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Inside the Frame

by George Lakoff

George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics and cognitive science at the University of California Berkeley, is a specialist in the technique of "framing," a communication tool that creates a "frame" for a message that defines the terms of the debate. Lakoff believes that the Republicans are experts at framing, while the Democrats hardly appear to understand how the technique works at all. Take almost any major political issue, and the Democrats react to how the Bush Cartel has "framed the issue," rather than forcing the GOP to respond to a Democratic "frame."

Lakoff is also one of the founders of -- and a fellow at -- [the Rockridge Institute](#), a progressive think tank in Oakland, California. One of the goals of the Rockridge Institute is to "reframe the terms of political debate to make a progressive moral vision more persuasive and influential."

People have different political outlooks and they think, "I stand for this," or "I stand for that." I stand for more taxes or less taxes. I stand for affirmative action or non-affirmative action. But few people think to talk about the language of politics and how politicians use language.

You are part of a group of people who use a particular concept to understand what the conservative -- or we should say right wing -- movement has done with language to influence public opinion. It is something called framing. That's not exclusive to the right wing, of course, but they use it. Can you explain what that concept is and why the right wing and the Bush Republican Party use it so well?

Lakoff: The first thing to know about language is that it expresses ideas and thoughts. Every word is defined with respect to what cognitive scientists call a frame. A frame is a conceptual structure of a certain form. Let me give you an example. Suppose I say the word "relief." The word "relief" has a conceptual frame associated with it. Here's the frame: In order to give someone relief, there has to be an affliction and an afflicted party -- somebody who's harmed by this affliction -- and a reliever, somebody who gives relief to the afflicted party or takes away the harm or pain. That reliever is a hero. And if someone tries to stop the person giving relief from doing so, they're a bad guy. They're a villain. They want to keep the affliction ongoing. So when you use only one word, "relief," all of that information is called up. That is a simple conceptual frame.

Then there's metaphorical thought. We all think metaphorically. When you add "tax" to "relief" to give you the term "tax relief," it says that taxation is an affliction. That's a new metaphor. Then, using the metaphor, anyone who gets rid of the taxation -- the affliction -- is a hero, and anybody who tries to stop him is a bad guy.

On the first day that Bush came into office, the language completely changed coming out of the White House. The press releases all changed. One of the new expressions that came in was the term "tax relief." It evokes all of these things -- that taxation is an affliction that we have to get rid of, that it's a heroic thing to do, that people who try to prevent this heroic thing are bad guys.

The press releases went out to all the TV stations, all the radio stations, all the newspapers -- and soon the media started using the term "tax relief." That puts a certain frame out there: a conservative frame, not a progressive frame. Soon a lot of people are using the term "tax relief," and, before you know it, Democrats start using the term "tax relief," and shooting themselves in the foot.

That's a nice example of how language can evoke a way of understanding society, the world, economic policy, and so on, with just two words -- very, very simple. This happens all the time.

Is the use of the phrase "tax relief" and all it evokes an example of framing an issue, so that cutting taxes is seen as "tax relief"?

That's right. That is framing an issue. One of the first things I teach about framing is this: I give my students an exercise. I say, "Don't think of an elephant. Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant." And of course, they can't do it. You have to think of an elephant in order to not think of one. The word "elephant" evokes an image and knowledge about that image -- it's a frame. Negating a frame evokes the frame.

So if you go on Fox News -- "fair and balanced" -- two liberals, two conservatives, and one commentator who is asking the questions, and the question is, "Are you in favor of the President's tax relief program or are you against it?" -- it doesn't matter what you say. If you say, "I'm against tax relief," you're still evoking that framing. You're still in their frame, and all that it automatically brings with it: what kinds of policies are good, who is bad, and so on. That's how Fox News works. It frames the issues from a conservative perspective. Once the issue is framed, if you accept the framing, if you accept the language, it's all over.

