



Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate

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About The Author:

George Lakoff is the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the founding senior fellow at the Rockridge Institute, which specializes in applying cognitive linguistics to the use of framing in political discourse. He is the author of *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* and *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, and he has coauthored several other books. Lakoff helped Bill Clinton and Howard Dean frame their messages.

General Overview:

Frames are the mental structures that shape the way we view the world. Frames are the connotations that we instill words with and the context in which we place those value-laden words. No one sees or hears frames, they are part of what scientists refer to as the “cognitive unconscious,” inaccessible to the conscious mind, but at play in our decisions, our actions and the way that we process data. All words are defined relative to conceptual frames. When we hear a word, its frame or collection of frames is activated in our brain.

Reframing is being used in the political arena particularly well by conservatives to change what people view as commonsense or intuitively correct assessments of their reality. In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, George Lakoff explains how progressives should use framing techniques to counter conservative arguments and reframe the debate.

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Framing 101

One of the first lessons that students receive in studies of framing is an inferential command: don't think of an elephant. No student can stop their mind from summoning the bulkiness, the grayness, the trunkiness of an elephant. Students discover that they can't block frames from being accessed by their unconscious mind. The conclusion: when we negate a frame, we evoke the frame.

When Nixon addressed the country during Watergate and used the phrase, "I am not a crook," he coupled his image with that of a crook and thereby established what he was denying. This example embodies another important principle of framing: when arguing against the other side, don't use their language because it evokes *their* frame and not the frame you seek to establish.

Enveloping words in a perspective, a frame, provides a ready-made relationship between words, concepts and consequences that enables even those who don't understand the idea to "explain" or convey that idea and its "implications" to other people. Framing is the means by which this transference of context takes place. Conservatives are so successful in framing their message that they have news anchors and commentators discussing the ideas using the conservative-supplied phrases and framing.

Progressives have not been able to combat these "framed messages" because they fail to understand that conservatives choose words explicitly designed to "frame" the debate. When a progressive argues against "tax relief," he or she is reinforcing not just the frame, but the notion that taxes are a burden that people need relief from. It is a trap into which progressives have fallen too many times. Framing is the way words and phrases are used to evoke not just ideas, but a world view. It is not just language. The ideas are primary and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.

How does framing work? For example, if one reads *The Contract with America* and analyzes the conservatives' various positions, it is difficult to see how the various pieces fit into a coherent whole. For example, what does abortion have to do with taxation? What does taxation have to do with gun control? What does tort reform have to do with Israel? None of these positions fits together without a context, a frame to explain how they relate.

The Strict Father Family Model

What pulls all these issues together is the frame of "family values." Progressive and conservative positions derive from two opposing paradigms for families: the strict father family model and the nurturant family model. Strict father family model borrows much from James Dobson's seminal work *Dare to Discipline*. The progressive nurturant family model is more like the Dr. Spock model. Both models are highly evocative to Americans generally.

Strict father family philosophy views the world as a fearful place filled with evil. In this world, there are absolute rights and wrongs. Children born as pleasure-seeking will err and hurt others in the fulfillment of their own desires if left unguided. Strict fathers teach

children to be good. In this world view, children must be obedient and learn from the father who is the moral authority. Children learn morality by associated pain with wrongdoing. This teaches them to control their impulses to avoid pain. This control or self-discipline is fundamental to success.

Inherent in the strict father model is the ideal of the good person as disciplined, obedient, learns what is right, does what is right, doesn't do what is wrong and therefore, prospers and becomes self-reliant. Clearly, conservatives link their father model to their view of government.

Government should not reward those who lack discipline and become dependent upon others. Social programs reward dependency, which makes people weak and immoral. Therefore, social programs are immoral. When Bush is pushed to solve the deficits, he says that the solution is to rid the country of "wasteful spending" like social programs. Because that objective fits into the "strict father" family moral view, it will be praised by conservatives with the same views. Does the strict father perspective want an end to government? No. Conservatives like many things about government, especially the military that protects moral people. However, conservatives are against social programs that take care of people because they see such programs as immoral, fostering dependence.

In world affairs, the United States becomes the strict father/moral authority to the world because it is the biggest, most powerful and richest country in the world. It is the United State's duty to teach the undeveloped (or children nations) how to be disciplined and prosper. Since the United Nations is a collection of underdeveloped (children countries) or senile dependent countries (Europe), the United States must tell them all what to do to maximize profits and prosperity; which is to do what the United States wants. Because the United States is the parent, they don't need permission from the children to do what is morally correct, like not invading Iraq.

