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Who Framed George Lakoff?

By *EVAN R. GOLDSTEIN*

A noted linguist reflects on his tumultuous foray into politics

George P. Lakoff is falling asleep. It is a bright summer afternoon in San Francisco, and Lakoff is nursing a latte at a small table near the entrance of a bustling, sun-dappled cafe. "This is what happens when you are 67," he explains sheepishly after dozing off midsentence. A stocky man with a wide smile and a well-trimmed white beard, Lakoff doesn't seem tired so much as beleaguered.

For years he's been at the center of some of the biggest intellectual disagreements in linguistics (most famously with Noam Chomsky) and has helped create an important interdisciplinary field of study, cognitive linguistics, that is reshaping our understanding of the complex relationship between language and thought. More recently he has been vying for respect among people notoriously hard to persuade about anything — politicians and their financial backers. So this summer he has been on the road promoting his new book, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics With an 18th-Century Brain* (Viking), which argues that liberals have clung to the false belief that people think in a conscious, logical, and unemotional manner and that this belief has doomed Democrats' chances with voters.

But transferring scholarly ideas into political practice can be tricky. After a heady few years when he seemed the person Democratic policy makers wanted on the other end of the telephone, Lakoff is finding that what they're asking for — and are willing to put money behind — is not always what he can provide. Lakoff's foray into politics is a story marked by intellectual breakthroughs, the allure of influence, and a fall from great heights. Yet his lifetime work permeates several disciplines and continues to spur cognitive researchers to go off in new directions.

Lakoff's impact has reached "across the social sciences and humanities," says John A. Goldsmith, a professor of linguistics and computer science at the University of Chicago. "He has always aimed at a larger audience." Goldsmith is co-author of a book on the Lakoff-Chomsky feud, *Ideology and Linguistic Theory: Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates* (Routledge, 1995). Says Gilles Fauconnier, an emeritus professor of cognitive science at the University of California at San Diego and another founder of cognitive linguistics: "Lakoff has shown more curiosity and more initiative than many other social scientists or linguists of his

generation in being willing to go against the mainstream."

That tendency to go against the tide has been a feature of Lakoff's career since the beginning. In the late 1960s, Lakoff joined company with some of Chomsky's students and colleagues and began pushing the noted scholar's landmark theory of generative grammar in more expansive directions, in particular toward the study of meaning. Chomsky maintained that linguistics methodology required that a line be drawn between the meaning of language and the function of language (syntax). Lakoff and his fellow dissidents, who became known as generative semanticists, considered such a distinction arbitrary and wrong-headed. One generative semanticist equated it to a theory of the stomach that ignores digestion. Around the same time, Lakoff began a career-long habit of making incursions into other fields — philosophy and psychology in particular — and incorporating some of those findings into his linguistics scholarship.

The tension between the two camps was palpable during a series of famous lectures that Chomsky gave at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology beginning in 1967, in which Chomsky began to challenge the work Lakoff and his colleagues were doing. Chomsky felt the generative semanticists were leading linguistics into areas so tangentially related to language that he questioned whether they were doing linguistics at all. With Lakoff and other dissident linguists often in the audience, Chomsky's lecture hall became a scene of intense, acid-tongued intellectual combat.

One illustrative episode, recounted in Randy Allen Harris's *The Linguistics Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1993), has Lakoff repeatedly interrupting Chomsky to shout, "Noam! Noam! You're wrong!" At another point, Lakoff interjects: "I have been lecturing about these things, and if you are interested, you should come to my class." As Harris, a professor of rhetoric and communication design at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, notes wryly, "the level of gall required for anyone, let alone a junior lecturer, to tell the inventor of the field to attend his classes if he wanted to stay current goes right off the chutzpah meter."

Though there remains some debate about how the linguistics wars ended, Chomsky is widely regarded as having retained his place at the center of the discipline. It's his theories that you'll find today in most linguistics textbooks. "When the intellectual history of this age is written, Chomsky is the only linguist whom anybody will remember," says Geoffrey Nunberg, an adjunct professor at the School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley and a consulting professor of linguistics at Stanford University.

