

Thoughts on Framing the Progressive Political Conversation and Campaign in 2004 and Beyond

By Professor Jeffrey Feldman, NYU

Jeffrey Feldman originally published these essays at DailyKos.com. In an effort to bring them together in one place for easy access they were republished at Dogfight04.com.

The January 2005 Meetups are just a few days away. In an effort to help spark the conversation at those meetings, this document was literally thrown together at the last minute.

What you are about to read is Version 1. We call it the Rough and Dirty Version. We will have a full e-book available and updated in the near future.

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Chapter 1

We've Been Framed: Looking to Lakoff (Intro)

by [Jeffrey Feldman](#)

Sun Nov 7th, 2004 at 08:29:11 PST

With so many Democrats saying that Bush won because he is a criminal with dumb supporters, I believe it's time to take a serious look at **George Lakoff**.

According to Lakoff, it wasn't Bush that beat us. It was the GOP *frame*. We lost because we got framed. Over the next few weeks, I will focus on Lakoff's book [Don't Think of an Elephant!](#), published to help progressives understand why the GOP wins, and how to beat them.

Plenty of writers will explain why we lost. But Lakoff's book is no ordinary "hindsight-is-20:20" vision memoir or out-of-touch academic theory. Lakoff is for Democrats who are tired of having better ideas, but getting muddled in debates--tired of pushing good policy, but alienating voters--tired of getting out the vote, but still losing elections.

Today, I start with a general discussion of what "frames" are in Lakoff's model and what they are not, and where they were most devastating for us in this election.

Why *Did* Bush Win?

The first time I thought there was something seriously wrong in the way I understood the election was after John Kerry won all three debates, but the polls stayed pretty much the same. Remember that feeling? Kerry was so much more articulate than Bush. Stiff, sure. But smart, prepared, statesman-like. He was taller! Bush was cocky, tired, repetitive, balked on many answers. For goodness sake: Bush was caught wearing a wire!

But the debates did not shake the numbers, even though Kerry managed to beat Bush on the game of low expectations and way out perform him on all three debates.

I remember sitting there and thinking: Damn. There's something I'm not hearing and not seeing here. Aren't we supposed to win when we present the best ideas in the clearest style? Aren't we supposed to win when their candidate acts and looks like an idiot? Aren't we supposed to win when the majority of the electorate agrees with what our guy is saying?

Apparently, it's more complicated than that.

According to Lakoff, we won the debate, but lost the battle not because of the ideas our candidate expressed, but because of the ideas invoked by the words our candidate used.

Sit back for a minute and think about that last sentence.

Lakoff's basic argument is that the words we use have consequences in politics on two levels. If we are more strategic in the language we use, we will control both levels of meaning, be more successful in advancing a progressive agenda, and win more elections.

Expressing vs. Invoking

Lakoff's book is essentially a theory of language. It explains how language works and why this has consequences in politics.

The three key components of Lakoff's theory are:

- Phrases
- Meanings
- Frames

In future postings, I'll look closer at each of these, but today let's get a handle on the general idea

This is the Lakoff's model in a nutshell:

- Every phrase we use has *two levels of meaning*

- First, there is the meaning *expressed* in the words themselves, the ideas they communicate directly.
- Second, there is the meaning *invoked* by the words, the broad set of unspoken ideas through which we understand ourselves and the world around us (e.g., the "frame")

What we will discover is that while all phrases express meaning, one type of phrase is particularly good at invoking frames: metaphors. A metaphor is a phrase that expresses one thing in the terms or qualities of another:

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- head of state (states aren't bodies)
 - face of evil (evil is not a person)
 - war on terror (terror is not a place or army)

Metaphors are powerful, according to Lakoff, precisely because they invoke broad sets of unspoken beliefs, and therefore can tip us towards interpreting other words and events in a certain way.

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world...You can't see or hear frames...When you hear a word, it's frame is activated in your brain. (Lakoff)

Our ideas were good. But we lost because the opposition didn't just think about the first level of meaning in their words. They chose words that *invoked* powerful sets of unspoken and unheard ideas that framed the entire debate—views of how the world works that ultimately trumped and undermined every possible statement made by our candidate. The GOP won because somehow, someway--while we were obsessing over the best phrases to use to tell people about our ideas--they chose language that tipped the entire terrain in their favor.

Those phrases were then repeated and amplified endlessly by the media--not just by FOX, but by all media, even the progressive Blogs. No matter how articulate Kerry was, none of his speeches or commercials were able to dislodge those unspoken and unheard ideas set in place by the GOP.

Many of us think this is just about a good "meme." But it's more than just a phrase that gets repeated. It's how that repeated phrase invokes the GOP controlled frame.

