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Metaphors of Terror

by George Lakoff

1: Our Brains Had to Change

Everything we know is physically instantiated in the neural system of our brains.

What we knew before September 11 about America, Manhattan, the World Trade Center, air travel, and the Pentagon was intimately tied up with our identities and with a vast amount of what we took for granted about everyday life. It was all there physically in our neural synapses. Manhattan: the gateway to America for generations of immigrants—the chance to live free of war, pogroms, religious and political oppression!

The Manhattan skyline had meaning in my life, even more than I knew. When I thought of it, I thought of my mother. Born in Poland, she arrived as an infant, grew up in Manhattan, worked in factories for twenty-five years, and had family, friends, a life, a child. She didn't die in concentration camps. She didn't fear for her life. America was not all that she might have wanted it to be, but it was plenty.

I grew up in Bayonne, N.J., across the bay from that skyline. The World Trade Center wasn't there then, but over the years, as the major feature of the skyline, it became for me as for others the symbol of New York—not only of the business center of America, but also the cultural center and the communications center. As such, it became a symbol for America itself—a symbol for what it meant to be able go about your everyday life free of oppression and just do your job and live your life, whether as a secretary or an artist, a manager or a fireman, a salesman or a teacher or a TV star. I wasn't consciously aware of it, but those images were intimately tied to my identity, both as me and as an American. And all that and so much more was there physically as part of my brain on the morning of September 11.

The devastation that hit those towers that morning hit me. Buildings are metaphorically people. We see features—eyes, nose, and mouth—in their windows. I now realize that the image of the plane going into South Tower was for me an image of a bullet going through someone's head, the flame pouring from the other side blood spurting out. It was an assassination. The tower falling was a body falling. The bodies falling were me, relatives, friends. Strangers who had smiled as they had passed me on the street screamed as they fell past me. The image afterward was hell: ash, smoke, and steam rising, the building skeleton, darkness, suffering, death.

The people who did this got into my brain, even three thousand miles away. All those symbols were connected to more of my identity than I could have realized. To make sense of this, my very brain had to change. And change it did, painfully. Day and night. By day, the consequences flooded my mind; by night, the images had me breathing heavily, nightmares keeping me awake. Those symbols lived in the emotional centers of my brain. As their meanings changed, I felt emotional pain.

It was not just me. It was everyone in this country, and many in other countries. The assassins managed not only to kill thousands of people but to reach in and change the brains of people all over America.

It is remarkable to know that two hundred million of my countrymen feel as wrenched as I do.

2: The Power of the Images

As a metaphor analyst, I want to begin with the power of the images and where that power comes from.

There are a number of metaphors for buildings. A common visual metaphor is that buildings are heads, with windows as eyes. The metaphor is dormant, there in our brains waiting to be awakened. The image of the plane going into South Tower of the World Trade Center activated it. The tower became a head, with windows as eyes, the edge of the tower the temple. The plane going through it becomes a bullet going through someone's head, the flame pouring from the other side blood spurting out.

Tall buildings are metaphorically people standing erect. As each tower fell, it became a body falling. We are not consciously aware of the metaphorical images, but they are part of the power and the horror we experience when we see them.

Each of us, in the prefrontal cortex of our brains, has what are called "mirror neurons." Such neurons fire either when we perform an action or when we see the same action performed by someone else. There are connections from that part of the brain to the emotional centers. Such neural circuits are believed to be the basis of empathy.

This works literally—when we see a plane coming toward the building and imagine people in the building, we feel the plane coming toward us; when we see the building toppling toward others, we feel the building toppling toward us. It also works metaphorically: if we see the plane going through the building, and unconsciously we metaphorize the building as a head with the plane going through its temple, then *we* sense—unconsciously but powerfully—being shot through the temple. If we metaphorize the building as a person and see the building fall to the ground in pieces,

then we sense—again unconsciously but powerfully—that *we* are falling to the ground in pieces. Our systems of metaphorical thought, interacting with our mirror neuron systems, turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors.

