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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mb2c857>

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### Publication Date

2013-02-15

Peer reviewed

# How the State of the Union Worked

by George Lakoff



Political journalists have a job to do -- to examine the SOTU's long list of proposals. They are doing that job, many are doing it well, and I'll leave it to them. Instead, I want to discuss what in the long run is a deeper question: How did the SOTU help to change public discourse? What is the change? And technically, how did it work?

The address was coherent. There was a single frame that fit together all the different ideas, from economics to the environment to education to gun safety to voting rights. The big change in public discourse was the establishment of that underlying frame, a frame that will, over the long haul, accommodate many more specific proposals.

Briefly, the speech worked via frame evocation. Not statement, evocation -- the unconscious and automatic activation in the brains of listeners of a morally-based progressive frame that made sense of what the president said.

When a frame is repeatedly activated, it is strengthened. Obama's progressive frame was strengthened not only in die-hard progressives, but also in partial progressives, those who are progressive on some issues and conservative on others -- the so-called moderates, swing voters, independents, and centrists. As a result, 77 percent of listeners approved of the speech, 53 percent strongly positive and 24 percent somewhat positive, with only 22 percent negative. When that deep progressive frame is understood and accepted by a 77 percent margin, the president has begun to move America toward a progressive moral vision.

If progressives are going to maintain and build on the president's change in public discourse so far, we need to understand just what that change has been and how he accomplished it.

It hasn't happened all at once.

In 2008, candidate Obama made overt statements. He spoke overtly about empathy and the responsibility to act on it as the basis of democracy. He spoke about the need for an "ethic of excellence." He spoke about the role of government to protect and empower everyone equally.

After using the word "empathy" in the Sotomayor nomination, he dropped it when conservatives confused it with sympathy and unfairness. But the idea didn't disappear.

By the 2013 Inaugural Address, he directly quoted the Declaration and Lincoln, overtly linking patriotism and the essence of democracy to empathy, to Americans caring for one another and taking responsibility for one another as well as themselves. He spoke overtly about how private success depends on public provisions. He carried out these themes with examples. And he had pretty much stopped making the mistake of using conservative language, even to negate it. The change in public discourse became palpable.

The 2013 SOTU followed this evolution a crucial step further. Instead of stating the frames overly, he took them for granted and the nation understood. Public discourse had shifted; brains had changed. So much so that John Boehner looked shamed as he slumped, sulking in his chair, as if trying to disappear. Changed so much that Marco Rubio's response was stale and defensive: the old language wasn't working and Rubio kept talking in rising tones indicating uncertainty.

Here is how Obama got to 77 percent approval as an unapologetic progressive.

The president set his theme powerfully in the first few sentences -- in about 30 seconds.

Fifty-one years ago, John F. Kennedy declared to this Chamber that 'the Constitution makes us not rivals for power but partners for progress...It is my task,' he said, 'to report the State of the Union -- to improve it is the task of us all.' Tonight, thanks to the grit and determination of the American people, there is much progress to report.  
...

First, Obama recalled Kennedy -- a strong, unapologetic liberal. "Partners" evokes working together, an implicit attack on conservative stonewalling, while "for progress" makes clear his progressive direction. "To improve it is the task of us all" evokes the progressive theme that we're all in this together with the goal of improving the common good. "The grit and determination of the American people" again says we work together, while incorporating the "grit and determination" stereotype of Americans pulling themselves up by their bootstraps -- overcoming a "grinding war" and "grueling recession." He specifically and wisely did not pin the

war and recession on the Bush era Republicans, as he reasonably could have. That would have divided Democrats from Republicans. Instead, he treated war and recession as if they were forces of nature that all Americans joined together to overcome. Then he moved on seamlessly to the "millions of Americans whose hard work and dedication have not yet been rewarded," which makes rewarding that work and determination "the task of us all."

This turn in discourse started working last year. Empathy and social responsibility as central American values reappeared in spades in the 2012 campaign right after Mitt Romney made his 47 percent gaff, that 47 percent of Americans were not succeeding because they were not talking personal responsibility for their lives. This allowed Obama to reframe people out of work, sick, injured, or retired as hard working and responsible and very much part of the American ideal, evoking empathy for them from most other Americans. It allowed him to meld the hard working and struggling Americans with the hard working and just getting by Americans into a progressive stereotype of hard working Americans in general who need help to overcome external forces holding them back. It is a patriotic stereotype that joins economic opportunity with equality, freedom and civil rights: "if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead, no matter where you come from, what you look like, or who you love."

It is an all-American vision:

It is our unfinished task to make sure that this government works on behalf of the many, and not just the few; that it encourages free enterprise, rewards individual initiative, and opens the doors of opportunity to every child across this great nation.