The GOP beat us by framing the debate. And you know what's the most frustrating? We helped them and didn't even realize it.

George W. Bush may be bad at getting across the first level of meaning--a "D" student in English 101. He just can't *express* complex ideas in well-built sentences.

But Bush is a master at *invoking* the frame. He is a master at getting out those two or three word phrases that get picked up and hyper-amplified in the media. Anyone who calls Bush "dumb" based on his speaking style doesn't understand how Bush uses language. Bush is, perhaps, the greatest frame invoker of the modern political era.

It's about the Metaphors, Stupid

Right after 9/11, the GOP wasn't quite sure how to frame what happened. Here are some of the phrases the Bush team used in the early days:

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- Terrorists must be brought to justice (crime frame)
 - Terrorists are cowards (schoolyard fight frame)
 - Smoke 'em out (fox/hunting frame)
 - Dry up the swamp (slimy monsters frame)
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Ultimately, they settled on "War on Terror," thereby framing the debate in terms of two clear sides. And the war on terror is really a war between Americans who are "good" and terrorists who are "evil."

It is difficult to exaggerate how much John Kerry struggled against the war frame invoked by the GOP. His arguments were sound, his policies clear, his record solid. But still the GOP kept invoking the frame. Anyone who doesn't support the "war on terror" (terror=evil), must be evil themselves. Bring on the Swift Boat Vets. Their lies were completely wrong. But they reinforced the notion that the US fights wars against evil enemies, and if we're not careful, forces within us conspire to take us down.

After a certain point, I could see why Kerry didn't give more specifics about Iraq. Either he was going to shift the frame or he was going to lose. So, late in the game he tried to shift the frame from "war" to "crime"--the very frame where Bush began--but it was too late. Too much of the public was already thinking through the war frame.

But there's a bigger lesson, here.

Democrat's can't change the frame and still use Bush's phrases that invoke the prior frame.

We can't "win" the "war on terror" by building alliances and enforcing laws. Wars can only be won by fighting. In this sense--and this speaks to the power of frames--even mounting casualties are a better at showing that you are winning the war, than talk of building alliances.

Isn't that insane? How many of us thought that when US casualties hit 1,000--Bingo! Kerry wins. We were so wrong. The casualty numbers were evidence that Bush was fighting the war, that Bush would not let evil win without fighting. The only way for Kerry to trump Bush in the war frame was to talk about fighting harder and better (e.g., to unveil plans of a massive invasion, use of unconventional weapons, etc., etc.).

We can credit the late talk by Edwards and Kerry about "killing" the terrorists to this attempt to show that they would fight better, to a last ditch effort to control the GOP frame.

Ah, but you can't control a frame set by someone else. To win, you have to invoke a new frame that serves your interests, and holds.

Chapter 2

Who you Callin' Stupid? How to Frame Issues:

Tue Nov 9th, 2004 at 07:51:09 PST

Imagine this: *You're watching Bush on TV. Suddenly, you can't take it any more. Reaching for the remote, you say, "Bush! He's so damn **stupid**."* I'll be the first to admit it: I'm addicted to calling Republicans 'stupid.' I can't help myself. I'm a junkie.

But are they 'stupid' or not?

The more I think about it, 'stupid' doesn't make much sense. None of the stupid people I know have gotten very far. George W. Bush--king of 'stupid'--yeah, he's done pretty well.

While there are many, many factors that contribute to Bush's electoral success, in the opening chapter of [Don't Think of an Elephant!](#), **George Lakoff** argues that this knee-jerk habit of progressives to call Republicans 'stupid' is a big reason why Dems lose.

This is a hard habit to break, though, because it's based in core set of beliefs that all progressives hold.

So, if our goal is to take control of political debates through the power of framing, Lakoff says that we must stop calling Republicans stupid. Instead, we should ask:

"When Progressives call Republicans stupid, how does this help the GOP win?"

Real Time Sucker Punch

For Lakoff, the key to understanding how frames work is to first spend some time thinking about how we react when we listen to Republicans talk.

Immediately following the election, this Dem tendency to cry 'stupid' when confronted with GOP talk, was brought to the fore.

On last week's edition of *Real Time* Allen Simpson and Andrew Sullivan both hit Bill Maher with a double punch on this issue that not only threw Bill off his game, but revealed exactly how deeply entrenched this problem is for progressives

When confronted with this idea that Dems should not call Republicans 'stupid,' Maher like many progressives, immediately assumed that he was being told to embrace Evangelical ideas or move to the center on social policy.

This is absolutely wrong.

According to Lakoff, progressives don't need to accept right wing ideas, but unless we stop for a minute and understand what's happening when we pull out the 'stupid' label, we won't understand why these accusations aren't persuasive in political debates, and why the 'stupid' label reinforces our own misconception of how political ideas take hold.

