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The Framing Wars

By MATT BAI

After last November's defeat, Democrats were like aviation investigators sifting through twisted metal in a cornfield, struggling to posit theories about the disaster all around them. Some put the onus on John Kerry, saying he had never found an easily discernable message. Others, including Kerry himself, wrote off the defeat to the unshakable realities of wartime, when voters were supposedly less inclined to jettison a sitting president. Liberal activists blamed mushy centrists. Mushy centrists blamed Michael Moore. As the weeks passed, however, at Washington dinner parties and in public post-mortems, one explanation took hold not just among Washington insiders but among far-flung contributors, activists and bloggers too: the problem wasn't the substance of the party's agenda or its messenger as much as it was the Democrats' inability to communicate coherently. They had allowed Republicans to control the language of the debate, and that had been their undoing.

Even in their weakened state, Democrats resolved not to let it happen again. And improbably, given their post-election gloom, they managed twice in the months that followed to make good on that pledge. The first instance was the skirmish over the plan that the president called Social Security reform and that everybody else, by spring, was calling a legislative disaster. The second test for Democrats was their defense of the filibuster (the time-honored stalling tactic that prevents the majority in the Senate from ending debate), which seemed at the start a hopeless cause but ended in an unlikely stalemate. These victories weren't easy to account for, coming as they did at a time when Republicans seem to own just about everything in Washington but the first-place Nationals. (And they're working on that.) During the first four years of the Bush administration, after all, Democrats had railed just as loudly against giveaways to the wealthy and energy lobbyists, and all they had gotten for their trouble were more tax cuts and more drilling. Something had changed in Washington -- but what?

Democrats thought they knew the answer. Even before the election, a new political word had begun to take hold of the party, beginning on the West Coast and spreading like a virus all the way to the inner offices of the Capitol. That word was "framing." Exactly what it means to "frame" issues seems to depend on which Democrat you are talking to, but everyone agrees that it has to do with choosing the language to define a debate and, more important, with fitting individual issues into the contexts of broader story lines. In the months after the election, Democratic consultants and elected officials came to sound like creative-writing teachers, holding forth on the importance of metaphor and narrative.

Republicans, of course, were the ones who had always excelled at framing controversial issues, having invented and popularized loaded phrases like "tax relief" and "partial-birth abortion" and having achieved a kind of Pravda-esque discipline for disseminating them. But now Democrats said that they had learned to fight back. "The Democrats have finally

reached a level of outrage with what Republicans were doing to them with language," Geoff Garin, a leading Democratic pollster, told me in May.

By the time Washington's attention turned to the Supreme Court earlier this month, rejuvenated Democrats actually believed they had developed the rhetorical skill, if it came to that, to thwart the president's plans for the court. That a party so thoroughly relegated to minority status might dictate the composition of the Supreme Court would seem to mock the hard realities of history and mathematics, but that is how much faith the Democrats now held in the power of a compelling story. "In a way, it feels like all the systemic improvements we've made in communications strategy over the past few months have been leading to this," Jim Jordan, one of the party's top strategists, said a few days after Sandra Day O'Connor announced her resignation. "This will be an extraordinarily sophisticated, well-orchestrated, intense fight. And our having had some run-throughs over the past few months will be extremely important."

The most critical run-through for Democrats, in light of the test ahead, was the defense of the filibuster, and for that reason, it offers some useful clues to how Democrats may try to frame the Supreme Court fight as well. The battle began late last fall, when Senate Republicans, feeling pretty good about themselves, started making noises about ramming judges through the Senate by stripping Democrats of their ability to filibuster, a plan the Republican senators initially called "the nuclear option." The fight was nominally over Bush's choices for the federal bench, but everyone knew it was in fact merely a prelude to the battle over the Supreme Court; the only way for Democrats to stop a confirmation vote would be to employ the filibuster.

In January, Geoff Garin conducted a confidential poll on judicial nominations, paid for by a coalition of liberal advocacy groups. He was looking for a story -- a frame -- for the filibuster that would persuade voters that it should be preserved, and he tested four possible narratives. Democratic politicians assumed that voters saw the filibuster fight primarily as a campaign to stop radically conservative judges, as they themselves did. But to their surprise, Garin found that making the case on ideological grounds -- that is, that the filibuster prevented the appointment of judges who would roll back civil rights -- was the least effective approach. When, however, you told voters that the filibuster had been around for over 200 years, that Republicans were "changing rules in the middle of the game" and dismantling the "checks and balances" that protected us against one-party rule, almost half the voters strongly agreed, and 7 out of 10 were basically persuaded. It became, for them, an issue of fairness.

Garin then convened focus groups and listened for clues about how to make this case. He heard voters call the majority party "arrogant." They said they feared "abuse of power." This phrase struck Garin. He realized many people had already developed deep suspicions about Republicans in Washington. Garin shared his polling with a group of Democratic senators that included Harry Reid, the minority leader. Reid, in turn, assigned Stephanie Cutter, who was Kerry's spokeswoman last year, to put together a campaign-style "war room" on the filibuster. Cutter set up a strategy group, which included senior Senate aides, Garin, the pollster Mark Mellman and Jim Margolis, one of the party's top

ad makers. She used Garin's research to create a series of talking points intended to cast the filibuster as an American birthright every bit as central to the Republic as Fourth of July fireworks. The talking points began like this: "Republicans are waging an unprecedented power grab. They are changing the rules in the middle of the game and attacking our historic system of checks and balances." They concluded, "Democrats are committed to fighting this abuse of power."