Howard Dean is being criticized because it is considered political suicide to roll back tax cuts ("to roll back tax relief," as the right wing and the Bush administration call it). Would it be an example of good Democratic framing to say he doesn't want to roll back tax cuts; he wants to promote community enrichment and community growth? And that to do that, he's going to need more participation and support from members of the American community.

Not good enough. You have to provide another, progressive understanding of taxation. And you also have to make it very, very clear that there's a basic problem here. Cognitive scientists call it the problem of hypocognition. That means that you actually lack some of the complex ideas that you need. Not every important idea is already out there, with a name. Not every important idea has become normal and conventional. Sometimes you have to talk for a while to explain what a particular idea is, and you have to come up with language for it. By the way, this was also true of conservatives. They have been working at it for 30 years to develop their language.

The idea is this: If I were Howard Dean, I would say taxes are what you pay to be an American, to live in this country with democracy, with opportunity, and especially with the enormous infrastructure paid for by previous taxpayers -- infrastructure like schools and roads and the Internet, the stock market, the Securities and Exchange Commission, our court system, our scientific establishment, which is largely supported by federal money. Vast amounts of important, marvelous infrastructure: all of these things were paid for by taxpayers. They paid their dues. They paid their fair share to be Americans and maintain that infrastructure. And if you don't pay your fair share, then you're turning your back on your country.

One of the important things to know about the way that this infrastructure works is that people who are very wealthy use more of it than people who aren't. For example, nine-tenths of the use of the court system is for corporate law. People should pay their fair share in being Americans, and that's why we have a progressive income tax.

The phrase "tax relief" is two words. The right wing and the Bush propaganda machine seem very good at two- or three-word mantras that they then echo chamber through Fox News and the New York Post and CNN. What you've just said is a mouthful. How can that compete against two words?

The conservatives used to have a mouthful too. But they started back in the '50s, and after the '64 election they really got started. For the last 30 to 40 years, they have pumped \$2 billion into supporting all of their think tanks and media apparatus. They have built this series of think tanks that started out after the Goldwater debacle, when "conservative" was a dirty word, when the idea of tax relief could not be introduced in two words. The phrase would have been meaningless. And what they did was to develop these ideas with very great patience and fortitude, in campaign after campaign, year after year, and invent the right words as the ideas came into popular view. Their success didn't happen overnight. They took a long-term view. I think we can do things a little faster since we now understand the science of it a little better, but some things are not going to happen overnight.

But I think the idea of paying your dues to America -- the analogy of saying, look, if you join a membership recreation center, you didn't build the basketball court. You didn't build the swimming pool. Your dues are paying to maintain them and maybe help to build something else in the future. But that's what being a member of a long-term institution is. You're a member of American society, this marvelous institution, and you need to pay your fair share. It's only fair.

As you have pointed out before, the Bush administration is incredibly skilled at using these framing phrases and concepts. And the right-wing think tanks laid the groundwork for it. But it seems to me that one characteristic of the framing phrases they use is that they are positive-sounding. It's Medicare reform. It's saving the forests by burning them down. It's clean air by allowing deregulation of the industry. They're not negative. The Democrats tend to use negative phrases a lot.

Exactly. Don't think of an elephant, right? The Democrats, by saying "stop this, attack that, overturn this," are shooting themselves in the foot. They're being reactive, not active. And you don't win by using the other guy's terms and putting a "not" in front of it or a "stop" in front of it. The conservatives understand this. They have a language machine in place -- a very well-supported machine run by a man named Frank Luntz who uses all this think-tank research to come up with a manual of how to talk about each issue. Not just how to talk about it, but how to think about it, how to reason about it, what the arguments are from the Republican point of view. There's an honest reasoning and talking part to what he does, but then there's also a way to twist words, to use propaganda. That's what you're talking about.

For example, you have the "Clear Skies Initiative," which is getting rid of all the anti-air pollution laws. They use words like "healthy, clean and safe" for things like nuclear power plants or coal plants. They issue advisories that say when you're talking to women, use words that women like, like "love" and "from the heart" and "for the children." Those things are propaganda uses. There are propaganda uses on the right, but that's not most of what they do. Most of it is successful framing of the things they really believe.

