Framing the Dems

How conservatives control political debate and how progressives can take it back

BY GEORGE LAKOFF

ON THE DAY THAT GEORGE W. BUSH TOOK OFFICE, THE words "tax relief" started appearing in White House communiqués. Think for a minute about the word *relief*. In order for there to be relief, there has to be a blameless, afflicted person with whom we identify and whose affliction has been imposed by some external cause. Relief is the taking away of the pain or harm, thanks to some reliever.

This is an example of what cognitive linguists call a "frame." It is a mental structure that we use in thinking. All words are defined relative to frames. The relief frame is an instance of a more general rescue scenario in which there is a hero (the reliever), a victim (the afflicted), a crime (the affliction), a villain (the cause of affliction) and a rescue (the relief). The hero is inherently good, the villain is evil and the victim after the rescue owes gratitude to the hero.

The term *tax relief* evokes all of this and more. It presupposes a conceptual metaphor: Taxes are an affliction, proponents of taxes are the causes of affliction (the villains), the taxpayer is the afflicted (the victim) and the proponents of tax relief are the heroes who deserve the taxpayers' gratitude. Those who oppose tax relief are bad guys who want to keep relief from the victim of the affliction, the taxpayer.

Every time the phrase *tax relief* is used, and heard or read by millions of people, this view of taxation as an affliction and conservatives as heroes gets reinforced.

The phrase has become so ubiquitous that I've even found it in speeches and press releases by Democratic officials—unconsciously reinforcing a view of the economy that is anathema to everything progressives believe. The Republicans understand framing; Democrats don't.

When I teach framing in Cognitive Science 101, I start with an exercise. I give my students a directive: "Don't think of an elephant." It can't be done, of course, and that's the point. In order not to think of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant. The word *elephant* evokes an image and a frame. If you negate the frame, you still activate the frame. Richard Nixon never took Cognitive Science 101. When he said, "I am not a crook," he made everybody think of him as a crook.

IF YOU HAVE BEEN FRAMED, THE ONLY RESPONSE IS TO reframe. But you can't do it in a sound bite unless an appropriate progressive language has been built up in advance. Conservatives have worked for decades and spent billions on their think tanks to establish their frames, create the right language, and get the language and the frames they evoke accepted. It has taken them awhile to establish the metaphors of taxation as a burden, an affliction and an unfair punishment—all of which require "relief." They have also, over decades, built up the frame in which the wealthy create jobs, and giving them more wealth creates more jobs.

Taxes look very different when framed from a progressive point of view. As Oliver Wendell Holmes famously said, taxes are the price of civilization. They are what you pay to live in America—your dues—to have democracy, opportunity and access to all the infrastructure that previous taxpayers have built up and made available to you: highways, the Internet, weather reports, parks, the stock market, scientific research, Social Security, rural electrification, communications satellites, and on and on. If you belong to America, you pay a membership fee and you get all that infrastructure plus government services: flood control, air-traffic control, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and so on.

Interestingly, the wealthy benefit disproportionately from the American infrastructure. The Securities and Exchange Commission creates honest stock markets. Most of the judicial system is used for corporate law. Drugs developed with National Institutes of Health funding can be patented for private profit. Chemical companies hire scientists trained under National Science Foundation grants. Airlines hire pilots trained by the Air Force. The beef industry grazes its cattle cheaply on public lands. The more wealth you accumulate using what the dues payers have provided, the greater the debt you owe to those who have made your wealth possible. That is the logic of progressive taxation.

No entrepreneur makes it on his own in America. The American infrastructure makes entrepreneurship possible, and others have put it in place. If you've made a bundle, you owe a bundle. The least painful way to repay your debt to the nation is posthumously, through the inheritance tax.

Those who don't pay their dues are turning their backs on our country. American corporations registering abroad to avoid taxes are deserting our nation when their estimated $70 billion in dues and service payments are badly needed, for schools and for rescuing our state and local governments.