Cutter's war room began churning out mountains of news releases hammering daily at the G.O.P.'s "abuse of power." In an unusual show of discipline, Democrats in the Senate and House carried laminated, pocket-size message cards -- "DEMOCRATS FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY, AGAINST ABUSE OF POWER," blared the headline at the top -- with the talking points on one side and some helpful factoids about Bush's nominees on the other. During an appearance on "This Week With George Stephanopoulos" in April, Senator Charles Schumer of New York needed all of 30 seconds to invoke the "abuse of power" theme -- twice.

By the time Reid took to the airwaves in late May, on the eve of what looked to be a final showdown on the filibuster ("This abuse of power is not what our founders intended," he told the camera solemnly), the issue seemed pretty well defined in the public mind. In a typical poll conducted by Time magazine, 59 percent of voters said they thought the G.O.P. should be stopped from eliminating the filibuster. Perhaps feeling the pressure, a group of seven Republicans joined with seven Democrats in a last-minute compromise. Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader, and his team, smarting from crucial defections, had no choice but to back down from a vote. The truce meant that several of Bush's judges would be confirmed quickly, but it marked a rare retreat for Republicans and infuriated conservative activists, who knew that a Supreme Court battle would now be messier than they had hoped.

For their part, Democrats were euphoric at having played the G.O.P. to a draw. The facts of the filibuster fight hadn't necessarily favored them; in reality, the constitutional principle of "checks and balances" on which the Democrats' case was based refers to the three branches of government, not to some parliamentary procedure, and it was actually the Democrats who had broken with Senate tradition by using the filibuster to block an entire slate of judges. ("An irrelevancy beyond the pay grade of the American voter," Garin retorted when I pointed this out.) And yet it was their theory of the case, and not the Republicans', that had won the argument. As Garin explained it, Republicans had become ensnared in a faulty frame of their own making. The phrase "nuclear option" -- a term Frist and his colleagues had tried gamely, but unsuccessfully, to lose -- had made Dr. Frist sound more like Dr. Strangelove. "It's a very evocative phrase," Garin said. "It's blowing up the Senate. It's having your finger on the button."

Garin was gloating, but it was hard to blame him. On the eve of what promises to be a historic debate over the direction of the nation's highest court, Democrats on Capitol Hill seemed to have starkly reversed the dynamic of last fall's election. Then, they had watched helplessly as George W. Bush and his strategists methodically twisted John Kerry into a hopeless tangle of contradictions and equivocations, using words and

imagery to bend him into a shape that hardly resembled the war hero he had been. Now, Democrats believed, they had deciphered the hieroglyphics of modern political debate that had so eluded them in the campaign, and in doing so they had exacted some small measure of revenge. As one of the party's senior Senate aides told me a few days after the filibuster compromise was reached, "We framed them the way they framed Kerry."

The father of framing is a man named George Lakoff, and his spectacular ascent over the last eight months in many ways tells the story of where Democrats have been since the election. A year ago, Lakoff was an obscure linguistics professor at Berkeley, renowned as one of the great, if controversial, minds in cognitive science but largely unknown outside of it. When he, like many liberals, became exasperated over the drift of the Kerry campaign last summer -- "I went to bed angry every night," he told me -- Lakoff decided to bang out a short book about politics and language, based on theories he had already published with academic presses, that could serve as a kind of handbook for Democratic activists. His agent couldn't find a publishing house that wanted it. Lakoff ended up more or less giving it away to Chelsea Green, a tiny liberal publisher in Vermont.

That book, "Don't Think of an Elephant!" is now in its eighth printing, having sold nearly 200,000 copies, first through liberal word of mouth and the blogosphere and then through reviews and the lecture circuit. (On the eve of last fall's election, I came across a Democratic volunteer in Ohio who was handing out a boxful of copies to her friends.) Lakoff has emerged as one of the country's most coveted speakers among liberal groups, up there with Howard Dean, who, as it happens, wrote the foreword to "Don't Think of an Elephant!" Lakoff has a DVD titled "How Democrats and Progressives Can Win: Solutions From George Lakoff," and he recently set up his own consulting company.

When I first met Lakoff in April, at a U.C.L.A. forum where he was appearing with Arianna Huffington and the populist author Thomas Frank, he told me that he had been receiving an average of eight speaking invitations a day and that his e-mail account and his voice mailbox had been full for months. "I have a lot of trouble with this life," Lakoff confided wearily as we boarded a rental-car shuttle in Oakland the following morning. He is a short and portly man with a professorial beard, and his rumpled suits are a size too big. "People say, 'Why do you go speak to all these little groups?' It's because I love them. I wish I could do them all." Not that most of Lakoff's engagements are small. Recently, in what has become a fairly typical week for him, Lakoff sold out auditoriums in Denver and Seattle.

