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# GEORGE LAKOFF MANIFESTO

*continued* ▶

by George Lakoff

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONSERVATIVES' MOST POWERFUL WEAPON

For the most part, liberals and progressives still don't understand what conservatives are doing to them. There have been major articles written recently on conservative think tanks (*New York Times* Sunday Magazine, July 25, 2004 and *Harper's*, September 1, 2004 ), but no discussion at all of the mechanism conservatives use to confound liberals and forever have them on the defensive.

That mechanism is called **framing**. Conservatives have managed to frame public debate on just about every issue. They have framed regulation as government interference in the free market, which is in turn framed as nature's way of optimizing wealth for all. Conservatives have framed poor people as undisciplined and to blame for their own poverty, environmentalists as tree huggers who care more about owls than people, criticism of government foreign policy as support for the enemy, and the Iraq War as part of a War on Terror. Yet, as much as liberals discuss politics, they still have not yet learned enough about framing to see how conservatives have won—and how liberals and progressives can become more effective in contributing to public discourse.

Framing is the conservatives' most important weapon. Framing is critical because a frame, once established in the mind of the reader (or listener, viewer, etc.) leads that person almost inevitably to the conclusion desired by the framer, and it blocks consideration of other possible facts and interpretations.

George Bush's frame around tax cuts as "relief" illustrates this: When conservatives discuss tax reduction, the phrase "tax relief" is repeated over and over. For there to

This manifesto is from George Lakoff's book, ***Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate***. To learn more about this book, click here.

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be “relief” there must be an affliction, an afflicted party harmed by the affliction, a reliever who takes the affliction away and is therefore a hero. And if anybody tries to stop the reliever, he’s a villain wanting the suffering to go on. Add “tax” and you have a metaphorical frame: Taxation is an affliction. The taxpayer is the afflicted party, the conservatives are heroes and the liberals are villains. The only sensible thing to do with taxes (as with any affliction) is to get rid of them. Entirely.

If the **facts don't fit** the frames,  
the **frames stay** and the **facts are ignored**.

Any time you hear the words “tax relief,” all of this is called up. The words are then repeated day after day, quoted in every newspaper, on every TV and radio station. The term becomes the way TV commentators and journalists talk about taxes. Pretty soon the liberals are talking about their “tax relief,” only for the middle class. By adopting the conservatives’ language, they have adopted one of their central ideas. Every time they use the words, they reinforce the idea.

The reason is that once phrases become part of everyday language, their frames become physically fixed in people’s brains. Once this happens, mere facts don’t matter. If the facts don’t fit the frames, the frames stay and the facts are ignored. Once the conservatives see their frames accepted, they have an overwhelming advantage in every debate. Their frames become the new common sense, because frames define what common sense is.

These properties of frames have consequences. If you negate a frame, you just re-inforce the frame. When Nixon, during Watergate, said on TV, “I am not a crook,” everyone thought of him as a crook. Denying a claim reinforces the claim. Another example, “There hasn’t been any tax relief for most people” reinforces the idea of taxation as an affliction. By using the other side’s words, you reinforce their frames. It’s a trap liberals continuously fall into.

By using the **other side’s** words, **you reinforce** their frames. **It’s a trap** liberals continuously **fall into**.

Another trap is the assumption that all you have to do is set the facts straight and people will reason to the right conclusion. Wrong! If the facts contradict the common-place frames, the frames will stay and the facts will be ignored. The 9–11 Commission Report argued that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with al Qaeda and the 9–11 attack. But speaker after speaker at the Republican convention referred to the Iraq War as part of the War on Terror, and it went by unquestioned by most commentators and millions of viewers. The frame is constantly being reinforced and has remained in the brains of a great many Americans. The facts won’t register—unless they are presented as part of a successful reframing of the issues.

The media seem unaware of how framing works. The conservatives’ most powerful weapon is barely discussed, because it is barely comprehended. As a cognitive linguist,

whose profession includes the scientific study of framing, I've decided to stop cursing the papers and television, and to do something about it.

Some colleagues and I have started a progressive think tank dedicated to reframing (the Rockridge Institute <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org>) and I've written a new book, called *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing).

Framing matters. You need to know how it works. Here are some helpful excerpts from the new book, which is available in *Don't Think of an Elephant!*

## WHAT UNITES PROGRESSIVES

To approach what unites progressives, we must first ask what divides them. Here are some of the common parameters that divide progressives from one another:

- » Local interests
- » Idealism versus pragmatism
- » Radical change versus moderate change
- » Militant versus moderate advocacy
- » Types of thought processes: socioeconomic, identity politics, environmentalist, civil libertarian, spiritual, and antiauthoritarian.

