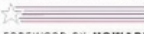


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

"one of the most influential political thinkers
of the progressive movement"
Howard Dean

don't think of an elephant!
KNOW YOUR VALUES AND FRAME THE DEBATE
 **GEORGE LAKOFF**
FOREWORD BY **HOWARD DEAN** INTRODUCTION BY **DON HAZEN**

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR PROGRESSIVES

Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives

George Lakoff, Howard Dean (Foreword), Dan Hazen (Introduction)

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Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives George Lakoff , Howard Dean (Foreword) , Dan Hazen (Introduction)

Don't Think of An Elephant! is the antidote to the last forty years of conservative strategizing and the right wing's stranglehold on political dialogue in the United States.

Author George Lakoff explains how conservatives think, and how to counter their arguments. He outlines in detail the traditional American values that progressives hold, but are often unable to articulate. Lakoff also breaks down the ways in which conservatives have framed the issues, and provides examples of how progressives can reframe them.

Lakoff's years of research and work with leading activists and policy makers have been distilled into this essential guide, which shows progressives how to think in terms of values instead of programs, and why people support policies which align with their values and identities, but which often run counter to their best interests.

Don't Think of an Elephant! is the definitive handbook for understanding and communicating effectively about key issues in the 2004 election, and beyond. Read it, take action—and help take America back.

Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives Details

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From Reader Review Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives for online ebook

Trevor says

I read the original version of this when it first came out. I was working as an industrial officer in a trade union at the time and the idea we needed to start finding a way to reframe the debate to make social justice more relevant seemed pretty urgent. I don't remember being all that impressed with the book to be honest. But I think I'm much more impressed with it now. I've a feeling that is because I've read much more by the author and now know he isn't just a 'self-help' kind of author, although, because this book is clearly written for a general audience, it almost seems like that, and certainly that was how I've thought of it since.

The main argument here is that the right have been much more effective at getting their message across to their constituency than the left have been. After three-and-a-half decades of 'neoliberalism' - that is, an obsession with selling off government assets, reducing programs designed to help the poor, savage attacks on public schools, hospitals, and endless wars that have reduced entire regions to barely functioning hell-holes for the sake of sucking out their oil and natural resources (think Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan), and while this has been supported by both sides of politics in the Anglophone nations of the world - there is barely a left voice left in politics.

The right has been fighting a culture war and they have been winning. That we now have someone of the stature of Trump groping wildly at the international body politic shows the depth of the problem we face. It feels like sanity itself has been grabbed by the pussy - that that is a joke I can make about the 'leader of the free world' beggar's belief.

The problem for the left identified in this book is one of framing. But I think this is the wrong word. Framing has a feel about it that seems to imply 'lying'. It implies 'spin'. And really, the left doesn't need spin, it doesn't need to be caught distorting the truth to make its message sound appealing, in fact, I feel the exact opposite is what is needed. What the left needs is to speak its values. For too long the left has sought 'the sensible middle' and this has meant the debate has moved further and further to the right. It is impossible to motivate your constituency when they struggle to see any difference between the candidate on your side and the one on the other side. The problem isn't spin, the problem is the left has stopped talking about the things that differentiate them from the right, and so people support the side they know believes what they are saying, rather than the mealy-mouthed who don't say anything just in case they offend corporate investors or Rupert Murdoch or white supremacists or god knows who else.

It is only by being prepared to shift the debate to our values that there is some hope of some form of passion being reintroduced into the political debate. In fact, it is only if we start stressing our values that there is some hope of us causing divisions in the right itself. Michael Apple talks about this in his *Educating the Right Way* - that the left doesn't think about the natural divisions that exist in the right between conservatives, managerialists, fundamentalist Christians, libertarians. There are issues that the left might well be able to struggle around and then unite with each of these groups over, even though they are fundamentally opposed by other sections of the right - but the left has proven remarkably ineffective at doing this. Unity never seems to be the left's strong suit. And it is not just ideological purity that is the problem. The problem is also an inability forthrightly construct issues so as to present left-values clearly enough to make those values more generally appealing. Like I said, we are more likely to be mealy-mouthed than forthright.