How this came to be is a story about the unlikely intersection of cognitive science and political tumult. It began nearly 40 years ago, when, as a graduate student, Lakoff rebelled against his mentor, Noam Chomsky, the most celebrated linguist of the century. The technical basis of their argument, which for a time cleaved the linguistics world in two, remains well beyond the intellectual reach of anyone who actually had fun in college, but it was a personal and nasty disagreement, and it basically went like this: Chomsky said that linguists should concern themselves with discovering the universal rules of syntax, which form the basis for language. Lakoff, on the other hand, theorized

that language was inherently linked to the workings of the mind -- to "conceptual structures," as a linguist would put it -- and that to understand language, you first had to study the way that each individual's worldview and ideas informed his thought process.

Chomsky effectively won this debate, at least in the sense that most American linguistics departments still teach it his way. (To this day, the two men don't speak.) Undeterred, however, Lakoff and his like-minded colleagues marched off and founded the field of cognitive linguistics, which seeks to understand the nature of language -- how we use it, why it is persuasive -- by exploring the largely unconscious way in which the mind operates.

In the 1970's, Lakoff, verging into philosophy, became obsessed with metaphors. As he explained it to me one day over lunch at a Berkeley cafe, students of the mind, going back to Aristotle, had always viewed metaphor simply as a device of language, a facile way of making a point. Lakoff argued instead that metaphors were actually embedded in the recesses of the mind, giving the brain a way to process abstract ideas. In other words, a bad relationship reminds you on an unconscious level of a cul-de-sac, because both are leading nowhere. This results from what might be called a "love as journey" frame in the neural pathways of your brain -- that is, you are more likely to relate to the story of, say, a breakup if it is described to you with the imagery of a journey. This might seem intuitive, but in 1980, when Lakoff wrote "Metaphors We Live By," it was considered fairly radical. "For 2,500 years, nobody challenged Aristotle, even though he was wrong," Lakoff told me, sipping from a goblet of pinot grape juice. Humility is not his most obvious virtue.

Through his work on metaphors, Lakoff found an avenue into political discourse. In a seminal 1996 book, "Moral Politics," he asserted that people relate to political ideologies, on an unconscious level, through the metaphorical frame of a family. Conservative politicians, Lakoff suggests, operate under the frame of a strict father, who lays down inflexible rules and imbues his family with a strong moral order. Liberals, on the other hand, are best understood through a frame of the nurturant parent, who teaches his child to pursue personal happiness and care for those around him. (The two models, Lakoff has said, are personified by Arnold Schwarzenegger on one side and Oprah Winfrey on the other.) Most voters, Lakoff suggests, carry some part of both parental frames in the synapses of their brains; which model is "activated" -- that is, which they can better relate to -- depends on the language that politicians use and the story that they tell.

The most compelling part of Lakoff's hypothesis is the notion that in order to reach voters, all the individual issues of a political debate must be tied together by some larger frame that feels familiar to us. Lakoff suggests that voters respond to grand metaphors -- whether it is the metaphor of a strict father or something else entirely -- as opposed to specific arguments, and that specific arguments only resonate if they reinforce some grander metaphor. The best evidence to support this idea can be found in the history of the 2004 presidential campaign. From Day 1, Republicans tagged Kerry with a larger metaphor: he was a flip-flopper, a Ted Kennedy-style liberal who tried to seem centrist, forever bouncing erratically from one position to the other. They made sure that virtually

every comment they uttered about Kerry during the campaign reminded voters, subtly or not, of this one central theme. (The smartest ad of the campaign may have been the one that showed Kerry windsurfing, expertly gliding back and forth, back and forth.) Democrats, on the other hand, presented a litany of different complaints about Bush, depending on the day and the backdrop; he was a liar, a corporate stooge, a spoiled rich kid, a reckless warmonger. But they never managed to tie them all into a single, unifying image that voters could associate with the president. As a result, none of them stuck. Bush was attacked. Kerry was framed.

According to Lakoff, Republicans are skilled at using loaded language, along with constant repetition, to play into the frames in our unconscious minds. Take one of his favorite examples, the phrase "tax relief." It presumes, Lakoff points out, that we are being oppressed by taxes and that we need to be liberated from them. It fits into a familiar frame of persecution, and when such a phrase, repeated over time, enters the everyday lexicon, it biases the debate in favor of conservatives. If Democrats start to talk about their own "tax relief" plan, Lakoff says, they have conceded the point that taxes are somehow an unfair burden rather than making the case that they are an investment in the common good. The argument is lost before it begins.

Lakoff informed his political theories by studying the work of Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster who helped Newt Gingrich formulate the Contract With America in 1994. To Lakoff and his followers, Luntz is the very embodiment of Republican deception. His private memos, many of which fell into the hands of Democrats, explain why. In one recent memo, titled "The 14 Words Never to Use," Luntz urged conservatives to restrict themselves to phrases from what he calls, grandly, the "New American Lexicon." Thus, a smart Republican, in Luntz's view, never advocates "drilling for oil"; he prefers "exploring for energy." He should never criticize the "government," which cleans our streets and pays our firemen; he should attack "Washington," with its ceaseless thirst for taxes and regulations. "We should never use the word outsourcing," Luntz wrote, "because we will then be asked to defend or end the practice of allowing companies to ship American jobs overseas."

