

[Print This Article](#)
[E-Mail This Article](#)

Longtime aide to President Bush to resign August 31.
[Full Coverage](#) | [Career Timeline](#) | [Video](#) | [Photos](#)

Advertisement

MOST VIEWED ARTICLES

Updated 3:31 p.m. ET
Print Edition On the Site

- [21st-Century Barbarism](#)
- [Fliers' Remorse](#)
- [The White Open Spaces](#)
- [Candidate: Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney: Proposal: 'One-Strike' Laws for Online Sex](#)

E-MAIL NEWSLETTERS

View a Sample and Sign Up
[Washington City Guide](#)

[Movies](#)

[Travel](#)

[At Home](#)

[Manage Your Newsletters](#)

TODAY IN SLATE



[Note to Major League](#)

[Pitchers: Big Brother's Watching You](#)

Rove's 'Mob' Remark: An Age-Old Social Slur

By [Monica Hesse](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, August 15, 2007; Page C07

In explaining the timing of his pending resignation, [Karl Rove](#) told the [Wall Street Journal](#), "I'm not going to stay or leave based on whether it pleases the mob."

The *mob*?

It's a three-letter grenade of a word -- so French Revolution, so frothy-mouthed peasants torching the streets.

Whether deployed innocuously or insidiously as a substitute for a neutral word like "people," it turns a statement into a putdown, a transformation immediately noted by Rove critics. From Gawker: "Only a mastermind could cast the voice of the people as a mob." Wrote [Eugene Robinson](#) in this newspaper: "Benighted fools who don't blindly trust his honesty or fully appreciate his genius are nothing more than 'the mob.'" The word is rooted in *mobile vulgus*, an ancient Latin phrase used by politicians, which translates into "the fickle crowd." *Mobile* (pronounced *mo-bi-leh*) referred to the crowd's tendency to change its collective, uneducated mind. In the 17th century, "mobile" was shortened to "mob." (Let us leave aside a discussion of that other Latinate derivative, la Cosa Nostra, or the opposition grass-roots group Mothers Opposed to Bush.)

The official definition of "mob" now:

- (a) The disorderly and riotous part of the population.
- (b) The common mass of people; the lower orders; the uncultured or illiterate.

"With most words you expect to have some change in semantics," says Ben Zimmer, the editor for [Oxford University Press](#)'s American dictionaries. "This one has stayed surprisingly similar to its pejorative roots."

As in, "The mob has many heads, but no brains." (Thomas Fuller, British writer of the 17th century)

It is a word designed to rile, implying as it does that the people are

Also In Style ...

[Death Grip](#)

[Mommy the Toy Snatcher](#)

['Maxed Out' Man James Scurlock, Right on the Money](#)

[In This Case, 'Truth' May Not Set Anyone Free](#)

[SHOPPER Style Section](#)

E-MAIL NEWSLETTER



Get the scoop on local shopping, styles and deals delivered to your

inbox every Tuesday and Thursday.

[See a Preview](#) | [Sign Up Now](#)

SAVE & SHARE ARTICLE

[What's This?](#)

[Digg](#)
[del.icio.us](#)
[Reddit](#)

[Google](#)
[Yahoo!](#)
[Facebook](#)

not only (a) stupid, but (b) stupid in a collective cow-herd sense. (Americans would always rather be stupid in an independent way. It's a rugged-individualism thing.)

Perhaps proving this very cow-herdedness, however, many have tried to suggest our system of government is all mobbed up by brandishing a [Thomas Jefferson](#) quote: "A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine."

Sorry, guys. The esteemed founder never said it. The folks at Monticello's research library witheringly say that old saw has been dogging him for years.

Those who attempt to use *the* word today speak at their own peril -- and would do best to pay attention to their articles: "When people talk about a mob, they just mean a disorderly group of people," says Geoffrey Nunberg, a linguist at the [University of California at Berkeley](#) who has studied political language. The phrase "the mob," says Nunberg, has very different connotations. "It suggests undemocratic condescension. Nobody talks about 'the rabble' anymore, either. Nowadays we don't use words like that."

And yet we, the people, are a heck of a lot closer to the original definition of "mob" than we've been in a long time. Mobile? You betcha. Not only do we still have the warp-speed ability to change our minds (Love/hate/love/hate/love [Lindsay Lohan](#)), but now we've also got warp-speed ways to disseminate that mind-changing among the masses (another iffy word). Think of what chaos the Romans could have created with texting and blogging technologies.

Rove, widely acknowledged as a master of understanding the political public and using granular bits of data-mining to target it ever more precisely, likely chose his word with care. And Christian Nold, author of the social commentary "Mobile Vulgus," says Rove's quote is representative of modern politics. Politicians, he says, rely on the public to give them credibility. "But they also have this idea that the public is a thing that needs to be suppressed."

Today, the rabble shows its restlessness with polls, not pitchforks. And when those numbers go the wrong way, a man can become a victim of the mob.

[Print This Article](#) [E-Mail This Article](#) [Permission to Republish](#)

More on washingtonpost.com

- [Last Guys Standing](#)
- [President Again Turns to Gillespie](#)
- [Who Will Be the Next Rove?](#)



» [Related Topics & Web Content](#)

powered by 

People who read this also read ...

- [Who Will Be the Karl Rove Of the 2008 Campaign?](#)
- [The Rove Legacy](#)
- [Al Kamen - Rove's True Regret: It's a Rap](#)
- [Obama Says He Can Unite U.S. 'More Effectively' Than Clinton](#)

Post a Comment

Ad Join the discussion. Sponsored by Cisco.  welcome to the human network. 

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Your washingtonpost.com User ID will be displayed with your comment.

Add a comment (max 5000 characters)

Submit

Comments that include profanity or personal attacks or other inappropriate comments or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

SEARCH:  washingtonpost.com Web: Results by 

[NEWS](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [ARTS & LIVING](#) | [CITY GUIDE](#)

[JOBS](#) | [CARS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [RENTALS](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#)

[washingtonpost.com: Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Make Us Your Home Page](#) | [mywashingtonpost.com](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS](#) | [Archives](#)
[The Washington Post: Subscribe](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Electronic Edition](#) | [Online Photo Store](#) | [The Washington Post Store](#) | [About The Post](#) | [National Weekly](#)
[The Washington Post Company: Information and Other Post Co. Websites](#)

© Copyright 1996-2007 The Washington Post Company | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights and Permissions](#)