While the scars have not healed for Lakoff — "It was a nasty period, and it has remained nasty," he says — he nevertheless emerged as a major force within the discipline. Deciding to get "as far away from Chomsky as possible," he went first to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and then to the University of California at Berkeley, where he is still a professor of cognitive science and linguistics.

There he helped make the West Coast the epicenter of cognitive linguistics, which extends far beyond linguistics' traditional focus on overt and observable linguistic structures into the broader realm of cognition. "Language is only the tip of the iceberg of very elaborate mental processes that are going on when we talk and when we think," says Fauconnier. "And those mental processes, those cognitive operations, define the human species and play a role not just for language but in many forms of thought and action that humans have."

In his new book, Lakoff takes aim at "Enlightenment reason," the belief that reason is conscious, logical, and unemotional. Harnessing together work from several fields, particularly psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics, he mounts a polemical assault on the notion that people think rationally — which, he argues, is fundamentally at odds with how the brain actually functions.

Approximately 2 percent of the millions of pieces of information the brain absorbs every minute are processed consciously. The remaining 98 percent are handled by the unconscious brain. The mind, in other words, is like a tiny island of conscious reasoning afloat in a vast sea of automatic processes. In that sea, which Lakoff calls "the cognitive unconscious," most people's ideas about morality and politics are formed. We are all, in many respects, strangers to ourselves. Lakoff's book grandly describes what he believes are the revolutionary implications of his findings: "a new understanding of what it means to be a human being; of what morality is and where it comes from; of economics, religion, politics, and nature itself; and even of what science, philosophy, and mathematics really are." (He singles Chomsky out as "the ultimate figure of the Old Enlightenment.")

It is the political ramifications of Lakoff's theory that preoccupy him these days. An unabashed liberal (he insists on the label "progressive"), he says that Republicans have been quick to realize that the way people think calls for placing emotional and moral appeals at the center of campaign strategy. (He suspects that they gleaned their knowledge from marketing, where some of the most innovative work on the science of persuasion is taking place.) Democrats, Lakoff bemoans, have persisted in an old-fashioned assumption that facts, figures, and detailed policy prescriptions win elections. Small wonder that in recent years the cognitive linguist has emerged as one of the most prominent figures demanding that Democrats take heed of the cognitive sciences and abandon their faith in voters' capacity to reason.

The roots of the cognitive revolution in the social sciences are numerous and wide-ranging, but Lakoff traces his own story to Berkeley in 1975, when he attended a series of lectures that prompted him to embrace a theory of the mind that is fully embodied. Lakoff came to believe that reason is shaped by the sensory-motor system of the brain and the body. That idea ran

counter to the longstanding belief — Lakoff traces it back 2,500 years to Plato — that reason is disembodied and that one can make a meaningful distinction between mind and body.

One of the most influential lectures Lakoff heard that summer was delivered by Charles J. Fillmore, now an emeritus professor of linguistics at the university, who was developing the idea of "frame semantics" — the theory that words automatically bring to mind bundles of ideas, narratives, emotions, and images. He called those related concepts "frames," and he posited that they are strengthened when certain words and phrases are repeated. That suggested that language arises from neural circuitry linking many distinct areas of the brain. In other words, language can't be studied independently of the brain and body. Lakoff concluded that linguistics must take into account cognitive science.

The field of cognitive linguistics was born, and Lakoff became one of its most prominent champions. But it wasn't until the mid-1990s that he began thinking through some of the political implications of framing. Startled by the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in 1994, Lakoff set about looking for conceptual coherence in what he saw as the seemingly arbitrary positions that defined modern conservatism. What thread connected a pro-life stance with opposition to many social programs, or a hostility toward taxes with support of the death penalty? Lakoff concluded that conservatives and liberals are divided by distinct worldviews based on the metaphor of the nation as a family. Conservatives tend to relate to a "strict father" mode, which explains why they are concerned with authority, obedience, discipline, and punishment. Liberals, on the other hand, perceive the nation as a "nurturant parent," an empathic presence dedicated to protection, empowerment, and community. Swing voters harbor both frames.

