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FRAMES AND BRAINS

“Framing” is not primarily about politics or political messaging, or communication. It is far more fundamental than that: Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality—and sometimes to create what we take to be reality.

But the discovery and use of frames does have an enormous bearing on politics. Given our media-obsessed, fast-paced, talking-points political culture, it’s critical that we understand the nature of framing and how it can be used.

Political framing is really applied cognitive science. Frames facilitate our most basic interactions with the world—they structure our ideas and concepts, they shape the way we reason, and they even impact how we perceive and how we act. For the most part, our use of frames is unconscious and automatic—we use them without realizing it.

Erving Goffman, the distinguished sociologist, was one of the first to notice frames and the way they structure our interactions with the world. Goffman studied institutions, like hospitals and casinos, and conventionalized social behavior, like dating and shopping. He found something quite remarkable: Social institutions and situations are shaped by mental structures (frames), which then determine how we behave in those institutions and situations.¹

To describe this phenomenon, he used the metaphor of “life as a play.” For instance, consider the hospital frame, with its clearly defined roles: doctor, surgeon, nurse, orderly, patient, visitor, receptionist, janitor, and so on. There are locations where scenes play out: the operating room, the emergency room, the recovery room, the waiting area, and patient rooms. There are props: the operating table, scalpels, bandages, wheelchairs, and so on. And there are conventional actions: operations, taking temperature and blood pressure, checking charts, emptying bedpans, and so on.

The hospital frame also has an internal logic, because there are fixed relations and hierarchies among the roles: Doctors are superior to nurses, who are superior to orderlies; all surgeons are doctors, but not vice versa; surgeons perform operations in the operating room.

Conversely, the hospital frame rules out certain behavior, because it determines what is appropriate and what isn’t: Orderlies or visitors do not perform operations; surgeons don’t empty bedpans; operations are not performed in the waiting area; visitors bring flowers to the patients, but surgeons don’t bring flowers to orderlies.

The scenarios also have a logic and a linear order: First you check in at the registration desk, then you’re prepped for an operation before you are operated on;

visitors are allowed after the operation. Checking in after your operation is ruled out by the logic of the frame.

All of us know thousands of such frames for everyday conventionalized activities, from dating to taking buses to getting money at an ATM to eating at a restaurant. Many frames come with language that is meaningless outside that frame: surgeon, emergency room, waiter, bus driver, PIN. Without operations, a surgeon would be meaningless. Just as a waiter would be without restaurants.

Similarly, frames structure our political institutions—elections, courts, and legislative and administrative structures. In the frame defining the Supreme Court, the semantic roles include a chief justice and eight associate justices. The scenario structure includes hearing cases, voting on them, and writing opinions, in that order. The props include robes, the courthouse, a gavel, and so on.

Political disputes are sometimes about how frames interact and whether one frame takes priority over another. Can the FBI search a congressman's office for evidence of corruption? That is, does the administration frame include law enforcement jurisdiction over Congress?

Frame structures also appear on a smaller scale. Charles Fillmore, one of the world's great linguists, has studied how everyday frames work at the level of sentences. The verb "accuse," for example, is defined with respect to an accusation frame, with semantic roles: accuser, accused, offense, and accusation. The accuser and accused are people (or metaphorical people, like corporations), the offense is an action, and the accusation is a speech act, in particular, a declaration. The offense is assumed by the accuser to be bad, that is, illegal or immoral, and the accuser is declaring that the accused did perform the offense.

For example, take this sentence: "The Democrats accused Bush of illegal spying on U.S. citizens." The accusers are the Democrats, the accused is the president, the offense is illegal spying on U.S. citizens, and the accusation is the act of declaring. The verb "accuse" is decomposed into two statements, one declared and one presupposed. The badness (illegality or immorality) of the offense is presupposed by the accuser, who is declaring that the accused did perform the offense.

