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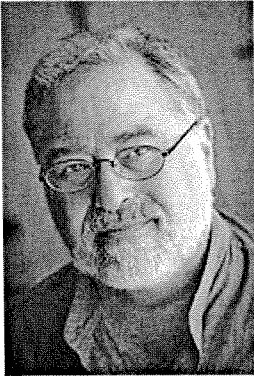
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UC Berkeley Point of View

Nailing the frames of the Republican National Convention

Tuesday, August 31: Pull yourself up by your bootstraps — if you can afford the boots

By George Lakoff | 1 September 2004



UC Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff filed daily dispatches about the language used in the major speeches of the Republican National Convention. Lakoff is a senior fellow at the [Rockridge Institute](http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/) (<http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/>) and the author of "Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think"; his latest book, "Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate," will be published by [Chelsea Green](http://www.chelseagreen.com/2004/items/elephant) (<http://www.chelseagreen.com/2004/items/elephant>) in mid-September. ([Bart Naegel](http://www.bartnaegel.com) (<http://www.bartnaegel.com>) photo)

- [August 30: All terror, all the time](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/08/31_lakoff_gop1.shtml)
(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/08/31_lakoff_gop1.shtml)
- [August 31: Pull yourself up by your bootstraps — if you can afford the boots](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/01_lakoff_gop2.shtml)
(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/01_lakoff_gop2.shtml)
- [September 1: Red-meat night frames Kerry](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/02_lakoff_gop3.shtml)
(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/02_lakoff_gop3.shtml)
- [September 2: Freedom, liberty, freedom](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/03_lakoff_gop4.shtml)
(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/09/03_lakoff_gop4.shtml)

The second night of the Republican convention, billed as "People of Compassion," was an attempt to frame Republicans as "compassionate" to complement the previous day's "Nation of Courage," and also to present contemporary Republicanism as a coherent whole. The idea was to take away the Democrats' strong suit - caring about people and doing something about it. The Republicans were there to show they do it differently and better.

The Democratic issues traditionally have been education, health care, social justice, fair taxation, and support for science (e.g., stem cell research). Attempting to undercut the Democrats, speaker after speaker cited President Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative, the prescription-drug discount card, tax cuts, increased home ownership, and federal support for "ethically sound" stem-cell research as evidence of Republicans' concern for the people.

How compassionate conservatism and its programs differ from Democrats' can be summarized by two sentences taken from Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's speech: "Our opponents have a way of confusing compassion with dependency. We believe true compassion encourages and empowers Americans to be responsible and take control of their own lives."

This sentiment - and the many others like it expressed - come straight out of the strict-father model I described in "Moral Politics." In short: in the conservative worldview, the world is and always will be a dangerous and difficult place, a competitive environment in which there will always be winners and losers. The father's job, and by extension the government's, is to protect and support the family, and it is his moral duty to teach his children right from wrong, using physical discipline when necessary, so that they will gain the internal discipline to do right rather than just "what feels good." Such discipline also allows people to pursue their self-interest to become self-reliant and prosperous.

Morality and prosperity are thus linked through discipline. This focus on discipline is seen as a form of

love- "tough love." Without such discipline you can be neither prosperous nor moral, and hence if you don't prosper, it's your own fault. Thus there is a natural hierarchy of morality linked with prosperity. The prosperous are the good, and therefore should rule. "Compassion" is helping disciplined people make it, or at least keeping the government from getting in their way.

This frame was presented as a grand ideal throughout the major speeches. Let's break down the major framing elements bit by bit.

Michael Steele, Maryland lieutenant governor: "You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong. You cannot help the wage earner by pulling down the wage payer. You cannot further the brotherhood of man by encouraging class hatred. You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich. You cannot build character and courage by taking away man's initiative and incentive. And you cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they should do for themselves."

The first four sentences are code for lower taxes. They invoke the old stereotype of liberals as socialists out to redistribute wealth through class warfare. The implication is that liberals want to rescue the weak (the poor) by sabotaging the hard work of the strong (the rich). "You cannot" says that this is in vain; the wealth hierarchy is a product of a law of nature. The rich are at the top because they deserve it. The second sentence's wording is interesting because it spotlights the wage, not the work, as the significant part of the transaction: the "wage payer" is the person who has the money to give to the "wage earner." What's hidden is that it is the worker whose toil provides money to the "wage payer." As we did yesterday, we also have to look at what's not in the frame. The rich are in no danger of being destroyed; in the last couple of decades the richest Americans have doubled their assets.

