

Back to Framing: More Than A Message
<http://www.longviewinstitute.org/research/wallack/levels>

Longview Institute

Framing: More Than A Message

by Lawrence Wallack

If you took all the words written about why the Democrats lost the 2004 election and laid them side-by-side in one long sentence, it would be one heck of a long sentence. And that sentence would have just a few recurring themes. One of those themes would be that the Democrats didn't have a message and could not effectively communicate what they stood for. This James Carville quote from a December 5, 2004, William Safire column concisely captures this particular theme:

"They produce a narrative, we produce a litany." (That's a list, or enumeration. [Safire note]) "They say, 'I'm going to protect you from the terrorists in Tehran and the homos in Hollywood.' We say, 'We're for clean air, better schools, more health care.' And so there's a Republican narrative, a story, and there's a Democratic litany."

It seems to be increasingly difficult to talk about the issues we care about most in a way that resonates with a critical mass of the population. We don't really have a coherent story or a set of frames that link to that story. The American promise of abundant opportunity, living wage jobs, access to health care, quality education, affordable housing, upward mobility, a clean environment, and a secure retirement seems to be drifting further from fulfillment. People committed to fulfilling this promise struggle with crafting a story rooted in resonant values, a story that captures the ethic that hard work should be fairly rewarded so that families can be self sufficient and provide for themselves.

Lakoff's Levels

One of the people getting the most attention on the issue of framing is George Lakoff. Lakoff, a cognitive linguist who has spent 40 years studying framing at the deepest possible level, believes that some frames may actually be hardwired in our brains. His recent work, *Don't Think of an Elephant* has given people hope that some of the dominant frames of today—frames that reinforce a view of America with which many are uncomfortable—can be changed. This is certainly possible. However, Lakoff would be the first to admit that the process of

identifying and critiquing existing frames is easy compared to the task of creating new frames and making them part of the dominant stories of the culture.

One of the most useful tools that Lakoff provides us with is the “three levels of analysis.” Level 1 involves big ideas and universal values like fairness, equality, justice, protection, reward-for-work, family, community, etc. We all share these values in general but interpret them differently. For example, take fairness. Obviously we all value fairness. However, for some, fairness is interpreted as getting your due—making sure you are well taken care of is a key component. For others, fairness is interpreted as an obligation to take care of others—sharing with others is a key component. Obviously, individually we all believe in parts of both, but the larger argument in society is when to apply which.

For instance, is it fair that 46 million people lack health insurance? Some would say that, far from being fair, the situation is obviously immoral. Society has an obligation to care for its members. However, others see this as a fair outcome of a market-based system where health insurance is something that is earned (with exceptions such as children, the elderly, and those in extreme poverty) rather than a right—something to be *earned*, not freely given.

Level 2 involves how we classify issue types. Lack of health insurance may be classified as a public health issue, a children’s issue, an educational issue, an employment issue, a moral choice issue, etc. How the issue is classified could result in its getting more traction because it could activate certain Level 1 values. For example, framing health insurance as a children’s issue may activate values that are more friendly to advancing public policy approaches than does talking about it as an employment issue, or that are certainly more friendly than talking about it as a moral choice issue.

A recent *New York Times* report indicated that the Inuit are arguing that global warming should be classified as a human rights issue rather than an environmental issue because global warming threatens their very existence and is primarily due to human influences from those outside their group. This re-categorizes the problem at Level 2 and may activate different values at Level 1 and potential remedies at Level 3.

Level 3 involves specific policies or programs that might be developed to remedy the problem. Policies and programs that are in conflict with dominant values at Level 1 have a low likelihood of being accepted at Level 3. One of the main differences between conservatives and progressives over the past generation is that the conservatives have put their resources toward changing Level 1 values and defining Level 2 issues accordingly. Progressives have focused on arguing policy and programs at Level 3. You know the rest of the story.

Only marginal success is possible when you argue the “plumbing” at Level 3 without having developed the blueprint at Levels 1 and 2. By arguing for health care coverage at Level 3, you can get some expansion of coverage for children but not for adults. While this does some good, the research shows that unless the entire family unit is insured, the coverage for children alone makes little difference. Ultimately,

to advance universal access to health care, you must develop stories using Level 1 values.

Think of the current debate over Social Security. Not so long ago Social Security was the “third rail” of American politics and virtually untouchable. It wouldn’t have made sense to anyone to talk about privatization or personal accounts (Level 3) because there was no reference point (a resonant set of values) at Level 1. Now we are arguing over how to pay for the transition, and less about whether the transition should take place—the evolution of dominant values reflected in the current representation of the “ownership society” story has certainly helped bring this about.