The word "spying" also comes with a frame, in which there is a spy, a spied-upon person, and an act of spying, which is a surreptitious attempt by the spy to get incriminating or strategically useful information about the spied-upon person. The spy is not just monitoring another's activities; the spy's job is to actively look for anything that could be interpreted as suspicious or incriminating. In short, the spy is bringing his or her own framing to the everyday activities of the spied-upon person. An activity that is "innocent" from the perspective of the person performing it may be suspicious or incriminating to the spy.

What is interesting about the above sentence is that Bush did not deny that the spying took place. His defense is that it was neither illegal nor immoral, not in any way bad, but rather that it was good, part of carrying out his duty as commander in chief. In doing so, Bush is trying to undermine the frame—to make the frame not fit—rather than to accept the presupposition.

Goffman's institutional frames and Fillmore's sentence frames have the same structure: semantic roles, relations between those roles, a typical scenario.

The vast majority of work on framing within cognitive science and linguistics is devoted to everyday aspects of our lives.² Our central focus at the Rockridge Institute is to ask questions about framing and its relevance to politics: How can we apply the discoveries in linguistics and cognitive science to politics? Is framing ever used to serve political ends without public awareness? By reframing, can we help reveal important truths about political issues?³

DEEP FRAMES: “THE WAR ON TERROR”

Over the past thirty-five years, conservatives have spent more than \$4 billion constructing a system of dozens of think tanks and training institutes, staffed by right-wing intellectuals. They have managed to dominate the framing of issues and have profoundly changed American politics in the process.

One way they have done this is through the effective use of surface frames, such as the mental structures associated with the “war on terror” frame. These frames build on lexical frames—the conceptual frames associated with words like “war” in its ordinary sense and “terror” in its ordinary sense. Surface frames are associated with phrases like “war on terror” that both activate and depend critically on deep frames. These are the most basic frames that constitute a moral worldview or a political philosophy. Deep frames define one’s overall “common sense.” Without deep frames, there is nothing for surface frames to hang on to. Slogans do not make sense without the appropriate deep frames in place.

A closer look at the “war on terror” frame can be illustrative. The American public has hardly grasped the significance of this conservative frame. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there was brief discussion of treating the terrorist acts as an international police problem (Secretary of State Colin Powell, for one, suggested this⁴): Take it to the International Criminal Court, seek an indictment of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda operatives, forge an international coalition to find him and al-Qaeda members, devote our resources to diplomacy and intelligence gathering, and use our military for “police actions” if need be. In short, put bin Laden on trial for crimes against humanity and give him due punishment.

That idea didn’t last long. Quite immediately, the Bush administration and the right-wing message machine started promoting a “war on terror.” The conceptual frame associated with “war” has semantic roles: armies, a fight, a moral crusade, a commander in chief, a capture of territory, the surrender of an enemy, and patriots supporting the troops. “War” implies the necessity of military action. When we’re in a war, all other concerns are secondary.

When “terror” is added to “war,” a metaphor is produced in which “terror” becomes the opposing army. As in any war, the enemy must be defeated. But “terror” is not actually an army—it is a state of mind. As such, it cannot be beaten on a field of battle. It is an emotion. Moreover, the “war on terror” frame is self-perpetuating; merely being in a war scares citizens, and reiteration of the frame creates more fear. So there is no end to the “war on terror,” because you can’t permanently capture and defeat an emotion.

A strategic advantage of the frame is that “war” also invokes Article II of the Constitution, giving the president broad powers as commander in chief. It allows the military to perform what is essentially a police function: bringing criminals to justice. It negates due process, because in war you assume the enemy is guilty—you shoot to kill.

This is a powerful surface frame, with a wide-reaching set of implications. So why did the “war on terror” phrase resonate, given how misleading it is? Why does it persist to this day?

It works because it relies on conservative deep frames. When something “resonates” or “makes sense,” it engages your deep frames. Conservatives have long advanced the idea that our military can—and should—be used to shape foreign policy; our strength is the size and capacity of our military. They have advanced a retributive crime policy—punish the wrongdoers, no need to look at systemic causes of crime. The “war on terror” activates these deep frames, and politicians, the media, and the public continue to use the phrase because the conservative deep frames have become so pervasive.