The Nurturant Family Model

Progressives come from a completely different viewpoint on family. Unlike the strict father model that views the father as the head of the family, nurturant parents' world view is gender neutral and responsibility equivalent. Both parents are responsible for the rearing, educating and moral upbringing of the children. Nurturant parents see children as innately good and capable of becoming better. They see the world as a good place and everyone's role is to improve the world for each other. Progressives also want fulfillment for society. Fulfillment is a core component of nurturing that is fostered by freedom, economic opportunity and prosperity as well as the sense of shared community. Fulfillment also requires feeling safe and secure. Consequently, protecting people from harm, both internal and external, is very much a progressive value. Progressives need to say that.

Progressives have trouble articulating their outrage at 9/11 and their desire to protect the country for a number of reasons. There are six types of progressives who derive their shared sense of mission from certain core issues:

1. **Socioeconomic progressives** think that everything is a matter of money and class and all solutions are ultimately economic and social class solutions.
2. **Identity politics progressives** say it is time for their oppressed group to get its share now.
3. **Environmentalists** think in terms of sustainability of the earth, the sacredness of the earth and the protection of native peoples.
4. **Civil liberties progressives** want to maintain freedoms against threats to freedom.
5. **Spiritual progressives** have a nurturant form of religion or spirituality and their spiritual experience relates to their connection and service to other people and their community.
6. **Antiauthoritarians** believe there are all sorts of illegitimate forms of authority out there and we have to fight them.

Each group considers their issue to be the most urgently dealt with. They have not sat down and established priorities or frameworks for these issues. Progressives tend to conflict. Progressives need to stop conflicting to succeed against conservatives.

Conservatives hated each other in the 1950s. During the Vietnam War era, conservatives noticed that they were losing young people to the progressives. Lewis Powell, just prior to becoming a Supreme Court Justice, wrote the Powell Memo, which said that if we keep losing the country's best and brightest to progressive ideals, conservatism has no future. William Simon took up Powell's ideas and convinced a group of wealthy people to fund institutes and university chairs for conservative thought and research. They have written more books on their philosophies than have the progressives.

Conservatives have created media opportunities and worked to curry favor with the media. Conservatives outspent progressives four-to-one on research during 2002 and they received four times as much coverage in the media. Conservative think tanks discovered framing's importance. They figured out how to get those frames into the minds of the public and how to get their people covered by the media. Conservatives meet every Wednesday at events coordinated by Grover Norquist to talk over issues and positioning. They figure out a compromise point of view.

Bonding with the Voters

Progressives don't frame a progressive world view. Their collection of unframed positions look chaotic. Conservative positions are chaotic, too, but they are held together by the frame of the strict father family model. Progressives lack such a frame. Progressives also hold beliefs about communication that are wrong. For example, progressives believe that people just need facts to make the right decisions. Cognitive research reveals that people think in frames. Frames are not changed by the addition, correction, amendment or subtraction of a "fact." Facts that aren't aided by a conceptual framework are just discarded. Nor do people instinctively discern the "truth."

People often don't accept a truth if it doesn't fit into a frame or world view that they already understand. Progressives have to create the frame and then supply facts that fill

it. Progressives also believe that people act in their rational self-interest. Consequently, progressives don't understand why poor people vote for Bush when it makes their situation so much worse. The reason is simple: people don't vote their self-interest, they vote their identity. They vote for the people that they identify with. It is a mistake to believe that people vote only in their self-interest.

Progressives equate political campaigns with marketing and they choose positions based on polling. This creates a candidate who has positions that differ by precinct, demographics and voter income levels. This range of positions make progressive candidates seem inconsistent, insincere and without conviction. Even if one doesn't like conservatives, they know what conservatives believe. Candidacy is not marketing; it is about bonding with voters. Voters bond with people whose opinions and beliefs echo their own. Voters vote their identity. Progressives need to talk about what they believe in. They need to frame their values.

Frank Luntz is the conservatives' language guru who supplies lists of evocative words to get voters believing that the policy is going in one direction while it is actually going in the opposite. Luntz wrote a memo that said when talking to women, use phrases like, "for the children, from the heart, and love as much as possible." Using language in this manner is a science. Its application can be honest or it can be harmful, intending to mislead the listener. It is also a discipline. It is about determining the right idea, finding the right frame and choosing the word usage that reinforces and evokes the strict father model in concert with those ideas.