As Lakoff says, if you try to win an argument with facts alone you lose. This is because people don't judge arguments on the basis of facts, but on the basis of their values. And if the facts don't fit their values, then the facts are ignored.

The mistake that might be taken from this idea is to think that since people's values are fixed, there isn't really any way to shift people. We tend to think people are either progressive or conservative, and therefore essentially separate species. As someone who thinks of himself as on the far end of the spectrum of this condition, I'm somewhat prone to thinking in binary ways like this too - but really there are many people who don't fall into the right/left binary at all. In fact, most people (and it grieves me to say this) fall somewhere in the middle. That means that how an issue is framed for them can be enough to tip them one way or the other - and for decades the left has allowed how issues are framed to match right wing passions, rather than those of the left. This is often because the right have been much more likely to stress fear and selfishness - and, as Bynug-Chul Hun says somewhere, no is always louder than yes.

An interesting phenomenon, I hadn't noticed until it was pointed out at a lecture I attended recently, is that Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders are aging, baby-boomer, white guys. The point being that since the left allowed itself to die at some stage around 1980 the only people left who remember left-wing rhetoric are 'of a certain age'. This is probably putting the case a bit more strongly than it really should be put - but it illustrates the point I want to make - both men have shown that what might be termed traditional left-wing policies has an audience, and that audience is prepared to listen. When the best on offer to combat Trump is Clinton (hey, I can be as bloody nasty as any man, Killary), then, god help us. Don't get me wrong, I would have voted for her if I could vote in the US election - but if that is as good as the choice gets, then we need to change the rules.

I think, ultimately, this book is saying that we need to go back to speaking from our own values and that that is the only way we can have any hope of countering the values laden vision of the right. That is, you don't counter their vision with facts, you don't counter their vision with compromise - you counter their vision with your vision.

A big part of the point of this book is to encourage the left to stop using the language (and I would also say the policies too) of the right. Because, when you do use that language, and you might even be speaking against it, you are reinforcing the system of values that produced that language in the first place. That is, we need to start speaking of the future as if we believed in our vision for that future. Climate change is an interesting case in point. The right should be terrified of the climate change debate, but it is almost as if it is the left that is terrified. I mean, humanity is removing the basis upon which life on this planet depends - and we are doing that so that a couple of already absurdly wealthy men can become marginally more wealthy. That is, we are destroying life on the planet for everyone to improve the life of a couple of billionaires in ways they won't even notice. The utter absurdity of the situation is what we need to stress, as well as the fact that if we do something now we might actually leave a planet worth living in for our kids but if we don't, we won't.

Now look, I get it, there are lots of people who think Jesus is going to come down from the clouds and wave his magic cross and put all the trees back on the hills and all the coal back in the ground - and those people are morons and there's not a lot we can do for them. I know, it's sad, but some people are beyond help. But I believe most people would rather do something to clean a stream than to shit in it and hope their sky god will clean it up afterwards. I think there is a natural revulsion to the idea we are killing the planet. The point isn't to convince the most rabid climate change denier that he is a moron, but rather to give the majority of people some hope that they can do something that will mean they will be able to breathe clean air or swim in the ocean and that these things shouldn't be cast aside as the 'price of progress'.

After decades of the right-wing ascendancy, the time for the left to start stating their values has come. It's urgent, there is NO TIME otherwise.

????? ?????????????? says

[illegible]

Manny says

The question this book poses is a very good one. In the US, Democrats and Republicans disagree on almost everything. Why is that?

Lakoff's answer is that it all goes back to different ways of thinking about the concept of the family. Republicans assume that people are fundamentally bad. They think in terms of an authoritarian father-figure, who expects to be obeyed, and in return protects the family both from a hostile outside world and from their own mistaken desires. Democrats assume that people are fundamentally good, and see the parents' role as nurturing children and helping them coexist with the rest of society. I don't completely believe his analysis, but it's interesting.

The later sections give advice on how the Democrats should "reframe" political issues so as to present them from their own perspective, rather than falling into the trap of accepting the Republicans' way of viewing them. I wonder if the successful Obama campaign used some of these insights?