The Truth Will Set Us Free

The problem, according to Lakoff is that Democrats don't understand the relationship between facts and frames.

Instead, our understanding of how political debate works is based on what he calls a core set of "Enlightenment Myths." Now, I'm pretty fond of the Enlightenment, so I wanted to make sure I understood what Lakoff was getting at here. Is he saying that we should reject rational thinking? No, he is not at all.

Here's his point: ***"To be accepted, the truth must fit people's frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off the frame."*** --Lakoff

Think for a minute of the great 'fact bouncers' of recent politics. Al Gore comes to mind.

In the 2000 debates, Gore showed up with a massive quantity of facts to present to George W. Bush and to the American public.

Gore's strategy of using these **facts** to convince the American public was based on what Lakoff calls this three-step logic:

- The truth will set us free
 - People are rational beings
 - Present people with the facts and they will draw the right conclusion
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I'll never forget that moment when Gore dangled the Dingle bill in front of Bush and the American people. Gore had an amazing control over legislative facts, but those facts just bounced off Bush and conservative voters because they did not fit into the GOP frame of compassionate conservatism that Bush advanced relentlessly for the whole campaign.

Bouncing Off

The problem that we get to when we hold up accusations of 'stupid,' is that Dems tend to think of facts as witnesses of a universal truth. In this broad logic, we imagine all people as rational beings who naturally act in their best interest (read: acting on the universal truth).

So Dems don't so much make arguments or build frames as we *confront* Republicans with facts, whereupon we imagine them suddenly *understanding* the truth.

But facts bounce off, according to Lakoff, if they don't fit in to the concepts we have in our heads.

Lately, for example, the progressives have started to throw around the numbers "over 1,000 dead" and "over 10,000 dead and maimed" to describe the situation in Iraq.

While I don't doubt that many, many Republicans are concerned about these statistics, by confronting the GOP with these facts, we have not been successful at taking control of the Iraq war debate.

Michael Moore's framing of the Iraq war was so successful precisely because he used the image of a horrific bomb exploding on a peaceful street, and the breakdown of a Republican mother of a dead soldier to frame Iraq.

But the metaphor of 'freedom on the march' and, more recently, Rumsfeld's metaphor of the 'situation tipping' in our favor, have dominated debate and tended to fend off the idea that casualty statistics equal trouble.

Moreover, while so many people accept the fact that Iraq did not cause 9/11, this GOP frame is so strong and so prominent that it has caused even the most damning facts from the heart of government itself to bounce off.

Self Interest vs. Self Identity

In thinking about this past election, two Democrats emerged as radical alternatives to the habit of calling Republicans stupid.

John Edwards's stump speech was a brilliant attempt to dominate the election by creating a kitchen table frame that would help GOP voters identify with the Democrats. I loved Edward's speech. Rather than taking numbers, he painted a picture of a single mom sitting in her kitchen, worrying about the bills, and thinking about her family. You can bet that speech brought out tiny beads of sweat on Karl Rove's big fleshy forehead.

Ah, but Edwards wasn't very good at putting out metaphors that held his frame in place. Instead, he stuck to the refrain "hope is on the way." To this day, I'm not really sure what that meant.

Then there is Barak Obama.

Obama's speech at the Democratic Convention demonstrated his deep understanding of Lakoff's ideas on how political debate works.

Obama used that platform to cast himself in the frame of a strong family. His candidacy was not about unemployment numbers, was not about deaths in Iraq and was not about tax breaks. It was about his values as a member of an American family. And it was in that frame of the family, that so many people see their own identity.

Kerry of course, for better or for worse, is the classic example of a Democratic fact bouncer.

When I read the contract of "understanding" which set out the rules for the debates, one clause stated that the candidates were not allowed to use charts.

Can you imagine George W. Bush pulling out a chart? Of course you can't. Apparently, Kerry had in mind that he could use facts and figures to make his case.

In one surreal moment during the campaign, I saw a clip of Kerry speaking to senior citizens about health care. There he was--our candidate--standing in front of a chart, confronting the elderly with the facts of how George W. Bush had ruined healthcare. You could hear those facts bouncing off the audience.

Of course, whether or not Kerry lost or Bush stole the election, calling the GOP 'stupid' is a habit that we need to break--and which the young Turks of the Democratic Party are already moving past.

Once we get this habit under control, we can turn to the critical task of getting back in touch with our core values, and finding the metaphors that frame events in our favor.

Chapter 3

Right Hook: How to Frame Issues

Thu Nov 11th, 2004

The other night I watched Scarborough knock out Bernstein in less than one round.