In Lakoff's view, not only does Luntz's language twist the facts of his agenda but it also renders facts meaningless by actually reprogramming, through long-term repetition, the neural networks inside our brains. And this is where Lakoff's vision gets a little disturbing. According to Lakoff, Democrats have been wrong to assume that people are rational actors who make their decisions based on facts; in reality, he says, cognitive science has proved that all of us are programmed to respond to the frames that have been embedded deep in our unconscious minds, and if the facts don't fit the frame, our brains simply reject them. Lakoff explained to me that the frames in our brains can be "activated" by the right combination of words and imagery, and only then, once the brain has been unlocked, can we process the facts being thrown at us.

This notion of "activating" unconscious thought sounded like something out of "The Manchurian Candidate" ("Raymond, why don't you pass the time by playing a little

solitaire?"), and I asked Lakoff if he was suggesting that Americans voted for conservatives because they had been brainwashed.

"Absolutely not," he answered, shaking his head.

But hadn't he just said that Republicans had somehow managed to rewire people's brains?

"That's true, but that's different from brainwashing, and it's a very important thing," he said. "Brainwashing has to do with physical control, capturing people and giving them messages over and over under conditions of physical deprivation or torture. What conservatives have done is not brainwashing in this way. They've done something that's perfectly legal. What they've done is find ways to set their frames into words over many years and have them repeated over and over again and have everybody say it the same way and get their journalists to repeat them, until they became part of normal English."

I asked Lakoff how he himself had avoided being reprogrammed by these stealth Republican words. "Because I'm a linguist, I recognize them," he said. Even to him, this sounded a little too neat, and a moment later he admitted that he, too, had fallen prey to conservative frames now and then. "Occasionally," he said with a shrug, "I've caught myself."

In May 2003, Senator Byron Dorgan, the North Dakota Democrat, read "Moral Politics" and took Lakoff to a Democratic Senate retreat in Cambridge, Md. Lakoff had never met a senator before. "I knew what they were up against, even if they didn't know what they were up against," Lakoff says. "They were just besieged. My heart went out to them."

Lakoff gave a presentation, and in the parlance of comedians, he killed. Hillary Clinton invited him to dinner. Tom Daschle, then the minority leader, asked Lakoff if he would rejoin the senators a few days later, during their next caucus meeting at the Capitol, so that he could offer advice about the tax plan they were working on. Lakoff readily agreed, even though he had come East without so much as a jacket or tie. "I went in there, and it was just this beautiful thing," he told me, recalling the caucus meeting. "All these people I'd just met applauded. They gave me hugs. It was the most amazing thing."

Of course, the idea that language and narrative matter in politics shouldn't really have come as a revelation to Washington Democrats. Bill Clinton had been an intuitive master of framing. As far back as 1992, Clinton's image of Americans who "worked hard and played by the rules," for instance, had perfectly evoked the metaphor of society as a contest that relied on fairness. And yet despite this, Democrats in Congress were remarkably slow to grasp this dimension of political combat. Having ruled Capitol Hill pretty comfortably for most of the past 60 years, Democrats had never had much reason to think about calibrating their language in order to sell their ideas.

"I can describe, and I've always been able to describe, what Republicans stand for in eight words, and the eight words are lower taxes, less government, strong defense and family

values," Dorgan, who runs the Democratic Policy Committee in the Senate, told me recently. "We Democrats, if you ask us about one piece of that, we can meander for 5 or 10 minutes in order to describe who we are and what we stand for. And frankly, it just doesn't compete very well. I'm not talking about the policies. I'm talking about the language."

Dorgan has become the caucus's chief proponent of framing theory. "I think getting some help from some people who really understand how to frame some of these issues is long overdue," he says, which is why he invited Lakoff back to talk to his colleagues after the 2004 election. Meanwhile, over on the House side, George Miller, a Democrat from the San Francisco area, met Lakoff through a contributor and offered to distribute copies of "Don't Think of an Elephant!" to every member of the caucus. The thin paperback became as ubiquitous among Democrats in the Capitol as Mao's Little Red Book once was in the Forbidden City. "The framing was perfect for us, because we were just arriving in an unscientific way at what Lakoff was arriving at in a scientific way," says Representative Nancy Pelosi, the minority leader in the House.

In fact, though Lakoff started the framing discussion, he was by no means the only outside expert whom Democrats were consulting about language. To the contrary, a small industry had blossomed. Even before the 2004 election, Pelosi had enlisted John Cullinane, a software entrepreneur in Boston, to help the caucus develop the wording for a vision statement. Cullinane spent an hour and a half with members of the caucus one afternoon, while his aide scrawled suggestions on a white board. Among his recommendations was that they come up with a list that had six parts -- either six principles or six values or six ideas. When we spoke, I asked Cullinane why it had to be six. "Seven's too many," he replied. "Five's too few."