If progressive deep frames had been articulated and present in the public mind, the idea of a “war on terror” never would have made sense. If we viewed our strength as our diplomatic ability to forge international consensus and coalitions, and if we recognized that killing and maiming civilians through military action creates more terrorists and fosters more acts of terrorism, we wouldn’t have looked to our military to solve the problem. Had progressive deep frames been prevalent at the time of 9/11, Americans would have taken “war on terror” as a powerful metaphor but not a literal guide to action, like the “war on poverty.” They would have seen it as a major crime problem—like international organized crime—and sought to bring these criminals to justice by the means that work best, like tracing bank accounts, placing spies in their organizations, and so on.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of deep framing—the framing of moral values and principles. It is a long-term enterprise and entirely different from crafting short-term messages about a single issue or candidate that use surface frames, and it is more important. Without the long-term deep frames in place, the short-term slogans have no structure to build upon. They don’t resonate because they don’t reinforce any deep frames. (One of the most frustrating experiences of the Rockridge staff is when we are asked to help craft a message on a single issue for an advocacy or grassroots group. It is hard to explain that slogans or phrases in a value vacuum don’t do much good.)

So how are deep frames embedded in the public mind? To cultivate new deep frames requires going on the offense with your values and principles, repeating them over and over and over. It cannot be done through a single ad campaign or a single group or a single election. It cannot work as part of a “war room,” or a “rapid response” approach, which is inherently reactive, not proactive. It must be done over a long period, planned in advance and perhaps as a part of many short-term campaigns. And it must be done by many organizations working in concert across issue areas.

For more discussion of surface frames—like “tax relief”—you can read *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* or go to our Web site, www.rockridgeinstitute.org.

ISSUE-DEFINING FRAMES:
IRAQ AND IMMIGRATION

Just as frames structure and define social institutions, they also define issues. An issue-defining frame characterizes the problem, assigns blame, and constrains the possible solutions. More important, issue-defining frames block relevant concerns if those concerns are outside of the frame.

Issue-defining frames exist at an intermediate depth, between the surface frames that conceptualize slogans about issues and the deep frames, those for values, principles, and fundamental concepts that go across issues.

For a current example of an issue-defining frame, let's look at Iraq. Conservatives have taken the framing initiative and continue to call it "war." This frame has very real implications, especially considering the commonplace theory that America fights only the good fight. If what is happening in Iraq is seen as a "war," it has to be a just war, despite how and why we got into it. It has to be a war against evil, or we wouldn't be in it. And we have to fight to the finish, however difficult it may be.

In the "war" frame, "cut and run"—a typically conservative response to reasonable proposals of withdrawing troops, or setting a timetable, or, at the least, setting goals in Iraq—applies. Here's the conceptual frame associated with "cut and run":

There is a war being fought against evil. Fighting requires courage and bravery. Those fully committed to the cause are brave. Those who "cut and run" are interested only in saving their own skins, not in the moral cause; they are cowards. The "cut and run" approach endangers both the moral cause and the lives of the brave troops who are fighting for it. Those with courage and conviction stand and fight.

The "war" frame not only defines what's happening in Iraq but also constrains the solutions. In a war, it is cowardly and immoral to "cut and run."

The "war" frame is a trap, and those opposed to "staying the course" have repeatedly fallen in. John Murtha responded to the "cut and run" accusation with "stay and pay," and John Kerry with "lie and die." Senator Jack Reed suggested "the plan to be in Iraq forever."

What's wrong with these responses? First, the grammar—X and Y—evokes the "cut and run" frame and thus reinforces it. Then, each one of these is a self-interest, save-our-skins frame that accepts the "war" frame and says it is in our interest to get out. We "pay," we "die," we are stuck there forever. This does not reject the "cut and run" frame, which presupposes a war against evil. It accepts that frame and takes the saving-our-skin position, which in the frame is cowardly and immoral. The advocates of removing our troops fell right into the trap.