Ana M. Román says

Me recomendaron este libro en una charla, una persona que entiende del tema y lo cierto es que es una lectura interesante aunque hay algunas cosas que se repetían en exceso. Plantea unas premisas interesantes. Especialmente útil si eres estadounidense pero también si no lo eres porque las ideas que plantea pueden aplicarse en muchos ámbitos y no sólo el político.

Este es un libro que los liberales deberían leer y que si los conservadores leen lo mismo se plantean a quien votan. También hay que tener en cuenta que tal y como el mismo autor afirma, él es liberal.

Leslie says

This book is an unsettlingly convincing analysis of a frame that unifies the Republican's political platform: the government as a strict father. He explains a decades-long strategy to train bright minds and coach leaders to use coherent language and dominate the media. Consequently, the argument goes, the Republicans define our concepts of most important issues, while the Democrats are left to argue against them, still using their language. He advocates that the Democrats evolve their own language under the frame of a nurturant parent. Doing so would allow them to communicate their goals more effectively to the public. Such communication is important because voters vote their values rather than their best interests.

It is fascinating how deeply embedded in our cultural subconscious - and yet how evocative - the symbolic language he analyses are. For example, he discusses Bush's use of "permission slip" when he was arguing for us to enter the war with Iraq despite lack of collaboration from the UN. It is true that anyone who understands the strict father model will swallow this whole without needing to consider all its implications. It screams, "Of course we're the ones in control. We're not the schoolkids. In fact, the positions are reversed - we've got to show all those underdeveloped UN countries who don't know how to be as good as we are."

I probably need to spend some time on the Rockridge Institute website.

Nancy says

This slim volume on political framing by George Lakoff is sometimes referred to as a 101 to his many other publications. It goes a long way in explaining why the left and right struggle with meaningful conversations. This is another incarnation of a book originally published in 2004. Lakoff is a cognitive scientist and linguist who has been teaching at Berkley since 1972. (Sidelight: "Berzerkly" as my brother would fondly call it. My bro moved there to complete a second master's degree in the 70's. Hence the name being inspired when a modest midwestern yet 'wild-eyed liberal Minnesotan' moves to that California hippy mecca in the Age of Aquarius!!) Lakoff only reinforces my belief that Republicans mask their true intentions of furthering the elite divide with the way they frame the debate. This sucks so many average people into voting against their own best interests. And it all lies in branding, image and language. Progressives are branded as socialists when we ultimately want the same freedom and equal opportunity. These are a direct threat to those with corporate and individual wealth and power. Of course they're going to deflect your vision.

I'm enough of a moderate to naively believe we all want the same thing but the ways we choose to go about it are vastly different. Obviously with the latest administration, the conservatives have the upper hand. Why they've succeeded is because the Republican party does a much better job at framing the discourse and finding a theme that unites them all. Progressives are left putting out big and little fires issue by issue with no cohesive thread to bind us together. We argue in ways that make the gap bigger by propelling us to either extreme offense or defense positions but seldom calm dialogue. Lakoff explains those vastly different means of approach with a metaphor of nation as family. The models being a strict father figure as opposed to the nurturant parent. When he goes on to expand these approaches to life in general and politics in particular, it explains much of the divide. There are also those who function with a little bit of both ideologies whom he refers to as biconceptuals. While one can hardly hope to change the mind of a far right winger, a surprising number of people fall in this middle range. Here is where one can have an influence and may find their values actually merge when framed properly.

Without going into a multiple paragraph analysis, this book may be short, but it is important and far from simple. I highlighted way too much and was left constantly putting it down to ponder the ramifications. I can't stress how MUCH I liked this and would highly recommend it to anyone wanting to find a civil discourse. I will definitely be looking Lakoff's more in-depth works.

*One added comment - much of this book truly was not new, but it must not be so obvious to some. I've got good friends whose angry postings over the current state of affairs only drives the wedges deeper. We tend to think as Lakoff said, "The facts will set you free." Unfortunately most right wing diehards are too caught up in the rhetoric they are blind to it. How and why that happens is what this book is about. And how can we open up the conversation to make a valid point without alienating??