Mistakenly, progressives also believe that they have all the ideas they need and that their problems are media access and magic-bullet phrases like partial-birth abortion. Lacking words is usually a result of a lack of ideas. Ideas come in the form of frames. With the right frames, words come easily. With the right frames, the media will listen.

Progressives lack simple, evocative frames for what they stand for. For example, there is no progressive counter to "tax relief." Conservatives have made taxes look evil when they are not. Framing taxes positively is *not* that difficult. They are investments, dues, membership fees in America - in the lifestyle that we all enjoy. Everyone's business piggybacks on the investments that we have all made in our communications, transportation, education, research and exploration programs. The wealthy have gotten rich using what previous generations of taxpayers paid for. They owe the taxpayers of this country a debt and they should be paying it back. This is the accurate view of the role of taxes and it needs to be repeated over and over and refined until it becomes part of the American Mind.

Succeeding against the conservative framing and brainwashing that has gone on for so long requires progressives to stop reacting and start planning. Progressive funding organizations need to begin thinking differently. They need to think in terms of infrastructure, the big picture and investing for the long term. Progressive foundations need to change their focus from helping as many as possible, which dilutes their efforts to larger, more enabling projects that will serve more in the long term.

Progressives need to talk about values, *their* values. Progressives need their issues to be integrated into strategic initiatives just as the Right does. Strategic initiatives are plans built on change in one carefully chosen area and they have automatic effects on many other issue areas. For example, tax cuts reduce the amount that government has to spend. That makes it easy to justify cutting spending on things like wasteful and immoral social programs.

There are eleven things that Progressives can do to start winning on issues and building a constituency. They are:

1. Understand what conservatives have done well and where progressives have missed the boat.
2. Don't think of an elephant. Using conservative language to argue against them reinforces their framing.
3. Truth alone will not set you free. Focus on *framing* truths.
4. People vote values. Learn the values are and use language that frames them.
5. They are the strict father. Be able to explain what conservatives believe and why they believe what they do.
6. Think strategically across issue areas. Think in terms of large moral goals.
7. Think about the consequences seen and unseen of any proposal.
8. Remember that voters vote their identity and values and those may not coincide with their self-interest.
9. Unite and cooperate. Know the six types of progressive thought and where you fit into those.
10. Be proactive, not reactive. Practice reframing every day, on every issue.
11. Activate the nurturant model of swing voters and the progressive base. Don't move to the right.

What's In A Word?

Plenty, if the word is "marriage." Marriage is a powerful metaphor for trust, unity and lifelong commitment. It is a religion-evoking word. A frame for something that is lasting, important and central to being human. Beyond a doubt, "gay marriage" activates the strict father model in voters.

Progressives can combat this by taking the truly high ground. They need to get the media asking, "Should the government have the right to tell people who they can and cannot love, commit to and share possessions and insurance benefits with?" Or, "Does it benefit society when people who love each other make a lifelong commitment?"

Conservatives have made a practice of repeating the same phrases and words over and over. Repetition makes the words and phrases and thereby the framing seems commonplace and commonsense. Reporters need to be aware of this technique and resist aiding it. Reporters have an obligation to study framing and to learn to see through it and get to the truths of the motivation beneath it.

Metaphors of Terror

Before September 11, Manhattan was the gateway of liberty and the seat of American commerce for many of us. But on that day, for many of us, it became the embodiment of our own deaths, a presaging of the assassination of our country, our way of life.

Bush began framing and reframing this event. Within hours, that frame was substituted for the “war on terror” frame and the elements changed from a civil and civilized process to one of bloodshed, casualties, enemies, military action, war powers and vengeance. Unfortunately, this frame will only make the terrorism problem worse.

Progressives tried to advise justice not vengeance, but they failed to frame their issues in terms of the terrorist reality. Radical Islamics grow up poor without hope in the monarchies that govern them. Strict father models not only fail to acknowledge poverty as a root cause for terror, but they believe that people are poor because they are unworthy and immoral. Because the strict father is unconcerned about poverty, it seeks only to punish the results of that poverty: the attacks on the United States.

Unless the primary causes are removed, warring against these people will only create more terrorists. Progressives could have framed the correct response to the terrorists by espousing a central progressive value: that we are all responsible for one another. A real solution was not carpet bombing Afghanistan. A real solution is to work with the monarchies and the theocrats to funnel some of their moneys into their people’s hands and relieve the poverty of their people. Foreign policy built upon morals would be more effective than that in place now under conservative ideology.

