

# Clean your clock

Why does Old Slang stay with us long after the basis for the metaphor has staggered off into the mists of meaning?

“Our side would welcome that debate,” Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, told Democrats hinting at a floor fight over the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court. “And frankly, we’ll *clean your clock*.”

*The Wall Street Journal* told Virginia’s GOP that the way to “turn a red state blue” was to act like liberals: “Republicans in that ostensibly ‘red’ Republican state got their *clocks cleaned* in November’s elections after they refused to take a coherent stand on taxes.”

Keith McFarland at *Business Week* recalled that U.S. industries awakened to the need for quality production 20 years ago “primarily because America was getting its *clock cleaned* by the Japanese.”

All three usages of this mysterious slang expression took place in 2006. The earliest citation was from 1959, suggesting it was derived from the early 20th-century *fix your clock*, using the face of a timepiece to stand for the human face, as in the related insult, *a face that would stop a clock*.

Comes now this citation from the sports page of *The Trenton Evening Times* of July 28, 1908, about a couple of local baseball teams: “It took the Thistles just one inning to *clean the clocks* of the Times boys.” That means that this mechanical metaphor has been kicking around for at least nearly a century, most often in sports lingo, now more in combative political language (and occasionally with a sexual overtone regarding being exhausted by one’s partner, though I can offer no citation). And it is being spread

around the world: in an article about the portrayal of villains on Japanese television, Kate Elwood wrote three months ago in *The Daily Yomiuri* of Tokyo that an idealistic teacher named Yankumi “with a certain élan, *cleans the clocks* of assorted bad guys over many episodes... way to go, Yankumi!”

Why does Old Slang stay with us long after the basis for the metaphor has staggered off into the mists of meaning? Perhaps alliteration helps give it linguistic longevity; *clean your clock* comes readily to the tongue though it has no semantic relation to “wash your face.”

## THE LONG WAR

What do we call the war we’re in? The Iraqi war? Gulf war II? The war on terror? Global struggle against terrorism? Clash of civilisations?

One unwritten law of war is that every war has to have a name. Pettifoggers in Congress decided to call the Korean War *the Korean conflict*, because it was a United Nations “police action” and never officially declared a war, but it is remembered as the Korean War. The 1914-1918 clash of groups of nations was described by an idealistic Woodrow Wilson as “the war to end war,” but events made sure that never stuck; it was initially labelled *the Great War*, which competed with the World War and did not gain its historical title of *World War I*, of course, until *World War II*. (The comedian Sid Caesar, dressed in a doughboy’s uniform and helmet in a classic skit set in late 1918, exulted anachronistically, “World War I is over!”)

Even non-shooting wars get a name. The most memorable political coinage of the post-Second World War

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era was the cold war (denied capitalisation), which was often attributed to the superpundit Walter Lippman. I knocked myself loose researching that one, and credit the coinage to the publicist and triple Pulitzer Prize-winner Herbert Bayard Swope, who icily informed Lippman that “I used it first in a little talk I made in ‘45” and later put it in a 1946 speech he wrote for Bernard Baruch. Swope’s secretary produced a 1949 letter from that elder statesman stating, “You coined the expression, and I gave it currency.”

One prospect for the name of the hostilities currently in the headlines is *the long war*. President George W. Bush, in his January 31, 2006, State of the Union address, told Congress and the nation, “Our own generation is in a *long war* against a determined enemy.” This previewed the Pentagon’s *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* issued the following month, which cited Bush’s September 20, 2001, prediction of “a lengthy campaign” and was titled “*Fighting the Long War*.” If *the long war* catches on, who would be the new Swope? As of now, the coiner is Gen. John Abizaid.

Going against the phrase’s adoption is its official sponsorship; going for it is the likelihood of war opponents countering in rhyme “long war, wrong war.” Let’s keep an eye on this one. □

*New York Times Service*