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Author

Lakoff, George

Publication Date

2010-07-16

Peer reviewed

Conservatism's Death Gusher

by **George Lakoff**

The issue is death -- death gushing at ten thousand pounds per square inch from a mile below the sea, tens of thousands of barrels of death a day. Not just death to eleven human beings. Death to sea birds, sea turtles, dolphins, fish, oyster beds, shrimp, beaches; death to the fishing industry, tourism, jobs; and death to a way of life based on the beauty and bounty of the Gulf.

Many, perhaps a majority, of the Gulf residents affected are conservatives, strong right-wing Republicans, following extremist Governors Bobby Jindal and Haley Barbour. What those conservatives are not saying, and may be incapable of seeing, is that conservatism itself is largely responsible for what happened, and that conservatism is a continuing disaster for conservatives who live along the Gulf. Conservatism is an ideology of death.

It was conservative laissez-faire free market ideology -- that maximizing profit comes first -- that led to:

- The corrupt relationship between the oil companies and the Interior Department staff that was supposedly regulating them
- Minimizing cost by not drilling relief wells
- The principle that oil companies could be responsible their own risk assessments on drilling
- Maximizing profit by outsourcing risk assessment that told them what they wanted to hear: zero risk!
- Maximizing profit by minimizing cost of materials
- Maximizing profit by failing to pay cleanup crews and businesses for their losses
- Focusing only on profit by failing to test the cleanup methods to be used if something went wrong
- Minimizing cost by sacrificing the health of cleanup crews, refusing to allow them to use respirator masks to protect against toxic fumes.

It is conservative profit-above-all market fundamentalism that has led other oil companies to mount a massive PR campaign to isolate BP as an anomalous "bad actor" and to argue that offshore drilling should be continued by the self-proclaimed "good actors." Their PR fails to mention that in Congressional hearings it came out that they all outsource risk assessment to the same company that declared that BP had "zero risk." The PR fails to mention that they all use cost-benefit analysis to

maximize profits just as BP did. Cost-benefit analysis only looks at monetary costs versus benefits, case by case, not at the risk of massive death of the kind gushing out of the Gulf at present. Death, in itself, even at that scale, is not a "cost." Only an outflow of money is a "cost." This is what follows from conservative laissez-faire market ideology, an ideology that continues to sanction death on a Gulf scale.

But the facts won't make a difference to dyed-in the-wool conservatives, since the facts will be filtered through their ideological frames: when the facts don't fit the frames, the facts will be ignored.

The conservative worldview says man has dominion over nature: nature is there for human monetary profit. Profit is sanctioned over the possibility of massive death and destruction in nature. Conservatives support even more dangerous drilling off the coast of Alaska and are working to repeal the President's moratorium on deep water drilling. Nature be damned; the oil companies have a right to make money, death or no death.

Directness of causation is a rarely noticed property of the conservative worldview. What are the causes of crime? Bad people, lock 'em up, say conservatives. There are no social or economic causes, that is, systemic causes, in the conservative universe. So it is with the Death Gusher. Blame BP, the "bad actor." Look for the immediate cause, but don't look any further, at the profit-above-all system in which all oil companies operate, a system idolized by conservatives. Without an understanding of systemic causes, the causes cited above won't make much sense.

A great many self-identified conservatives are actually what I've called "biconceptuals," who have both conservative and progressive worldviews, but on different issues. They actually share a progressive view of nature: they love the beauty and appreciate the bounty of the Gulf, as it was before the Death Gusher. They want to save the environment of the Gulf and the way of life as it was. But shift the issue to the culpability of laissez-faire markets, the absolute right to profit from nature and profit-maximizing corporate practices, and their conservative worldview is activated. They will not be able to see the causal role of conservatism itself in the Death Gusher, and in the conservative ideology of greed and death that has given us the global warming disaster we now face worldwide.

Incidentally, there are bi-conceptual Democrats who share the conservative view of the market. Their views have led to many of President Obama's problems with Democrats in Congress.

Finally, there is what progressive Democrats see as a contradiction: conservative advocates of smaller and weaker government and critics of governmental power

trying to pin the Death Gusher Disaster on Obama for not having and using enough government power to prevent or lessen the disaster -- even though the government has no capacity to plug oil wells.

The contradiction is logical, from a progressive point of view, but not from a conservative point of view. The highest value in the conservative universe is to preserve, defend, and extend conservatism itself. Anything that helps, or fails to harm, Obama contradicts this highest principle, since Obama's deepest values on the whole fundamentally contradict conservative values. Conservatives, on principle, cannot let a major opportunity to criticize Obama go by. Of course, it also helps conservatives politically.

Those who are not held captive by the conservative worldview should be able to recognize the causal role of conservatism in the Death Gusher in the Gulf. Many progressives do, but keep it to themselves.

Progressives have been much too kind to conservatives on this matter. They have largely accepted the Bad Actor Frame, criticizing BP but not the whole industry and its practices. No one should be drilling miles under the sea, where oil comes out at 10,000 pounds per square inch. No matter how much profit is involved.

Conservatism gushes death -- and not only in the Gulf of Mexico.