Korten’s Questions

David Korten is the author of *When Corporations Rule the World*, and is the board chair of the Positive Futures Network, publisher of *YES!* magazine—“supporting you in creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.” In his talk, *Renewing the American Experiment* Korten points out:

“The power of the [right wing] extremists comes not from their numbers, which are relatively small, but from their ability to control the stories by which we answer three basic questions:

- How will we prosper?
- What will make us secure?
- And how will we find meaning?

These are increasingly serious questions for a great many Americans...To gain a foothold in the discourse, progressives must come up with more holistic and compelling stories.”

It long been said that whoever tells the stories of a nation need not care who makes its laws. So Korten alerts us to a very important aspect of the process of public policy development. Think about how the following stories relate to Level 1 values and principles.

1. How will we prosper?

According to Korten, the Right argues that we will prosper through a free market in which individual effort and work are rewarded, and in which people can compete fairly.

Progressives, on the other hand, currently advance a story that sounds like “First, we redistribute the wealth.”

2. What will make us secure?

The Right's story has to do with being the strongest and most powerful nation with an unwavering conviction about the rightness of the cause. "Might makes right" and self-determination, resoluteness, and defending America at all costs are givens (acting alone when necessary, because "we don't need a permission slip").

Progressives are portrayed as believing that working together will make us safe: More summits and greater diplomacy rather than unilateral action and aggressiveness will be the key. As Korten points out, "Stop giving people a reason to hate us, and trust the UN." Being nicer, not tougher or stronger, seems to be the suggested course of action.

By the way, another very important point here is that progressives tend to focus on more basic or root causes, while conservatives emphasize a more direct cause-and-effect understanding. So conservative stories tend to be simpler, while progressive stories are more complex. In many ways conservatives simply need to *assert* because they reflect "conventional wisdom" drawn from a dominant reinforcing paradigm, while progressives need to *explain*. Thus, rather than a sound bite, progressives require a sound "page."

3. How will we find meaning?

For the Right, meaning seems to be found in a black-and-white understanding of a particular kind of religion and God. There is absolute right and wrong, and this gets reflected in a specific meaning as morality.

Progressives, with a greater focus on interconnectedness and relativism, have a much more difficult problem articulating meaning as part of politics.

Lakoff and Korten have provided two very powerful ideas that might be applied to the issue of stories. So let's consider the example of welfare reform, which was a Republican initiative that came to be embraced by a Democratic president, and explore this.

Welfare Reform Illustration:

Conservative	Liberal/Progressive
Level 1: Values and Principles	
Self-discipline, reward for work, self-determination, personal responsibility, government hurts	Obligation to the collective good, shared responsibility, unequal starting places, government helps
Level 2: Issue Categories	

Conservative	Liberal/Progressive
Moral behavior, taxes, education	Poverty, social welfare, inequality
Level 3: Programs and Policies	
Tax cuts, business incentives to create opportunity, short-term “bootstrap” help for individuals	Financial aid, health care, housing, educational assistance so people will take advantage of opportunity
Basic Argument	
Welfare hurts rather than helps by undermining the very attributes that people need to be successful (hard work, self-discipline, etc). It makes people dependent rather than independent. It rewards immoral behavior by giving people something that they have not earned, thus worsening the problem.	Welfare helps by giving people the basic necessities they need to be successful. It makes people independent by providing a helping hand. It encourages moral behavior in society by sharing with those who are disadvantaged. It is a manifestation of our obligation to the collective good.

The Progressive Story

So here is the task we face. We need to think about an overall “progressive story” that creates a context for programs and policies that can make a difference. We need to have “Korten” stories rooted in “Lakoff” Level 1 values and principles that can be the context for an elaboration of social policies and programs (Level 3) that are fairer, provide more opportunity, protect the environment, and advance the larger cause of a socially just society.

This is really the core of the Rockridge mission—moving new stories to the center of public discourse and providing frames that “conduct” the power of the stories. I haven’t talked about messages here because messages are really part of the problem—the focus on finding a message minimizes the substantial and legitimate size of the challenge we face. It creates an expectation that the challenge is mostly just how to arrange the words. Framing is more than just a message. It represents a conceptual system in which major issues are connected by a common understanding of values.

I frequently hear people talk about “framing” Social Security when they are simply coming up with a clever message and suggesting some numbers that might “convince” people. The real issue is not about Social Security, but about the role of government and the relationship we have with it. A message won’t work when the larger frame has been set in opposition to that message. As Stephen Moore, an activist

interested in revamping Social Security, noted in a recent *Los Angeles Times* article, “You have extremely high expectations among conservatives that real change is going to take place. Conservatives have waited for 20 years for this alignment.”

The message is the final step, not the first step. It is the product that should be a natural extension of stories and frames, not the basis. The road to meaningful framing may be a longer journey than most of us like, but it’s the milestone we need to pass in order to reach our final destination.