The war frame is dishonest and has led to a tragic loss of life. We need to reframe what's going on in Iraq and tell the truth: This is an occupation, not a war.

Notice how the "occupation" frame—as an issue-defining frame—restructures the terms of the debate to illuminate more honest concerns. In an occupation, there are pragmatic issues: Are we welcome? Are we doing the Iraqis more harm than good? How badly are we being hurt? The question is not whether to withdraw but when. In an

occupation, the problem is not an evil enemy. The problem is when to leave. The solutions that “make sense” in an occupation are entirely different from the solutions that “make sense” in a war.

Further, the occupation frame is more honest. The war was over when Bush famously stood on the aircraft carrier in front of a “Mission Accomplished” banner and announced the end of major military operations. A war has one army fighting another army over territory. Our fighting men and women defeated Saddam’s military machine shortly after the invasion in March 2003. Then came the occupation. Our troops were trained to fight a war, not to occupy a country where they don’t know the language and culture, where they don’t have enough troops, where they face an anti-occupation insurgency by the Iraqis themselves, where there is a civil war going on, and where most Iraqis want them out.

For another illustrative issue-defining frame, let’s turn to immigration. Here, conservatives again took the initiative and defined the problem as “illegal immigration.” The roles in this frame are the immigrants and American agencies concerned with immigration (under the Department of Homeland Security). The principal cause of the problem is the immigrants, and the secondary cause is the inability of the agencies to stop the immigrants from crossing the border.

Under such framing, the immigrants have committed the crime of crossing the border and are seen as felons; by “taking jobs from Americans” and making use of social services, they are putting a strain on local governments and “taking money out of taxpayers’ pockets.” Possible “solutions” flow from that framing: rounding up immigrants and deporting them; granting citizenship to those here longest and deporting those here less than two years; instituting a “temporary worker” program to legally admit workers here for a short time, denying them many basic rights and any hope of citizenship.

Such framing overlooks many concerns of progressives, such as the essential work undocumented immigrants perform, the basic denial of civil rights, the trade policies that have forced people into unemployment in Mexico, or the way our economy drives wages down to the lowest possible level.

Let’s see what happens if we reframe the issue and define it as a problem of “illegal employers.” Now the problem becomes the employers who are hiring undocumented workers so they can pay workers less or skirt paying taxes. Employers are recognized as driving down wages, hurting American workers, and exploiting immigrants, many of whom have already fled oppressive circumstances.

The possible solutions that flow from such framing are much different: Fine or punish employers for hiring undocumented workers or provide a way for these workers to get the proper documents and work with due protection of the law. This is a way to unite immigrants and American workers, ensuring that all have access to decent wages, rather than dividing them—by pitting their interests against one another—and overlooking the system that drives down all of their wages.

There are other ways of framing the issue that focus on progressive values. An “immigrant gratitude” frame, which honors their contributions and compensates them with necessary social services and a reasonable path to citizenship. A “cheap labor” frame, which focuses on the forces in the economy that are really hurting American workers—seeing labor not as an asset but as a resource whose cost must be minimized if

profits are to be maximized. A “creating immigrants” frame that focuses on what causes people to flee their homes and come to the United States—poverty and/or political oppression in their native country and, in certain cases, American trade policy that impoverishes people elsewhere. Any solution would require a reevaluation of our foreign policy toward such nations and our “free-trade” policies.⁵

What these exercises show is simple: Frames not only define issues, problems, causes, and solutions; they also hide relevant issues and causes. Moreover, policies and programs make sense only given issue-defining frames.

MESSAGING FRAMES

Among the many kind of frames—besides surface frames, deep frames, and issue--defining frames—are messaging frames, familiar to media scholars. There are many genres, and each has its own rules: political speeches and debates, advertising, news stories, editorials, and commentaries. What they have in common are certain semantic roles: messengers, audience, issue, message, medium, and images.