Natalie says

Have you ever pondered why people driving old hooped mobiles plaster George W stickers on their bumpers? Or...Why do people struggling to pay their rent vote for Republican candidates?

Personally, I've always wondered how any teacher in a public school could ever support any conservative nut. It undermines everything we work for!

How? Why? We'll as an educator, I should have known, because I studied the way people learn in college. The basic research reveals that people learn from stories. Give a list of words tied to a story and any child or adult will remember it. If a seven-word sound bite proves catchy enough, a person will be hooked. People learn, remember, and base their personal, political, and moral decisions on frames.

This book points out that when Democrats talk, they talk. Look at my long commentary here:) They express relevant points, but consume so much time getting to them, that the average person flips to American Idol. Democrats believe the facts will set them free. However, as Ted Kennedy said, "Facts are stubborn things." Republicans know better. They possess a knack for words. In two to five words, their half can conjure up an image, and evoke an emotion. Repeat these few words enough, and a falsehood becomes a truth regardless of it's original origin. The book asks, What do you think of when you hear the words "tax relief" "Blue Skies Initiative" "Children and families" "Liberal Media" "Family Values" "Gay Marriage" "No Child Left Behind" "Spotted Owl" "UnAmerican" "For us or Against Us" "Accountability"

Republicans own the language, the media, and currently our country until the Democrats learn how to frame their positions. Their money proved well spent studying and discussing in think tanks. Republicans present a cohesive ideology that makes many feel immoral for rallying against. People feel compelled to vote against their own self-interests and Democrats support the cause and reinforce THEIR frames by adopting their language.

Every Democrat should read this book and do something fast, before the strict father kills the nurturing parent off for good!

Emilio says

PopSugar Reading Challenge #26. A book with an animal in the title

Un libro bastante formativo sobre el lenguaje político aunque se queda un poco corto.

No he leído ningún libro sobre este tipo de temas tan directo como este. No sé si eso es bueno para este libro o malo para todos los demás o yo soy un inculto en temas de política. Me recuerda a No Logo o a El mundo y sus demonios pero sobre el tema específico del lenguaje político.

El libro va de esa parte de la novela 1984 que habla de la neolengua, de que la paz es la guerra... Trata de cómo los polos políticos se apropian de campos semánticos (vida, progreso...), para no tener que hacer programas políticos de verdad. Lo hace muy bien, todo narrado de una forma muy amena. Pero hay un "pero" del tamaño de Canadá, la falta de coherencia o estructura.

Si fuera un tratado más sesudo de lenguaje político desde el principio hasta el final hubiera estado bien. Si hubiera sido un manual de discusión política tipo Dialectica Eristica pero sin risas tampoco hubiera estado mal. Tampoco hubiera estado mal un libro sobre análisis del lenguaje político basado en la anécdota. Pero pica en todas las flores sin definirse mucho. Y para un libro de menos de 300 páginas es demasiada dispersión.

El libro no está mal, es una buena aproximación al análisis del lenguaje político, le falta algo de Carl Sagan o un mucho de Christopher Hitchens por la parte de la necesidad de pensamiento crítico o combatividad y le sobra mucho de posicionamiento político. Incluso me pareció que se pierde en cuanto se posiciona políticamente. Aclaro que ni me parece mal su postura ni estoy alejado de sus opiniones, pero hace que el público que va a leerlo sin cerrar el libro sea el que ya piensa como él y al que no hace falta convencer. Tampoco da herramientas de análisis y cuando da alguna herramienta es para el debate político de salón/cuñadil y no para analizar o entender los mensajes políticos.

Muy recomendable si nunca has leído nada sobre análisis político porque es muy, muy introductorio. Si buscas algo académico o sesudo te lo puedes saltar.

Lori says

Trigger warning for progressive politics!

Betsy Robinson says

Although it is only 168 pages and subtitled "The essential progressive guide for the issues that define our future . . .," cognitive scientist George Lakoff has written an opus, not a quick-fix, sound-bite-loaded little guide. Often it suffers from too much detail, but I'm giving it five stars for the sections that explain the brain

science of why facts don't matter to many voters and they will vote against their own interests, and the last chapter (which is worth the cost of the book), "How to Respond to Conservatives."