Carl was doing great: good footwork, landing punches, nothing cocky. All of the sudden, Joe's right hook came outta nowhere: "Ya' see, this is why Democrats lose. When the majority of voters have Middle America values (POW! Carl's teeth go flying)--they just don't get what's being thrown at 'em by a bunch of bi-coastal elites."

Get up, Champ! Shake it off! Hit back!! Uh...Champ? But it was too late. Carl was out cold. Broken jaw. Moral TKO in round one.

Red State values? Middle America mindset? East Coast Elitism? While Democrats search in vain for a morality counterpunch--while we anxiously rifle through old boxes filled with the causes we champion--the GOP floors us by forcing everyone to talk about morality as if it were a map.

And yet, in [Don't Think of an Elephant](#), Lakoff says the key to controlling political debates is to speak from our moral perspective at all times. How do we speak from our moral perspective without getting clocked by that right hook?

For starters, we need to throw out that map and start solving puzzles.

The Morality Map

The metaphor of morality as a map is one of the most effective GOP frames controlling political debate, today. It works. Period. We can't beat it. We can't change it. For now, all we can do is stop using it.

Ah, but it's hard to give it up.

Just the other day Zel Miller lashed out at Maureen Dowd, saying she was a "highbrow hussy from New York" and that the more she wrote the "redder these states get." Maureen replied: "I am a highbrow hussy from Washington."

We all still love Maureen. But the problem isn't solved by correcting Miller's moral geography, or by making light of it.

Miller unfolded the morality map, and Dowd jumped right up to help him use it.

The morality map has been in print for a while, but it's been a best seller since Gore v. Bush 2000. In the past few months, the whole country has taken their map out and left it unfolded on the kitchen table. Some people have posted theirs in the bedroom. My parents have a TV in just about every room of their house, so they have a morality map in every room, too.

We know this map is wrong, but since last Wednesday morning, Dems have embraced it. Responding to moral geography by speaking terms of the map is still using the map. Redrawing the map in a thousand variations to complicate the red-state:blue-state divide--is still using the map.

When we talk about the map we advancing the GOP frame for talking about values. It doesn't even matter anymore if we talk actual issues. The map has become the super metaphor that keeps the whole GOP morality frame in play.

Throw out that morality map you have in your house, and the one your car, too. Throw them in the dumpster. Toss them out the window. No more morality maps.

The Puzzle of Positions

According to Lakoff, the best way to understand our moral perspective is to think about how various groupings of political positions on issues can seem illogical and puzzling.

Here are some common conservative and progressive puzzles--seemingly contradictory political positions whose logical relationship makes no sense to the opposition:

Liberal Puzzle: Conservative "Right-to-Life" advocates also tend to be in favor of capital punishment (huh?)

Conservative Puzzle: Liberal "child welfare" advocates also tend to support the right to murder unborn children (huh?)

The starting point for understanding the progressive moral perspective--and by contrast, the moral perspective of conservatives--is to solve these puzzles, to figure out what these positions have to do with each other.

No simple map with two colors will provide the answer to these puzzles. Instead, we need to think bigger and more basic at the same time. We need to think of a fundamental logic, a worldview that frames all the political stands of the two dominant political ideologies in our current system.

Ultimately, the goal of Lakoff's work on the language of American politics is to describe conservative and progressive worldviews (e.g., their moral perspectives) with enough detail to help us make sense of these puzzles.

Now, Lakoff's goal is not to provide the ultimate answer to what makes us think and act. He is not arguing what is right or wrong. Instead, he is providing a model that explains these three things, and these three things only:

- * Why certain political positions go together
- * Why the puzzles for conservatives are not the puzzles for progressives and vice-versa
- * Why people use particular words in political debate

Warning: To consider the full ramifications of Lakoff's model, we must trust him when he tells us that there are real, on the ground, political gains to be had if we first--only for a moment--allow our political feet leave the ground. His model of two worldviews and their subsequent moral perspectives is abstract, and that may make us impatient. Trust him for today. We will land back down, tomorrow, but we first need to listen to what he says.

Two Worldviews, Two Moral Perspectives

Lakoff's description of Conservative and Liberal worldviews is organized around a very simple idea: The Family. Keep in mind; this is just one way to describe what's in people's heads that motivating their words and actions in political debate, but it's a good description worth considering.

The Conservative worldview is centered on a "Strict Father" model of the family, which posits a traditional nuclear family, with the father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family, and the authority to set policy, impose strict rules, and enforces them. Children must respect and obey their parents, whereby they build character. The principle goal is to raise children that are self-reliant in a dangerous world.

The Liberal worldview is centered on a "Nurturing Parent model of the family, which posits an empathetic and nurturing parent (male or female) who teaches children respect and caring for others--both in and out of the family. Children are obedient because nurturing parents' teach respect, care and even the questioning of their authority. The principle goal is for children to be happy and fulfilled in their lives.

