

A Crime by Any Other Name . . .

THERE is one agency in Washington that no longer has any fraud, waste or abuse in it. These things were eliminated by means of memorandum written to Department of Health and Human Services staff by Secretary Patricia Harris.

The terms were replaced by "program misuse" and "management inefficiency." Employees were directed to adopt the new terminology.

This action could be a belated effort to fulfill President Carter's 1977 promise to have federal regulations written in "plain English," or it might be a forerunner of George Orwell's "1984."

In the prophetic book, Big Brother instituted "newspeak," a system for narrowing the range of thought. It contained no word for science, for example, and "crimestop" meant the faculty of stopping short of any dangerous thought, called "thoughtcrime."

The objective of making federal documents more readily understood has merit, but trying to cover wrongdoing, graft, incompetency or

dishonesty by renaming them is a different matter. If newspeak has come to Washington, is Big Brother far away?

Changing the name of something does not necessarily alter its character, but elimination of crime by memorandum might seem to offer some hope of slowing down our crime rate. It could be the only way.

Speeding might be referred to as "super-acceleration," which may not be against the law because it isn't in the law.

If police would stop referring to cases where people are shot, stabbed or bludgeoned to death as murder, we wouldn't have so many killings. Manslaughter might be called "unscheduled demise," and perhaps a resolution by the legislature could change everything.

During the war, soldiers sometimes forgot to tell owners of certain properties they were scrounging that they intended to make use of the items. This often was referred to as "liberated property." It wouldn't have been militarily nice to call it theft.

Somehow, embezzlement never did sound much like stealing, and neither did misappropriation of funds. Yet, these white-collar crimes reportedly rank terms of dollars with money taken at gunpoint.

One of the most practiced and least punished forms of law breaking is burglary. Few burglars are caught and fewer make trips to the penitentiary. This type of crime might be greatly reduced if we called it "misplaced assets" or "expropriated property." This wouldn't help the victims, but it would reduce the number of burglaries.

But this suggestion comes rather late, as various types of sins have been relabeled "the new morality" when it is merely "the old immorality" that's always been here.

People may fool themselves as often as others fool them. This may be the case in Washington if it is believed that changing the names of wrongdoing will make the deeds right. Still, in "1984" it is written that "Whatever the party holds to be truth is truth!"