That schema is at the center of Lakoff's seminal 1996 book (reissued by the University of Chicago Press in 2002), *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. In working out his theory, Lakoff found that people tend to vote not on specific issues but rather for the candidate who best reflects their moral system by evoking the right "frames." Consider the phrase "tax relief," an effective staple of the Republican lexicon. According to Lakoff, the word "relief" elicits a frame in which taxes are seen as an affliction. And every time the phrase "tax relief" is heard or read by people, the relevant neural circuits are instinctively activated in their brains, the synapses connecting the neurons get stronger, and the view of taxation as an affliction is unconsciously reinforced.

Moreover, Lakoff believes, policy can be crafted to change the neurological landscape of peoples' brains — what he calls "cognitive policy making." For example, he is particularly enthused about Sky Trust, a proposal to reduce carbon emissions developed by Peter Barnes, a founder of the Working Assets Funding Service. The policy is constructed on a foundation of two frames. The first is that

oil, coal, and gas companies have polluted the environment and stymied the development of clean and renewable energy alternatives. The second frame is that the air over the United States is owned by the people of the United States. Why should private companies be allowed to dump pollutants into the public's air at no cost?

If Sky Trust were law, all carbon-based fuel companies would participate in an annual auction to buy "pollution permits," which would determine how much energy they could sell. The proceeds would go into a trust, with an equal share of the money going to every American — around \$1,000 per person the first year. Just as important, Lakoff explains, Sky Trust would reinforce the frame that Americans own the air, while also creating a new frame that the air is more valuable clean than polluted.

In May 2003, Lakoff got his chance to directly influence politics. Invited to address a gathering of Democratic senators at their annual retreat on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, he encountered a scene filled with despair. President Bush was enjoying record-high approval ratings, which he had parlayed into historic gains for the Republicans in the 2002 midterm elections. Karl Rove, Bush's chief political strategist, was speaking plausibly of building a durable Republican majority.

The beleaguered senators were primed for a solution. Lakoff offered one: Learn the art of framing, and you can turn the electoral tide. The idea carried the allure of a quick fix. And Lakoff — who exudes unflagging self-confidence — became a political player.

He had been allotted 20 minutes to make his pitch. "As it turned out, they gave me 35," he recalls. "The senators were blown away." True enough. Tom Daschle, then-leader of the Senate Democrats, asked Lakoff to extend his stay on the East Coast and return with him to Washington. On Capitol Hill a few days later, the scholar joined a meeting of other Democratic senators. "When I entered the room, these senators got up and hugged me," Lakoff says. "It was an awesome situation."

Bush's re-election the following November put more pressure on Democrats. As their stock plummeted, Lakoff's skyrocketed. Shortly before the 2004 midterms, a small environmental press in Vermont, Chelsea Green, published his *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate — The Essential Guide for Progressives*, a hastily assembled primer for liberal activists. The slender paperback sold an improbable 250,000 copies and was distributed to every Democrat in the House of Representatives.

Inundated with invitations to brief lawmakers, strategists, and advocacy organizations, Lakoff began a life of perpetual motion, dashing to engagements around the country. Howard Dean, at that time mounting a surprisingly successful insurgent bid for the Democratic presidential nomination, predicted that Lakoff would be "one of the most influential political thinkers of the progressive

movement when the history of this century is written." The conservative National Review joked, "If the American Left believed in sainthood, they would have resolved to beatify George Lakoff by now." There was even a DVD, *How Democrats and Progressives Can Win: Solutions From George Lakoff*.

Over the next four years, Lakoff brought out three more books: *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); *Whose Freedom?: The Battle Over America's Most Important Idea* (Farrar, 2006) — about the right's largely successful attempt to redefine freedom as relief from government intervention — and, most recently, *The Political Mind*. All the while, Lakoff continued to teach at Berkeley and churn out white papers from his office at the Rockridge Institute, a think tank that he helped start in 2000 to promote the use of framing by progressive candidates and issues. (It closed in April because of lack of funds.)

