

George Lakoff tells how conservatives use language to dominate politics

By Bonnie Azab Powell , NewsCenter | 27 October 2003

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Linguistics professor George Lakoff at the Free Speech Movement Café. (BAP photos)

Framing the issues: UC Berkeley professor George Lakoff tells how conservatives use language to dominate politics

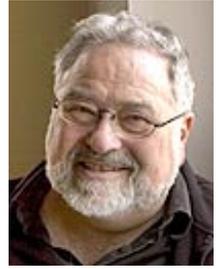
BERKELEY – With Republicans controlling the Senate, the House, and the White House and enjoying a large margin of victory for California Governor-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger, it's clear that the Democratic Party is in crisis. George Lakoff, a UC Berkeley professor of linguistics and cognitive science, thinks he knows why. Conservatives have spent decades defining their ideas, carefully choosing the language with which to present them, and building an infrastructure to communicate them, says Lakoff.

The work has paid off: by dictating the terms of national debate, conservatives have put progressives firmly on the defensive.

In

George Lakoff dissects "war on terror" and other conservative catchphrases

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2000 Lakoff and seven other faculty members from Berkeley and UC Davis joined together to found the Rockridge Institute, one of the few progressive think tanks in existence in the U.S. The institute offers its expertise and research on a nonpartisan basis to help progressives understand how best to get their messages across. The Richard & Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor in the College of Letters & Science, Lakoff is the author of "Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think," first published in 1997 and reissued in 2002, as well as several other books on how language affects our lives. He is taking a sabbatical this year to write three books - none about politics - and to work on several Rockridge Institute research projects.

In a long conversation over coffee at the Free Speech Movement Café, he told the NewsCenter's Bonnie Azab Powell why the Democrats "just don't get it," why Schwarzenegger won the recall election, and why conservatives will continue to define the issues up for debate for the foreseeable future.

Why was the Rockridge Institute created, and how do you define its purpose?

I got tired of cursing the newspaper every morning. I got tired of seeing what was going wrong and not being able to do anything about it.

The background for Rockridge is that conservatives, especially conservative think tanks, have framed virtually every issue from their perspective. They have put a huge amount of money into creating the language for their worldview and getting it out there. Progressives have done virtually nothing. Even the new Center for American Progress, the think tank that John Podesta [former chief of staff for the Clinton administration] is setting up, is not dedicated to this at all. I asked Podesta who was going to do the Center's framing. He got a blank look, thought for a second and then said, "You!" Which meant they haven't thought about it at all. And that's the problem. Liberals don't get it. They don't understand what it is they have to be doing.

Rockridge's job is to reframe public debate, to create balance from a progressive perspective. It's one thing to analyze language and thought, it's another thing to create it. That's what we're about. It's a matter of asking "What are the central ideas of progressive thought from a moral perspective?"

How does language influence the terms of political debate?

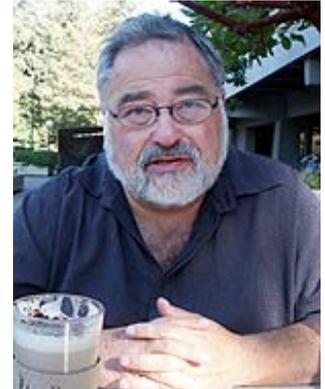
Language always comes with what is called "framing." Every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework. If you have something like "revolt," that implies a population that is being ruled unfairly, or assumes it is being ruled unfairly, and that they are throwing off their rulers, which would be considered a good thing. That's a frame.

If you then add the word "voter" in front of "revolt," you get a metaphorical meaning saying that the voters are the oppressed people, the governor is the oppressive ruler, that they have ousted him and this is a good thing and all things are good now. All of that comes up when you see a headline like "voter revolt" - something that most people read and never notice. But these things can be affected by reporters and very often, by the campaign people themselves.

Here's another example of how powerful framing is. In Arnold Schwarzenegger's acceptance speech, he said, "When the people win, politics as usual loses." What's that about? Well, he knows that he's going to face a Democratic legislature, so what he has done is frame himself and also Republican politicians as the people, while framing Democratic politicians as politics as usual - in advance. The Democratic legislators won't know

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what hit them. They're automatically framed as enemies of the people.

Why do conservatives appear to be so much better at framing?

