

# The Words of the Week - 6/5/20

Some of the words that defined the week ending June 5, 2020

Welcome to The Words of the Week, in which we look over some of the good, the bad, and the semantically imprecise words that tickled your curiosity this past week. Please note that [bad](#) is used here in a vague fashion; we do not really think of any words as bad (although sometimes they are a bit unruly).



## 'Festoon'

The recent passing of an enormously popular artist who had a [penchant](#) for wrapping things in fabric sent lookups for [festoon](#) much higher than usual.

[penchant \(n.\): a strong and continued inclination. Broadly: LIKING.](#)

Christo, Artist Who Wrapped and Festooned on an Epic Scale, Dies at 84  
— (headline) [The New York Times](#), 31 May 2020

As a noun *festoon* may mean “a [decorative](#) chain or strip hanging between two points” or “a carved, molded, or painted ornament representing a decorative chain.” The verb form of the word (which is the use of *festoon* most often associated with Christo) may be defined as “to hang or form festoons on,” “to shape into festoons,” and “decorate, adorn.” *Festoon* may be traced to the Latin *festā* (“festival”), which is also the root of the noun [feast](#).

## 'Unhinged'/'dominate'

[Unhinged](#) and [dominate](#) also were among our most searched words, following the release of an audio recording in which President Trump could be heard giving strongly worded advice to a number of the nation's governors.

Audio: In 'Unhinged' Call, Trump Tells 'Weak' Governors to 'Dominate' Protesters  
— (headline) [Rolling Stone](#) (rollingstone.com), 1 Jun. 2020

*Unhinged*, an adjective, is defined as “highly disturbed, unstable, or **distraught**”; the verb form of [unhinge](#) may be defined as either “to make unstable” or “to remove from the hinges.” *Unhinged* has been used in this manner since the middle of the 17th century.

**distraught (adj.): agitated with doubt or mental conflict or pain.**

Our sad Case is now such, That we have an Incensed God; an angry King; a threatening Councell; a **heady** Clergy; a divided Nobility; a discontented Gentry; a **distempered** People; a distracted Religion; an unhinged State ... a **defection** from the Principles of sound Policy; a Parliament which should be the Redresse of all these, made quite otherwise, to us, by some that have abused it: and generally such a conspiracy; such a complying of ill Symptomes; that even Miracles must be wrought, or else we perish.

— Thomas Povey, *The moderator expecting sudden peace, or certaine ruine*, 1643

**heady (adj): willful, rash, violent, impetuous.**

**distemper (v.): to throw out of order.**

**distemper (n.): bad humor or temper.**

**defection (n.): conscious abandonment of allegiance or duty (as to a person, cause, or doctrine): desertion.**

*Dominate*, which comes from the Latin word for “master” (*dominus*), has been around slightly longer; our earliest evidence of use comes in the 16th century, and also appears in a political discussion of governors.

IF we beare the preheminance of a Magistrate, & dominate over others, as rulers and governours of them; it is necessarie that especially we abounde in foure severall points of wisdom.

— Hermannus Schottennius, *The government of all estates* (trans.), 1566

## 'Lowlife'/'scum'

Trump also **propelled** [lowlife](#) and [scum](#) to the top of our lookups last week, after he posted a [remonstrance](#) of Andrew Cuomo, governor of New York, on Twitter.

**propel (v.): to drive forward or onward by or as if by means of a force that imparts motion.**

**remonstrance (n.): an earnest presentation of reasons for opposition or grievance.**

Trump suggested that violence and looting seen on the streets of New York City on Monday night was the result of the governor's failure to accept the president's offer to deploy the National Guard. "Yesterday was a bad day for the Cuomo Brothers. New York was lost to the looters, thugs, Radical Left, and all others forms of Lowlife & Scum," Trump wrote.  
— Dan Mangan, *CNBC* (cnbc.com), 2 Jun. 2020

*Lowlife* has been used as an adjective ("of or relating to the world of low social life") since the early 18th century. The particular noun use that Trump appears to have intended ("a person of low moral character") is considerably more recent, dating from the beginning of the 20th century.