What is needed is value-based foreign policy, a moral foreign policy that recognizes that America can be better if the world is a better place. Nurturant morality is ethical behavior built upon empathy and responsibility for yourself and others needing your help. From these two values come a host of others: fairness, minimal violence, justice without vengeance, an ethic of care, protection for those who need it, recognition of interdependence and many others. Nurturant morality would enforce and promote the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treat, the Kyoto Accord and other treaties in the best interests of the globe.

The War on Terror has given the Bush administration a free hand to pursue its conservative agenda domestically. The conservatives have wanted to raid the Social Security trust fund for some time. Now, they are fighting the war in Iraq with our retirement funds. No one dares to talk about it that way for fear of being branded “unpatriotic,” but that doesn’t make the fact any less true.

The conservatives have estimated that the war on terror won’t end. Does this mean that they will have to stay in power forever? These are issues of framing that have to be challenged.

Metaphors That Kill

A popular metaphor in use today is that of the nation as a person. This means that if the other person (nation) commits an aggression, that it is okay to strike back. This nation metaphor obscures the fact that hundreds of thousands or millions will be hurt in the process. It also strengthens the self-interest model because it permits citizens to view the state as themselves and its actions as their own.

In the first Gulf War, George H.W. Bush called for war on Iraq to protect America's oil "lifeline." When that did not fly, he switched to the invasion of Kuwait as justification for grabbing at Iraq's oil. His son pushed two metaphorical justifications for war. One was that Saddam Hussein equals Al Qaeda which equals terrorism. The second was that weapons of mass destruction equal potential attacks which invokes 9/11 on a larger scale. Bush used these metaphors to invoke the strict father as he lists the reasons to fear Saddam and couples that with the things that Saddam has done to his neighbors and citizens. If you accept all these metaphors, in the absence of a Democratic opposition, the war seems just.

For the progressive and antiwar movements to stop future wars, they must articulate progressive values in a larger framework that provides a vision of how the world could be made safer if America acted differently.

Betrayal of Trust

There is no evidence that Saddam Hussein had any weapons of mass destruction. There is no connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda. President Bush has been exposed as a liar. Yet 70 percent of Americans still believe that the U.S. invaded Iraq to get the weapons and to stop the help that Saddam was giving Al Qaeda. Why?

Linguists discovered something startling about lies: most people are less concerned that the lie was told than they are about why the lie was told. Several studies have shown that when people find out a lie has been told, they ask: did the person know that they were giving false information? Did that person give false information for a good reason? Did he try to gain advantage over someone? Did he use it to harm someone? If it can't be proven that he did, then people conclude that there was no lie, it was a misstatement, a mistake, an exaggeration, but it was not an act to respond to with infamy.

By adhering to the incorrect perception that "the truth sets you free," progressives failed to frame the President's actions in a way that would have made a difference to the American public: betrayal of trust. When the President asks men and women to risk their lives, it must be because the reasons being given are true. Otherwise, the President is betraying the trust that the people have placed in his hands.

The American people paid for this war with their future retirement, yet all the profits are going to Halliburton and other Bush contributors. Progressives needed to put the President's acts in the context of his betrayal of their trust and their futures. That would have made the lies understood for what they were, deception to exploit Americans' fears

and enrich Bush and his supporters. Expose the real rationale for the war and the President's betrayal would have been exposed.

What the Right Wants

The conservatives want to be the strict father to America and/or the rest of the world. There is a natural order that must be followed: God above all, man above nature, adults above children, Western culture above other cultures and America over other countries.

Economics is part of this moral order. Competition is the discipline of economics. Wealthy people are good because they have discipline. Poor people are lazy and lack discipline, therefore they deserve to be poor and serve the wealthy. The vast and increasing gap between rich and poor is an ongoing recognition by God of the good work being done by the wealthy. Free markets are moral because they permit the wealthy to maximize their money and that benefits everyone. Regulation is bad because it restrains profit making.

Government exists to protect the interests of the wealthy who are good and moral. Government exists to find new ways for the rich to become richer because that benefits everyone. Citizens only have those rights consistent with the moral order, therefore there is no abortion, no healthcare, no right to know how government policy is made, no right to a living wage and so on.

