How many times have you heard progressives profess utter bewilderment at the propensity of Bush supporters openly and willingly to vote against their own best interests?

George Lakoff, professor of cognitive science and linguistics at UC Berkeley, offers insights and explanations into both this question and the self-defeating response of the progressive community in his August 2004 book, "don't think about an elephant" [Chelsea Green Publishing, ISBN 1-931498-71-7].

According to Lakoff, rather than vote in their own interests, most voters act consistent with their image whom or what they wish they were or would like to be. Rather than view this diverse nation in something like its full complexity, most respond to national events and issues according to the role they see for themselves in one of two extreme models of the nuclear family: either that dominated by a stern, authoritarian father (although it is clear there are domineering matriachs sufficient for the most demanding taste ); or that led in a more-or-less gender neutral, cooperative, nurturing mode. In the worldview of the authoritarian model, we are all born bad and can be corrected only by stern discipline, ruthless competition and self-denial.

In the nurturing view, we are all born with potential to be good which has only to be encouraged and allowed to emerge. Voters gravitating to the former worldview, tend to be more comfortable with the conservative, or neo-con, agenda; those preferring the latter, tend to gravitate toward the progressive.

Lakoff further details how the conservative community has co-opted the language used to 'frame' the public's perception of issues confronting the electorate.

'Framing' is important because the vista of perceived solutions to any problem is limited, just as looking out a window, by what is and is not within the field of view. For a trivial example, telling a class of Berkeley frosh not think about an elephant guarantees the pachyderm will be on their minds. More significantly, since Bush took office, taxes have been routinely referred to publicly in terms of 'tax relief', as though taxes were an onerous burden, rather than obligatory dues owed by all for the maintenance and improvement of the general good. Even what constitutes the general good differs depending on viewpoint: in the authoritarian model, well-being is equated with wealth accumulation, and its attendant virtues of over-riding, self-serving self-interest, rapacious acquisitiveness, and disregard for the rights and welfare of others.

In the nurturing model, the well-being of the individual, family or community is directly linked to the welfare of others, within, adjacent to, or beyond any such grouping, so an ethic of sharing and
neighborliness is promoted. In the former, disparities between individuals' well-being and welfare are viewed as a natural result of differences in competitiveness. In the latter, such disparities are seen to result largely from defects in a dysfunctional social organization.

Practically, Lakoff argues that roughly a third of the American electorate supports primarily the authoritarian-family model for national governance, a third the nurturing-family model, and roughly a third moves from one mode of response to national events to the other depending on the specific issues.

Conservatives have effectively framed public discourse in terms that invoke the hyper-competitive view in which there are always, expectedly, winners and losers: the more of each, the better the system is working. Yet, in all the major religions there is the recognition that it is more blessed to give than to receive, that those who benefit from a society or social organization owe the most in return because the benefit they have received has been obtained from and through that social organization.

The failure of the progressives to frame debate in terms of the values they share - cooperation, sharing of both burden and benefits, equity and equality, caring and concern for the less-fortunate - has resulted in the conservatives' agenda prevailing by default. Lakoff suggests that the first step toward reversing the trend of the last twenty-five to fifty years, rather than defensively reacting to the world-view of the neo-cons, is take the initiative to frame public discussion in terms of the values and virtues of the nurturing model. For example, view taxes as our investment in the well-being of the future, not a burden but support of the infrastructure on which future well-being of all depends, not to be evaded by present recipients of the most benefit but owed in proportion to benefit already received.

This slim volume contains ten chapters divided into two sections. The first chapter consists of a brief description of Lakoff's vision how the 'framing' of public discourse both focuses and limits the range of debate. The next five are reprints of pungent, poignant Lakoff web-essays, with one exception from his writings for Alternet.org, dealing with Schwarzenegger, gay marriage and the runup to the present Iraq war. Although of possible historical interest, it is unfortunate that these were not recast in a present perspective instead of being included seemingly untouched from their original times and contexts.

In the second section, the last four chapters of the book detail specific proposals how the progressive community, rather than defensively playing catchup to neo-conservative framing, can counteract their agenda, retake the initiative in a dynamic, pro-active way, and recapture the imagination and enthusiasm of a much more substantial fraction of the American electorate than at present: in Ghandi's words, "Be the change you want!"

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