REFRAMING TAKES AWHILE, BUT IT WON'T HAPPEN IF WE don't start. The place to begin is by understanding how progressives and conservatives think. In 1994, I dutifully read the "Contract with America" and found myself unable to comprehend how conservative views formed a coherent set of political positions. What, I asked myself, did opposition to abortion have to do with the flat tax? What did the flat tax have to do with opposition to environmental regulations?

Which father would you want: the Great Santini or Bill Cosby?

NEAL PETERS COLLECTION (2)

What did defense of gun ownership have to do with tort reform? Or tort reform with opposition to affirmative action? And what did all of the above have to do with family values? Moreover, why do conservatives and progressives talk past one another, not with one another?

The answer is that there are distinct conservative and progressive worldviews. The two groups simply see the world in different ways. As a cognitive scientist, I've found in my research that these political worldviews can be understood as opposing models of an ideal family—a strict father family and a nurturant parent family. These family models come with moral systems, which in turn provide the deep framing of all political issues.

THE STRICT FATHER FAMILY

In this view, the world is a dangerous and difficult place, there is tangible evil in the world and children have to be made good. To stand up to evil, one must be morally strong—disciplined.

The father's job is to protect and support the family. His moral duty is to teach his children right from wrong. Physical discipline in childhood will develop the internal discipline adults need to be moral people and to succeed. The child's duty is to obey. Punishment is required to balance the moral books. If you do wrong, there must be a consequence.

The strict father, as moral authority, is responsible for controlling the women of the family, especially in matters of sexuality and reproduction.

Children are to become self-reliant through discipline and the pursuit of self-interest. Pursuit of self-interest is moral: If everybody pursues his own self-interest, the self-interest of all will be maximized.

Without competition, people would not have to develop discipline and so would not become moral beings. Worldly success is an indicator of sufficient moral strength; lack of success suggests lack of sufficient discipline. Those who are not successful should not be coddled; they should be forced to acquire self-discipline.

When this view is translated into politics, the government becomes the strict father whose job for the country is to support (maximize overall wealth) and protect (maximize military and political strength). The citizens are children of two kinds: the mature, disciplined, self-reliant ones who should not be meddled with and the whining, undisciplined, dependent ones who should never be coddled.

This means (among other things) favoring those who control corporate wealth and power (those seen as the best people) over those who are victims (those seen as morally weak). It means removing government regulations, which get in the way of those who are disciplined. Nature is seen as a resource to be exploited. One-way communication translates into government secrecy. The highest moral value is to preserve and

extend the domain of strict morality itself, which translates into bringing the values of strict father morality into every aspect of life, both public and private, domestic and foreign.

America is seen as more moral than other nations and hence more deserving of power; it has earned the right to be hegemonic and must never yield its sovereignty, or its overwhelming military and economic power. The role of government, then, is to protect the country and its interests, to promote maximally unimpeded economic activity, and maintain order and discipline.

From this perspective, conservative policies cohere and make sense as instances of strict father morality. Social programs give people things they haven't earned, promoting dependency and lack of discipline, and are therefore immoral. The good people—those who have become self-reliant through discipline and pursuit of self-interest—deserve their wealth as a reward. Rewarding people who are doing the right thing is moral. Taxing them is punishment, an affliction, and is therefore immoral. Girls who get pregnant through illicit sex must face the consequences of their actions and bear the child. They become responsible for the child, and social programs for pre- and postnatal care just make them dependent. Guns are how the strict father protects his family from the dangers in the world. Environmental regulations get in the way of the good people, the disciplined ones pursuing their own self-interest. Nature, being lower on the moral hierarchy, is there to serve man as a resource. The Endangered Species Act gets in the way of people fulfilling their interests and is therefore immoral; people making money are more important than owls surviving as a species. And just as a strict father would never give up his authority, so a strong moral nation such as the United States should never give up its sovereignty to lesser authorities. It's a neatly tied-up package.

Conservative think tanks have done their job, working out such details and articulating them effectively. Many liberals are still largely unaware of their own moral system. Yet progressives have one.