Then there was Richard Yanowitch, a Silicon Valley executive and party donor, who worked with Senate Democrats, providing what he calls "private-sector type marketing." Last December, at Dorgan's request, Reid put Yanowitch in charge of a "messaging project" to help devise new language for the party. Another adviser who became a frequent guest on the Hill after the election was Jim Wallis, a left-leaning evangelical minister who wrote "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it." In January, after addressing a Senate caucus retreat at the Kennedy Center, Wallis wrote a memo to the Democratic Policy Committee titled "Budgets Are Moral Documents," in which he laid out his argument that Democrats needed to "reframe" the budget in spiritual terms.

What all of these new advisers meant by "framing," exactly, and whether their concepts bore much resemblance to Lakoff's complex cognitive theories wasn't really clear. The word had quickly become something of a catchall, a handy term to describe anything having to do with changing the party's image through some new combination of language. So admired were these outside experts that they could hardly be counted as outsiders anymore. In May, for instance, Roger Altman, Clinton's former deputy treasury secretary, held a dinner for the former president to discuss the party's message with about 15 of its most elite and influential thinkers, including James Carville, Paul Begala, the

pollster Mark J. Penn and John Podesta, president of the Center for American Progress, the liberal think tank. Lakoff sat at Clinton's table; Wallis, at the next one over.

ush's plan to reform Social Security provided, last winter, the first test of the Democrats' new focus on language and narrative. In retrospect, it shows both the limits of framing and, perhaps, the real reason that Democrats have managed to stymie critical pieces of the Bush agenda.

Almost as soon as Bush signaled his intention to overhaul the existing program, Democrats in Congress, enamored of Lakoff's theories, embarked on a search for a compelling story line. Yanowitch's highly secretive messaging group met for months on the topic and came up with two "sample narratives" that Democrats might use. The first, titled "Privatization: A Gamble You Can't Afford to Take," stressed the insecurity of middle-class families and compared Bush's plan to a roll of the dice. The second, "The Magical World of Privatization," spun out a metaphor that centered on Bush as "an old-fashioned traveling salesman, with a cart full of magic elixirs and cure-all tonics." Some of this imagery found its way into the dialogue, for better or worse; Pelosi and other House members, never too proud to put their dignity above the greater good, held an outdoor news conference standing next to a stack of giant dice.

As they would later with the filibuster fight and with the Supreme Court, Senate Democrats, under Reid's direction, set up a war room and a strategy group, this one run by Jim Messina, chief of staff for Senator Max Baucus of Montana. Eschewing all the lofty metaphors, the war room stuck to two simple ideas: Bush's plan relied on privatizing the most popular government benefit in America, and it amounted to benefit cuts coupled with long-term borrowing. In addition to keeping members focused on their talking points, Messina's team and its allies -- led by two liberal interest groups, MoveOn.org and Campaign for America's Future, with help from the all-powerful AARP -- also had to stop senators and congressmen from offering compromise plans that might drive a wedge into the caucus. In this way, Democrats had decided to follow the example of Bill Kristol, the Republican strategist who had urged his party (shrewdly, as it turned out) to refrain from proposing any alternatives to Clinton's doomed health-care plan in 1993. "The minute we introduce a plan, we have to solve the problem" is how one senior Democratic aide explained it to me. "We are the minority party. It's not our job to fix things."

As it happened, this was where Lakoff himself proved most helpful. In a meeting with House Democrats, some of whom were considering their own versions of private accounts, he urged them to hold firm against Bush's plan. "I pointed out that as soon as you allow them to get a privatization frame in people's minds about retirement and Social Security, it becomes an unintelligible difference," he recalled. "People will not be able to tell the difference between your plan and the other guy's." Referring to Pelosi, he added, "Nancy was saying the same thing, and so they stopped." As Democrats stood firm, Bush's idea for private accounts, which was never all that popular with voters to begin with, seemed to slowly lose altitude. A Gallup tracking poll conducted for CNN and USA Today showed the president's plan losing support, from 40 percent of voters in January to 33 percent in April.

Bush had tried to recast his proposed "private accounts" as "personal accounts" after it became clear to both sides that privatization, as a concept, frightened voters. But as they did on the filibuster, Democrats had managed to trap the president in his own linguistic box. "We branded them with privatization, and they can't sell that brand anywhere," Pelosi bragged when I spoke with her in May. "It's down to, like, 29 percent or something. At the beginning of this debate, voters were saying that the president was a *president* who had new ideas. Now he's a *guy* who wants to cut my benefits." At this, Pelosi laughed loudly.

What had Democrats learned about framing? In the end, the success of the Social Security effort -- and, for that matter, the filibuster campaign -- may have had something to do with language or metaphor, but it probably had more to do with the elusive virtue of party discipline. Pelosi explained it to me this way: for years, the party's leaders had tried to get restless Democrats to stay "on message," to stop freelancing their own rogue proposals and to continue reading from the designated talking points even after it got excruciatingly boring to do so. Consultants like Garin and Margolis had been saying the same thing, but Democratic congressmen, skeptical of the in-crowd of D.C. strategists, had begun to tune them out. "Listening to people inside Washington did not produce any victories," Pelosi said.