Crucial to the message is the messenger. In the 2005 campaign in California’s special election, the most effective messengers against Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s proposals to reshape state government were nurses and firefighters. They had integrity and credibility.

As a messenger, George W. Bush is remarkably aware of his audience and often includes hidden messages to his base. Props matter. To appear folksy, Bush releases images of himself using his chain saw on his ranch. The medium—radio, TV, newspapers—makes an enormous difference. On TV, images are more important than words. In print ads, what comes first is usually more important than later text.

LESSONS FROM COGNITIVE SCIENCE

1. The use of frames is largely unconscious. The use of frames occurs at the neural level, so most people have no idea they are even using frames, much less what kind of frames. Thus, the conservative message machine can impose its frames without the public—progressive or not—being aware of them. For example, the “war on terror” frame has been imposed by conservatives but used by independent journalists and even by many progressives without much comment. In another area, Time magazine ran the headline “Illegals!” for a feature article on immigration. Democrats have used the “tax relief” frame without being aware that it undercuts their own views.

2. Frames define common sense. What counts as “common sense” varies from person to person but always depends on what frames are in the brain and how frequently they are used and evoked. Different people can have different frames in their brains, so “common sense” can differ widely from person to person. However, in getting their frames to dominate public discourse, conservatives have changed “common sense,” and progressives have been letting them get away with it. Progressives should become

conscious of framing that is at present accepted unconsciously as “common sense” but that hides the deep problems.

3. Repetition can embed frames in the brain. One of the funniest bits on Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* is video clips it runs of right-wing leaders and spokespeople using the same words over and over on the same day. The technique of repetition of the same words to express the same idea is effective. The words come with surface frames. Those surface frames in turn latch onto and activate deep frames. When repeated over and over, the words reinforce deep frames by strengthening neural connections in listeners.

4. Activation links surface frames to deep frames and inhibits opposition frames. When the surface frames are activated, the deep frames that make sense of them are activated as well. The activation of conservative deep frames—the conservative moral system and the political and economic principles that follow from that—then inhibits the progressive moral system and principles.

5. Existing deep frames don’t change overnight. Brains don’t change quickly. Just using your own language, with your surface framing, won’t necessarily convince people. Your deep framing must be established in order for your surface frames to have any effect. Persistence is key!

6. Speak to biconceptuals as you speak to your base. The brain permits different—and inconsistent—moral worldviews to govern different aspects of one’s life. The morality that governs your life Saturday night in the club might not be the same one that governs your behavior the next morning in church. In politics, we use the term “swing voters” for biconceptuals who can apply either a progressive or a conservative moral worldview to politics. Another way to put this is that either worldview—either set of deep frames—can be activated when making political decisions.

Conservatives seek to activate conservative deep frames in biconceptuals by activating conservative surface frames linked to those deep frames. As we have observed, they speak to the center by speaking to their base. Progressives should do the same. When progressives “move to the right” by adopting conservative positions, they activate and reinforce conservative deep frames—conservative values and positions.

7. The facts alone will not set you free. Facts can be assimilated into the brain only if there is a frame to make sense out of them. We think and reason using frames and metaphors. The consequence is that arguing simply in terms of facts—how many people have no health insurance, how many degrees Earth has warmed in the last decade, how long it’s been since the last raise in the minimum wage—will likely fall on deaf ears. That’s not to say the facts aren’t important. They are extremely important. But they make sense only given a context.

8. Simply negating the other side’s frames only reinforces them. The title of the book *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* says it all: Tell someone that, and he or she will think of an elephant. Like every other word, “elephant” is defined by a frame that contains a mental image of an elephant and some crucial information about elephants: They have trunks, huge round bodies, big floppy ears, and so on. The word evokes the frame, even if you ask someone not to think of an elephant. When former president Richard Nixon spoke his famous line, “I am not a crook,” everyone thought of him as a crook. When Senator Joe Lieberman said “I am not George Bush” in a debate with Ned Lamont, everyone thought of him as George Bush.