Because they've put billions of dollars into it. Over the last 30 years their think tanks have made a heavy investment in ideas and in language. In 1970, [Supreme Court Justice] Lewis Powell wrote a fateful memo to the National Chamber of Commerce saying that all of our best students are becoming anti-business because of the Vietnam War, and that we needed to do something about it. Powell's agenda included getting wealthy conservatives to set up professorships, setting up institutes on and off campus where intellectuals would write books from a conservative business perspective, and setting up think tanks. He outlined the whole thing in 1970. They set up the Heritage Foundation in 1973, and the Manhattan Institute after that. [There are many others, including the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institute at Stanford, which date from the 1940s.]

And now, as the New York Times Magazine quoted Paul Weyrich, who started the Heritage Foundation, they have 1,500 conservative radio talk show hosts. They have a huge, very good operation, and they understand their own moral system. They understand what unites conservatives, and they understand how to talk about it, and they are constantly updating their research on how best to express their ideas.

Why haven't progressives done the same thing?

There's a systematic reason for that. You can see it in the way that conservative foundations and progressive foundations work. Conservative foundations give large block grants year after year to their think tanks. They say, 'Here's several million dollars, do what you need to do.' And basically, they build infrastructure, they build TV studios, hire intellectuals, set aside money to buy a lot of books to get them on the best-seller lists, hire research assistants for their intellectuals so they do well on TV, and hire agents to put them on TV. They do all of that. Why? Because the conservative moral system, which I analyzed in "Moral Politics," has as its highest value preserving and defending the "strict father" system itself. And that means building infrastructure. As businessmen, they know how to do this very well.

Meanwhile, liberals' conceptual system of the "nurturant parent" has as its highest value helping individuals who need help. The progressive foundations and donors give their money to a variety of grassroots organizations. They say, 'We're giving you \$25,000, but don't waste a penny of it. Make sure it all goes to the cause, don't use it for administration, communication, infrastructure, or career development.' So there's

actually a structural reason built into the worldviews that explains why conservatives have done better.

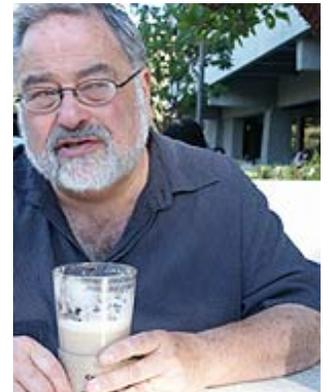
Back up for a second and explain what you mean by the strict father and nurturant parent frameworks.

Well, the progressive worldview is modeled on a nurturant parent family. Briefly, it assumes that the world is basically good and can be made better and that one must work toward that. Children are born good; parents can make them better. Nurturing involves empathy, and the responsibility to take care of oneself and others for whom we are responsible. On a larger scale, specific policies follow, such as governmental protection in form of a social safety net and government regulation, universal education (to ensure competence, fairness), civil liberties and equal treatment (fairness and freedom), accountability (derived from trust), public service (from responsibility), open government (from open communication), and the promotion of an economy that benefits all and functions to promote these values, which are traditional progressive values in American politics.

The conservative worldview, the strict father model, assumes that the world is dangerous and difficult and that children are born bad and must be made good. The strict father is the moral authority who supports and defends the family, tells his wife what to do, and teaches his kids right from wrong. The only way to do that is through painful discipline - physical punishment that by adulthood will become internal discipline. The good people are the disciplined people. Once grown, the self-reliant, disciplined children are on their own. Those children who remain dependent (who were spoiled, overly willful, or recalcitrant) should be forced to undergo further discipline or be cut free with no support to face the discipline of the outside world.

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-George Lakoff



So, project this onto the nation and you see that to the right wing, the good citizens are the disciplined ones - those who have already become wealthy or at least self-reliant - and those who are on the way. Social programs, meanwhile, "spoil" people by giving them things they haven't earned and keeping them dependent. The government is there only to protect the nation, maintain order, administer justice (punishment), and to provide for the promotion and orderly conduct of business. In this way, disciplined people become self-reliant. Wealth is a measure of discipline. Taxes beyond the minimum needed for such government take away from the good, disciplined people rewards that they have earned and spend it on those who have not earned it.

From that framework, I can see why Schwarzenegger appealed to conservatives.

Exactly. In the strict father model, the big thing is discipline and moral authority, and punishment for those who do something wrong. That comes out very clearly in the Bush administration's foreign and domestic policy. With Schwarzenegger, it's in his movies: most of the characters that he plays exemplify that moral system. He didn't have to say a word! He just had to stand up there, and he represents Mr. Discipline. He knows what's right and wrong, and he's going to take it to the people. He's not going to ask permission, or have a discussion, he's going to do what needs to be done, using force and authority. His very persona represents what conservatives are about.

You've written a lot about "tax relief" as a frame. How does it work?