I can't possibly summarize, let alone retain the information from this book, but what I've decided to do is share some of the most salient points, along with my contemplations about how to use this material for myself. I hope many readers will do this. Lakoff says that the job of "reframing" the progressive narrative requires experts, but if enough of us learn just a little bit and put it out into public spaces, we will help heal our present cultural divide. [I found italicizing my contemplations to distinguish them from Lakoff's text too messy, so just know that what follows is a mix of my own opinions, riffing on Lakoff's information.]

Politics are based on moral values which are set by our upbringing.

Conservative paradigm: top-down, strict-father hierarchy, kids are born bad and need to learn to be good through discipline and punishment. Only then will they learn self-responsibility, and then they're on their own.

Progressive paradigm: nurturing parents; it is ideal to help everyone; kids are born good and need to be nurtured.

We all have **frames** according to our paradigms and beliefs. Imagine a picture frame that allows what we see. We choose facts that comport with the frames we already have, which is like choosing the art to match the color and size of the picture frame. Anything that clashes or is the wrong size is somehow rejected. Our unconscious sense of the architecture of who we are depends on this. This is common to all people. Hence, keeping this inner scaffolding intact is a matter of life and death.

Many people are moderates who hold conservative views in some areas and progressive in others. They are **"biconceptualists."** These are the people that politicians want to speak to most and Republicans currently do a much better job of addressing them according to their frames and values than Dems. Whoever's language is most prevalent will get the other side using it, reinforcing the ideas of the most loquacious side. Case in point: "tax relief"—based on the conservatively framed value that taxes are bad—is now a term used by progressives, reinforcing the notion that taxes are bad and completely ignoring the fact that "private depends on public": To live, we require roads, schools, public services, everything that makes up the system that we live in. In fact there is no private existence without public existence. This can extend to the air we breathe. If it's not clean, we will eventually get sick. Yet through smart P.R. and repetition, the frame of this discourse has become the conservative frame and the common language, and no amount of fact-yelling will make it otherwise. So in short, progressives have to stop mimicking conservative language and say what they mean as it relates to our values. Life and freedom depend on the existence of a public. And the public exists through our common contribution to it.

Systemic movements change things in general. Systems have myriad actions, creating myriad chain reactions, creating everything from global warming to electing a pathological liar to the highest office in the land.

One chain reaction that screams to me is the result of progressives disparaging and demeaning values and morals that they don't hold, which eventually created a tidal wave of hubris that is now fueling an understandable backlash of conservative revenge. (If you doubt this, remember some time in your life where you were shamed and how awful that felt.) It is not that conservatives believe Trump's lies. They simply don't care, or like Paul Ryan recently, they excuse them as due to inexperience. This is a way to wipe facts out of the frame because the strict-father paradigm of punishment is a strongly held value and Trump

promises that it will happen under his leadership.

In my opinion, part of the solution—in addition to reframing issues like education, health care, environmental protection, etc. in terms of freedom for all of us because private life depends on public personal protections (not "benefits" or "entitlements"), or using other values we all share such as security, prosperity, and opportunity—is realizing what we progressives have done. I personally feel remorse for all the times I've been intolerant and dismissive of people who, in my estimation, "don't understand what's so obvious to me." I regret that my frame has been so narrow as to exclude the importance of values in my reverence for facts—a product of my deep ignorance about systems and how they work. And I will henceforth try to listen better when somebody is hurting to hear what they really are hurting about. And I will try to express my own hurt and desire for healing in terms of values. Lakoff's final guidelines about communicating differently:

- Show respect
- Respond by reframing
- Think and talk on the level of values
- Say what you believe

* * *

Since I published the above, the U.S. president has broadcast a display of his cabinet praising him. It has been posted all over Facebook with progressives disparaging it--completely unaware that they are picking up his message and disseminating it for him. Here is my comment on Facebook to my friends:

A lot of friends are posting the praise fest staged by 45 yesterday. While, for me, it echoes of North Korea's "our dear leader"-mandated rhetoric and is creepy, having just finished George Lakoff's book *Don't Think of an Elephant: the essential progressive guide for the issues that define our future*, I see a danger in not understanding the brilliance of the strategy. The reason 45 does these things is that they work. He controls what Lakoff calls the critical "framing" of issues. And every time he repeats the rhetoric, no matter how staged or exaggerated, he effectively controls what language we all speak. and the more times this happens, the more the nonsense becomes accepted truth. Here's my review of the book, but I highly recommend that everybody read the whole book. It's an eye-opener.