The Steele quotation's last two sentences are basically a strict-father lecture about the importance of doing it yourself. It's immoral to accept help or to help people because then (as Frist declared), they might get dependent. What about people who work hard and play by the rules, but simply because of the structure of the economy, can't make it? They're not in the frame. The 40 million Americans who work hard but still have no health care and can thus be bankrupted by a major illness are not in the frame. In this economy, an enormous amount of work doesn't pay enough to live on. For this economy to function, somebody has to do such work and get paid too little. A quarter of the American work force is outside the Republican frame.

To summarize: The basic assumption of conservatism is that there is a hierarchy of merit, and that merit is based on whether you are disciplined enough to succeed. So, social programs are immoral because they give people things that they haven't earned and therefore make them dependent. If you don't make it, it's your own fault; the idea of cycles of poverty does not exist. Only people who can make it are in the frame - people like Arnold Schwarzenegger .

Arnold Schwarzenegger, governor of California: If you believe that government should be accountable to the people, not the people to the government, then you are a Republican! If you believe a person should be treated as an individual, not as a member of an interest group, then you are a Republican! If you believe your family knows how to spend your money better than the government does, then you are a Republican! If you believe our educational system should be held accountable for the progress of our children, then you are a Republican! If you believe this country, not the United Nations, is the best hope of democracy in the world, then you are a Republican! And, ladies and gentlemen, if you believe we must be fierce and relentless and terminate terrorism, then you are a Republican!

There is another way you can tell you're a Republican. You have faith in free enterprise, faith in the resourcefulness of the American people, and faith in the U.S. economy. To those critics who are so pessimistic about our economy, I say: "Don't be economic girlie men!"

These principles hold only for cases that fit the conservative frame that is being built up here. Let's parse this Republican rallying cry sentence by sentence.

Government should be accountable to the people, not the people to the government: Now, he doesn't really mean that Dick Cheney should be accountable to the people, say, by revealing the notes of his

secret conferences about energy policy. What Schwarzenegger is invoking is the traditional conservative preference for smaller government, less regulation . except, that is, when the strict-father worldview requires bigger government, as in a larger military and a new Department of Homeland Security, and more regulation, like the Patriot Act. The principle holds for the cases that fit conservative values.

A person should be treated as an individual, not as a member of an interest group: "Interest group" has become code for groups that have traditionally been disempowered and now want more rights, such as women, gays, the disabled, and minorities. Of course there are all sorts of interest groups that conservatives don't mind, including the military establishment, conservative Christians, seniors, agribusiness, pharmaceutical companies, and investors in oil companies. But they are outside the frame.

You believe your family knows how to spend your money better than the government does: Code for lower taxes. Outside the frame is that your family doesn't know how to build its own army, highways, and Internet, not to mention things that your family business might depend on, such as a trustworthy banking system, court systems to adjudicate corporate disputes, and skilled employees trained at public universities paid for by taxes. The idea of taxation as wise public investment that only government can carry out doesn't fit the conservative frame and so is not mentioned.

That our educational system should be held accountable for the progress of our children: Essentially says that if schools are inadequate we should cut off their funds as punishment. Notice that he is not saying that the community or the country should be held accountable for the money being given to the education system. The Bush administration cut off the funding for the "No Child Left Behind" program, which has disastrously weakened public schools. But only the schools, not the funders of the schools, are in the frame.

This country, not the United Nations, is the best hope of democracy in the world: Notice the contrast - it's either us or the United Nations; nothing about working together. The sentence is about maintaining U.S. sovereignty and the idea that the US is the pre-eminent moral authority in the world. We know what's right and wrong, and the developing and underdeveloped "children" countries that largely make up the U.N. should go along with what we say.

We must be fierce and relentless and terminate terrorism: That's invoking his Terminator image, saying that we have to go after the terrorists with weapons and kill them. What is left out of the frame is the fact, corroborated by the 9/11 Commission, that such an approach does not address the root causes of terrorism and thus only recruits more terrorists.