There are limited cases where the use of the other side's frames can be effective. For example, you might be skillful enough to undermine one of their frames by following its inferences to a logically absurd conclusion. When Republicans presented the "Contract with America" in 1994, one Democratic response was to warn people to "read the fine print."

THE PROBLEM OF RATIONALISM

Understanding frame analysis means becoming aware of one's own mind and the minds of others. This is a big task. We were not brought up to think in terms of frames and metaphors and moral worldviews. We were brought up to believe that there is only one common sense and that it is the same for everyone. Not true. Our common sense is determined by the frames we unconsciously acquire, and one person's common sense is another's evil political ideology. The truths that have been discovered about the mind are not easy to fathom, especially when false views of the mind get in the way.

The discovery of frames requires a reevaluation of rationalism, a 350-year-old theory of mind that arose during the Enlightenment. We say this with great admiration for the rationalist tradition. It is rationalism, after all, that provided the foundation for our democratic system. Rationalism says it is reason that makes us human, and all human beings are equally rational. That is why we can govern ourselves and do not have to rely upon a king or a pope to govern us. And since we are equally rational, the best form of government is a democracy. So far, so good.

But rationalism also comes with several false theories of mind.

- We know from cognitive science research that most thought is unconscious, but rationalism claims that all thought is conscious.
- We know that we think using mechanisms like frames and metaphors. Yet rationalism claims that all thought is literal, that it can directly fit the world; this rules out any effects of framing, metaphors, and worldviews.
- We know that people with different worldviews think differently and may reach completely different conclusions given the same facts. But rationalism claims that we all have the same universal reason. Some aspects of reason are universal, but many others are not—they differ from person to person based on their worldview and deep frames.
- We know that people reason using the logic of frames and metaphors, which falls outside of classical logic. But rationalism assumes that thought is logical and fits classical logic.

Rationalism says that people vote on the basis of their material self-interest, that they are conscious of why they voted, that they can tell a pollster what their most important concerns are, and that they will vote for the candidate who best addresses those concerns.

But we know from Wirthlin (see Chapter 1) that this is false. The rationalist theory of voters isn't true. Yet progressive pollsters still act as if it is. And progressive

candidates take their advice. They run on a laundry list of programs recommended by their pollsters and act as if Wirthlin had never made his discovery.

If you believed in rationalism, you would believe that the facts will set you free, that you just need to give people hard information, independent of any framing, and they will reason their way to the right conclusion. We know this is false, that if the facts don't fit the frames people have, they will keep the frames (which are, after all, physically in their brains) and ignore, forget, or explain away the facts. The facts must be framed in a way to make sense in order to be accepted as a basis for further reasoning.

If you were a rationalist policy maker, you would believe that frames, metaphors, and moral worldviews played no role in characterizing problems or solutions to problems. You would believe that all problems and solutions were objective and in no way worldview dependent. You would believe that solutions were rational, and that the tools to be used in arriving at them included classical logic, probability theory, game theory, cost-benefit analysis, and other aspects of the theory of rational action.

You would further believe in the classical theory of categories, and you would divide up the policy-making world by categories, creating issue "silos." Thus, there would be educational policies, separate from health policies, separate from environmental policies, and so on.

Rationalism pervades the progressive world. It is one of the reasons progressives have lately been losing to conservatives.

Rationalist-based political campaigns miss the symbolic, metaphorical, moral, emotional, and frame-based aspects of political campaigns. Real rationality recognizes these politically crucial aspects of our mental life. We advocate getting real about rationality itself, recognizing how it really works. If you think political campaigns are about laundry lists of policies that have no further symbolic value, then you miss the heart of American politics.

EXPRESSING OUR VALUES

To get out of the rationalist trap, progressives must understand their deepest implicit values and make them explicit. But this is a bit tricky.

Progressive candidates have been having a problem telling the public what they stand for. They have difficulties expressing their values and their political principles. Yet progressives do stand for something (usually a lot) and do have values and political principles. Why can't they just say what they are? If you can't tell me what you stand for, it sounds like you don't stand for anything. What is going on here? How can intelligent, articulate people in public life stand for something without being able to say what they stand for?