Jonas Blom says

George Lakoff has written an easy to read introduction to the use of metaphors and language in political debate. Although it is aimed at American progressives, I can take some value from it in understanding the debate climate in Sweden.

Biggest takeaway: the aha-moment when Lakoff describes the different conceptual metaphors that guides our political values. We tend to see "nation as a family" but while conservatives use the "strict father" concept, progressives use the "nurturing parents" concept. That makes a huge difference in our attitudes towards, for example, taking care of refugees, punishment of crimes, and engagement in foreign politics.

Annette Bowman says

This is the book anyone in the "resistance" should be reading.

Lboylan says

I had heard the book discussed a fair amount prior to reading it and do not feel that actually reading it added much to my understanding. This must have been a collection of essay because some ideas are just repeated over and over. The concept is actually not very hard to grasp, so even this very short book seemed too long! Frankly, practical tips rather than just the concept would have made it more useful. I found the model of the "strict father" versus "nurturant parent" a bit insipid. The PC gender neutralization of the "nurturing" role was precious, self-congratulatory, and no more warranted than would be gender neutralization of the "father role".

Elizabeth Wallace says

My brother-in-law (who gave me this book in response to my request: "I NEED BOOKS THAT TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON") told me this book is a must-read for any liberal who wants to debate intelligently. Now, before you click on to a different book with the thought "Gah, snore.." this is ALSO a book for non-political people. I hate politics, I'm bored by them, and sometimes scared half to death by them, but what I REALLY hate is not knowing what's going on, and not being able to join in the discussions. Harlan Ellison once said "The phrase is not 'everyone is entitled to their own opinion' it's SUPPOSED to be 'everyone is entitled to their own INFORMED opinion.'" For those of us who don't always pay attention to the political environment, this is a great look at what liberals/progressives need to do to get our voices heard in a country where conservatives spend MILLIONS on corporate think tanks and buying off the "liberal media." (Working for a newspaper, the "liberal media" label always makes me laugh. And yell. Angrily.)

It's a book for Democrats, but I sure wish some Republicans would read it too, then maybe we'd stop hearing nonsense like "No Child Left Behind" (which is also known as "Screw the Public School System.")

It's short, it's smart, and it ain't boring. What more can you hope from in a political book?

Colleen says

A game-changer for anyone who wants to understand how to frame their values in public discourse and understand why / how others frame theirs. Powerful, practical, applicable to political discourse as well as for activists in progressive movements. Animal activists take note!

Christie Angleton says

Mind. Blown.

Trish says

This slim handbook subtitled “Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives” was originally published in 2004. It is slightly more than one hundred pages that recaps the large ideas Lakoff had written about in his role as cognitive scientist, in a book called *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, first published in 1996 by the University of Chicago Press. *Moral Politics* is on its third edition (ISBN-13: 978-0226411293), published in time for the 2016 election. Last year Lakoff also published an essay on his website called “Understanding Trump” subtitled “How Trump Uses Your Brain Against You.” Lakoff is Richard and Rhoda Goldman Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, where he has taught since 1972.

I am astonished Lakoff’s brilliant insights are not better utilized by the Democratic Party. Bernie took the lessons to heart and started pounding out a new single-note message so that we couldn’t miss it, but why was he out there alone? Why didn’t the entire liberal left start with reframing—we had a handbook after all—and completely change the way business was done?

One could argue that Hillary did use Lakoff’s cognitive science approach by allowing the ‘Stronger Together’ message to express her values. I vaguely recall hearing also “This is not who we are,” when Trump said or did something particularly egregious. I was paying attention, but it seems to me Hillary’s team could have been A LOT more explicit about the ideas in Lakoff’s book, reframing arguments and changing the discussion. She just couldn’t manage to relinquish control and involve us.