But now there were people from outside Washington -- experts from the worlds of academia and Silicon Valley -- who were making the same case. What the framing experts had been telling Democrats on the Hill, aside from all this arcane stuff about narratives and neural science, was that they needed to stay unified and repeat the same few words and phrases over and over again. And these "outsiders" had what Reid and Pelosi and their legion of highly paid consultants did not: the patina of scientific credibility. Culturally, this made perfect sense. If you wanted Republican lawmakers to buy into a program, you brought in a guy like Frank Luntz, an unapologetically partisan pollster who dressed like the head of the College Republicans. If you wanted Democrats to pay attention, who better to do the job than an egghead from Berkeley with an armful of impenetrable journal studies on the workings of the brain?

You might say that Lakoff and the others managed to give the old concept of message discipline a new, more persuasive frame -- and that frame was called "framing." "The framing validates what we're trying to say to them," Pelosi said. "You have a Berkeley professor saying, 'This is how the mind works; this is how people perceive language; this is how you have to be organized in your presentation.' It gives me much more leverage with my members."

On a recent morning in his Virginia office, seated next to one of those one-way glass walls that you find only in the offices of cops and pollsters, Frank Luntz explained why George Lakoff and his framing theory were leading the Democratic Party astray. In recent years, Luntz's penchant for publicity -- he is a frequent commentator on cable television -- has earned him no small amount of scorn and ridicule from fellow Republicans; that Lakoff's little book had suddenly elevated Luntz to a kind of mythic villain seemed to amuse him.

"In some ways, the Democrats appreciate me more than the Republicans do," Luntz, 43, told me with a trace of self-pity.

The problem with Lakoff, Luntz said, is that the professor's ideology seemed to be driving his science. Luntz, after all, has never made for a terribly convincing conservative ideologue. (During our conversation, he volunteered that the man he admired most was the actor Peter Sellers, for his ability to disappear into whatever role he was given.) Luntz sees Lakoff, by contrast, as a doctrinaire liberal who believes viscerally that if Democrats are losing, it has to be because of the words they use rather than the substance of the argument they make. What Lakoff didn't realize, Luntz said, was that poll-tested phrases like "tax relief" were successful only because they reflected the values of voters to begin with; no one could sell ideas like higher taxes and more government to the American voter, no matter how they were framed. To prove it, Luntz, as part of his recent polling for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, specifically tested some of Lakoff's proposed language on taxation. He said he found that even when voters were reminded of the government's need to invest in education, health care, national security and retirement security, 66 percent of them said the United States overtaxed its citizenry and only 14 percent said we were undertaxed. Luntz presented this data to chamber officials on a slide with the headline "George Lakoff Is Wrong!!"

"He deserves a lot of credit," Luntz said of Lakoff. "He's one of the very few guys who understands the limits of liberal language. What he doesn't understand is that there are also limits on liberal philosophy. They think that if they change all the words, it'll make a difference. Won't happen." (Last month, after we talked, Luntz challenged Lakoff, through me, to a "word-off" in which each man would try to "move" a roomful of 30 swing voters. Lakoff responded by counterchallenging Luntz to an "on-the-spot conceptual analysis." Since I had no idea what either of them was talking about, I let it go.)

Luntz's dismissiveness is what you might expect to hear about Lakoff from a Republican, of course. But the same complaint has surfaced with growing ferocity among skeptical Democrats and in magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Republic*. An antiframing backlash has emerged, and while it is, on the surface, an argument about Lakoff and his theories, it is clearly also a debate about whether the party lacks only for language or whether it needs a fresher agenda. Lakoff's detractors say that it is he who resembles the traveling elixir salesman, peddling comforting answers at a time when desperate Democrats should be admitting some hard truths about their failure to generate new ideas. "Every election defeat has a charlatan, some guy who shows up and says, 'Hey, I marketed the lava lamp, and I can market Democratic politics,'" says Kenneth Baer, a former White House speechwriter who wrote an early article attacking Lakoff's ideas in *The Washington Monthly*. "At its most basic, it represents the Democratic desire to find a messiah."

In a devastating critique in *The Atlantic's* April issue, Marc Cooper, a contributing editor at *The Nation*, skillfully ridiculed Lakoff as the new progressive icon. "Much more than an offering of serious political strategy, 'Don't Think of an Elephant!' is a feel-good, self-

help book for a stratum of despairing liberals who just can't believe how their common-sense message has been misunderstood by eternally deceived masses," Cooper wrote. In Lakoff's view, he continued, American voters are "redneck, chain-smoking, baby-slapping Christs desperately in need of some gender-free nurturing and political counseling by organic-gardening enthusiasts from Berkeley."

Lakoff doesn't have much patience for criticism (he's a tenured professor, after all), and he keeps at his disposal a seemingly bottomless arsenal of linguistic and philosophical theories with which to refute such attacks. In response to Cooper's article and another in *The Atlantic*, by Joshua Green, Lakoff fired off a nine-page draft response to a long e-mail list of friends and journalists in which he accused Cooper and Green of living in the "rationalist-materialist paradigm" (that's RAM for short), an outdated belief system that mistakenly assumes the rationality of other human beings. He also pointed out that they had cleverly, but unsuccessfully, tried to trap him in the "guru frame," a story line about one individual who passes himself off as having all the answers to other people's problems.

