of audacious linguistic gymnastics that would have made Bill Clinton blush, board chair Dawn Danko told those assembled at the June 13 meeting: "While we're in-

terested in embracing transparency, and of course always want to be as transparent as possible, we will not be releasing the report."

To drive home just how ludicrous that is, imagine for a moment the board was talking about math education and during this imaginary discussion the chair said: "While we're interested in embracing teaching math, and of course always want to teach as much math as possible, we will not be teaching math."

You can no more be

transparent by keeping things secret than you can expect students to learn math by not teaching math. And yet for some reason, the board, or at least its chair, seems to think that the people who elected them will accept that absurd line of thinking.

I do not know what's contained in the report, but I wonder if the potential embarrassment will even come close to approaching the self-inflicted shame the constant will-they, won't-they charade is causing the board and its members.

Not only does it make the trustees look indecisive, but it also makes it look like they're deliberately hiding something. Something they don't want the voters to know during an election year.

The only clue we have as to why the report remains

under wraps comes from the late-May motion that agreed to its release "pending legal review."

However, it really makes you wonder what the lawyers said that the board didn't already know from the seven months reporter Richard Leitner has been fighting to get this report released.

So, thanks to the board's action — opposed only by trustee Maria Felix Miller — the fight will continue. We will go forward with our appeal to the province's Information and Privacy Commissioner.

We will take the time and spend the money in the public interest to liberate this report from the school board's vault. In turn, the board will spend more time and more money to try and keep it locked away.

Ultimately, the board's actions may not prevent

this report from seeing the light of day, but at least it will have succeeded in keeping it secret until well after this fall's election.

Trustees are chosen by the people to make decisions on our behalf about the education of our children. In order for voters to be confident in their abilities to do the important work they were elected to do, we must be able to trust their judgment.

How does it serve the students of Hamilton to have a key piece of the trust puzzle missing? In fact, how does shrouding the reasons for censuring the conduct of one of its members in complete secrecy serve anyone but the board members themselves?

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## LACK OF ACTION

As gas prices rise to a all-time high, I am shocked at the lack of leadership at the provincial and federal levels. The war in Ukraine should not affect our prices in North America.

It is very obvious that OPEC is responsible for the rising prices. It is reported that OPEC is going to reduce production again in the fall, pushing prices even higher.

Yet our governments are doing nothing, except raking in millions of gas-tax dollars.

There are actions they can take now. They can cancel the carbon tax — eight cents a litre. They can reduce the gas taxes for every litre of gas. Most importantly, they can work with the U.S. to put pressure on OPEC. Finally, both Canada and the U.S. can ignore the world market price and set their own prices.

**ROMAN CARUK**  
HAMILTON

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# WHY DID A U.S. PAPER PUT PEOPLE BURNING FLAGS ON ITS COVER?

## CONTEXT MATTERS, WRITES GORDON CAMERON

*It's about trust. Our relationship with our readers is built on transparency, honesty and integrity. As such, we have launched a trust initiative to tell you who we are and how and why we do what we do.*

I have a good friend who runs a paper in rural South Dakota. For those of you unfamiliar with politics in the Mount Rushmore State,



GORDON CAMERON  
Column

it's every bit as Republican as you'd think. In fact, over 80 per cent of the voters in my friend's county cast their ballot for Donald Trump in 2020.

I bring this up as on the front page of a mid-June

edition of her paper, she chose to run a photograph of a group of locals burning American flags. You might assume that if something like that were going on in the centre of town, it would start a riot causing millions of dollars in damage and perhaps even loss of life. You might also assume that my friend was taking her life in her hands by running a photo of the proceedings, and while she's a brave journalist, she's also a proud American who would no sooner do something to insult her country

than I would do something to insult mine.

Yet, there was no riot. My friend is safe and sound and, in fact, I doubt that she even received a single letter to the editor on the topic.

So why wasn't this a big deal?

It's all about the context.

This photo wasn't about a group of radicals setting a national symbol alight in protest or to provoke a reaction. This was a group of veterans carefully disposing of worn and tattered flags. They were taking part in this retirement ceremony out of ultimate respect for this American icon. This was not a shameful scene, and one made completely understandable through the photo's caption.

As journalists, it is our job to help make sense of the world. In order to do that, we must not only show you what's going on, but to put it into its proper context. It's why if we run a close-up of a trio people at a protest, it's important for

us to tell you if they were part of a crowd of thousands or the only three. It's why when the rest of the province was stunned that an independent candidate defeated the PCs in Haldimand-Norfolk, it was important that we told readers that Bobbi Ann Brady had been the outgoing MPP's assistant for over 20 years and had been endorsed by her former boss.

Context matters and it's our job to provide it. Without it, readers would get false impression of the news of the day and make key decisions based on incomplete or wrong information. And that's the exact opposite of what good journalism should do.

*Gordon Cameron is the group managing editor for Hamilton Community News and is a member of Metroland's trust committee. gocameron@hamiltonnews.com. We welcome your questions and value your comments at trust@metroland.com.*

## PUNISHING THE POOR

The government is asking the working poor to pay back the Canadian Emergency Response Benefits (CERB). This, after Trudeau announced \$4.9 billion over the next six years and \$40 billion over the next 20 years to upgrade Norad. Trudeau must assume Norad is in more dire need of emergency funding than our working poor which, in my opinion, is a disgusting money grab to pay the bills for our government's spending priorities. But then again, it has always been the working poor who have footed the bill for our leaders' assumptions.

ROGER LAMBERT  
HAGERSVILLE

## YOUROPINIONS

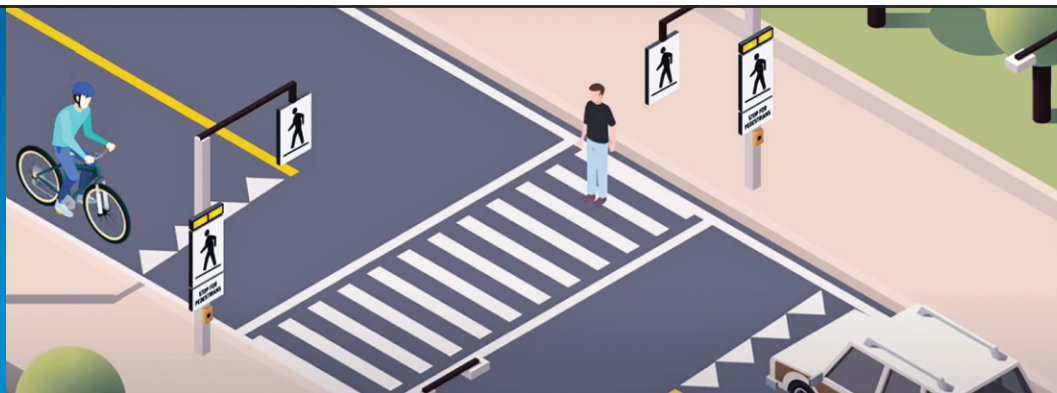
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