Bernie just had one message and he said it loudly and often, and even if we didn’t know what he would do in different situations that arose in foreign affairs, we knew his basic playbook:

Man is basically good. Citizens working together unleash the creative potential in the population. Who wants to be rich when people are starving next door? We have some big problems but we’ll get there together.

This book is a series of conclusions and so reading it is a little like mainlining information if you’ve never seen it before. It may take reading it a couple times before the information sticks in your head, and before you are able to apply the techniques he shares with us. Many of these ideas probably seem familiar if you have been thinking about what happened in the last election. I hadn’t been able to articulate my own thoughts but the instant I saw what Lakoff wrote about conservatives and the ‘strict father’ way of looking at the world, it sounded so right (see Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land*).

One thing Lakoff points out is that when conservatives start using Orwellian language—language that is the opposite of what they mean—they are weak. Just as they are vulnerable on their position on environment and global warming, they are weak on the ‘healthcare’ bill. We should take these issues and run with them, turning every argument into a referendum on what they are not doing to solve these problems. We own the moral arguments here. They have nothing. Be smart. Be smarter. The far right has appropriated the word

“freedom” if you can imagine.

The far right uses “freedom” to mean “freedom from coercion from others,” which at first blush sounds pretty good. Who wouldn’t want that? But then they go on to express the need to “save capitalism from democracy”, so that laws won’t constrain their money-making and power consolidation. They object to paying taxes in excess of the amounts one would voluntarily contribute. Why pay taxes for schools if one does not have children oneself? is one common argument. They are being coerced to pay for social welfare.

Conservatives are also very big on ‘tort reform,’ or putting limits on awards in lawsuits (like for exploding products, leaking barges, or environmental catastrophe). “If parties who are harmed cannot sue immoral or negligent corporations or professionals for significant sums, the companies are free to harm the public in unlimited ways in the course of making money.”

Liberals look at freedom in a different way: freedom to express one’s creativity, to pursue one’s interests; or freedom from anxiety, from hunger, exploitation, environmental degradation. To achieve these freedoms, we need groups of people working together, doing what they do best.

A recent interview with the president of Princeton University, Christopher L. Eisgruber, confirmed something I’d noticed but wasn’t sure was a blip or a real, observable phenomenon. Eisgruber said that the students at Princeton gave him enormous hope for the future. They are engaged, and their values are right side up. I only hope they continue to exhibit those values in their jobs and at the ballot box in the years to come, and perhaps even help other people understand the ‘strict father’ (I can’t help but think of a spanking father and all that entails) model is an unsatisfactory way for adults to engage with their world.

Read this book. It’s important. It’s short.

Drew says

I just finished reading George Lakoff’s don’t think of an elephant: know your values and frame the debate. Published in 2004, it appears to be a collection of essays and thoughts he has pulled together over the years. Frankly, it could have been reduced to about a 30-40 page primer that might get a wider audience. However, at 119 pages, it’s a quick read.

The book is about frames, i.e. how we understand the world, how we know what we know. Frames control how we deal with new facts that are presented to us. If a fact agrees with the frame, it’s accepted. If a fact disagrees with the frame, in more cases than not, the fact will be discarded, regardless of whether it is true or not. According to Lakoff, frames rule our world.

His book is for progressives and goes a long way to de-vilefying conservatives and “red-state voters”. He notes that progressives can’t call people who voted for Bush as stupid or moronic. The frames they have developed, and that have been reinforced by 40 years of conservative communications, simply won’t allow these facts to overwhelm their worldview. Lakoff urges progressives to think in terms of ideas, frames, and moral values. Everyone has these and it’s a matter of framing progressive values and repeating them often to get our message across. It can’t be done overnight, and as he repeats often, “the truth will not set you free”. Facts by themselves are not sufficient. One of his best examples is the frame of “tax relief”. It just sounds good, doesn’t it? Relief. Relief is a good thing. Relief from what? Taxes. If it’s relief, then taxes must be bad. If progressives talk about tax relief and say that it isn’t any good or helps the wrong people, they’re still

using the tax relief frame and are simply reinforcing the idea of relief. We need to talk about it differently. We need to talk about how government built the interstate system, how it created the internet, how cures and vaccines have been developed by the national health institutes. Paraphrasing Lakoff, your tax refund can't pay to build a highway to drive to work.