Education must preserve and extend conservative values. Eventually, schools will reflect the moral order. The good disciplined students (of the wealthy) will be in private schools. Poor undisciplined students will go to the poorer schools.

In 30 to 40 years, conservatives have managed to propagate their ideas and their frames through the media and popular culture. They have managed to make populists into effete liberals perceived as weak-minded, unpatriotic, spendthrift and tax-and-spend wasters of American money. They have made conservatives who really are the elitists appear to be the salt of the earth. Conservatives painted progressives as the betrayers of American prosperity while sending American jobs offshore, opening the American markets to everyone and selling the government to the multinationals.

What Unites Progressives

Progressives find more reasons to disagree than they should. They divide over things like local interests, idealism versus pragmatism, radical change versus moderate change, militant versus moderate advocacy.

Just trying to create programs creates dissent. Progressives will argue over every aspect of the implementation, target population and on and on. Most Americans aren't as interested in programs as they are in personal beliefs. They want to know what candidates stand for. They need to know that what the candidate stands for is what they stand for. Are the candidate's values their values? Are the candidate's beliefs their beliefs? They want to know what direction the candidate wants to take the country in.

Progressives can be united through shared values, principles and policy directives, but how is this accomplished?

First, values must come out of a shared progressive vision.

Progressives envision America as a family, a caring responsible family. They envision America as a place where people care about each other, not just themselves, and act responsibly with strength and effectiveness for each other. The values underlying this vision are: Caring and responsibility, protection and fulfillment in life, fairness, freedom, opportunity, prosperity, community, service, cooperation and trust, honesty, open communications.

Second, principles must realize these progressive values.

Equity - citizens and the nation owe each other.

Equality – we should assure power balance.

Democracy – there should be maximum citizen participation and minimal power concentrations, optimized journalistic standards, publicly financed elections, good public education, stake holders controlling corporations (not just stockholders).

A government for a better future – the government should promote better protections, more freedom, a cleaner environment, prosperity, better health, greater fulfillment, less violence and improved infrastructure.

Ethical business – the providing of goods and services should not impair the public welfare, pollution is not an acceptable tradeoff for jobs.

Values-based foreign policy – we should promote an effective military investment for peacekeeping and protection, we should build and maintain strong international alliances, we should care and help with the problems of poverty, health, population control and human rights all over the world.

Third, policy directives must fit these values and principles.

From these principles and values come policies. For example, an economy focused on prosperity for all Americans, fair markets and security through military strength, a national plan for healthcare, a vibrant, well-funded education system that nurtures children and teaches them the truth about their nation and clean environmental initiatives that benefit everyone.

Fourth, a 10-word philosophy that encapsulates all of the above must be presented.

Conservatives have a 10-word mission statement: Strong Defense, Free Markets, Lower Taxes, Smaller Government, Family Values. Progressives' mission statement might be: Stronger America, Broad Prosperity, Better Future, Effective Government, Mutual Responsibility. This philosophy emphasizes the shared responsibility that governments and citizens have to each other and activates the nurturant model of competence, effectiveness, respect, equality and caring rather than the strict, authoritarian, punitive and self-interested values of the conservative model.

How to Respond To Conservatives

Sooner or later, you will want to apply framing to conversations with conservatives, here are some helpful guidelines to keep in mind:

- Progressive values are the best traditional American values. Stand up for these values with dignity.
- Right-wing ideologues want to apply the strict father role model to government, morality and politics. If they understood what conservatives believe, most Americans would not agree with this application.
- Your challenge is to activate people's nurturant model for politics.
- Be respectful of Conservatives. Listen. Don't take cheap shots and don't let them take cheap shots.
- Make them explain and define their terms.
- Embrace civil discourse that is nurturant and composed. Be prepared
- Be calm. Calmness is a sign that you know what you're talking about.
- Be good-humored. That shows you are comfortable with yourself.
- Hold your ground. Always be on the offense, never the defense. Keep your voice steady and un-rising.
- Expect the stereotypes that progressives are weak, uninformed, angry and elitist. Prove the stereotypes wrong.
- Be in command of your facts and yourself. Start with values most relevant to your framed reference.
- Seek out those with nurturant models active in their lives
- Use *your* frame and your frame's language, not theirs. If they try to control the frame, don't play.
- Keep pushing your frame. Repetition is key. When your frame is accepted, everything makes sense.
- Ask questions and present stories to introduce frames or to reframe your position.
- Use wedge issues.