Just as quickly as Lakoff's star rose, a backlash began. For a few years, "he was the man of the hour from top to bottom and bottom to top on the part of floundering Democrats," says Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University and author, most recently, of *The Bulldozer and the Big Tent: Blind Republicans, Lame Democrats, and the Recovery of American Ideals* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007). "He was more than the flavor of the week. He was the messianic flavor, the flavor to end all flavors."

Gitlin recalls running into Lakoff at a progressive-policy conference in Washington in 2005, after not seeing him since their time as colleagues at Berkeley in the early 1990s. "He'd changed," Gitlin recalls. "He was very tense and embattled."

Shortly before the meeting, *The Atlantic* had run an article by Marc Cooper, a lecturer at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Titled "Thinking of Jackasses," the essay dismissed Lakoff's work as "psychobabble as electoral strategy." Next the magazine published an essay by Joshua Green, a senior editor, "It Isn't the Message, Stupid." Green derided Lakoff for offering no new ideas and questioned whether the Democratic Party could bring about its own reversal of fortune merely with "snazzier packaging and a new sales pitch."

Lakoff was particularly stung when Rahm Emanuel, an influential Democratic representative from Illinois, devoted an entire chapter of a book to attacking him. In *The Plan: Big Ideas for America* (PublicAffairs, 2006), Emanuel and his co-author Bruce Reed, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, rejected the view that the Democrats' problems stemmed from an inability to get their message out; the problem was the substance of that message. Framing, the authors said, amounted to little more than slapping a new coat of paint on failed old ideas. Most cutting to Lakoff, they called him one of the "highbrows" who harbored the "fallacy that we can game history to our advantage." Although *The Plan* might not

have been read much beyond the insulated world of political strategists and consultants, it made Lakoff a persona non grata on Capitol Hill. "All of a sudden I was controversial," Lakoff says.

Another intellectual blow was delivered by Steven Pinker, an evolutionary and cognitive psychologist at Harvard University. Writing in *The New Republic* in 2006, Pinker chastised Lakoff for his "cartoonish depiction of progressives as saintly sophisticates and conservatives as evil morons" and declared his political efforts "a train wreck" and "jejune nonsense." Lakoff blasted back with an essay-length reply on *The New Republic's* Web site. He accused Pinker of misrepresenting his ideas and falling prey to his own ideological blinders, such as the view that thought is universal and disembodied rather than an emotional process that relies on frames, image-schemas, and metaphors. The spat endured for another round, a distilled version of which appeared in the journal *Public Policy Research* (March-May, 2007).

It is sometimes difficult when reading Lakoff to know where his political advocacy ends and his cognitive-linguistics scholarship begins. When I ask him about that, he acknowledges that his political celebrity has put a strain on his scholarly work, but he insists that he has not abandoned linguistics for politics: "The work I do in politics is linguistics, it is linguistics about political subjects — it is advocacy linguistics." That means, he says, "I do a simple linguistic analysis, and then I say based on that analysis you should do this, this, and that. But it all rests on doing the linguistics."

Owen Flanagan, a professor of neurobiology at Duke University, is even more skeptical than Pinker, declaring Lakoff a member of the "neuroenthusiasta," his term for cognitive scientists who overstate the implications of their research, and the journalists who breathlessly hype their findings. According to Flanagan, brain science is only helpful to the extent that it tells us something we don't already know. To illustrate his point, he offers an analogy: When children learn how to ride a bike, something changes in their brains. If a scientist offers parents a detailed description of that neurological transformation, it might be interesting, but it won't help children learn to ride a bike.

Similarly, Flanagan sees Lakoff's insight — that successful politicians know how to use emotionally appealing narratives to rally support — as "one of the main topics in ancient political philosophy." Understanding it has nothing to do with neuroscience, he says. "But as soon as you put 'neuro' in front of an idea, especially an old idea, it sounds interesting to people in a way that it wouldn't if you just said, Hey, I have an idea. It is a way of credentializing yourself."

Lakoff himself says that the politicians and news media who courted him had only a superficial understanding of his work. He knew things had gone wrong when he was invited to a meeting in 2006

with Bill Clinton and a team of political strategists. Lakoff says that he delivered a short presentation emphasizing how the Democrats' strategy for the midterm elections should highlight progressive morals, ideas, and principles but that Clinton kept bringing the conversation back to slogans, phrasing, and marketing. "It became clear to me that I was brought there as a spinmeister," Lakoff says. "Finally I gave up."