Programs are a major problem for attempts at unity. As soon as a program is made specific, the differences must be addressed. Progressives tend to talk about programs. But programs are not what most Americans want to know about. Most Americans

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want to know what you stand for, whether your values are their values, what your principles are, what direction you want to take the country in. In public discourse, values trump programs, principles trump programs, policy directions trump programs. I believe that values, principles, and policy directions are exactly the things that can unite progressives, if they are crafted properly. The reason that they can unite us is that they stand conceptually above all the things that divide us.

## IDEAS THAT MAKE US PROGRESSIVES

What follows is a detailed explication of each of those unifying ideas.

1. First, **values** coming out of a basic progressive vision
2. Second, **principles** that realize progressive values
3. Third, **policy directions** that fit the values and principles
4. And fourth, a **brief ten-word philosophy** that encapsulates all the above

## THE BASIC PROGRESSIVE VISION

The basic progressive vision is of community—of America as family, a caring, responsible family. We envision an America where people care about each other, not just themselves, and act responsibly with strength and effectiveness for each other.

We are all in the same boat. Red states and blue states, progressives and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats. United, as we were for a brief, beautiful moment just after September 11, not divided by a despicable culture war.

## THE LOGIC OF PROGRESSIVE VALUES

The progressive core values are family values—those of the responsible, caring family.

Caring and responsibility, carried out with strength: These core values imply the full range of progressive values. Here are those progressive values, together with the logic that links them to the core values.

- 1** Protection, fulfillment in life, fairness. When you care about someone, you want them to be protected from harm, you want their dreams to come true, and you want them to be treated fairly.
- 2** Freedom, opportunity, prosperity. There is no fulfillment without freedom, no freedom without opportunity, and no opportunity without prosperity.
- 3** Community, service, cooperation. Children are shaped by their communities. Responsibility requires serving and helping to shape your community. That requires cooperation.
- 4** Trust, honesty, open communication. There is no cooperation without trust, no trust without honesty, and no cooperation without open communication.

Just as these values follow from caring and responsibility, so every other progressive value follows from these. Equality follows from fairness, empathy is part of caring, diversity is from empathy and equality.

Progressives not only share these values, but also share political principles that arise from these values.

## PROGRESSIVE PRINCIPLES

**EQUITY.** What citizens and the nation owe each other. If you work hard, play by the rules, and serve your family, community, and nation, then the nation should provide a decent standard of living, as well as freedom, security, and opportunity.

**EQUALITY.** Do everything possible to guarantee political equality and avoid imbalances of political power.

**DEMOCRACY.** Maximize citizen participation; minimize concentrations of political, corporate, and media power. Maximize journalistic standards. Establish publicly financed elections. Invest in public education. Bring corporations under stakeholder control, not just stockholder control.

**GOVERNMENT FOR A BETTER FUTURE.** Government does what America's future requires and what the private sector cannot do—or is not doing—effectively, ethically, or at all. It is the job of government promote and, if possible, provide sufficient protection, greater democracy, more freedom, a better environment, broader prosperity, better health, greater fulfillment in life, less violence, and the building and maintaining of public infrastructure.

**ETHICAL BUSINESS.** Our values apply to business. In the course of making money by providing products and services, businesses should not adversely affect the public good, as defined by the above values.

**VALUES-BASED FOREIGN POLICY.** The same values governing domestic policy should apply to foreign policy whenever possible.

Here are a few examples where progressive domestic policy translates into foreign policy:

- » Protection translates into an effective military for defense and peacekeeping.
- » Building and maintaining a strong community translates into building and maintaining strong alliances and engaging in effective diplomacy.
- » Caring and responsibility translate into caring about:
  - and acting responsibly for the world's people;
  - world health, hunger, poverty, and ecology;
  - population control (and the best method, women's education);
  - rights for women, children, prisoners, refugees, and ethnic minorities.

All of these would be concerns of a values-based foreign policy.

## POLICY DIRECTIONS

Given progressive values and principles, progressives can agree on basic policy directions. Policy directions are at a higher level than specific policies. Progressives divide on specific policy details while agreeing on directions. Here are some of the many policy directions they agree on.

**THE ECONOMY.** An economy centered on innovation that creates millions of good-paying jobs and provides every American a fair opportunity to prosper.

**SECURITY.** Through military strength, strong diplomatic alliances, and wise foreign and domestic policy, every American will be safeguarded at home, and America's role in the world will be strengthened by helping people around the world live better lives.

