Word histories: Deadline
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WORD HISTORIES

by Craig M. Carver

deadline

An item on the agenda at last July's G-7 economic summit was the cost of closing Ukraine's infamous Chernobyl nuclear plant, which still operates despite severe safety problems. Deputy Energy Secretary William White said before the meeting that the group would "set some *deadlines* for Chernobyl." *Deadline* (a limiting line, mark, or time) was coined during the Civil War, in the notorious Confederate POW camp Andersonville. The earliest known written instance of the word occurs in an 1864 report by Colonel D. T. Chandler: "The Federal prisoners of war are confined within a stockade fifteen feet high. . . . A railing around the inside of the stockade, and about twenty feet from it, constitutes the '*dead line*,' beyond which the prisoners are not allowed to pass" (read into the *Congressional Record*, 1876). If a prisoner crossed the line, he was summarily shot. After the war *dead-line* survived in the South as jargon in games of marbles, referring to a line drawn near the ring. If on the first shot a player's shooter fell short of the line, he was "dead" and had to drop out of the game. In the West cattle ranchers used a *dead line* to indicate the point beyond which sheep farmers were not to go on pain of being "dry gulched"—that is, killed. From a physical line not to be crossed, *deadline* evolved into a point in time not to be crossed—most often a given time after which newspaper or magazine copy would not be accepted for inclusion in a particular issue.

rival

The meeting of the superstar tenors José Carreras, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti last July for a concert in Los Angeles's Dodger Stadium was like a World Cup of virtuoso singing. But the performers themselves played down their potential competitiveness. "You have to put all of your concentration into opening your heart to the music," Domingo said. "You can't be *rivals* when you're together making music." *Rival* (a competitor) is from the Latin *rīvus*, meaning "brook or stream," which yielded the adjective *rīvālis*, "of a brook," and then the noun *rīvālis*, "one using the same brook as another; one living on the opposite side of a stream from another." River rights have always been a source of contention for beasts and men, because a river both provides water and is a natural boundary ("*Si inter* rivales, *id est qui per eundem rivum aquam ducunt, sit contentio de aquae usu* . . ." ["If between river-neighbors, that is, those who draw water from the same stream, there is a disagreement about the use of the water . . ."]—Domitius Ulpianus, Roman lawyer, died A.D. 230). Thus *rivalis* came to refer more generally to any competitor, and was adopted directly into English in the sixteenth century, particularly in its figurative meaning "a competitor in love" ("You both are *Rivals*, and love Hermia; And now both *Rivals* to mock Helena"—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1600). *Rivulet* (a small stream) also derives from *rivus*, but *river*, surprisingly, comes from the Latin *rīpa* (bank), as do (through French) *riparian* and *arrive*.

trophy

Controversy at Virginia Military Institute was laid to rest at least temporarily last May after a federal judge ruled that in return for financing a comparable school at a nearby women's college, the all-male school could continue to exclude women. "This was our last stand," one senior said. "The equal-rights people want V.M.I. as a *trophy*." *Trophy* originates in the Indo-European root *trep-*, meaning "to turn," which in Greek became *tropē*, "a turning (of the enemy), a rout." From *tropē* came *tropaion*, a memorial set up on the battlefield where the enemy had been routed. In ancient Greece a *tropaion* consisted of captured arms, shields, helmets, and standards hung upon a tree or a stake so as to resemble a man. Because a *tropaion* was dedicated to a god or gods, it was sacrilege to destroy it. The Romans, who adopted the word as well as the custom, altering it to *tropaeum* and later *trophaeum*, preferred to carry their memorials back to Rome. In Imperial times *trophaei* were triumphal arches or huge constructions with columns. French borrowed the Latin, changing it to *trophée*, which in turn

was adopted into English ("The battaile was so eqall, that aither of the partyes, pretended to have had the victorye therof. But the Athenians dyd make and set up their *Trophe* or signe of victorye, pretending to have had the better"—Thomas Nicolls, translator, *The Hystorie Writtone by Thucidides*, 1550). The meaning of *trophy* then extended to anything taken as a spoil or a prize, especially if it was displayed as a memorial.

Illustrations by Peter Bennett

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