Most of the politicians never got "the metaphor stuff" — how people's political perspectives are unconsciously shaped by their understanding of the nation as a family. I ask him whether anyone in Washington got it. He pauses for a long moment, finally offering up Howard Dean, who wrote the foreword to *Don't Think of an Elephant!* Gitlin says that it should come as no surprise to any academic that "people involved in professional politics are not interested in intellectual revolutions."

Lakoff is often compared with Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster and rhetorical strategist who created such phrases as "The Clear Skies Initiative" (for President Bush's plan to cut power-plant emissions) and "the death tax" (as opposed to the less ominous "estate tax"). Lakoff bristles at the comparison. "I'm not the Democratic Frank Luntz," he says flatly. But even Dean was quoted in *The Atlantic* vowing to "make George Lakoff the Democrats' Frank Luntz."

"In a way, George fell victim to the expectations established by Luntz," says Nunberg. "I think Pelosi and the Democrats wanted a Luntz of their own. And though Luntz is no theorist, he is better with language." (As evidence of Lakoff's "tin ear," he cites Lakoff's proposals to call taxes "membership fees" and trial lawyers "public-protection attorneys.")

Lakoff is plainly tired of his political reputation. "Someone calls you a guru, you hate it, but you can't stop it," he says. But even some of his friends and supporters say that he undermined his own credibility. Peter Teague, a program director at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, was one of Lakoff's first major political patrons in 2002, providing two grants totaling \$195,000 to the Rockridge Institute for Lakoff to serve as a resource to other progressive organizations. Teague was initially drawn to Lakoff's framing work because it was not about spin. "I loved that he said if you are just doing message you are going to continue to do it wrong, and that if we are going to give birth to a new kind of politics, we have to do it in a way that challenges old assumptions and old ways of doing business," he says. "The communications piece has to be the expression of a coherent whole."

But Teague quickly became disillusioned. "If Teddy Kennedy or Nancy Pelosi or Harry Reid got on the phone and said, 'George, we need new words, we need to reframe our response on national security,' George would give an immediate answer, he would provide a set of better words," he says. "George became the guy he

criticized. He became a spinmeister." Teague recalled numerous conversations during which Lakoff agreed that he had made a mistake. "And the next thing you know, he would do the exact same thing again."

Teague continues to consider Lakoff a friend. The tragedy, he says, is that at the very moment when people were intensely interested in his work, Lakoff's actions diminished his influence.

According to Gilles Fauconnier, the enormous expectations that surrounded Lakoff's ideas were fed by the public's lack of understanding about brain science. "There is a pervasive folk theory in the media that scientists can look at an fMRI or a brain scan and link specific brain activity to specific behaviors, but that is completely exaggerated," he says. What Lakoff and others have, in fact, shown are the ways in which frames and metaphors — what Fauconnier calls "backstage cognition" — affect people's thinking and behavior. Fauconnier insists that a genuine paradigm shift would occur if politicians took such unconscious processes into account. "But there is a lot of inertia against this revolution," he cautions. A lot of the social sciences, in particular, he says, were built on a belief in human rationality.

Will the revolution succeed? Fauconnier says it is too early to tell. "It is still a minority view in academe. But thanks to people like George, who has shown incredible energy, we have made strides."

Lakoff acknowledges that both academic and political cultures are slow to change. But he is optimistic, pointing to the way in which the growth of cognitive psychology has undermined the rational-actor model that long dominated economics. In his own field, Lakoff predicts that "brain-based linguistics" will soon become the new standard — indeed, eclipsing Chomsky.

And despite his setbacks, Lakoff is not giving up on politics. He is still confident that his ideas can make a difference to Democrats. When he wrote *Thinking Points*, his handbook for progressive activism, he sent the first copy to Barack Obama. "I don't know if he read it," Lakoff says, as a wide grin flashes across his face, "but a number of people have observed that if you look through *Thinking Points*, it is the Obama campaign."

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