But the way they frame them isn't necessarily what is actually implemented.

That's right. When it's propaganda, it's a form of lying. And they do have frames that lie. There are a certain number of them -- "compassionate conservatism" is one of them. So yes, there are quite a number of cases where they're using frames and basically telling lies, but that's not everything. There's a lot of what they're doing that honestly expresses the system that they believe in.

Could you give me an example? Is "family values" an example?

I think so. "Family values" is a case where they honestly express certain things they believe in. However, there are also liberal family values -- but the progressives are not expressing these progressive family values, which, in fact, have been shown to be better at raising children. I have a book called *Moral Politics*, where I go through this in very great detail. It turns out that family values are important in both cases because the moral systems of both liberals and conservatives are based on models of the family. But most liberals don't understand this. Conservatives understand the link between their family values and their politics, but liberals tend not to.

Before we get into that, because I think that's fascinating, let me just run a couple things by you and get your reaction. When Clear Channel, a right-wing-owned radio conglomerate -- the owner is a big contributor to Bush-Cheney -- ran the series of "rallies" called "Support our Troops," was that framing? They were putting people in a position where if you oppose the war, you don't support our troops. Is that an example of framing?

Yes.

Do you have any suggestions to a person who says, "I do support our troops. That's why I think they shouldn't be in Iraq fighting a ginned-up war." How does that person frame that?

It's difficult. During the Vietnam War, people tried "Support our troops; bring them home," but it didn't work that well. The reason it's hard is that the groundwork hasn't been laid. It's very important: this is, again, the issue of hypocognition, of liberals not having the

concepts they need, not getting them out there, not getting the language set up. As a result, when there is something like the Gulf War or 9/11 or the Iraq War, there's silence.

Now, protection is a very, very important part of the progressive vision. You want to protect the environment. You want to protect your children. You want to protect investors. I do want to protect the country as well. But liberals and progressives haven't developed a powerful language of protection. They haven't put the effort into doing that. They haven't put the research into doing that. This takes research. And the right wing knows it. They support that research for their side.

So you can't just come up with a two-word phrase. You're saying you have to develop the infrastructure and do your homework before the framing phrase will have its resonance.

That's correct.

The idea of protection seems very close to what might be a central framing device. Since 9/11, the Bush Administration has been talking about "security" -- I imagine Frank Luntz might be behind that -- and it seems that the Bush Administration is confident of reelection because the "soccer mom" has become the "security mom," and the Bush Administration positions itself as providing "security." Now maybe some of that has been shifting, due to a growing perception that we're "losing the war" in Iraq. But let's go back to two months ago, when Bush was riding high in Iraq. Why can't the Democrats convert the "protection" model into the "security" model?

There are several factors involved, and you have to sort them out. To do this, we have to talk about the conservative worldview. In the conservative world view, which starts with a model of the family I call a "Strict Father" family, there's an assumption that the world is a dangerous place, that there is competition, there will always be winners and losers, that children are born bad and have to be made good.

What is needed to deal with all this is a strict father who supports and protects the family, who raises children to know right from wrong, who raises his children to be able to take

care of themselves in the world. He does it in only one way -- by strength and punishment. Only punishment works. Only shows of strength work. That is part of the family model that's involved, and it's also part of the politics involved. When you have fear in the country, fear evokes a strict father model. It's to the conservatives' advantage to keep people afraid, to keep having orange alerts, to keep having announcements that they have secret information that there might be a bombing somewhere in the country. As long as you keep people afraid, you reinforce the strict father model.