**HEALTH.** Every American should have access to a state-of-the-art, affordable health care system.

**EDUCATION.** A vibrant, well-funded, and expanding public education system, with the highest standards for every child and school, where teachers nurture children's minds and often the children themselves, and where children are taught the truth about their nation—its wonders and its blemishes.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD.** Every child's brain is shaped crucially by early experiences. We support high-quality early childhood education.

**ENVIRONMENT.** A clean, healthy, and safe environment for ourselves and our children: water you can drink and air you can breathe. Polluters pay for the damage they cause.

**NATURE.** The natural wonders of our country are to be preserved for future generations.

**ENERGY.** We need to make a major investment in renewable energy, for the sake of millions of good-paying jobs, independence from Middle Eastern oil, improvements in public health, preservation of our environment, and the effort to halt global warming.

**OPENNESS.** An open, efficient, and fair government that tells the truth to our citizens and earns the trust of every American.

**EQUAL RIGHTS.** We support equal rights in every area involving race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

**PROTECTIONS.** We support keeping and extending protections for consumers, workers, retirees, and investors.

These and many other policy directions follow from our values and our principles.

## TEN-WORD PHILOSOPHIES

The conservatives have figured out their own values, principles, and directions, and have gotten them out in the public mind so effectively over the past thirty years that they can evoke them all in a ten-word philosophy: Strong Defense, Free Markets, Lower Taxes, Smaller Government, Family Values. We progressives have a different ten-word philosophy, but it won't be as meaningful yet because it will take us a while

to get our values, principles, and directions out there. My nomination for our ten-word philosophy versus theirs is the following:

PROGRESSIVES	CONSERVATIVES
STRONGER AMERICA	STRONG DEFENSE
BROAD PROSPERITY	FREE MARKETS
BETTER FUTURE	LOWER TAXES
EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT	SMALLER GOVERNMENT
MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY	FAMILY VALUES

- » A stronger America is not just about defense, but about every dimension of strength: our effectiveness in the world, our economy, our educational system, our health care system, our families, our communities, our environment, and so forth.
- » Broad prosperity is the effect that markets are supposed to bring about. But all markets are constructed for someone's benefit; no markets are completely free. Markets should be constructed for the broadest possible prosperity, and they haven't been.
- » Americans want and deserve a better future—economically, educationally, environmentally, and in all other areas of life—for themselves and their children. Lowering taxes, primarily for the super-rich elite, has had the effect of defunding programs that would make a better future possible in all these areas. The proper goal is a better future for all Americans.

- » Smaller government is, in conservative propaganda, supposed to eliminate waste. It is really about eliminating social programs. Effective government is what we need our government to accomplish to create a better future.
- » Conservative family values are those of a strict father family—authoritarian, hierarchical, every man for himself, based around discipline and punishment. Progressives live by the best values of both families and communities: mutual responsibility, which is authoritative, equal, two-way, and based around caring, responsibility (both individual and social), and strength.

The remarkable thing is just how much progressives do agree on. These are just the things that voters tend to care about most: our values, our principles, and the direction in which we want to take the nation.

I believe that progressive values are traditional American values, that progressive principles are fundamental American principles, and that progressive policy directions point the way to where most Americans really want our country to go. The job of unifying progressives is really the job of bringing our country together around its finest traditional values.

## HOW TO RESPOND TO CONSERVATIVES

Progressives are constantly put in positions where they are expected to respond to conservative arguments. It may be over Thanksgiving dinner, around the water cooler, or in front of an audience. But because conservatives have commandeered so much of the language, progressives are often put on the defensive with little or nothing to say in response.

The earlier chapters of *Don't Think of an Elephant!* are meant to explain who conservatives are, what they stand for, what kind of morality they see themselves as having, and how their family values shape their politics. They are also meant to make explicit what is usually felt but not articulated—progressive family values and how they carry over into progressive politics. And finally there is an introduction to framing—what mistakes to avoid and how to reframe, with some chapters providing examples of how framing works.

But sooner or later, you are called to act, to speak up. What do you do?

Progressive values are the best of traditional American values. Stand up for your values with dignity and strength. You are a true patriot because of your values.

- » Remember that right-wing ideologues have convinced half of the country that the strict father family model, which is bad enough for raising children, should govern our national morality and politics. This is the model that the best in American values has defeated over and over again in the course of our history—from the emancipation of the slaves to women's suffrage, Social Security and Medicare,

civil rights and voting rights acts, and Brown v. the Board of Education and Roe v. Wade. Each time we have unified our country more behind our finest traditional values.

