

Running from “Riot”

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Whenever it got started — ancient Sumer, maybe — doublespeak is linguistic legerdemain, a sad sign of modern times.

Consider the Associated Press’s recent pronouncement about the word “riot.” Use the meeker word “unrest,” the stylebook editors suggest. “Unrest is a vaguer, milder and less emotional term for a condition of angry discontent and protest verging on revolt.”

Nothing like vagueness and timidity to make reporting as crisp and specific as possible.

The AP adds: “Focusing on rioting and property destruction rather than underlying grievance

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has been used . . . to stigmatize broad swaths of people protesting against lynching, police brutality or for racial justice, going back to the



urban uprisings of the 1960s.”

Why the new recommendation?

Well, all that . . . rioting by the swaths of rioters raises the question — if you regard the rioting as politically inconvenient — how not to report it.

Of course, one could consistently say both that “policing and the law should be reformed in such-and-such a way” and that “people should not destroy the property and lives of others.” Moreover, violating the rights of others *should* have a social cost. Criminal activity *should* be stigmatized. There *is* a major difference between protesting injustice and committing injustice.

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Whether a mind can actually do this is debatable. But disguising from oneself and others what we can all see is one way people try.

This is Common Sense. I’m Paul Jacob.