Here are some other cases:

- Control Is Up: You have control *over* the situation, you're *on top of* things. This has always been an important basis of towers as symbols of power. In this case, the toppling of the towers meant loss of control, loss of power.
- Phallic imagery: Towers are symbols of phallic power and their collapse reinforces the idea of loss of power.
- Another kind of phallic imagery was more central here. The planes as penetrating the towers with a plume of heat. The Pentagon, a vaginal image from the air, penetrated by the plane as missile. These come from women who felt violated both by the attack and the images.
- A Society Is A Building. A society can have a "foundation" which may or may not be "solid" and it can "crumble" and "fall." The World Trade Center was symbolic of society. When it crumbled and fell, the threat was more than to a building.
- We think metaphorically of things that perpetuate over time as "standing." Bush the Father in the Gulf War kept saying, "This will not stand," meaning that the situation would not be perpetuated over time. The World Trade Center was build to last ten thousand years. When it crumbled, it metaphorically raised the question of whether American power and American society would last.
- Building As Temple: Here we had the destruction of the temple of capitalist commerce, which lies at the heart of our society.

Our minds play tricks on us. The image of the Manhattan skyline is now unbalanced. We are used to seeing it with the towers there. Our mind imposes our old image of the towers, and the sight of them gone gives one the illusion of imbalance, as if Manhattan were sinking. Given the symbolism of Manhattan as standing for the promise of America, it appears metaphorically as if that promise were sinking.

Then there is the persistent image, day after day, of the charred and smoking remains: hell.

The World Trade Center was a potent symbol, tied into our understanding of our country and ourselves in a myriad of ways. All of what we know is physically embodied in our brains. To incorporate the new knowledge requires a physical change in the synapses of our brains, a physical reshaping of our neural system. The physical violence was not only in New York and Washington. Physical changes—violent ones—have been made to the brains of all Americans.

3: How The Administration Frames the Event

The administration's framings and reframings and its search for metaphors should be noted. The initial framing was as a "crime" with "victims" and "perpetrators" to be "brought to justice" and "punished." The crime frame entails law, courts, lawyers, trials, sentencing, appeals, and so on. It was hours before "crime" changed to "war" with "casualties," "enemies," "military action," "war powers," and so on.

Donald Rumsfeld and other administration officials have pointed out that this situation does not fit our understanding of a "war." There are "enemies" and "casualties" all right, but no enemy army, no regiments, no tanks, no ships, no air force, no battlefields, no strategic targets, and no clear "victory." The war frame just doesn't fit. Colin Powell had always argued that no troops should be committed without specific objectives, a clear and achievable definition of victory, a clear exit strategy—and no open-ended commitments. But he has pointed out that none of these is present in this "war."

Because the concept of "war" doesn't fit, there is a frantic search for metaphors. First, Bush called the terrorists "cowards"—but this didn't seem to work too well for martyrs who willingly sacrificed their lives for their moral and religious ideals. More recently he has spoken of "smoking them out of their holes" as if they were rodents, and Rumsfeld has spoken of "drying up the swamp they live in" as if they were snakes or lowly swamp creatures. The conceptual metaphors here are Moral Is Up; Immoral Is Down (they are lowly) and Immoral People Are Animals (that live close to the ground).

The use of the word "evil" in the administration's discourse works in the following way. In conservative, strict father morality (see [Moral Politics](#), Chapter 5) evil is a palpable thing, a force in the world. To stand up to evil you have to be morally strong. If you're weak, you let evil triumph, so that weakness is a form of evil in itself, as is promoting weakness. Evil is inherent, an essential trait, that determines how you will act in the world. Evil people do evil things. No further explanation is necessary. There can be no social causes of evil, no religious rationale for evil, no reasons or arguments for evil. The enemy of evil is good. If our enemy is evil, we are inherently good. Good is our essential nature and what we do in the battle against evil is good. Good and evil are locked in a battle, which is conceptualized metaphorically as a physical fight in which the stronger wins. Only superior strength can defeat evil, and only a show of strength can keep evil at bay. Not to show overwhelming strength is immoral, since it will induce evildoers to perform more evil deeds because they'll think they can get away with it. To oppose a show of superior strength is therefore immoral. Nothing is more important than the battle of good against evil, and if some innocent noncombatants get in the way and get hurt, it is a shame, but it is to be expected and