- » Remember that everybody has both strict and nurturant models, either actively or passively, perhaps active in different parts of their lives. Your job is to activate for politics the nurturant, progressive values already there (perhaps only passively) in your interlocutors.
- » Show respect to the conservatives you are responding to. No one will listen to you if you don't accord them respect.
- » Listen to them. You may disagree strongly with everything that is being said, but you should know what is being said. Be sincere. Avoid cheap shots.
- » What if they don't show you respect? Two wrongs don't make a right. Turn the other cheek and show respect anyway. That takes character and dignity. Show character and dignity.
- » Avoid a shouting match. Remember that the radical right requires a culture war, and shouting is the discourse form of that culture war. Civil discourse is the discourse form of nurturant morality. You gain a victory when the discourse turns civil. They win when they get you to shout.

What if you have moral outrage? You should have moral outrage. But you can display it with controlled passion. If you lose control, they win.

- » Distinguish between ordinary conservatives and nasty ideologues. Most conservatives are personally nice people, and you want to bring out their niceness and their sense of neighborliness and hospitality.
- » Be calm. Calmness is a sign that you know what you are talking about.
- » Be good-humored. A good-natured sense of humor shows you are comfortable with yourself.
- » Hold your ground. Always be on the offense. Never go on defense. Never whine or complain. Never act like a victim. Never plead. Avoid the language of weakness, for example, rising intonations on statements. Your voice should be steady. Your body and voice should show optimism. You should convey passionate conviction without losing control.
- » Conservatives have parodied liberals as weak, angry (hence not in control of their emotions), weak-minded, softhearted, unpatriotic, uninformed, and elitist. Don't give them any opportunities to stereotype you in any of these ways. Expect these stereotypes, and deal with them when they come up.

By the way you conduct yourself, show strength, calmness, and control; an ability to reason; a sense of realism; love of country; a command of the basic facts; and a sense of being an equal, not a superior. At the very least you want your audience to think of you with respect, as someone they may disagree with but who they have to take seriously. In many situations this is the best you can hope for. You have to recognize those situations and realize that a draw with dignity is a victory in the game of being taken seriously.

Many conversations are ongoing. In an ongoing conversation, your job is to establish a position of respect and dignity, and then keep it.

- » Don't expect to convert staunch conservatives.
- » You can make considerable progress with biconceptuals, those who use both models but in different parts of their life. They are your best audience. Your job is to capture territory of the mind. With biconceptuals your goal is to find out, if you can by probing, just which parts of their life they are nurturant about. For example, ask who they care about the most, what responsibilities they feel they have to those they care about, and how they carry out those responsibilities. This should activate their nurturant models as much as possible. Then, while the nurturant model is active for them, try linking it to politics. For example, if they are nurturant at home but strict in business, talk about the home and family and how they relate to political issues.

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**EXAMPLE:** Real family values mean that your parents, as they age, don't have to sell their home or mortgage their future to pay for health care or the medications they need.

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- » Avoid the usual mistakes. Remember, don't just negate the other person's claims; reframe. The facts unframed will not set you free. You cannot win just by stating the true facts and showing that they contradict your opponent's claims. Frames trump facts. His frames will stay and the facts will bounce off. Always reframe.

- » If you remember nothing else about framing, remember this: Once your frame is accepted into the discourse, everything you say is just common sense. Why? Because that's what common sense is: reasoning within a commonplace, accepted frame.
- » Never answer a question framed from your opponent's point of view. Always reframe the question to fit your values and your frames. This may make you uncomfortable, since normal discourse styles require you to directly answer questions posed. That is trap. Practice changing frames.
- » Be sincere. Use frames you really believe in, based on values you really hold.
- » A useful thing to do is to use rhetorical questions: Wouldn't it be better if...? Such a question should be chosen to presuppose your frame.

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EXAMPLE: Wouldn't it be better if we had a president who went to war with a plan to secure the peace?

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- » Stay away from set-ups. Fox News shows and other rabidly conservative shows try to put you in an impossible situation, where a conservative host sets the frame and insists on it, where you don't control the floor, can't present your case, and are not accorded enough respect to be taken seriously. If the game is fixed, don't play.
- » Tell a story. Find stories where your frame is built into the story. Build up a stock of effective stories.

- » Always start with values, preferably values all Americans share like security, prosperity, opportunity, freedom, and so on. Pick the values most relevant to the frame you want to shift to. Try to win the argument at the values level. Pick a frame where your position exemplifies a value everyone holds—like fairness.

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**EXAMPLE:** Suppose someone argues against a form of universal health care. If people don't have health care, he argues, it's their own fault. They're not working hard enough or not managing their money properly. We shouldn't have to pay for their lack of initiative or their financial mismanagement.