The answer is simple from a cognitive science point of view. Our conceptual systems are unconscious. We usually cannot directly access unconscious systems of ideas. The result is that progressives tend to "feel" when a proposed policy sounds like the right—or wrong—thing to do. But many progressives cannot say exactly why they feel as they do, exactly what moral principles make it the right—or wrong—thing to do.

So progressives tend to find it difficult to provide morally based arguments for positions that they think are right. We hope, through this handbook, to begin to make the implicit reasons explicit—to fill in the gaps in progressive forms of argument—and to help progressives express the moral values and principles they really believe in.

FRAME OR LOSE

Lately, one school of thought making the rounds among progressives is that it may be best not to engage in articulating our values and principles, and not to do much of anything to put forth a progressive vision. The thinking, in a nutshell, is that things are going so wrong for conservatives that they are likely to self-destruct.

This is a terrible mistake. One thing we know about how brains change is that they can change more radically under conditions of trauma than under ordinary conditions. The questions are: What will the direction of the change be? How will the trauma or other disaster be framed? And who will get to frame it?

If progressives say nothing when disaster occurs from conservative policies, then conservatives will get to frame the disasters—and they will certainly not frame them as failures of conservative philosophy. They may twist the nature of causation and blame the disaster on progressives.

Failing that, there are other ways out. Consider, for instance, the various responses to crises that have come from the Bush administration: It was a failure of intelligence. It was an honest mistake. There were tactical errors. No one could have guessed it would happen. Everyone has made sacrifices and done the best anyone could expect of them. There were a few bad apples, and we're taking care of them. They could admit incompetence and replace the incompetent persons with people who look more competent. Or they could even argue that they were not conservative enough, reframing the disaster for still more conservative ends. When there is a loud, powerful, and effective chorus of progressive voices heard, conservatives can't use their effective reframing machine to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. That is why we cannot be silent.

When conservative philosophy causes disaster, progressives must make that clear, shout it from the rooftops, organize speakers everywhere to say it out loud, and repeat it until it registers in the brains of the public and becomes an issue, a matter of ongoing public debate. When there are victims, conservative villains, and progressive heroes, it should be made clear who is who.⁶

REFRAMING: WORDS TO RECLAIM

Conservatives have worked hard to redefine our words—that is, change the frame associated with a word so that it fits the conservative worldview. In so doing, they have changed the meaning of some of our most important concepts and have stolen our language.

Most notably, they have redefined the word “liberal.” They have turned it upside down. What once was—and still should be—a badge of pride is now a label to run from. Consider the differences between the conservative tag on “liberal” and the real meaning that we should hold near and dear to our hearts.

Conservatives: Tax-and-spend liberals want to take your hard-earned money and give it to lazy no-accounts. Latte-sipping liberals are elitists who look down their noses at you. Hollywood liberals have no family values. The liberal media twist the facts. Leftist liberals want to end the free market. Antiwar liberals are unpatriotic wimps who can’t defend our country. Secular liberals want to end religion.

Liberals: Liberty-loving liberals founded our country and enshrined its freedoms. Dedicated, fair-minded liberals ended slavery and brought women the vote. Hardworking liberals fought the goon squads and won workers’ rights: the eight-hour day, the weekend, health plans, and pensions. Courageous liberals risked their lives to win civil rights. Caring liberals have made the vulnerable elderly secure with Social Security and healthy with Medicare. Forward-looking liberals have extended education to everyone. Liberals who love the land have been preserving our environment so you can enjoy it. Nobody loves liberty and life more than a liberal. When conservatives say you’re on your own, we liberals know we’re all in this together.

“Liberal” is not the only example of the right’s framing larceny. Here are other examples of words worth reclaiming—and how conservatives and progressives view them.

PATRIOTISM

Conservatives: Patriots do not question the president or his war policies. To do so undermines our nation and its troops. Revealing secret, even illegal, government programs is treasonous. The Constitution should be amended to criminalize political dissent in the form of flag desecration.