Each model gives rise to a particular morality.

In Strict Father morality, the highest priorities are moral strength, respect for authority and strict behavioral norms, and insuring that the pursuit of self-interest is always maximized.

In Nurturing Parent morality, the highest priorities are empathy for others, taking care of one's self, nurturing social ties, and helping those who need help.

Description not Prescription

I don't agree with everything in Lakoff's two models. But the power of his argument lies less in their being 100% correct, then in the way they help us radically change our approach to talking about morality and values in political debate.

We are not consciously aware of these models and we are not actively using these models in our lives to make moral choices. They are descriptions that help us make sense of what conservatives are saying, why we respond the way we do. They are descriptions of conservative and liberal morality, not prescriptions of a list of conservative and liberal.

Are they useful? You bet they are.

Try this puzzle: If the GOP just won the election, why are they so combative all of the sudden, and why are Dems the only ones who notice this?

The Strict Father model suggests that what we are witnessing are not just angry conservatives. Rather, people like Bill Maher, Carl Bernstein, and Maureen Dowd are being punished by the conservatives for being disobedient, and we are being punished through them.

Each time Scarborough scolds a liberal on TV, he is doing two things. He is reinforcing the message that morality is a map, and he is invoking the frame of the Strong Father family, a moral system where children are taught to respect not question authority, where to question the father is to endanger the lives of children who the father is preparing to protect themselves in a dangerous world.

As for Democrats--we respond by accepting the frame of morality as a map, and invoking the morality of the Nurturing Parent family, a value system where children are taught to help those who can't help themselves, and that the world is better when we use our strength to teach respect.

Strict Father in the White House

In a country where we imagine the nation through the metaphor of the family, the victory of the GOP is the victory of Strong Father morality. So if we hear George Bush speaking in the language of nurturing and caring--of reaching out to allies and extending his hand across the aisle--you can bet he's doing this just to make Dems feel warm inside.

In reality, according to Lakoff, we all have both of these models in our heads, and there are very few situations where we think exclusively through one moral perspective. But we use the language

made available to us, and if that language invokes one model over another, than we leave ourselves open to a knockout blow.

But those days of lying face down on the mat next to a pile of our own teeth are coming to a close. Once we've tossed out that morality map, once we start listening for the logic of Strong Father morality and understand the logic of our own nurturing positions-- then we won't just be hitting back. We will be anticipating each GOP punch.

Chapter 4

Let's Get Tanked: How to Frame Issues #3

Try this quick test: Write down the first word that comes to mind in response to this statement:

In less than one term, George W. Bush turned the largest government surplus in history into the largest debt in history.

What did you write?

Most Democrats look at the national debt and they instantly think of Bush's "incompetence," "failure," "corruption." All true.

But according to George Lakoff in his book 'Don't Think of an Elephant!', if progressives want to regain political terrain, they need to look at the debt and start thinking about Bush's "achievement," "success," and "vision."

What? Debt as achievement: how can this be something to use as an 'achievement'?

Of course, Lakoff is not suggesting that we stop being outraged by Bush's approach to economics and the harm it will cause. Rather, he wants us to look at the language we use when we react to the debt. Our words indicate a key difference between Democrats and Republicans.

Where we see policy, the GOP see's strategy.

From Lakoff's research we learn that Democrats will never gain ground in national politics unless we stop thinking about policy, and start talking about strategy.

Thinking in Tanks

The \$100 word that will soon be on everyone's lips is hypo-cognition, which according to Lakoff means "without ideas." In Lakoff's estimation, the problem isn't that Democrats don't think. In fact, Democrats think all the time, but they do it in a haphazard way and in isolation.

The GOP thinks in tanks.

Since the defeat of Goldwater, the GOP has been establishing policy think tanks, organizations whose sole purpose is to bring intellectuals, politicians and policy wonks together and support them. Once in the tank, conservative intellectuals don't just generate individual policy ideas. Their goal is to generate the broad conservative vision and the strategies for implementing that vision. Think tanks are, in fact, strategic initiative institutes. The GOP has tons of these, we have very few.

In the worldview of the conservative think tank, individual policies do not stand-alone. Each policy is part of a strategy, an attempt at putting a particular conservative frame in place and setting a strategy in motion.

"Tax Relief" is a great example of how this works. The GOP devotion to reducing taxes is not just about "payback" for corporate support. Sure, greed is part of the occasion, but the GOP doesn't have the monopoly on that great American tradition. The real vision behind "tax relief" is much bigger, much more profound than money.