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**FRAME SHIFT:** Most of the forty million people who can't afford health care work full-time at essential jobs that cannot pay enough to get them health care. Yet these working people support the lifestyles of the top three-quarters of our population. Some forty million people have to do those hard jobs—or you don't have your lifestyle. America promises a decent standard of living in return for hard work. These workers have earned their health care by doing essential jobs to support the economy. There is money in the economy to pay them. Tax credits are the easiest mechanism. Their health care would be covered by having the top two percent pay the same taxes they used to pay. It's only fair that the wealthy pay for their own lifestyles, and that people who provide those lifestyles get paid fairly for it.

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- » Be prepared. You should be able to recognize the basic frames that conservatives use, and you should prepare frames to shift to. The Rockridge Institute Web site (<http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org>) will post examples from time to time.

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**EXAMPLE:** Your opponent says, “We should get rid of taxes. People know how to spend their money better than the government.”

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**REFRAME:** “The government has made very wise investments with taxpayer money. Our interstate highway system, for example. You couldn’t build a highway with your tax refund. The government built them. Or the Internet, paid for by taxpayer investment. You could not make your own Internet. Most of our scientific advances have been made through funding from the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health—great government investments of taxpayer money. No matter how wisely you spent your own money, you’d never get those scientific and medical breakthroughs. And how far would you get hiring your own army with your tax refund?”

- » Use wedge issues, cases where your opponent will violate some belief he holds no matter what he says.

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**EXAMPLE:** Suppose he brings up abortion. Raise the issue of military rape treatment. Women soldiers who are raped (by our own soldiers, in Iraq, or on military bases) and who subsequently get pregnant presently cannot end their pregnancies in a military hospital, because abortions are not permitted there. A Military Rape Treatment Act would allow our raped women soldiers to be treated in military hospitals to end their rape-induced pregnancies.

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**THE WEDGE:** If he agrees, he sanctions abortion, in government-supported facilities no less, where doctors would have to be trained and facilities provided for terminating pregnancies. If he disagrees, he dishonors our women soldiers who are putting their lives on the line for him. To the women it is like being raped twice—once by a criminal soldier and once by a self-righteous conservative.

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- » An opponent may be disingenuous if his real goal isn't what he says his goal is. Politely point out the real goal, then reframe.

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**EXAMPLE:** Suppose he starts touting smaller government. Point out that conservatives don't really want smaller government. They don't want to eliminate the military, or the FBI, or the Treasury and Commerce Departments, or the nine-tenths of the courts that support corporate law. It is big government that they like. What they really want to do away with is social programs—programs that invest in people, to help people to help themselves. Such a position contradicts the values the country was founded on—the idea of a community where people pull together to help each other. From John Winthrop on, that is what our nation has stood for.

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- » Your opponent may use language that means the opposite of what he says, called Orwellian language. Realize that he is weak on this issue. Use language that accurately describes what he's talking about to frame the discussion your way.

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**EXAMPLE:** Suppose he cites the “Healthy Forests Initiative” as a balanced approach to the environment. Point out that it should be called “No Tree Left Behind” because it permits and promotes clear-cutting, which is destructive to forests and other living things in the forest habitat. Use the name to point out that the public likes forests, doesn't want them clear-cut, and that the use of the phony name shows weakness on the issue. Most people want to preserve the grandeur of America, not destroy it.

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- » Remember once more that our goal is to unite our country behind our values, the best of traditional American values. Right-wing ideologues need to divide our country via a nasty cultural civil war. They need discord and shouting and name-calling and put-downs. We win with civil discourse and respectful cooperative conversation. Why? Because it is an instance of the nurturant model at the level of communication, and our job is to evoke and maintain the nurturant model.

Those are a lot of guidelines. But there are only four really important ones:

1. Show respect
2. Respond by reframing
3. Think and talk at the level of values
4. Say what you believe

## info

**BUY THE BOOK**

For more details or to buy a copy of George Lakoff's book, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, click here.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

George Lakoff is Richard and Rhoda Goldman Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, and is a founding senior fellow at the Rockridge Institute. He is one of the world's best-known linguists. His expertise is in cognitive linguistics, the scientific study of the nature of thought and its expression in language.

Since the mid-1980s he has been applying cognitive linguistics to the study of politics, especially the framing of public political debate. He is the author of the influential book, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, (2nd edition, 2002). In addition to his work on political thought and language, he has been active in his academic discipline. He is currently on the Science Board of the Santa Fe Institute (1995-01, 2003-present), has served as President of the International Cognitive Linguistics Association and on the Governing Board of the Cognitive Science Society, and is co-director with Jerome Feldman of the Neural Theory of Language Project at the International Computer Science Institute at Berkeley.

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