nothing can be done about it. Indeed, performing lesser evils in the name of good is justified—"lesser" evils like curtailing individual liberties, sanctioning political assassinations, overthrowing governments, torture, hiring criminals, and "collateral damage."

Then there is the basic security metaphor, Security As Containment—keeping the evildoers out. Secure our borders, keep them and their weapons out of our airports, have marshals on the planes. Most security experts say that there is no sure way to keep terrorists out or to deny them the use of some weapon or other; a determined well-financed terrorist organization can penetrate any security system. Or they can choose other targets, say oil tankers.

Yet the Security As Containment metaphor is powerful. It is what lies behind the missile shield proposal. Rationality might say that the September 11th attack showed the missile shield is pointless. But it strengthened the use of the Security As Containment metaphor. As soon as you say "national security," the Security As Containment metaphor will be activated and with it, the missile shield.

4: The Conservative Advantage

The reaction of the Bush administration is just what you would expect a conservative reaction would be—pure Strict Father morality: There is evil loose in the world. We must show our strength and wipe it out. Retribution and vengeance are called for. If there are "casualties" or "collateral damage", so be it. The reaction from liberals and progressives has been far different: Justice is called for, not vengeance. Understanding and restraint are what is needed. The model for our actions should be the rescue workers and doctors—the healers—not the bombers. We should not be like them, we should not take innocent lives in bringing the perpetrators to justice. Massive bombing of Afghanistan—with the killing of innocents—will show that we are no better than they. But it has been the administration's conservative message that has dominated the media. The event has been framed in their terms. As Newt Gingrich put it on the Fox Network, "Retribution *is* justice." We must reframe the discussion. I have been reminded of Gandhi's words: Be the change you want. The words apply to governments as well as to individuals.

5: Causes

There are (at least) three kinds of causes of radical Islamic terrorism:

- i. Worldview: The Religious Rationale
- ii. Social and Political Conditions: Cultures of Despair
- iii. Means: The Enabling Conditions

The Bush administration has discussed only the third: The means that enable attacks to be carried out. These include: leadership (e.g., bin Laden), host countries, training facilities and bases, financial backing, cell organization, information networks, and so on. These do not include the first and second on the list.

i. Worldview: Religious Rationale

The question that keeps being asked in the media is, "Why do they hate us so much?" It is important at the outset to separate out moderate to liberal Islam from radical Islamic fundamentalists, who do not represent most Muslims.

Radical Islamic fundamentalists hate our culture. They have a worldview that is incompatible with the way that Americans—and other westerners—live their lives. One part of this world view concerns women, who are to hide their bodies, have no right to property, and so on. Western sexuality, mores, music, and women's equality all violate their values, and the worldwide ubiquity of American cultural products, like movies and music, offends them. A second part concerns theocracy: they believe that governments should be run according to strict Islamic law by clerics. A third concerns holy sites, like those in Jerusalem, which they believe should be under Islamic political and military control. A fourth concerns the commercial and military incursions by Westerners on Islamic soil, which they liken to the invasion of the hated crusaders. The way they see it, our culture spits in the face of theirs. A fifth concerns jihad—a holy war to protect and defend the faith. A sixth is the idea of a martyr, a man willing to sacrifice himself for the cause. His reward is eternal glory—an eternity in heaven surrounded by willing young virgins. In some cases, there is a promise that his family will be taken care of by the community.

ii. Social and Political Conditions: Cultures of Despair

Most Islamic would-be martyrs not only share these beliefs but have also grown up in a culture of despair: they have nothing to lose. Eliminate such poverty and you eliminate the breeding ground for terrorists. When the Bush administration speaks of eliminating terror, it does not appear to be talking about eliminating cultures of despair and the social conditions that lead one to want to give up one's life to martyrdom.