THE NURTURANT PARENT FAMILY

It is assumed that the world *should be* a nurturant place. The job of parents is to nurture their children and raise their children to be nurturers. To be a nurturer you have to be empathetic and responsible (for yourself and others). Empathy and responsibility have many implications: Responsibility implies protection, competence, education, hard work and social connectedness; empathy requires freedom, fairness and honesty, two-way communication, a fulfilled life (unhappy, unfulfilled people are less likely to want others to be happy) and restitution rather than retribution to balance the moral books. Social responsibility requires cooperation and community building over competition. In the place of specific strict rules, there is a general "ethics of care" that says, "Help, don't harm." To be of good character is to be empathetic and responsible, in all of the above ways. Empathy and responsibility are the central values, implying other values: freedom, protection, fairness, cooperation, open communication, competence, happiness, mutual respect and restitution as opposed to retribution.

In this view, the job of government is to care for, serve and protect the population (especially those who are helpless), to guarantee democracy (the equal sharing of political power), to promote the well-being of all and to ensure fairness for all. The economy should be a means to these moral ends. There should be openness in government. Nature is seen as a source of nurture to be respected and preserved. Empathy and responsibility are to be promoted in every area of life, public and private. Art and education are parts of self-fulfillment and therefore moral necessities.

Progressive policies grow from progressive morality. Unfortunately, much of Democratic policy making has been issue by issue and program oriented, and thus doesn't show an overall picture with a moral vision. But, intuitively, progressive policy making is organized into five implicit categories that define both a progressive culture and a progressive form of government, and encompass all progressive policies. Those categories are:

Safety. Post–September 11, it includes secure harbors, industrial facilities and cities. It also includes safe neighborhoods (community policing) and schools (gun control); safe water, air and food (a poison-free environment); safety on the job; and products safe to use. Safety implies health—health care for all, pre- and postnatal care for children, a focus on wellness and preventive care, and care for the elderly (Medicare, Social Security and so on).

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Freedom. Civil liberties must be both protected and extended. The individual issues include gay rights, affirmative action, women's rights and so on, but the moral issue is freedom. That includes freedom of motherhood—the freedom of a woman to decide whether, when and with whom. It excludes state control of pregnancy. For there to be freedom, the media must be open to all. The airwaves must be kept public, and media monopolies (Murdoch, Clear Channel) broken up.

A Moral Economy. Prosperity is for everybody. Government makes investments, and those investments should reflect the overall public good. Corporate reform is necessary for a more ethical business environment. That means honest bookkeeping (e.g., no free environmental dumping), no poisoning of people and the environment and no exploitation of labor (living wages, safe workplaces, no intimidation). Corporations are chartered by and accountable to the public. Instead of maximizing only shareholder profits, corporations should be chartered to maximize stakeholder well-being, where shareholders, employees, communities and the environment are all recognized and represented on corporate boards.

The bottom quarter of our workforce does absolutely essential work for the economy (caring for children, cleaning houses, producing agriculture, cooking, day laboring and so on). Its members have earned the right to living wages and health care. But the economy is so structured that they can-

not be fairly compensated all the time by those who pay their salaries. The economy as a whole should decently compensate those who hold it up. Bill Clinton captured this idea when he declared that people who work hard and play by the rules shouldn't be poor. That validated an ethic of work, but also of community and nurturance.

Global Cooperation. The United States should function as a good world citizen, maximizing cooperation with other governments, not just seeking to maximize its wealth and military power. That means recognizing the same moral values internationally as domestically. An ethical foreign policy means the inclusion of issues previously left out: women's rights and education, children's rights, labor issues, poverty and hunger, the global environment and global health. Many of these concerns are now addressed through global civil society—international organizations dedicated to peacekeeping and nation building. As the Iraq debacle shows, this worldview is not naive; it is a more effective brand of realism.

