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# The Use of 9/11 to Consolidate Conservative Power: Intimidation via Framing

by George Lakoff

My wife, Kathleen, and I stood gaping at the TV as we watched the towers fall. Kathleen said to me, "Do you realize what Bush and Cheney are going to do with this?" We both realized very well. Until 9/11, the Bush presidency was weak. On 9/11, Cheney understood that the attack was an opportunity to take control, and take control he did. Colin Powell recommended calling the attack a crime. But Cheney understood that if it were framed as an act of war, then Bush and Cheney would be given war powers. So war it was, a metaphorical "war" on terror. The American people, intimidated by the vision of the towers falling, accepted the framing. Democrats, seeing the reaction of their constituents, went along with the framing. Except for my congresswoman, Barbara Lee. I ran to my computer to be the first to congratulate her on her no vote.

Terror meant everyone should be afraid of terrorists. Throughout the Midwest the predictable happened. A highly memorable event raises one's judgment of the probability that it will happen to them. All over America people started being afraid of terrorists. Bush asked for and got unlimited war powers and the Patriot Act.

From 9/11 on, the American people have been subject to conservative intimidation by framing. I've now written five books explaining how framing works in the brain and what citizens could do about it -- *Moral Politics*, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, *Whose Freedom?*, *Thinking Points*, and *The Political Mind*. The books were based on results from the cognitive and brain sciences on how reason about social and political issues really works -- primarily in terms of morally-based frames, metaphors, and narratives, and only secondarily, if at all, in terms of policy, facts, and logic. Those books were widely used by Democrats in the 2006 and 2008 elections -- and they helped.

But since the 2008 election, conservative intimidation of the electorate via framing has come back big time, with no adequate Democratic defense against it. With a Democratic president in office, Democrats, both citizens and office-holders, turned their attention to policy and logical, fact-based arguments for the policies. In response to the president's health care policies, conservatives attacked on the moral front, choosing two moral values from their value system: freedom ("government

takeover") and life ("death panels"). Knowing well that morality trumps lists of policy details, lists of facts, and logic, conservatives won that framing encounter, and have kept winning. Why? Because people, using their real reason, normally think unconsciously in terms of morally based systems of frames, metaphors, and narratives.

Since the 2008 election, America has returned to post-9/11 conservative intimidation by framing. The intimidation does not use violence. It uses media. When conservatives, using their moral system, are able to frame the main values that define public discourse, the media follows suit, because that is how "mainstream" public discourse has been defined. The media, encountering more conservative language, picks up on that language and uses it. Since conservative language evokes conservative frames and values, which are carried with it, the media (liberal or not) winds up helping conservatives. Even arguing against conservatives, liberal pundits in the media first quote what they say. Liberals in the media help the conservatives by quoting their language, even to argue against it.

In the post-2008 return to 9/11 style intimidation by framing, conservatives have been winning. They have protected banks from financial regulation, health insurance companies from government insurance, and corporations from serious environmental regulation. They have successfully attacked the very idea of the public -- public education, employees, unions, parks, housing, and safety nets.

Here's how public intimidation by framing works.

The mechanism of intimidation is framing, not just the use of words or slogans, but rather the changing of what voters take as right as a matter of principle. Framing is much more than mere language or messaging. A frame is a conceptual structure used to think with. Frames come in hierarchies. At the top of the hierarchies are moral frames. All politics is moral. Politicians support policies because they are right, not wrong. The problem is that there is more than one conception of what is moral. Moreover, voters tend to vote their morality, since it is what defines their identity. Poor conservatives vote against their material interests, but for their moral identity.

All language activates frames in the brain. Conservative language activates conservative frames, which activate conservative moral worldviews in the brains of those who hear the language. The more those frames are activated, the stronger the conservative moral views get in people's brains.

When Democrats are intimidated into using conservative language, they help conservatives, even if they are arguing against them. Here's why. The main voters you want to affect are the bi-conceptuals, those who are conservative on some issues

and progressive on others; that is, those who have both conservative and progressive moral worldviews, but on different issues. They are sometimes misnamed as "the center," "independents," or "moderates." But they do not have any single overriding worldview. Instead they have two. Given the way brains work, the activation of one worldview will inhibit the other worldview. The more one is activated, the stronger it gets and the weaker the opposite one gets. The worldview that is most activated by the public discourse they hear will most likely govern how they will vote. What activates one worldview versus another? Framing. Conservative language activates conservative frames, which activate conservative worldviews. If Democrats use conservative language, even to argue against it, they are just helping conservatives.

To a large extent, Democrats don't understand this. They think that language is neutral and that reason works by logic. If you just tell people the facts and reason logically, everyone should be convinced. But they aren't, because language works by framing and by brain mechanisms. Framing is just the normal way people think and talk. Conservatives tend to understand this. They avoid using liberal language. They frame issues very carefully to fit their goals. Democrats need to do the same -- avoid using conservative frames and instead frame the issues with their own values.

This takes a lot more than just a list of policies. Appropriate policies are vital, but lists of policies in the absence of a clear moral basis for them will always be ineffective in public discourse. Progressives have a clear moral basis for their policies, but they fail to discuss it. Democracy is defined by a simple morality: We Americans care about our fellow citizens, we act on that care and build trust, and we do our best not just for ourselves, our families, and our friends and neighbors, but for our country. Americans are called upon to share an equal responsibility to work together to secure a safe and prosperous future for their families and nation.

The conservative consolidation of power violates this most basic of democratic principles. It replaces social and personal responsibility with personal responsibility alone. It approves of the government over our lives by corporations for their own profit, and hence sees government by, of and for the people as immoral and to be eliminated.

The conservative move to defund government is a means not an end. What conservatives really want is to run the country and the world on conservative principles: to control reproduction (no abortion); to control what is taught (no public education); to control religion (conservative Christianity); to control race and language (mass deportation of Hispanic immigrants); to guarantee cheap labor (no unions); to continue white domination (no affirmative action); to continue straight domination (no gay marriage); to control markets (eliminate regulation, taxation,

unions, worker rights, and tort cases); to control transportation (privatize freeways); to control elections (institute bars to voting).

The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way. It is possible for Democrats to learn how frames, narratives, and brains really work. It is possible to take moral stands, with all policies backed up by a single moral vision. It is possible to awaken and strengthen the progressive worldview already present in swing voters who are partly progressive as partly conservative (called "independents," "moderates," and "the center"). It is possible for Democrats to say what they believe and win, without giving in to intimidation tactics.

But the longer we wait, the more damage the conservatives do. Ten years is already too long. It is time to end the era of conservative intimidation that took hold on 9/11.