Princeton Lyman of the Aspen Institute has made an important proposal—that the worldwide anti-terrorist coalition address the causal real-world conditions as well. Country by country, the conditions (both material and political) leading to despair need to be addressed, with a worldwide commitment to ending them. It should be done because it is a necessary part of addressing the causes of terrorism—and because

it is right! The coalition being formed should be made into a long-term global institution for this purpose.

What about the first cause—the radical Islamic worldview itself. Military action won't change it. Social action won't change it. Worldviews live in the minds of people. How can one change those minds—and if not present minds, then future minds? *The West* cannot! Those minds can only be changed by moderate and liberal Muslims—clerics, teachers, elders, respected community members. There is no shortage of them. I do not know how well they are organized, but the world needs them to be well-organized and effective. It is vital that moderate and liberal Muslims form a unified voice against hate and, with it, terror. Remember that "taliban" means "students." Those that teach hate in Islamic schools must be replaced—and *we* in the West cannot replace them. This can only be done by an organized, moderate, nonviolent Islam. The West can make the suggestion, but we alone are powerless to carry it out. We depend on the goodwill and courage of moderate Islamic leaders. To gain it, we must show our goodwill by beginning in a serious way to address the social and political conditions that lead to despair.

But a conservative government, thinking of the enemy as evil, will not take the primary causes seriously. They will only go after the enabling causes. But unless the primary causes are addressed, terrorists will continue to be spawned.

6: Public Discourse

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-California), who I am proud to acknowledge as my representative in Congress, said the following in casting the lone vote against giving President Bush full congressional approval for carrying out his War on Terrorism as he sees fit:

I am convinced that military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism against the United States. This is a very complex and complicated matter. . . . However difficult this vote may be, some of us must urge the use of restraint. Our country is in a state of mourning. Some of us must say, let us step back for a moment. Let us just pause for a minute and think through the implications of our actions today so that this does not spiral out of control. . . .

I have agonized over this vote, but I came to grips with it today and I came to grips with opposing this resolution during the very painful yet very beautiful memorial service. As a member of the clergy so eloquently said, "As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore."

I agree. But what is striking to me as a linguist is the use of negatives in the statement: "not prevent," "restraint" (inherently negative), "not spiral out of control," "not become the evil that we deplore." Friends are circulating a petition calling for "Justice*without* vengeance." "Without" has another implicit negative. It is not that these negative statements are wrong. But what is needed is a *positive* form of discourse.

There is one.

The central concept is that of "responsibility," which is at the heart of progressive/liberal morality (See [Moral Politics](#)). Progressive/liberal morality begins with *empathy*, the ability to understand others and feel what they feel. That is presupposed *inresponsibility*—responsibility for oneself, for protection, for the care of those who need care, and for the community. Those were the values that we saw at work among the rescue workers in New York right after the attack.

Responsibility requires competence and effectiveness. If you are to deal responsibly with terrorism, you must deal effectively with *all* its causes: religious, social, and enabling causes. The enabling causes must be dealt with effectively. Bombing innocent civilians and harming them by destroying their country's domestic infrastructure will be counterproductive—as well as immoral. Responsibility requires care in the place of blundering, overwhelming force.

Massive bombing would be irresponsible. Failure to address the religious and social causes would be irresponsible. The responsible response begins with joint international action to address *all three*: the social and political conditions, *and* the religious worldview, *and* the means with all due care.

7: Foreign Policy

I have been working on a monograph on foreign policy. The idea behind it is this: There are many advocacy groups that have long been doing important good works in the international arena, but on issues that have not officially been seen as being a proper part of foreign policy: the environment, human rights, women's rights, the condition of children, labor, international public health issues (e.g., AIDS in Africa), sustainable development, refugees, international education, and so on. The monograph comes in two parts.