"Our unfinished task" refers to citizens -- us -- as ruling the government, not the reverse. "We" are making the government do what is right. To work "on behalf of the many, and not just the few." And he takes from the progressive vision the heart of the conservative message. "We" require the government to encourage free enterprise, reward individual initiative, and provide opportunity for all. It is the reverse of the conservative view of the government ruling us. In a progressive democracy, the government is the instrument of the people, not the reverse.

In barely a minute, he provided a patriotic American progressive vision that seamlessly adapts the heart of the conservative message. Within this framework comes the list of policies, each presented with empathy for ideal Americans. In each case, we, the citizens who care about our fellow citizens, must make our imperfect government do the best it can for fellow Americans who do meet, or can with help meet, the American ideal.

With this setting of the frame, each item on the list of policies fits right in. We, the citizens, use the government to protect us and maximally enable us all to make use of individual initiative and free enterprise.

The fact that the policy list was both understood and approved of by 77 percent of those watching means that one-third of those who did not vote for the president have assimilated his American progressive moral vision.

The president's list of economic policies was criticized by some as a lull -- a dull, low energy section of the speech. But the list had a vital communicative function beyond the policies themselves. Each item on the list evoked, and thereby strengthened in the brains of most listeners, the all-American progressive vision of the first section of the speech. Besides, if you're going to build to a smash finish, you have to build from a lull.

And it was a smash finish! Highlighting his gun safety legislation by introducing one after another of the people whose lives were shattered by well-reported gun violence. With each introduction came the reframe "They deserve a vote" over and over and over. He was chiding the Republicans not just for being against the gun safety legislation, but for being unwilling to even state their opposition in public, which a vote would require. The president is all too aware that, even in Republican districts, there is great support for gun safety reform, support that threatens conservative representatives. "They deserve a vote" is a call for moral accounting from conservative legislators. It is a call for empathy for the victims in a political form, a form that would reveal the heartlessness, the lack of Republican empathy for the victims. "They deserve a vote" shamed the Republicans in the House. As victim after victim stood up while the Republicans sat slumped and close-mouthed in their seats, shame fell on the Republicans.

And then it got worse for Republicans. Saving the most important for last -- voting reform -- President Obama introduced Desiline Victor, a 102-year spunky African American Florida woman who was told she would have to wait six hours to vote. She hung in there, exhausted but not defeated, for many hours and eventually voted. The room burst into raucous applause, putting to shame the Republicans who are adopting practices and passing laws to discourage voting by minority groups.

And with the applause still ringing, he introduced police officer Brian Murphy who held off armed attackers at the Sikh Temple in Minneapolis, taking twelve bullets and lying in a puddle of his blood while still protecting the Sikhs. When asked how he did it, he replied, "That's just how we're made."

That gave the president a finale to end where he began.

We may do different jobs, and wear different uniforms, and hold different views than the person beside us. But as Americans, we all share the same proud title: We are citizens. It's a word that doesn't just describe our nationality or legal status. It describes the way we're made. It describes what we believe. It captures the enduring idea that this country only works when we accept certain obligations to one another and to future generations; that our rights are wrapped up in the rights of others; and that well into our third century as a nation, it remains the task of us all, as citizens of these United States, to be the authors of the next great chapter in our American story.

It was a finale that gave the lie to the conservative story of America, that democracy is an individual matter, that it gives each of us the liberty to seek his own interests and well-being without being responsible for anyone else or anyone else being responsible for him, from which it follows that the government should not be in the job of helping its citizens. Marco Rubio came right after and tried out this conservative anthem that has been so dominant since the Reagan years. It fell flat.

President Obama, in this speech, created what cognitive scientists call a "prototype" - an ideal American defined by a contemporary progressive vision that incorporates a progressive market with individual opportunity and initiative. It envisions an ideal citizenry that is in charge of the government, forcing the president and the Congress to do the right thing.

That is how the president has changed public discourse. He has changed it at the level that counts, the deepest level, the moral level. What can make that change persist? What will allow such an ideal citizenry to come into existence?

The president can't do it. Congress can't do it. Only we can as citizens, by adopting the president's vision, thinking in his moral frames, and speaking out from that vision whenever possible. Speaking out is at the heart of being a citizen, speaking out is political action, and only if an overwhelming number of us speak out, and live out, this American vision, will the president and the Congress be forced to do what is best for all.

By all means, discuss the policies. Praise them when you like them, criticize them when they fall short. Don't hold back. Talk in public. Write to others. But be sure to make clear the basic principles behind the policies.

And don't use the language of the other side, even to negate it. Remember that if you say "Don't Think of an Elephant," people will think of an elephant.

Structure is important. Start with the general principles, move to policy details, finish with the general principles.