Progressives: The greatest testament to one’s love of country is when one works to improve it. This includes principled dissent against policies one disagrees with and against leaders who promote those policies. Times of war are no exception. Our first loyalty is to the principles of our democracy that are embedded in our Constitution, not to any political leader.

RULE OF LAW

Conservatives: Criminals deserve strict punishment for their crimes. If that means two million people are in U.S. prisons, so be it. If police have to step on a few toes or cross a few constitutional lines, so be it. Courts have gone too far in letting criminals go free on “technicalities.” Strict sentencing constraints should overrule any tendency toward leniency on the part of judge or jury. As commander in chief, the president is the highest authority. He may choose not to observe domestic and international laws when he deems it necessary to fight our enemies. Some civil liberties are also subordinate to this fight.

Progressives: No one is above the law. The president must abide by constitutional limitations on his power and follow laws passed by Congress; police and judges must respect the constitutional rights of all citizens. Criminals must be accountable for their crimes, but society should temper its desire for retribution with wisdom and compassion. In civil matters, access to the courts should be equally available to all. Corporations and individuals must be accountable for injuries they inflict. The United States must abide by international law and treaty obligations.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Conservatives: It's a scary world. Fanatics wish us harm. We must respond with every means available to us, including torture and indefinite imprisonment without trial of those we suspect of acting against us. We must take the fight to the enemy regardless of the cost in lives, dollars, strained alliances, and our international reputation. Military force is our greatest weapon.

Progressives: It's a scary world, but for reasons that go well beyond the threat of terror. We can deal with terrorism far more wisely and without invading foreign nations under false pretenses. Terrorism is an international problem; we can fight it more effectively in partnership with other nations than by going it alone. We should fight terrorism with the tools for fighting international organized crime, rather than with the military. Moreover, we must recognize that our long-term security is also threatened by climate destabilization and pollution, by our dependence on foreign energy, by the growing gap between rich and poor, and by our faltering public education system.

FAMILY VALUES

Conservatives: Obedience and discipline are the core values of the family. Sex education in the schools, the right to abortion, and gay marriage undermine obedience and discipline. They are an affront to the family.

Progressives: Empathy and responsibility for oneself and others are the core values of the family. Respectful, loving, and supportive parenting promotes healthy families. Health care, education, food on the table, and social systems are essential to the well-being of the family. Loving, committed, and supportive individuals define the family, not gender roles.

LIFE

Conservatives: Abortion is the immoral taking of innocent life. It must be banned.

Progressives: Promoting life means ending America's huge infant mortality rate through pre- and postnatal care. It means caring for individuals throughout their lives. It means affordable universal health care to improve life and life expectancy for forty-five million uninsured Americans. It means improving the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink. It means improving schools and parenting so that every young life

has a chance to flower. It means finding ways to end the violence in our society that cuts short so many lives. It means fulfilling the promise of stem cell research, rather than destroying the hopes of millions of suffering Americans for the sake of a tiny cluster of undifferentiated cells that will otherwise be discarded.

Taking back these and other words is a long-term enterprise. The right didn't snatch them overnight, and we can't take them back quickly, either. But they can be reclaimed. They must be spoken often. And they must be spoken in the contexts in which progressives understand them.

Consider progressives across the country consistently saying something like this: "I am for life. That's why I support the right of all women to receive prenatal care and the right of all children to receive immunizations and to be treated when they are sick. That's why I believe we must safeguard the planet that sustains all life."

Or perhaps this: "I am a patriot. That's why I am compelled to oppose the government's spying on American citizens without court order and in defiance of Congress."

Repetition of such articulations is the key to redefining these words and reclaiming them. Progressives must say things like this when they speak to their friends, when they write letters to the editor, when they blog, when they run for office. Once this process begins, continues, and is repeated often enough, these words and the public's understanding of them can return to their traditional meanings. It will not be easy, but it must be done.