First, the book points out that the metaphors that foreign policy experts have used to define what foreign policy is rules out these important concerns. Those metaphors involve self-interest (e.g., the Rational Actor Model), stability (a physics metaphor),

industrialization (unindustrialized nations are "underdeveloped") , and trade (freedom is free trade).

Second, the book proposes an alternative way of thinking about foreign policy under which all these issues would become a natural part of what foreign policy is about. The premise is that, when international relations work smoothly, it is because certain moral norms of the international community are being followed. This mostly goes unnoticed, since those norms are usually followed. We notice problems when those norms are breached. Given this, it makes sense that foreign policy should be centered around those norms.

The moral norms I suggest come out of what I called in *Moral Politics* "nurturant morality." It is a view of ethical behavior that centers on (a) empathy and (b) responsibility (for both yourself and others needing your help). Many things follow from these central principles: fairness, minimal violence (e.g., justice without vengeance), an ethic of care, protection of those needing it, a recognition of interdependence, cooperation for the common good, the building of community, mutual respect, and so on. When applied to foreign policy, nurturant moral norms would lead the American government to uphold the ABM treaty, sign the Kyoto accords, engage in a form of globalization governed by an ethics of care—and it would automatically make all the concerns listed above (e.g., the environment, women's rights) part of our foreign policy.

This, of course, implies (a) multilateralism, (b) interdependence, and (c) international cooperation. But these three principles, without nurturant norms, can equally well apply to the Bush administration's continuance of its foreign policy. Bush's foreign policy, as he announced in the election campaign, has been one of self-interest ("what's in the best interest of the United States")—if not outright hegemony (the Cheney/Rumsfeld position). The Democratic leaders incorrectly criticized Bush for being isolationist and unilateralist, on issues like the Kyoto accords and the ABM Treaty. He was neither isolationist nor unilateralist. He was just following his stated policy of self-interest.

The mistaken criticism of Bush as a unilateralist and as uncooperative will now blow up in his critics' faces. When it is in America's interest (as he sees it), he will work with other nations. The "War against Terrorism" is perfect for changing his image to that of a multilateralist and internationalist. It is indeed in the common interest of most national governments not to have terrorists operating. Bush can come out on the side of the angels while pursuing his same policy of self-interest.

The mistake of Bush's critics has been to use "multilateralism" versus "unilateralism" as a way categorizing foreign policy. Self-interest crosses those categories.

There is, interestingly, an apparent overlap between the nurturant norms policy and an idealistic vision of the Bush administration's new war. The overlap is, simply, that it is a moral norm to refuse to engage in, or support, terrorism. From this perspective, it looks like Left and Right are united. It is an illusion.

In nurturant norms policy, anti-terrorism arises from another moral norm: Violence against innocent parties is immoral. But Bush's new war will certainly not follow *that* moral norm. Bush's military advisers appear to be planning massive bombings and infrastructure destruction that will certainly take the lives of a great many innocent civilians.

Within a year of the end of the Gulf War, the CIA reported that about a million Iraqi civilians had died from the effects of the war and the embargo—many from disease and malnutrition due to the US destruction of water treatment plants, hospitals, electric generation plants, and so on, together with the inability to get food and medical supplies. Many more innocents have died since from the effects of the war. Do we really think that the US will have the protection of innocent Afghanis in mind if it rains terror down on the Afghan infrastructure? We are supposedly fighting *them* because they immorally killed innocent civilians. That made them evil. If *we* do the same, are we any less immoral?

This argument would hold water if the Bush War on Terrorism were really about morality in the way that morality is understood by progressives/liberals. It is not. In conservative morality, there is fight between Good and Evil, in which "lesser" evils are tolerated and even seen as necessary and expected.

The argument that killing innocent civilians in retaliation would make us as bad as them works for liberals, not for conservatives.