The opposite of fear in all of this is hope and joy. It's important for liberals to stress the hope and promise of America, the joy of living in this country, and so on. You want to evoke that. But when fear is being evoked, the right-wing model is being evoked. Now, there are ways in which you can deal with the right-wing model. There are abusive fathers who betray the trust placed in them by the family -- and one of the things that Bush has been doing is betraying the trust that Americans have placed in him. He's lying to them. He's saying one thing and doing another. That harms people. There's a great deal of betrayal of trust there, and the liberals have to come out and get that message across. It's a hard message to get across because people don't want to think that the head of their family or the head of their nation is betraying their trust.

Can you explain a little bit more of the nurturing model of the Democrats, which is consistent with going back to the New Deal: that we are part of a larger community, a national community. Hillary Clinton's use of the phrase, "It takes a village" -- is that a good or a bad framing? Is that the essential concept of the nation as a community where we nurture everyone in our community, all Americans?

It's part of it. The "Nurturant Parent" model goes like this: It assumes that there are two parents involved and in charge of the family. And it has a set of background assumptions: that the world can be a better place, that it's our job to make it a better place, that children are born good and need to be made better, and that the job of a parent is to nurture his or her children, but also to turn those children into nurturers themselves -- nurturers of others.

Now what does it mean to be a nurturer? Well, two fundamental things. First, empathy. The

parent has to know what all those cries mean when a baby cries. Does he need his diaper changed? Does she need to be fed? Second, responsibility. A parent has to be responsible to a child. And you can't be responsible to someone else if you're not responsible for yourself. You have to be able to take care of yourself to be able to care for someone else. Being responsible means being strong, being competent, being educated -- taking your role very, very seriously. If you want to turn your child into a nurturer, then you want to make that child responsible to others, strong, capable, educated, competent, and so on. Then there are other values that follow from empathy and responsibility. One of them is protection. If you're responsible for a child, and you care about the child, you want to protect her or him.

Some of the things that liberals want to protect children from are things like pollution and smoking, and cars without seatbelts, and unscrupulous businessmen -- the same things they want the government to protect citizens from. But they also want to protect children from other things like terrorists and invasions and so on. In fact, protection in general -- protection of the environment, for example -- is a major part of the progressive worldview.

Another "Nurturant" value that's extremely important is fulfillment in life. If you empathize with someone, you want him or her to be a happy, fulfilled person. If you're an unhappy, unfulfilled person yourself, you're not going to want other people to be happier and more fulfilled than you are. So it's important -- morally important -- to be a happy, fulfilled person in order to properly empathize with other people. Happiness and fulfillment in life are a moral responsibility for progressives.

In addition to that, community building is extremely important because Hillary is right: It does take a village. Children do react to how their peers live and what their peers' values are, and you can't do it alone. You have to be in a community where people take care of each other. Other values that follow are things like fairness and freedom. If you empathize with someone, you want to be fair to them. If you want them to have a fulfilled life, you want them to be free and have maximal freedom to carry out their dreams. So there are values like fairness, freedom, fulfillment, trust, cooperation, building communities. These are important progressive values that come out of nurturing families.

What does that mean in terms of framing? Clearly the Bush Administration and Karl

Rove have all the right language, the right code words and the right framing, because Bush is the strong parental father figure. They've driven that one straight down the road, without any detours, and are still projecting that. What do the Democrats do, or Independents, or Greens, to create an attractive framing for the nurturing model?

Well, let's look at foreign policy. In foreign policy, the Bush administration uses a strict father model, and it says that only force works. Only punishment works. Moreover, it says that the strict father -- in this case, Bush -- is the moral authority. The U.S. knows better than anybody else. And they're certainly not going to ask other people who are presumably less moral than we are what we should do and how we should behave. That's why we go it alone. We have to preserve our sovereignty.

On the other hand, the progressive model looks at foreign policy very, very differently. In a progressive model, you apply the moral world view that you have, and you say that what's important here is both to empathize with other countries and be responsible to yourself, to care about your own interests and their interests, and to cooperate with them. And you build trust. How do you build trust? By making treaties and keeping them, where you cooperate with other people. What does cooperation mean? It means understanding what they need and helping them get it, as well as their helping you get what you need. So you build cooperation. That means building diplomacy and diplomatic relationships, and person-to-person relationships around the world, having people know each other's languages and visit each other's countries.