The goal of cutting taxes is to implement the GOP vision of dismantling the social welfare state. That's right. When the GOP talks about "tax relief," their goal is to re-frame the entire idea of government.

Tax Relief is about FDR

What is the real culprit in all of this? Opinions will differ about the origins of the social welfare state. I tend to think that the phrase "tax relief" is designed to wrestle this country out of the hands of Lyndon Johnson's vision of a "Great Society." Lakoff argues, however, that by cutting taxes, the GOP sees itself as battling a frame first put in place by FDR--the idea that the government

provides a social safety net that provides for citizens in times of need.

Here's how it works:

Rather than talking about dismantling social programs that the GOP views as a weakness to society, as stealing from "self-sufficient" and "independent" citizens to support the "weak" and the "undisciplined," the GOP floats the idea that taxes are a burden that we all feel. Who among us can disagree? Nobody likes to pay taxes. And so the phrase gets amplified in the media, we use it; argue against it. "President Bush's tax relief is really just tax relief for the wealthiest 1%!" was the Democrat's response--and it makes sense. *But it reinforces the frame.*

And slowly, but surely, the idea that taxes are a burden reframes the political debate enough--is left unchallenged by the assertion of a different frame (e.g., taxes are an investment in our future, they are the responsibility of good citizens, they are the privilege of success, etc.)—and the result? Massive tax cuts pass the Congress.

Fast-forward 18 months. World events transpire. Productivity drops. Tax bases dry up. We now have a huge debt.

And here's where the strategy comes into play: With the frame of taxes as a burden firmly in place, confirmed by years of Democratic reinforcement, and legitimated by hundreds of congressional votes--the GOP now turns to "relieve" the country of it's debt by cutting expenses. Social Security goes on the block. Then Medicare. Sure these are good programs. But are they worth the "burden" of taxes. And at the same time as they argue that we need to cut these social programs to make up for national debt, they argue for more tax breaks.

The more debt we have, the more the GOP can argue that we need to cut social programs, and the more they argue that we need to cut social programs, the more they will push for deeper cuts in taxes. The GOP will keep pushing "tax relief" until the national debt is so high that we have no "choice" but to dismantle the social welfare state altogether. Congress freed of the burden of providing a social safety net for citizens, thus, becomes the equivalent of the British House of Lords. And we receive: Government for the wealthy, by the wealthy, of the wealthy--and their sons.

Poliseeing vs. Strategy [Policy vs. Strategy]

To coin an SNL Bush-ism of my own, if the GOP is all about "strategy," then the Democrats are all about "poliseeing." We see only in terms of **policy**. We need to do both.

How do we get out of this mindset and back into strategic planning?

Lakoff argues that our "empty heads" are the product of our dissipating core principles.

In a recent work, the argument was made that strategic initiatives first come from thinking in terms of core principles. We must move from core principles to strategies of implementation, to individual policies, then finally the language to use to get them out.

Let me repeat that: the **language** we use to describe our better policies are the product of a long process that begins with thinking about core principles.

I personally much prefer the language of "core principles" to the language of "morality" and "values." But if we decide that the best way to implement our new Dem strategic initiative is to use the language of values, I'll fall in line.

But one thing is for certain: responding to the GOP frame of "tax relief," by pushing our own frame of "tax grief" will never work.

We may agree in policy terms, that increasing taxes for the wealthy is right. But our real goal is not to increase taxes.

Our real goal is to safeguard the social welfare state because a core principle of the Democratic Party, today--is still the safeguarding of the very idea of government as being responsible to its citizens--government that believes in the importance of providing a safety net for those who are in need. And we believe in a citizenry that views the financial support of this institution as honorable.

Pushing tax increases will never advance this vision. Instead, they advance the GOP frame of taxes as a burden by responding to relief with grief.

Lakoff's method is so powerful because it begins with the words we use. He is asking us to take our words and put them under a microscope, to have them lie down on the analyst's couch, to sit them down and interview them, to cut them open and operate--you pick your own professional metaphor.

But the key point he also makes is that once you've understood how Democratic language reinforces GOP frames (eek!), the next step is not simply to make up new phrases.

Framework begins with the radical evaluation of the language that we are using, but then it moves immediately to the difficult process of generating core principles.

For this development of core principles to move forward, it will require a different kind of work and a different kind of productivity--even the emergence of new spaces and new places to do this work.

For those us who practice critique, generating core principles will mean turning our attention to building up new concepts, not just being mindful of those that already exist. And while we are very strong at critique, Democrats are out of shape when it comes to the producing new principles.

The water may feel cold at first, but it's time to get back in the tank.

Chapter 5

Think Big, Hit First: Looking to How to Frame Issues (Conclusion)

[note: The Lakoff series by Jeffrey Feldman was originally published at [DailyKos](#) and was discussed the in the diary system referenced below. It was published at Dogfight04.com with permission of the author. His future work called The Frameshop will be published there as well.]