One thing I'd like to mention is his differentiation of framing from spinning. He sees spin as manipulative use of a frame. However, I would argue that it's spin, regardless of whether it's for good or for manipulation. Speaking in frames is an attempt to manipulate, or change, an individual's world view and how they process facts. We frame it one way in order to counter another frame. He says framing is good if we articulate frames we believe in and that we see as morally good. But, isn't that what conservatives, and all groups, do? They believe in what they're saying and use a frame that articulates that belief system. Propaganda, as Lakoff rightly points out, is something entirely different and bad. He defines it well by calling it the use of a frame that is known to be wrong and selling that frame for political or economic benefit of the purveyor.

To end on a high note, his last chapter on how to respond to conservatives is a must read. That chapter along with the introduction of frames and a few examples make this book worth a look, but it really should have been edited down to a few dozen pages.

Jack Wolfe says

This book is still relevant, and I'll prove it:

"By presenting a laundry list of issues, Clinton and other Democrats fail to present a moral vision-- a coherent identity with a powerful cultural stereotype-- that defines the very identity of the voters they are trying to reach. A list of issues is not a moral vision. Indeed, many Democrats were livid that Trump did not run on the issues. He didn't need to. His very being activated the strict father model-- the heart of the moral vision of conservative Republicans, and the most common response to fear and uncertainty."

That's right: George Lakoff predicted the 2016 election all the way back in 2004!

Okay, so I changed the names... In Lakoff's text "Clinton" is "Gray Davis" and "Trump" is "Arnold Schwarzenegger"... But everything else looks about right, yes?

"Don't Think of an Elephant" does not ask liberals to give up on "facts"; it doesn't ask us to deceive people, and it definitely doesn't ask us to do some bullshit like "move to the right." What it suggests is that progressives think deeply about "Framing" the issues. Lakoff doesn't agree with conservative positions, but as a cognitive scientist, he has to admire the way they've presented their case to the American public over the past forty years. Republicans use a very specific vocabulary to summon up a very specific view of the world. They embrace the language of values, and they force progressive competitors to adopt the same set of terms. And, finally, they find consensus, and show the world a unified front. If that front looks less unified in these days of "Trump people" and "Never Trump" people and libertarians and neo-Nazis, well, remember that they still all came out and voted for Donald.

Liberals and leftists and social justice types did not all come out and vote for Hillary Clinton. Some of this is one Clinton-- a lot of it is on Clinton (see my review of "Shattered")-- and some of it is on the voters. We, the party of youth and anxiety and doubt and moral righteousness-- is so horribly good at shooting ourselves in the foot. We're willing to throw away our country so long as we don't vote for someone with "shady ties"

to whatever. We gotta get over this instinct, people! We gotta find consensus. We gotta speak from our hearts. We gotta create a vocabulary that affirms what's best about America, and that demonstrates how progressive policy will make America even better.

(Can I suggest the use of one word first and foremost, the word "responsibility?" We, the people of America, have a responsibility to other Americans in the present and in the future. That means responsible tax policy. That means responsible treatment of the environment. That means caring for the poor and sick. That means making decisions that factor in many voices. It means doing everything that Trump don't. Trump is irresponsible. He makes hasty decisions, many out of pure self-interest. He has no regard for future American lives. He lies and cheats. He lives a life of total carelessness. It's not making our country better: it's endangering all of our lives and impoverishing our culture.)

Yeah.

Nat says

I use this book in the bullshit class as a foil for the Orwell. It's really pretty terrible.

Lakoff has some reasonable claims to make about conservatives manipulating language, but his positive proposals for how the Democrats should revise language are preposterous and the cognitive science background for his recommendations makes it seem like Democrats and Republicans can't understand each other because their brains are wired up differently.
