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Author

Lakoff, George

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The Huffington Post

By George Lakoff and [Glenn W. Smith](#)

"I'm trying not to say that I'm not accountable."

--[Lieutenant General Kevin Kiley, Walter Reed Hospital's former commander](#)

Now that the Democrats in Congress can hold hearings with sworn testimony, the word "accountability" has finally become a staple of the daily news. But what, exactly, does "accountability" mean?

Accountability is what is called a contested concept, that is, a concept with different meanings for different people, depending on their values. What we have found is that conservatives and progressives mean systematically different things when they use the word. This is not surprising, given the radically different meanings of "freedom" on the left and the right, as discussed in George Lakoff's book, *Whose Freedom?* As with all contested concepts, there is a shared core meaning of accountability, and it is linked to the meaning of responsibility: Whoever is responsible is accountable, and can be made to answer for not living up to his or her responsibilities.

That's where the commonality ends. Responsibility itself is contested. To progressives, it means social as well as personal responsibility -- responsibility for both oneself and everyone else who could be harmed by one's failure. To conservatives, it means individual responsibility only. The difference is not surprising, since conservatism is about individual responsibility while progressivism centers on both individual and social responsibility.

The difference in the meaning of accountability also follows from the general difference between progressive and conservative values. In strict father morality, which forms the basis of conservative values, the father is the unquestionable moral authority to be obeyed. It is he who holds those under his authority accountable and metes out punishment accordingly. In the conservative worldview, there are legitimate authorities whose job is to hold others accountable and mete punishment for failures of individual responsibility. Their individual responsibility and whatever accountability they have is satisfied when they hold others beneath them accountable and carry out punishment.

To progressives, one is accountable to those one is responsible for -- those affected and possibly harmed by one's actions. In government, accountability is paired with transparency. Government officials are supposed to be "transparent," that is, to tell the public what one is doing and why. The why is an "account" -- an explanation for one's actions. One can then judge the performance of government officials as they act as well as after they act, and judge on that basis whether they have carried out their responsibilities. This progressive view accords with nurturant parent families, in which parents have a responsibility to explain to their children why they are telling them what they can and cannot do.

There is thus a huge difference in the meaning of accountability between progressives and conservatives. To progressives, conservatives look like they are invoking accountability in order to avoid responsibility. Here's why. A conservative in authority holds other people below him accountable, and upon meting out punishment to those underlings, his personal responsibility is met. Story over. But to progressives, such a person has a social responsibility to everyone who can be harmed by his actions. He has public accountability. Holding an underling accountable and meting out punishment is not enough. He remains socially responsible. When he just holds others "accountable," he is avoiding that responsibility.

To date, the systematic difference in what responsibility and accountability mean to progressives and conservatives has not been made clear to the public. The result is a confusion about who is responsible for what and who is accountable to who for what. Yet accountability is central in placing blame, and when things go wrong, it matters who is to blame and why.

Let us begin our examples with President Bush.

"Shortly before he was inaugurated for his second term, President Bush was asked why no one was held responsible for the mistakes of the first. 'We had an accountability moment,' he replied, 'and that's called the 2004 elections.'"

--[Peter Baker, *Washington Post*, March 7, 2007](#)

In short, the President is accountable to the voters only in an election -- an accountability "moment" in which the voters can "punish" him by not re-electing him.

"I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I'm the decider, and I decide what is best."

--[President Bush, on demands for Rumsfeld's resignation](#)

The etymology of "responsibility" is the same as that for "respond" -- responsibility implies having to respond when questioned. But Bush, as a conservative in authority,

is saying, effectively: "I don't have to respond. I decide." Accordingly, the lack of transparency in the Bush administration is also a consequence of his radical conservatism. The decider, as ultimate authority, is not accountable to the public once he is elected and not up for re-election.

Next, consider Robert Gates' [remarks](#) at a recent press conference on the conditions at Walter Reed hospital.

"A final point on the question of accountability. A bedrock principle of our military system is that we empower commanders with the responsibility, authority, and resources necessary to carry out their mission. With responsibility comes accountability. It is my strong belief that an organization with the enormous responsibilities of the Department of Defense must live with these principles of accountability at all levels. Accordingly, after the facts are established, those responsible for having allowed this unacceptable situation to develop will indeed be held accountable."