In the past few weeks, many of us have been writing ourselves through anger, fear and sadness with an eye towards creating a discussion that might be helpful to those around us.

With that in mind, I began "Looking to Lakoff" as an impromptu workshop--a conversation for anyone who wished to sit down on the floor with me, roll up their sleeves, and talk through ideas. I am, now, in a very different state of mind. My feet are back on the ground and the emotions that drove me to read and discuss Lakoff have begun to dissipate. More importantly:

Lakoff is now on our minds, where once he was just on our bookshelves.

As a result, the time has come to wrap up the introduction and turn towards the task of putting Lakoff into practice. In this last "Looking to Lakoff" entry, I sum up my own thoughts and invite you to sum up yours.

This is the big picture discussion at the end of a series of smaller conversations.

Words and Deeds:

For those who may be looking in for the first time, here are all the postings in this series as you have found them in this book:

Looking to Lakoff:

1. [We've Been Framed](#)
 2. [Who You Callin' Stupid?](#)
 3. [Watch that Right Hook](#)
 4. [Let's Get Tanked](#)
 5. [Uniters and Dividers](#)
 6. [Think Big, Strike First](#)
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In these discussions, the main issues are: the words we use, our political ideas, and our ability to win.

Politics, according to Lakoff, unfolds through debate and action on the ground. We cannot win elections, he argues, unless we control both. We cannot be good on the ground, but lose debates and expect to win elections.

As a linguist--a strategic thinker primarily concerned with words--Lakoff isn't discounting the importance of boots-on-the-ground-politics so much as he is focusing attention on the battle of ideas as it plays out in debate.

The Democratic Party has always championed the local more than the Republican Party. But Lakoff is suggesting that political debate has become such a powerful tool, that Democrats need to be better at winning on that much larger terrain.

Words, in this sense, are deeds. They are a form of political action that can control perceptions that can focus people's attention, which can translate into numbers on the board.

Lesson One:

Listen, and speak strategically.

Framing

Initially, Lakoff forces us to swallow the bitter pill of our own assumptions. And what do we assume?

We assume that our politics are right--of course we do. We share that with every political party on the planet.

But we also have a set of assumptions about the way to convince others: We assume that we just need to show people the truth, and they will fall to their knees and vote for us. This idea that "the truth will set you free" is a big problem for Democrats, according to Lakoff. I agree.

We must be more strategic in how we go about convincing people that our ideas are better. We must control the debate.

Now, if we accept this idea that progressives have a set of enlightenment assumptions in their heads, while conservatives do not--we are already inside the logic of framing.

Framing is at its most basic, the process of looking for the broad ideas that provide logic for all ideas and expressions.

Just like any other twelve step program, the first step in Lakoff's program is acknowledging that frames are indeed a higher power.

Lesson Two:

The truth alone won't set you free.

Mainframes

What ultimately drives us to take Lakoff seriously is our belief that political positions do not exist in isolation, but are related to something larger: broad worldviews.

Since there are two parties with two broadly different positions, we accept on a gut level that there are two distinct worldviews providing an overarching logic to these politics.

Lakoff agrees. And to help us make sense of these worldviews-- which are way too big and too complex to reduce to a couple of easy narratives or "just so" stories--Lakoff provides us two big frames, the big divide, that helps us understand the difference between Democratic and Republican thinking.

Enter the "mainframes" of the "Strong Father" (Republican) and "Nurturing Parent" (Democrat).

Once we start thinking about these two big frames, we can finally see how every political position is an expression of a set of core values. Whether we realize it or not, when we express ourselves in political debate, we are invoking these values.

We don't need to accept Lakoff's mainframes, but we need to figure out how to understand and control the values we invoke because we want to make sure that our politics pushes our values, not theirs.

So the "Strong Father" vs. "Nurturing Parent" divide is as good a place to start as anywhere.

Lesson Three:

All political positions are expressions of a core set of values

We're Trapped in their Frames

OK, this is all interesting, but so what? Why should I care?

We should all care, because if Lakoff is right (and he is), we don't just lose debates, *we help them win!*

That's right: we are helping the GOP win debates.

We help them by allowing them to push their frames, and then by reinforcing them when we get hit. It's a brutal game, political debate. But we don't lose because our arguments are not good or because we are not right, we lose because they use language that unfolds a broad set of ideas, and pushes their big ideas. We jab back, but they control the fight.

To really beat them, we need to get in touch with our own core values, figure out what frames we want to invoke, decide on the language that will best invoke those frames, then push that language with a united front.

What are we doing now?