The phrase "Tax relief" began coming out of the White House starting on the very day of Bush's inauguration.

It got picked up by the newspapers as if it were a neutral term, which it is not. First, you have the frame for "relief." For there to be relief, there has to be an affliction, an afflicted party, somebody who administers the relief, and an act in which you are relieved of the affliction. The reliever is the hero, and anybody who tries to stop them is the bad guy intent on keeping the affliction going. So, add "tax" to "relief" and you get a metaphor that taxation is an affliction, and anybody against relieving this affliction is a villain.

"Tax relief" has even been picked up by the Democrats. I was asked by the Democratic Caucus in their tax meetings to talk to them, and I told them about the problems of using tax relief. The candidates were on the road. Soon after, Joe Lieberman still used the phrase tax relief in a press conference. You see the Democrats shooting themselves in the foot.

So what should they be calling it?

It's not just about what you call it, if it's the same "it." There's actually a whole other way to think about it. Taxes are what you pay to be an American, to live in a civilized society that is democratic and offers opportunity, and where there's an infrastructure that has been paid for by previous taxpayers. This is a huge infrastructure. The highway system, the Internet, the TV system, the public education system, the power grid, the system for training scientists - vast amounts of infrastructure that we all use, which has to be maintained and paid for. Taxes are your dues - you pay your dues to be an American. In addition, the wealthiest Americans use that infrastructure more than anyone else, and they use parts of it that other people don't. The federal justice system, for example, is nine-tenths devoted to corporate law. The Securities and Exchange Commission and all the apparatus of the Commerce Department are mainly used by the wealthy. And we're all paying for it.

So taxes could be framed as an issue of patriotism.

It is an issue of patriotism! Are you paying your dues, or are you trying to get something for free at the expense of your country? It's about being a member. People pay a membership fee to join a country club, for which they get to use the swimming pool and the golf course. But they didn't pay for them in their membership. They were built and paid for by other people and by this collectivity. It's the same thing with our country - the country as country club, being a member of a remarkable nation. But what would it take to make the discussion about that? Every Democratic senator and all of their aides and every candidate would have to learn how to talk about it that way. There would have to be a manual. Republicans have one. They have a guy named Frank Luntz, who puts out a 500-page manual every year that goes issue by issue on what the logic of the position is from the Republican side, what the other guys' logic is, how to attack it, and what language to use.

What are some other examples of issues that progressives should try to reframe?

There are too many examples, that's the problem. The so-called energy crisis in California should have been called Grand Theft. It was theft, it was the result of deregulation by Pete Wilson, and Davis should have said so from the beginning.

Or take gay marriage, which the right has made a rallying topic. Surveys have been done that say Americans are overwhelmingly against gay marriage. Well, the same surveys show that they also overwhelmingly object to discrimination against gays. These seem to be opposite facts, but they're not. "Marriage" is about sex. When you say "gay marriage," it becomes about gay sex, and approving of gay marriage becomes implicitly about approving of gay sex. And while a lot of Americans don't approve of gay sex, that doesn't mean they want to discriminate against gay people. Perfectly rational position. Framed in that way, the issue of gay marriage will get a lot of negative reaction. But what if you make the issue "freedom to marry," or even better, "the right to marry"? That's a whole different story. Very few people would say they did not support the right to marry who you choose. But the polls don't ask that question, because the right wing has framed that issue.

Do any of the Democratic Presidential candidates grasp the importance of framing?

None. They don't get it at all. But they're in a funny position. The framing changes that have to be made are long-term changes. The conservatives understood this in 1973. By 1980 they had a candidate, Ronald Reagan, who could take all this stuff and run with it. The progressives don't have a candidate now who understands these things and can talk about them. And in order for a candidate to be able to talk about them, the ideas have to be out there. You have to be able to reference them in a sound bite. Other people have to put these ideas into the public domain, not politicians. The question is, How do you get these ideas out there?

There are all kinds of ways, and one of the things the Rockridge Institute is looking at is talking to advocacy groups, which could do this very well. They have more of a budget, they're spread all over the place, and they have access to the media.

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. They have no moral perspective, no general values, no identity. People vote their identity, they don't just vote on the issues, and Democrats don't understand that. Look at Schwarzenegger, who says nothing about the issues. The Democrats ask, How could anyone vote for this guy? They did because he put forth an identity. Voters knew who he is.

Next: ["The 'free market' doesn't exist"](#)

Further reading:

- ["Notion Building,"](#) the New York Times Magazine's October 12, 2003 feature about John Podesta's Center for American Progress
 - [Rockridge Institute website](#)
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