



## Fighting words

### Description

Surveying the tense crowd before him, President Trump whipped it into a frenzy, exhorting followers to fight like hell [or] you're not going to have a country anymore. Then he aimed them straight at the Capitol, declaring: You'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong! (6).

That's a quote from the [Trump Trial Brief](#). The document reveals at least two layers of fighting words: the use of *whipped*, *frenzy* and *aimed* by the authors of the briefing document, and the terms they quote such as fight like hell.

I'm waiting for the defence on the Trump side that fighting words are part of the national discourse, or even everyday language. Defenders might say: it makes no more sense to say that fight like hell is an incitement to actual violence than the stirring Wesleyan hymn Soldiers of Christ, arise or the declaration I don't believe in defeat (137) in Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*. (The latter book was apparently one of Trump's few go-to sources.)

Apart from tired Trumpian clichés you can find fighting words delivered across the political and moral spectrum, from Martin Luther King Jr (Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed) to Margaret Thatcher (You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it). Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have alerted us to powers and pitfalls in the argument as war metaphor.

### Angry mobs

In my book *Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks*, I unpicked some of the terminology pertaining to frenzied crowds in a chapter Moved by the mob. What follows is extracted from that with some updates (pp.56-58).

In his seminal work on metaphor and emotion, the linguist Zoltán Kövecses identifies several key metaphors involving anger. Anger appears at times as a hot fluid in a container, a fire, a captive animal, a burden and a natural force. Kövecses focuses on the individual, but the schema can be expanded to

crowds. Anger is less about liberating a captive animal than releasing a herd. An angry crowd reaches boiling point, unleashes its anger, brews as if a storm, spreads itself like wildfire, and burns out. These are active and violent metaphors. In myth, Thor and Mars are the energetic gods of storms and thunder and preside over people's anger.

In her study of large compilations of texts, using corpus linguistic research techniques, Alice Deignan notes that "Heat metaphors are more often found in talk about the collective anger of a group of people and its impact, than in talk about the feelings of individuals" (280). She indicates how "Fire has the potential to become uncontrollable and very destructive, and it can be started "ignited" with a small and apparently innocuous spark" (280). As a recent example, [numerous press reports](#) refer to Trump *igniting* an insurrection.



## Summer of discontent

In the summer of 2011 in the United Kingdom, large numbers of youths raided shops for branded sportswear and electrical goods and set fire to shops. Such flash points are common in many countries. The riots followed a demonstration over the killing of a member of the public by police. The gang riots following the event and on the scale presented were abetted in no small part by rapid communications networks, as rioters signalled their moves to one another via secure messaging on BlackBerry smart phones.

The less expert joined in under the gaze of CCTV and global media, which increased the chances of individuals being identified, and provided tangible targets for the apparent anger of others in the community and the rule of law. The faces of the offenders appeared on television and then in the courts. The scenario is a familiar one, with parallels in other major cities of the world, e.g. the rioters at the Washington Capitol last month exercised similar cavalier practices of overt self identification, encouraged not least by ubiquitous smartphone cameras and photo-sharing platforms.

In the case of the 2011 UK rioters, it's not clear that they were angry, nervous, or just caught in the thrill of the moment. The [Guardian](#) newspaper reported criminologist John Pitts as saying the looters "quickly see that police cannot control the situation, which leads to a sort of adrenalin-fuelled euphoria "suddenly you are in control and there is nothing anyone can do." Nor was it clear that the people watching the effects on television were angry at the circumstances that might have led to the

riots, or at the rioters themselves.

I watched the January 6 Washington Capitol riots on CNN as they were happening. Friends and I only started to develop a language for how we felt about the events after reflection and conversation. Emotions are not just of the moment ([affect](#)) but evolve, and in a cultural context. In this respect you could say emotions are social, and in language.

## **We don't need to read minds**

Back to the 2011 riots: without presuming what was going on in people's minds, we can simply say that anger featured as a linguistic element in the various coping strategies of the actors or players in the intense drama – rioters, their relatives, police, store owners, journalists, bloggers, tweeters, viewers, politicians, civic leaders, and welfare campaigners. The [Guardian](#) reported, “Widespread anger and frustration at the way police engage with communities was a significant cause of the summer riots in every major city where disorder took place.” The attribution of anger provided a theme to the story.

In their seminal research on emotions, anthropologists Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White identify the kinds of social problems that society is quick to explain in emotional terms. Riots, social disorder, and violent crime are problems that news reporters, commentators, researcher, and other storytellers describe using the language of emotions, in particular the language of anger. As reported, the perpetrators of these acts may be described as angry, and those observing or caught up in the activity “were angry.”

The [Trump Trial Brief](#) mentions *anger* several times, e.g. “the crowd was armed, angry, and dangerous” (2). I listen to the [Lawfare Podcast](#), which identified the strong storyline to the document, implying that it's a case made for public consumption and the public record, rather than scoring dry legal points. Also see my post: [Mad crowds disease](#).

Also read: Coyne, Richard. 2016. *Mood and Mobility: Navigating the Emotional Spaces of Digital Social Networks*. Cambridge, MA: [MIT Press](#). [Amazon](#).

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## Note

- Image is of riot police in Edinburgh at the time of the 2005 G8 summit.

## Category

1. Culture

## Tags

1. anger
2. metaphor
3. mood
4. trump

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