We respond to their broad strategic initiatives with policy. We've got to unfold strategic initiatives of our own, and draw them into our fight.

Lesson Four:

Make them fight on our terms, stop accepting theirs.

The Big Picture Frame

None of this is going to work, of course, if we can't stop fighting amongst ourselves.

We've got to realize that there are many types of progressive politics, many different ways of seeing what is 'the key' progressive issue. We are all too quick to accuse other progressives of betraying 'the cause'.

Like Conservatives did fifty years ago, we have to find a way to get everyone to pose for the same Democratic Party family photo.

We don't have to like each other, but we have to acknowledge that our big picture goals are going to be the same.

This is not about winning at any cost. This is about sitting down at a table and unifying, so that we can win and keep winning.

How do we get along? We need to negotiate our way back to the table. We need to acknowledge that we all share a common goal, and start asking what are the minimum conditions we would accept to sit back down and talk to each other.

We then need to generate a mechanism that keeps us talking, generating a unified message, and getting that message out.

We need think tanks (or the new media equivalent), and we need forums where representatives come together every day--each and every day--to reinforce and build on that unity.

Lesson Five:

Be civil to each other, and unite; then we can win

THINK BIG, STRIKE FIRST

One of the hard, hard realizations that comes through reading Lakoff is the realization that the party of the Civil Rights Movement, the party of the Great Society, of the Social Welfare State--this party has become the party of reacting, and responding. We fight back, but we don't hit first anymore.

We have passion, we have principles, we have vision--but the structures we built so many years ago are now beaten up. We need to regroup and rebuild. We need to restate our principles, reinvigorate our vision, and rebuild our structures.

We need to think big again.

But thinking big doesn't mean ignoring the local.

Today, we talk about competing in individual local races. Lakoff is urging us to talk about winning every local race.

Today, we talk about policy solutions. Lakoff is urging us to talk about massive policy strategies that promote entirely new conceptions of who we are.

Today, we talk about fixing broken programs. Lakoff is urging us to talk about completely rebuilding the structure from the ground up.

Today, we talk about whose specific point is 100% right or wrong. Lakoff is urging us to talk about broad ideas that allow for all of our ideas to be heard.

Today, we talk about how to respond to the GOP. Lakoff is urging us to talk about how to make everyone respond to us.

Frameshop

There are many ways to put these ideas into action.

For my part, I see three clear paths.

First, it's important to practice framing issues and to respond to GOP frames *all the time*.

The diaries are a good place to start this work, and so I plan to begin a new series of essays that I will call **Frameshop**.

The purpose of **Frameshop** will be to offer continuous and sustained analyses of the frames that are dominating political discourse. I see this as an act of destabilization and a necessity in the current political moment.

Second, it is important to push for civility and unity in the progressive movement. Daily Kos is a good place to generate that message. We have incredible reach into the mainstream media, and into the heart of Democratic Party leadership. If we demonstrate the power of unity and push it--Joe Trippi will pick it up and we will push the party in the right direction.

I have been as guilty as anyone else at adding to the divisiveness. But I call now for an end to that.

We all come here because we believe in a common purpose. We should not back down at taking that unity to the next level.

Third, I believe it is important to push beyond this blog and to produce a new medium that can reach a broader audience.

I believe that medium is print media driven by email, but I am not certain. Over the next 6 months, I will be drafting ideas to move from being a diarist to being a producer of a new outlet for progressive ideas. The Daily Kos diaries are excellent places for discussion, sharing of ideas, and commando action.

But only the emergence of new outlets can have the lasting and significant impact that can support the work of the blogs and the activists on the ground.

By "Looking to Lakoff," I have been able to move from despair over the elections, to formulating ideas about changing the political landscape.

We can and will continue to discuss books together. But for now, I turn my attention to getting more people to come to the table.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to this discussion!

A note from the publisher: Stuart O'Neill and Dogfight04.com:

Jeffrey Feldman's work is valuable precisely because it provokes debate. Those Democrats who have been married to Policy rather than Strategy will find many of the base theories in George Lakoff's work or Jeffrey Feldman's discussion of those ideas, challenging to say the least.

Uniting, while still have internal disagreements, has never been a Democratic Party trait. Yet because the Republican Party has found a way to unite and disagree at the same time, we find ourselves in a minority position.

If this work is to have any benefit it is Jeffrey Feldman's hope, and mine, that you use this as a worksheet, a template, a discussion piece to find away to better understand what we, as Democrats, need to do to have an effective impact on 2006 and 2008. Please distribute this prior to your Meetups and regularly scheduled meetings.

I think you will be surprised as how many have never heard of 'Framing' or Lakoff...much less Feldman. This can help spark a new level of knowledge and unity. Thanks in advance for your time and effort.

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