Lakoff has some valid points. In his writing, at least, he explains framing in a way that is more intellectually complex than his critics have admitted. His essential insight into politics -- that voters make their decisions based on larger frames rather than on the sum of a candidate's positions -- is hard to refute. And Lakoff does say in "Don't Think of an Elephant!" albeit very briefly, that Democrats need not just new language but also new thought; he told me the party suffers from "hypocognition," or a lack of ideas. What's more, when it comes to the language itself, Lakoff has repeatedly written that the process of reframing American political thought will take years, if not decades, to achieve. He does not suggest in his writing that a few catchy slogans can turn the political order on its head by the next election.

The message Lakoff's adherents seem to take away from their personal meetings with him, however, is decidedly more simplistic. When I asked Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, the minority whip and one of Lakoff's strongest supporters, whether Lakoff had talked to the caucus about this void of new ideas in the party, Durbin didn't hesitate. "He doesn't ask us to change our views or change our philosophy," Durbin said. "He tells us that we have to recommunicate." In fact, Durbin said he now understood, as a result of Lakoff's work, that the Republicans have triumphed "by repackaging old ideas in all new wrapping," the implication being that this was not a war of ideas at all, but a contest of language.

The question here is whether Lakoff purposely twists his own academic theories to better suit his partisan audience or whether his followers are simply hearing what they want to hear and ignoring the rest. When I first met Lakoff in Los Angeles, he made it clear, without any prompting from me, that he was exasperated by the dumbing down of his intricate ideas. He had just been the main attraction at a dinner with Hollywood liberals, and he despaired that all they had wanted from him were quick fixes to long-term problems. "They all just want to know the magic words," he told me. "I say: 'You don't

understand, there aren't any magic words. It's about ideas.' But all everyone wants to know is: 'What three words can we use? How do we win the next election?' They don't get it."

And yet Lakoff had spoken for 12 minutes and then answered questions at the U.C.L.A. forum with Huffington and Frank, and not once had he even implied that the Democratic problem hadn't been entirely caused by Republicans or that it couldn't be entirely fixed by language. The more time I spent with Lakoff, in fact, the more I began to suspect that his complaint about "magic words" was another example of framing; in this case, Lakoff was consciously framing himself in his conversations with me as a helpless academic whose theories were being misused. The reality seemed to be that Lakoff was enjoying his sudden fame and popularity too much to bother his followers with troubling details -- like, say, the notion that their problem might be bigger than mere words or that it might take decades to establish new political frames. After all, Lakoff is selling out theaters and making more money than he ever thought possible; in 2006, Farrar, Straus & Giroux will publish his next book, on how conservatives have changed the meaning of the word "freedom." At one point, Lakoff told me he would like to appear as the host of a regular TV segment on framing.

Peter Teague, who oversees environmental programs at the liberal Nathan Cummings Foundation, was Lakoff's most important patron in the days after he wrote "Moral Politics." When I spoke with Teague about Lakoff a few months ago, he sounded a little depressed. "There's a cartoon version of Lakoff out there, and everyone's responding to the cartoon," Teague said. "It's not particularly useful. As much as we talk about having a real dialogue and a deeper discussion, we really end up having a very superficial conversation.

"I keep saying to George, 'You're reinforcing the very things you're fighting against.'"

I asked Lakoff, during an afternoon walk across the Berkeley campus, if he felt at all complicit in the superficiality that Teague was describing. "I do," he said thoughtfully. "It's a complicated problem. Of course it bothers me. But this is just Stage 1, and there are stages of misunderstanding. People have to travel a path of understanding."

His celebrity may yet prove to be his undoing. When I visited him in Berkeley in April, Lakoff, who until then had done all his work with Washington Democrats on a volunteer basis, had submitted a proposal to leaders in the House for a consulting contract. Although the details were closely guarded, it had something to do with a project to use focus groups to study narrative. In May, House Democrats decided not to finalize the deal after some members and senior aides wondered out loud if Lakoff mania had gotten out of hand. Lakoff, it seemed, was experiencing a common Washington phenomenon to which Frank Luntz could easily relate: the more famous an adviser gets, the more politicians begin to suspect him of trying to further himself at their expense. A friend of Lakoff's suggested to me that we were witnessing the beginning of an all-too-familiar frame: the meteoric rise and dizzying fall of a political sensation.

f that were true, it seemed, then the whole notion of framing might just be a passing craze, like some post-election macarena. It certainly sounded like that might be the case when I visited Harry Reid just before Memorial Day. Reid waved away the suggestion that language had much to do with the party's recent successes. "If you want my honest opinion, and I know you do, I think people make too much out of that," he said. "I'm not a person who dwells on all these people getting together and spending hours and days coming up with the right words. I know that my staff thinks, 'Oh, why don't you tell him about all this great work we've done on framing?' But honestly, that's not it."

Reid credited the "team effort" and message discipline of the caucus for its victory on the filibuster issue. At one point, when I asked Reid, a former boxer, about Lakoff's theories, he seemed to equate them with psychotherapy. "I'm not going to waste a lot of time sitting in a room talking about how my parents weren't good to me or something like that," Reid said firmly. "I'm not involved in any of that gimmickry."

