

## Name of the Year — A Short History

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Back in 1990, Allan Metcalf, executive secretary of the American Dialect Society, had the bright idea that ADS should choose a “Word of the Year” (Metcalf, 2002). ADS has been having fun doing this at their annual meetings ever since, garnering a great deal of positive publicity for their society.

In 2003, I had the idea that the American Name Society should copy ADS and choose a “Name of the Year.” I had been thinking about this for a few years, ever since becoming aware of “Word of the Year.” I was inspired to bring up the notion at the 2003 meeting of the Executive Council of ANS when it became clear that starting in January 2006 we would be holding our annual meetings at the same time and place as ADS. To my surprise, the Executive Council voted to endorse my plan.

The first Call for Nominations for Name of the Year said, “The name selected will be the one that best illustrates, through its creation and/or use during the past 18 months, important trends in North American culture.” It asked for nominees to be sent either to me or to Christine DeVinne by December 1 2004. A ballot was prepared with the four nominees received by that date: Al-Qaida, Jon Stewart, Nevaeh (“heaven” spelled backwards, a fast-growing baby name), and Fahrenheit 9/11. The winner was Fahrenheit 9/11, the title of Michael Moore’s documentary film about George W. Bush. Discussion before the vote showed many ANS members were impressed by Moore’s clever alteration of the title of Ray Bradbury’s famous dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

The ballot for 2005 Name of the Year also had four nominees: Aidan, Lewis “Scooter” Libby Jr, Scalito (a nickname for Supreme Court nominee Samuel Alito), and Katrina. Katrina was the overwhelming choice. The name of this hurricane became a byword for both great disasters and governmental incompetence. It was also appropriate for ANS to honor a hurricane name, since the idea of naming storms with people’s first names can be traced to the 1941 novel *Storm* by George R. Stewart (1895–1980), a longtime active member of ANS.

The 2006 Name of the Year ballot had twelve nominees: Ahmadinejad, Barbaro, Beatrice (from the Lemony Snicket series of children’s books), Blue Dog Democrats, Flickr, Jack, Macaca, Penguin Space Shuttle, Pluto, Restless Leg Syndrome, Shiloh Nouvel Jolie-Pitt, and Suri. This produced the closest contest ever, with Pluto winning out over Macaca by just one vote. Macaca, an epithet used by Senator George Allen directed at a campaign worker for his electoral opponent, Jim Webb, was widely considered responsible for Allen’s loss to Webb after the incident was disseminated over YouTube. Pluto had been the focus of worldwide protest when the

International Astronomical Union demoted that body from a planet to a “dwarf planet” in August 2006.

The first three years ANS chose the Name of the Year through a paper ballot, and members who were not physically present at the annual meeting were allowed to vote on the winners. After observing how the American Dialect Society conducted its Word of the Year vote, by show of hands from those present at the annual meeting, the ANS Executive Council decided that starting in 2007 we would switch to that form of voting, too.

Before the vote at the annual meeting in January 2008, there were nine 2007 nominees. These included Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Daughtry, the name of a pop/rock album by Chris Daughtry, Jersey Boys, the title of a Broadway musical based on singers Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, Forever Stamps, the United States Post Office’s new first-class stamps that can continue to be used when the price of postage rises, Google, “Carbon footprint”, Addison, which had boomed as a girl’s name in the United States because of the television character Dr Addison Montgomery of *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Private Practice*, and Barack Hussein Obama, the name of a young senator from Illinois who had recently begun a Presidential campaign.

The winner was none of the above. Instead “Betrayus,” a dark horse nominated from the floor during the meeting, was Name of the Year for 2007. This nickname was first used by Rush Limbaugh to describe Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska for his opposition to the Iraq war. It was later taken up by leftwing bloggers as a nickname for David Petraeus, Commanding General of the Multinational Force in Iraq. The clever pun of this pejorative nickname and its use by partisans on both sides of the political divide led to its victory.

At the 2007 meeting it was decided to copy ADS further by voting on winners in various categories, as they do for “Word of the Year.” In 2008 the vote would begin with choosing the Place Name, Trade Name, Fictional Name, and Personal Name of the year. These categories were chosen because they corresponded to the four “interest groups” which hold luncheon meetings during the ANS convention.

For 2008, nominees were solicited in the four separate categories. For Place Name of the Year, the nominees were Beijing, because of the 2008 Olympics, and Wasilla, home town of Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin.

For Trade Name of the Year, nominees were the pair Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, and AIG. These were all names associated with the financial crisis of late 2008.

The nominees for Fictional Name of the Year were all from the bestselling *Twilight* book series about vampires by Stephenie Meyer. The first film based on those books was released in 2008. Before the meeting, both Cullen, the surname of the vampire family, and Isabella “Bella” Swan, the name of the non-vampire teenage heroine of the series, had been nominated. During the vote Edward, the name of the vampire Bella falls in love with, was nominated from the floor. It was pointed out the many teenage girls were wearing badges saying “Looking for my Edward” because of Meyer’s fictional character.

The nominees for Personal Name of the Year were Ocho Cinco, the name of a football player who legally changed his name to the Spanish language version of “85,”

the number on his uniform; Zuma Nesta Rock Rossdale; Track, Bristol, Willow, Piper, and Trig, the names of Sarah Palin's children; and Hussein and Barack Hussein Obama, both nominated because of the huge amount of controversy they generated during the 2008 elections.

Category winners were Wasilla, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Edward, and Barack Hussein Obama. Barack Hussein Obama was selected overall Name of the Year, in a vote which would have been unanimous if one younger voter had not chosen Edward.

A full report of the 2009 Name of the Year contest can be found separately in this issue. The overall winner of the 2009 contest was the place name "Salish Sea."

After six years, the American Name Society is learning how to have more fun with Name of the Year, while still promoting the scholarly study of names. One of the goals of the contest is to promote publicity for and interest in our society. Our latest contest achieved that in Washington state, where several newspapers and websites reported on our recognition of Salish Sea. On Crosscut.com, Knute Berger wrote, "The American Name Society — yeah, I didn't know there was such a thing either — has picked the Salish Sea as 'Place Name of the Year.'"

ANS is particularly grateful to the American Dialect Society for being such good sports about our copying their idea. Since we began meeting in tandem with ADS, they have allowed us to announce our Name of the Year winners at the start of their annual Word of the Year votes, and have graciously included our winners in their press releases about Word of the Year. If Name of the Year eventually generates half of the good will both inside and outside our group as Word of the Year has done for ADS, we will be doing very well, and our little contest will have accomplished its goals.

What will be Name of the Year for 2010? Please send your nominees in for any of the four categories, and help us promote the scholarly study of names and show how names can be fun at the same time.

## Bibliography

Metcalf, Allan. 2002. *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of Their Success*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

## Notes on contributor

Cleveland Evans is Associate Professor of Psychology at Bellevue University in Bellevue, Nebraska. A member of the American Name Society for over thirty years, he served as its President during 2005 and 2006. Since January 2008 he has written a regular newspaper column on names in the *Omaha World Herald*.