What is building community about? That's building international organizations, and, moreover, caring about people means giving more power to the international organizations that we already have that are not now usually considered part of foreign policy. For example, we have organizations that are concerned with poverty around the world. But poverty is usually not considered part of foreign policy.

Also, women's rights and women's education. The most important thing for population control in the world -- and population control is a major issue -- is women's education. Where women get educated, population rates become controlled automatically. And women's rights are crucial. Women are treated abominably around the world. This is an

extremely important issue if you care about people and you care about other countries. Then you make it part of foreign policy.

Labor issues -- labor rights around the world are terrible. Our trade policies don't bring those issues in. It's very important that we bring in labor rights around the world. Children's rights are very important in this. International ecology, global health -- all of these are issues of caring about the world, about its people, and about other countries.

When other countries see that we have a foreign policy that is only about our national interest, or our national interest is defined only in terms of money and power and nothing else, then they say: "The U.S. doesn't get it. The U.S. is really an enemy of world peace. The U.S. is trying to dominate everybody else for its own interests." That is not a way to build trust. It's not a way to get cooperation. And it's definitely a way to have lots of people thinking that the U.S. is an enemy.

How do you translate those political concepts that grow out of the nurturing model into a framing that is reassuring to a public that is being told by the Bush Administration, "You're under siege"? They've eased up for a while, but between now and the election, I'm concerned there are going to be many more fright fests and alerts, to get people into the fear mode and to run to the strict father model.

Even if people feel that they've been screwed around, lied to -- abused in a public policy sense by the Bush administration -- they know Bush is going to go bomb the hell out of anyone that's really or allegedly trying to hurt us. Therefore, they'll run to him. How does a Democrat break through that and say, "We can provide the security"?

Wrong. Wrong way to talk and wrong way to think. The first way to break through that is to talk about the promise of America, the hope of America -- what is powerful and loving about the country -- to be positive, to break through the fear, because the fear is what evokes it. You have to project an image of love and warmth, and happiness and hope. That's the first thing. You don't feed the fear. Safety is a part of that, and you can point out that the Bush administration has betrayed its trust in not attending to making us safe. The PATRIOT

Act doesn't make us safer. They're cutting money for firefighters and police officers. They're not making our harbors safe. They're not making chemical plants safe. Safety and protection are important. Protection is part of a "Nurturant model," and you have to be a strong, protective parent if you're a nurturer, and you have to come across as a strong protector.

You say, "You know, they've betrayed our trust. They're not really protecting us. Have we been protected in Iraq? There were no weapons of mass destruction there in the first place. They weren't protecting us from that, and they lied to us. They betrayed our trust there. And here's why."

Then you say why they really went into Iraq, which is largely on the basis of their self-interest, and why they got into this mess. Have they really made us safer? The answer is no. We're not safer than we were before.

You're critical of the Democratic Party, saying they don't have a clue about framing, haven't laid the groundwork, don't understand it even now. And you say right now the Democratic Party is into marketing. They pick a number of issues, like prescription drugs and Social Security, and ask which ones sell best across the spectrum, and they run on those issues. What do you mean by that? Isn't the Republican Party into marketing? They're into brand identity, selling Bush as a brand. They use all sorts of marketing tools in addition to framing. So what's wrong with the Democrats being into marketing?

They don't use it right. They don't have a central vision. The Republicans do. The Republicans understand what they're about, and everything they do evokes what they're about. So they know how to talk and think as conservatives. They know how to build a conservative brand. The Democrats don't have a brand. They don't have a vision that they can articulate clearly and say what that vision is. What they have is a long list of programs. You say: Okay, what is your vision? And they'll give you 50 programs. That's not a vision, because the programs change from year to year. They are always going to be adjusted and fixed, and compromised, and so on.