The Future. Progressive values center on our children's future—their education, their health, their prosperity, the environment they will inherit and the global situation they will find themselves in. That is the moral perspective. The issues include everything from education (teacher salaries, class size, diversity) to the federal deficit (will they be burdened with our debt?) to global warming and the extinction of species (will there still be elephants and bananas?) to health (will their bodies be poisoned as a result of our policies, and will there be health care for them?). Securing that future is central to our values.

THESE ARE THE CENTRAL THEMES OF A PROGRESSIVE POLitics that comes out of progressive values. That is an important point. A progressive vision must cut across the usual program and interest-group categories. What we need are strategic initiatives that change many things at once. For example, the New Apollo Program—an investment of hundreds of billions over 10 years in alternative energy development (solar, wind, biomass, hydrogen) is also a jobs program, a foreign-policy issue (freedom from dependence on Middle East oil), a health issue (clean air and water, many fewer poisons in our bodies) and an ecology issue (cleans up pollution, addresses global warming). Corporate reform is another such strategic initiative.

PROMOTING A PROGRESSIVE FRAME

To articulate these themes and strategic initiatives, using government as an instrument of common purpose, we have to set aside petty local interests, work together and emphasize what unites us. Defeating radical conservatism gives us a negative impetus, but we will not succeed without a positive vision and cooperation.

An unfortunate aspect of recent progressive politics is the focus on coalitions rather than on movements. Coalitions are based on common self-interest. They are often necessary but they are usually short term, come apart readily and are hard to maintain. Labor-environment coalitions, for example, have been less than successful. And electoral coalitions with different interest-based messages for different voting blocks have left the Democrats without a general moral vision. Movements, on the other hand, are based on shared values, values that define who we are. They have a better chance of being broad-based and lasting. In short, progressives need to be thinking in terms of a broad-based progressive-values movement, not in terms of issue coalitions.

It is also time to stop thinking in terms of market segments. An awful lot of voters vote Democratic because of who they are, because they have progressive values of one kind or another—not just because they are union members or soccer moms. Voters vote their identities and their values far more than their self-interests.

PEOPLE ARE COMPLICATED. THEY ARE NOT ALL 100 PERCENT conservative or progressive. Everyone in this society has *both* the strict and nurturant models, either actively or passively—actively if they live by those values, passively if they can understand a story, movie or TV show based on those values. Most voters have a politics defined almost exclusively by one active moral worldview.

There are certain numbers of liberals and conservatives, of course, who are just not going to be swayed. The exact numbers are subject to debate, but from talking informally to professionals and making my own best guesses, I estimate that roughly 35 percent to 39 percent of voters overwhelmingly favor the progressive-Democratic moral worldview while another 35 percent to 38 percent of voters overwhelmingly favor the conservative-Republican moral worldview.

The swing voters—roughly 25 percent to 30 percent—have *both* worldviews and use them actively in different parts of their lives. They may be strict in the office and nurturant at home. Many blue-collar workers are strict at home and nurturant in their union politics. I have academic colleagues who are strict in the classroom and nurturant in their politics.

Activation of the progressive model among swing voters is done through language—by using a consistent, conventional language of progressive values. Democrats have been subject to a major fallacy: Voters are lined up left to right according to their views on issues, the thinking goes, and Democrats can get more voters by moving to the right. But the Republicans have not been getting more voters by moving to the left. What they do is stick to their strict ideology and activate their model among swing voters who have both models. They do this by being clear and issuing consistent messages framed in terms of conservative values. The moral is this: Voters are not on a left-to-right line; there is no middle.

Here is a cognitive scientist's advice to progressive Democrats: Articulate your ideals, frame what you believe effectively, say what you believe and say it well, strongly and with moral fervor.

Reframing is telling the truth as we see it—telling it forcefully, straightforwardly and articulately, with moral conviction and without hesitation. The language must fit the conceptual reframing, a reframing from the perspective of progressive values. It is not just a matter of words, though the right ones are needed to evoke progressive frames.

And stop saying "tax relief." ■

GEORGE LAKOFF *is a senior fellow at the Rockridge Institute and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of* Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think.