*Scum* has been part of our grand English vocabulary since at least the 14th century, and has a much wider range of meaning than people usually give it credit for. It may refer to, among other things, "extraneous matter or impurities risen to or formed on the surface of a liquid often as a foul filmy covering," "the scoria of metals in a molten state," and "a low, vile, or worthless person or group of people." The last time *scum* was this high in our lookups was way back in 2019, when Trump referred to Republicans who opposed him as *human scum*.

extraneous (adj.): existing on or coming from the outside.

foul (adj.): filled or covered with offensive matter.

film (n.): a thin skin or membranous covering: pellicle

scoria (n.): the refuse from melting of metals or reduction of ores: slag

molten (adj.): fused or liquefied by heat: melted

## 'Bunker'

*Bunker* was much in the news last week, after the Secret Service was said to have moved President Trump to such a place.

Protesters' breach of temporary fences near White House complex prompted Secret Service to move Trump to secure bunker  
— (headline) *The Washington Post*, 3 Jun. 2020

This word has been in use for hundreds of years; early meanings include "a chest or box often used as a window seat" and "a sand trap or embankment with soil exposed constituting a hazard on a golf course." The *bunker* that Trump was in last week is defined as "a protective embankment or dugout; especially, a fortified chamber mostly below ground often built of reinforced concrete and provided with embrasures." This is among the more recent meanings of the word, coming into use in World War II.

embankment (n.): a raised structure (as of earth or gravel) used especially to hold back water or to carry a roadway.

dugout (n.): a shelter dug in a hillside. Also: a shelter dug in the ground and roofed with sod.

embrasure (n.): an opening with sides flaring outward in a wall or parapet of a fortification usually for allowing the firing of cannon.

## 'Aiding and abetting'

Three additional former police officers were charged with [\*aiding and abetting\*](#) the murder of George Floyd, sending many to the dictionary in search of the precise meaning of this legal term.

Attorney General Keith Ellison's office on Wednesday upgraded charges against the former Minneapolis police officer who knelt on George Floyd's neck and charged the other three officers at the scene with aiding and abetting murder.

— Stephen Montemayor and Chao Xiong, [\*Minneapolis Star Tribune\*](#), 4 Jun. 2020

We have a rather simple definition for *aiding and abetting*: “helping and encouraging.” The legal meaning of this idiom varies from state to state, and country to country, making a precise definition for all instances in which it is used impractical. The two words have been used together in this legal manner for a very long time, with evidence of use as far back as the early 17th century.

By our Law the counsailor, commandor, or assistor are without any such difference or limitation as you have made, guiltie of homicide, & principall offenders: for al that be present, ayding, abetting or comforting him that doth murder, are principal offenders though they giue no stroke.

— William Fulbeck, *A parallele or conference of the civill law, the canon law, and the common law of this realme of England*, 1601

We doe farther declare & protest against this present House of Commons illegall Acts, Order, or Ordinance, for erecting a High Court of Justice, & usurping a power without any Law or president, to Trie, Depose, and bring to capitall punishment the King, and to Disinherit His Posterity, or any of them, and against the said Generall Councill of Officers, aiding and abetting them **therein**, as highly **impious** against the Law of God, Nations, & the Protestant Profession....

— Clement Walker, *Anarchia Anglicana*, 1649

**therein (adv.):** In or into that place, time, or thing. In that particular or respect.

**impious (adj.):** not pious: lacking in reverence or proper respect (as for God or one's parents): irreverent.

## Our Antedating of the Week: 'photo op'

For our antedating of the week we are looking at [\*photo op\*](#), as this word appears to have been on the minds of many people of late. *Photo op* is a shortened form of [\*photo opportunity\*](#); both may be defined as “a situation or event that lends itself to and is often arranged expressly for the taking of pictures that give favorable publicity to the individuals photographed.” Our earliest known use of *photo op* had previously come in 1981; recent findings show that the word was in use the year before.

The other was to provide musical introductions to press conferences and photo ops (campaign shorthand for opportunity).

— *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 Nov. 1980