What you want to know is what progressives are about morally -- what they stand for. That's the crucial thing. Then you can go to particular Congressional districts and see if there are issues where taking a stand on one of these issues will evoke that vision. But you have to have that progressive vision in the first place. They have a conservative vision, and it's very clear what that is. Their language evokes a conservative vision, and they can talk about that vision. They can talk about the kind of country they want and so on. It's very important that the Democrats learn to talk about the kind of country they want in general, what their moral vision is and how it differs from the conservative moral vision, why they think the conservatives have betrayed American values. Then you can do your marketing on top of that. But you don't just do marketing.

You close in an [interview](#) on the UC Berkeley website by bringing up your new governor out there, Arnold Schwarzenegger. And this was before he had assumed office. You're saying that Democrats have no branded moral perspective, no general values, no clear identity, and that people vote their identity. They don't just vote on the issues. And Democrats don't understand that.

Look at Schwarzenegger, who said nothing about the issues in his campaign. Democrats ask: How can anyone vote for this guy? Your answer is that they did it because he put forth an identity. Voters know who he is. Can you explain what you meant by that? Does identity trump issues? Do people vote because he had a sense of personhood? They felt confident he knew who he was, whereas the Democrats seemed all mushy? What exactly did you mean by saying that he has an identity, but the Democrats didn't?

The conservative worldview depends on a strict father view of the world. This has to do with building discipline, with showing strength, with punishing your enemies, with pursuing your self-interest to become self-reliant. Those are the values. What you're doing is functioning in a dangerous and difficult world, and you're learning how to cope with that dangerous and difficult world. That's how that works. Davis, the Democratic governor, had no clue about how to get his values across. And the result was people didn't like him. He couldn't communicate well.

Schwarzenegger had an identity, which was "The Terminator." He was Mr. Discipline, a bodybuilder. No one could question his discipline. He had a movie role that everybody identified with, and he was a hero that people wanted, fitting exactly the conservative strict father mold. The Republicans recognized this years in advance. He has been primed to be the candidate for governor for years. Most people in the country didn't know this, but those who knew about California politics knew that this was a long-standing thing. He didn't come out of nowhere. They brought him along. As soon as he announced that he was going to run, the entire Republican machine was behind him. They knew what was going on, and he had an identity straight out.

There were polls and focus groups where they asked people who were, let's say, Hispanic. These were Bustamante [Cruz Bustamante, the lieutenant governor, who was running against Schwarzenegger] supporters. They asked them: Do you think you will be better off if Schwarzenegger is governor? Or: Schwarzenegger has the following policies, and Bustamante has these policies -- which ones will you be better off with? They said: The Bustamante ones. Who are you voting for? Schwarzenegger. The pollsters didn't understand it because they thought that people voted on the issues and on self-interest. Well, sometimes they do. But mostly they vote on their identity -- on persons that they trust to be like them, or to be like people they admire.

Many Democrats, many Progressives, Independents, Greens -- whatever differences there are among them -- pride themselves on being committed to ideas, and are, as you point out, contemptuous of the notion that people would vote on an image and an identity -- even, in the case of Schwarzenegger, outweighing the value of voting on specific ideas. Is there a basic conundrum for Democrats because they believe ideas should trump identity? And, therefore, since they think you should win on the issues, they're in a sort of cul de sac because they're so contemptuous of putting people out there who can win on identity and character?

The issues are not the ideas. Democrats and liberals in general don't support their intellectuals, for example. They assume that the issues are about self-interest, and that there can be group self-interest. There are interest groups -- ethnic groups and so on. But that's not how people vote. People vote on their morality and their identity. Occasionally

they vote on their self-interest when it's important, but mostly they vote for what they believe in and who they are. That's something that Democrats don't understand. And they haven't been attentive enough to ideas and to understanding how the mind works. They focus instead on self-interest and issues, issue by issue. As long as they go issue by issue, they're going to lose.

George, thank you very much.

Thank you.