The idealistic claim of the Bush administration is they intend to wipe out "all terrorism." What is not mentioned is that the US has systematically promoted a terrorism of its own and has been trained terrorists, from the contras to the mujahadeen to the Honduran death squads to the Indonesian military. Indeed, there are reports that two of the terrorists taking part in The Attack were trained by the US. Will the US government stop training terrorists? Of course not. It will deny that it does so. Is this duplicity? Not in terms of conservative morality and its view of Good versus Evil and lesser evils.

If the administration's discourse offends us, we have a moral obligation to change public discourse!

Be the change you want! If the US wants terror to end, the US must end its own contribution to terror. And we must also end terror sponsored not against the West but against others. We have made a deal with Pakistan to help in Afghanistan. Is it part of the deal that Pakistan renounce its own terrorism in Kashmir against India? I would be shocked if it were. The Bush foreign policy of self-interest does not require it.

The question must be asked. If that is not part of the deal, then our government has violated its own stated ideals; it is hypocritical. If the terrorism we don't mind—or might even like—is perpetuated, terrorism will not end and will eventually turn back on us, just as our support for the mujahadeen did.

We must be the change we want!

The foreign policy of moral norms is the only sane foreign policy. In the idea of responsibility for oneself, it remains practical. But through empathy and other forms of responsibility (protection, care, competence, effectiveness, community development), it would lead to international cooperation and a recognition of interdependence.

8: Domestic Policy

I have a rational fear: a fear that the September 11th attack has given the Bush administration a free hand in pursuing a conservative domestic agenda. This has so far been unsayable in the media. But it must be said, lest it happen for sure.

Where is the \$40 billion coming from? Not from a rise in taxes. The sacrifices will not be made by the rich. Where then? The only available source I can think of is the Social Security "lockbox," which is now wide open. The conservatives have been trying to raid the Social Security fund for some time, and the Democrats had fought them off until now. A week ago, the suggestion to take \$40 billion from the Social Security "surplus" would have been indefensible. Has it now been done—with every Democratic senator voting for it and all but one of the Democrats in Congress?

Think of it: Are your retirement contributions—and mine—are going to fight Bush's "war." No one dares to talk about it that way. It's just \$40 billion, as if it came out of nowhere. No one says that \$40 billion dollars comes from your retirement contributions. No one talks about increasing taxes. We should at least ask just where the money is coming from.

If the money is coming from social security, then Bush has achieved a major goal of his partisan conservative agenda—without fanfare, without notice, and with the support of virtually all Democrats.

Calling for war, instead of mere justice, has given the conservatives free rein. I fear it will only be a matter of time before they claim that we need to drill for oil in the Alaskan Wildlife Refuge for national security reasons. If that most "pristine" place falls, they will use the national security excuse to drill and mine coal all over the country. The energy program will be pushed through as a matter of "national security." All social programs will be dismissed for lack of funds, which will be diverted to "national security."

Cheney has said that this war may never be completed. Newt Gingrich estimates at least four or five years, certainly past the 2004 election. With no definition of victory and no exit strategy, we may be entering a state of **perpetual war**. This would be very convenient for the conservative domestic agenda: The war machine will determine the domestic agenda, which will allow conservatives to do whatever they want in the name of national security.

The recession we are entering has already been blamed on The Attack, not on Bush's economic policies. Expect a major retrenchment on civil liberties. Expect any WTO protesters to be called terrorists and/or traitors. Expect any serious opposition to Bush's policies to be called traitorous.

Who has the courage to discuss domestic policy frankly at this time?

Afterword: Since this was written, a New York Times editorial acknowledged that the money is coming from the social security "lockbox." A Wall Street Journal editorial called for the President to take advantage of the moment to push his overall agenda through. Senator Frank Murkowski introduced a rider on the war appropriations bill authorizing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Preserve. The original name given to the operation was "Infinite Justice." This had the connotation of "perpetual war" in America; in Islam, where only God is Infinite, it had the connotation of war against Islam; and so the name has been changed.