You have faith in free enterprise, faith in the resourcefulness of the American people, and faith in the U.S. economy: So, now it's time to abandon government accountability in favor of a faith-based economy, with nothing about what the economic policies are going to be. The implication is that free enterprise just works by itself as long as you trust the market. But there's no such thing as a purely free market. It's a myth. It's constructed in certain people's favor with tax loopholes, incentives and subsidies, and it's regulated by government bodies such as the SEC and the Fed. But that's outside the frame.

To those critics who are so pessimistic about our economy, I say: "Don't be economic girlie men!": Liberals are wimps. Conservatives are the real men - the real strict fathers. The critics he's referring to are indeed pessimistic, but about Bush's handling of the economy, his tax policy and his deficit, not about the U.S. economy itself.

There is little that is "moderate" about Arnold. He is a conservative through and through. But Arnold is great theater, a master of great frame construction. All most people see is what is in his frame, not what is outside it.

When we get to Laura Bush's speech, the last of the night, it's time to bring the story back around from compassionate conservatism to the "global war on terrorism" and how our safety is what's most at stake.

Laura Bush, First Lady: All of these issues [education, health care, etc.] are important. But we are living in the midst of the most historic struggle my generation has ever known. The stakes are so high. So I want to talk about the issue that I believe is most important for my own daughters, for all our families, and for our future: George's work to protect our country and defeat terror so that all children can grow up in a more peaceful world.

The most important word here is that "but." The First Lady's speech is about being the wife on the home front. When she invokes "some very quiet nights at the dinner table. weighing grim scenarios and ominous intelligence about potentially even more devastating attacks," you can practically see Ma and Pa sitting there in the firelight, deciding whether to attack the Indians before the Indians attack them. She talks about the sacrifices of being on the home front, like the man trying to raise three daughters while his military wife is away but who turned all the laundry pink. (Ineptitude at household chores shows it's not his usual job. He's not one of those effeminate "househusbands." He's making a sacrifice.)

Laura Bush: Many of my generation remember growing up at the height of the Cold War, hiding under desks during civil defense drills in case the communists attacked us. And now, when parents ask me, what should we tell our children - I think about those desks. We need to reassure our children that our police and firemen, and military and intelligence workers are doing everything possible to keep them safe. We need to remind them that most people in the world are good. And we need to explain that because of strong American leadership in the past we don't hide under our desks anymore. Because of President Bush's leadership and the bravery of our men and women in uniform, I believe our children will grow up in a world where today's terror alerts have also become a thing of the past.

This is a very interesting frame: she brings in the universal desire to keep one's children safe by referencing the Cold War and the fear of nuclear attack, and then says that now we don't have to cower like children because we have a president who strikes back. She is uniting conservative moral strength on the home front - the discipline needed to be moral and prosperous - with the global show of strength in war. Laura Bush is spelling out, as John McCain and Rudy Giuliani implied last night, that the Democrats' issues (education, health, etc.) all pale before safety at home. And that safety can be preserved only by the Bush pre-emptive war policy.

But - stepping back and again looking outside the frame - the Cold War had no pre-emptive attacks; it was about détente. We just spent a lot of money and forced our foes to spend a lot of money as well, preserving the status quo until communism crumbled from the inside. That was apparently a less dangerous status quo than the one that McCain said could not be tolerated with Saddam Hussein.

Overall, the evening was an artful and very effective effort at frame construction, and of tying together the framings of the first two nights into a coherent whole. So far, the framing - and what lies outside the frame - has gone largely uncommented on by the press.

George Lakoff's affiliation with the Rockridge Institute appears for identification purposes only.

Previous NewsCenter interviews with Lakoff:

- [Linguistics professor George Lakoff dissects the "war on terror" and other conservative catchphrases \(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/08/25_lakoff.shtml\)](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/08/25_lakoff.shtml), 26 August 2004
- [Framing the issues: UC Berkeley professor George Lakoff tells how conservatives use language to dominate politics \(http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27_lakoff.shtml\)](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27_lakoff.shtml), 27 October 2003