Now Gates himself, as Secretary of Defense, like Rumsfeld before him, was responsible from the outset of the war for making sure that our wounded veterans would be taken care of properly. Moreover, Bush was responsible as well, as was the Republican-run armed services committee through 2006. But Gates is not saying that Bush or the Republicans on the Armed Services Committee should be held accountable. Nor is he saying that he himself should be held accountable in the future. Instead, he will punish those lower in the chain of command. And indeed he removed the Secretary of the Army and the general in command of Walter Reed.

Should that end the story? Here's [Eugene Robinson](#) of the *Washington Post*: "It's hard to believe, but the officials who presided over a terrible failure of government are actually being held accountable."

But the story must not end there. The proper response from Democrats and from the press would be not to be satisfied, but to continue to press the issue, since there will be no satisfactory treatment of veterans in the near future. Moreover, the President too should be held accountable by the public. His lack of concern over the plight of veterans for years is part of his betrayal of the American public.

Next consider Robert Mueller, Director of the FBI, asked about the revelation that FBI agents had been illegally spying on American citizens -- even given the lax provisions of the Patriot Act.

Here is [Mueller](#):

"But the question should, and must, be asked: How could this happen? Who is accountable? And the answer to that is: I am to be held accountable."

He then went on to say that FBI employees would probably face disciplinary action.

Mueller says he is "accountable." But he is not offering to resign. Nor is he accepting continuing responsibility for making sure this does not happen again. Instead, he is going to punish underlings. He takes that as sufficient to meet his responsibility -- he has done what he was accountable for. There is no public explanation for what happened. There are no publicly announced procedures for making sure it does not happen again. And Mueller does not say that higher-ups in the Justice Department are accountable, not just to blame for the past but for guaranteeing the future.

Then there is the case of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, at a [press conference](#) about the politically-motivated firing of Justice Department prosecutors for either failing to prosecute enough Democrats or having the effrontery to prosecute guilty Republicans.

"I accept responsibility for everything that happens here within this department, but when you have 110,000 people working in the department, obviously there are going to be decisions made that I am not aware of in real time."

The passive voice is worthy of note: "there are going to be decisions made." The implication is that the decisions are made by other people without his knowledge or consent. But nothing is said about his responsibility (a) to insure that no one makes politically-motivated decisions, (b) to have procedures in place for guaranteeing that, and (c) for making those procedures and the bases for decisions transparent.

The reference to "real time" is also interesting. The assumption is that there is no time lapse between the making of decisions and the carrying out of those decisions, that after the decisions were made but before they were carried out, there was not enough of a time lapse for him to be informed. Again the blame is shifted to underlings -- by whom the decisions were made and carried out with no "real time" to inform him.

The issue of accountability in these cases is especially poignant when you consider the central role of accountability in conservative educational policy. The No Child Left Behind Act is a model of shifting responsibility and accountability to the lowest possible levels. Who is responsible for making sure that schools have the facilities and the funding for highly qualified teachers? Who is responsible for making sure that poor students have enough to eat when they come to school? Who is responsible for insuring early childhood education so that young children are ready to learn when they get to school? Is it the President who proposes the national budget? The Congress that designs programs and appropriates funds? The governors and state legislatures? The mayors of cities? The school boards? The taxpayers who refuse to pay for excellent schools?

According to Bush, it is the teachers, the individual schools, and the students themselves. Most important, it is not Bush. And it is not those who set the policies and the funding priorities. It is certainly not conservative politicians who are opposed to raising tax money to pay for excellent schools. This is exactly what one would expect from the conservative ideology of individual, not social, responsibility.

This dissociation of accountability from responsibility is reflected in corporate culture, where CEOs are not accountable for how well their company does. The company can do badly, and the CEO can still walk away with a golden parachute worth many millions. As in conservative politics, the man responsible is not himself held accountable.

What to Do?

This analysis is not given for the sake of analysis alone. The real issue is what action to take. First, notice which use of accountability is being used -- progressive or conservative. Second, when someone in the press uses the conservative version to avoid responsibility, shout out loud: write to your newspaper or other media outlet and refer them to this piece. If possible call them. Tell your friends and sensitize them to the distinction. Accountability, the real thing, matters for our democracy.

Finally, if you haven't already done so, tune in to Rockridge Nation: -- our speak out network -- for the discussion of [Thinking Points](#), our handbook for progressives who want to speak out.