After leaving Reid, I walked across the Capitol to see Nancy Pelosi, who told a different story. She assured me that Lakoff's ideas had "forever changed" the way Democratic House members thought about politics. "He has taken people here to a place, whether you agree or disagree with his particular frame, where they know there has to be a frame," she told me. "They all agree without any question that you don't speak on Republican terms. You don't think of an elephant."

I suggested that maybe she and Reid had different views on the value of framing as a strategy. "Oh, no," she said emphatically, drawing out the last word. "He's been a leader on it! The two of us know better than anyone what's at stake here. In fact, he sort of initiated our abuse-of-power frame."

It was hard to know what to make of these conflicting conversations. Perhaps Reid feared that if he admitted to caring about framing, he would be framed as one of those clueless Democrats seeking easy answers. Perhaps Pelosi was covering for him by suggesting they were unified when in fact they weren't. But it seemed more likely that the disconnect between the party's two elected leaders reflected a broader confusion among Democrats about what they actually mean by framing. There is no doubt that having a central theme and repeating it like robots has made Democrats a respectable opposition force in Congress. To Pelosi and a lot of other Democrats, that is the miracle of this thing called framing. To Reid, it is just an intuitive part of politics, and he doesn't need some professor to give it a name or tell him that Democrats haven't been very good at it.

Whatever you call it, this kind of message discipline will be a crucial piece of what will most likely become, in the weeks ahead, a Democratic push to block Bush's designs on the Supreme Court. In order to stop a nominee, Democrats will have to frame the filibuster battle in the public arena all over again, and this time, they will have to convince voters that it is Bush's specific choice for the nation's highest court -- and not simply a slate of faceless judges -- who represents the reckless arrogance of Republican rule. Even in the hours after O'Connor made her announcement, you could see in

Democratic responses the first stirrings of this new campaign. "If the president abuses his power and nominates someone who threatens to roll back the rights and freedoms of the American people," said Ted Kennedy, lifting lines directly from Garin's latest polling memo, "then the American people will insist that we oppose that nominee, and we intend to do so." Meanwhile, Susan McCue, Reid's powerful chief of staff, offered me a preview of the theory to come: "It goes beyond 'abuse of power.' It's about arrogance, irresponsibility, being out of touch and catering to a narrow, narrow slice of their ideological constituency at the expense of the vast majority of Americans."

It is not inconceivable that such an argument could sway public opinion; Americans are congenitally disposed to distrust whichever party holds power. The larger question -- too large, perhaps, for most Democrats to want to consider at the moment -- is whether they can do more with language and narrative than simply snipe at Bush's latest initiative or sink his nominees. Here, the Republican example may be instructive. In 1994, Republican lawmakers, having heeded Bill Kristol's advice and refused to engage in the health-care debate, found themselves in a position similar to where Democrats are now; they had weakened the president and spiked his trademark proposal, and they knew from Luntz's polling that the public harbored serious reservations about the Democratic majority in Congress. What they did next changed the course of American politics. Rather than continue merely to deflect Clinton's agenda, Republicans came up with their own, the Contract With America, which promised 10 major legislative acts that were, at the time, quite provocative. They included reforming welfare, slashing budget deficits, imposing harsher criminal penalties and cutting taxes on small businesses. Those 10 items, taken as a whole, encapsulated a rigid conservative philosophy that had been taking shape for 30 years -- and that would define politics at the end of the 20th century.

By contrast, consider the declaration that House Democrats produced after their session with John Cullinane, the branding expert, last fall. The pamphlet is titled "The House Democrats' New Partnership for America's Future: Six Core Values for a Strong and Secure Middle Class." Under each of the six values -- "prosperity, national security, fairness, opportunity, community and accountability" -- is a wish list of vague notions and familiar policy ideas. ("Make health care affordable for every American," "Invest in a fully funded education system that gives every child the skills to succeed" and so on.) Pelosi is proud of the document, which -- to be fair -- she notes is just a first step toward repackaging the party's agenda. But if you had to pick an unconscious metaphor to attach to it, it would probably be a cotton ball.

Consider, too, George Lakoff's own answer to the Republican mantra. He sums up the Republican message as "strong defense, free markets, lower taxes, smaller government and family values," and in "Don't Think of an Elephant!" he proposes some Democratic alternatives: "Stronger America, broad prosperity, better future, effective government and mutual responsibility." Look at the differences between the two. The Republican version is an argument, a series of philosophical assertions that require voters to make concrete choices about the direction of the country. Should we spend more or less on the military? Should government regulate industry or leave it unfettered? Lakoff's formulation, on the other hand, amounts to a vague collection of the least objectionable ideas in American

life. Who out there wants to make the case against prosperity and a better future? Who doesn't want an effective government?

What all these middling generalities suggest, perhaps, is that Democrats are still unwilling to put their more concrete convictions about the country into words, either because they don't know what those convictions are or because they lack confidence in the notion that voters can be persuaded to embrace them. Either way, this is where the power of language meets its outer limit. The right words can frame an argument, but they will never stand in its place.

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