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The New Obama Narrative

by George Lakoff

For the first two years of his administration, President Obama had no overriding narrative, no frame to define his policymaking, no way to make sense of what he was trying to do. As of his 2011 State of the Union Address, he has one: Competitiveness.

The competitiveness narrative is intended to serve a number of purposes at once:

1. Split the Republican business community off from the hard right, especially the Tea Party. Most business leaders want real economics not ideological economics. And it is hard to pin the "socialist" label on a business-oriented president. He may succeed.
2. Attract bi-conceptuals -- those who are conservative on some issues and progressive on other issues. They are sometimes mistakenly called "moderates" or "independents," though there is no one ideology of the moderate or the independent. They make up 15 to 20 percent of the electorate, and many are conservative on economic issues and progressive on social issues. He attracted them in 2008, but not in 2010. He needs less than half to win in 2012. He may well succeed.
3. Competitiveness has five natural metaphors: A war, a race, a competitive sport, a competitive game, and dog-eat-dog predation. The president's "Sputnik moment" imposed the Cold War metaphor -- one in which we are temporarily losing a worldwide economic war, but can catch up with mobilization.
4. The president implicitly, if not explicitly, declared economic war ("win"), asking for a complete long-term ("future") economic mobilization. So, when the conservatives say, "No, investment just means spending, his narrative makes them unpatriotic. In a war, we have to all work together. And *he* is the Commander-in-Chief. He gets the moral authority.
5. As Commander-in-Chief, he gets to define how to win over the long haul. Here the race metaphor enters. We are "behind" other nations. We need to "catch up" in what is needed for long-term prosperity: education, infrastructure, research for innovation, clean energy. These aspects of the progressive agenda become a business agenda for defending the nation. This brings back his progressive base.
6. War-like competitiveness fits conservative not progressive thought. But there is a form of competitiveness that does fit progressive thought: Personal best! The race with oneself. It is what Obama has called The Ethic of Excellence in

his great Father's Day speech of 2008, where he defined democracy in terms of empathy, social and personal responsibility and a demand for excellence.

Can Obama can make his competitiveness narrative fit sensible Republican businesspeople, the bi-conceptuals ("moderates" and "independents"), and his progressive base? Is it a narrative that will win his reelection? It may be.

But to really bring in the business community, he has to be convincing in what he does, not just what he says. Enter William Daley as chief of staff, and Jeff Immelt of GE running his jobs commission. Lowering the corporate tax rate (conservatives cheer), making up for it by cutting off oil subsidies and tax loopholes (progressives cheer), but evening the playing-field for most corporations that didn't get subsidies and loopholes (conservative). Working on the deficit: A five-year freeze on "annual domestic spending" -- red meat for conservatives (but not technically a "cut"). It's "only" 12 percent of the budget. Cuts in the defense budget (progressive) but not very big or significant (conservative).

This is Obama's old promise -- no red states or blue states, only red, white, and blue states. An economic cold war to wave the flag and declare unity of purpose.

Maybe.

The hard right won't buy it -- when Democrats say investment they hear spending. Of course, they are not really interested in cutting deficits per se. It is for them a means to an end, and the end is making the nation and the world fully conservative, eliminating social responsibility in favor of personal responsibility alone, eliminating empathy, increasing militarism, establishing an unregulated purely laissez-faire free market, and maintaining a dominance hierarchy of western over nonwestern culture, Christian over non-Christian, white over non-white, straight over gay, male over female. The hard right talks jobs, spending and the deficit, but their economics is based on the culture war. That's why the culture war is back. Legislation to end any support for abortion, defund NEA, NEH, and NPR, end public education.

Will the sensible Republican business community split off from such ideologically based economics and government, and support a pragmatic Democratic president on a national commitment to competitiveness?

For progressives who are listening seriously, there is of course a dark side. The competitiveness frame excludes half of what progressives care about. Abortion rights, under attack nationally by conservatives, don't help competitiveness, nor does gay marriage, worker rights, clean air and water, saving species and preserving natural environments, public financing of elections, helping the homeless, ending the

war in Afghanistan, arts and humanities education, helping immigrants who are not well-educated, and on and on. Can these be made to fit the competitiveness frame?

Maybe.

Can you have unity without equality? Can you have productive industries without fair wages and organizing rights? Can you have long-term prosperity while destroying nature? Can you be economically productive without good health? Can you maximize production without women's rights? Can you educate a population without educating them in empathy and introspection and a vibrant sense of the aesthetics of life?

Can these be made to fit the competitiveness narrative -- competing on democratic principles of equality, fairness, and empathy? Or should we have to make them fit a competitiveness narrative?

Think for a moment of what the president did not say.

He failed to say that Social Security has a two-and-a-half trillion dollar surplus and that it is earned, not given away. What is called a "cut" would actually be theft from those who have paid into it over a lifetime. He needs to go on the offensive on Social Security, not be defensive. The same on Medicare. He failed to mention that it works and has the lowest operating cost of any form of health care by far. He failed to say that pensions are delayed earned payments for work already done, and that the conservative move to allow states and cities to declare bankruptcy is really a move to eliminate pensions for public employees and eliminate as much of public service as possible. He failed to say that "privatization" doesn't eliminate government, but institutes government by corporation for corporate profit not the benefit for citizens. He failed to say that we should have gratitude for immigrants -- with or without papers, educated or not -- who work hard at low pay to make possible the lifestyles of the middle and upper classes. He failed to defend the right to unionize as the foundation of fair working relationships.

These omissions are disturbing, especially since they can perfectly well fit a competitiveness narrative.

On the positive side, Democrats should long ago have recognized that they should be the party of small business, and this may help get them there.

Unfortunately, the president's address puts progressive Democrats in a terrible position. They may agree on issues like Social Security, medicare, education, and infrastructure, but they have serious concerns about gun control, women's rights and abortion, the war in Afghanistan, the right to unionize, housing for the poor, art and

humanities education, and many other issues that don't fit competitiveness as usually understood.

I think progressive Democrats should speak out on these issues and try to provide a movement the president can get out in front of. But with the economic war metaphor controlling the political discourse, Democratic candidates supporting these issues will have a harder time fitting the narrative if it catches on. Though there are sufficient issues to support the president on, progressive Democrats will most likely run into trouble on much of what they do, and should, care about.

It is crucial to have a progressive movement that is really progressive. But what will its narrative be if the president's competitiveness pre-empts it?