

# **FAMILY VERSUS COMMUNITY FRAMES OF REFERENCE:**

## **FEAR, LOVE, AND COURAGE**

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### **The family metaframe**

Political “framing” refers to the activity of placing political discourse into a context of commonly accepted values and commonly known stories, fables, or archetypes. George Lakoff<sup>4</sup> argues for a general approach to political framing (i.e. a metaframe) that starts with a family metaphor, and more particularly a parent-child metaphor, for the relationship of actors. In the regressive<sup>5</sup> (i.e. right-wing) frame, political power is focused on a strict and controlling father-figure to whom citizens as child-like subjects owe submission and blind trust. The regressive frame also invites citizens (especially males) to identify with the strict father, but mainly in their private roles as family heads and business owners. In Lakoff’s progressive frame, political power is focused on a nurturing parent-figure, to whom citizens as subjects owe cooperative respect and a trust earned by performance. His progressive frame also invites citizens to identify with

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<sup>4</sup> George Lakoff, 2004, *don’t think of an elephant – know your values and frame the debate*, Chelsea Green Publishing: White River Junction VT.

<sup>5</sup> Lakoff suggests the term “regressives” for the radical right movement currently in control of the Republican Party. Members of that movement refer to themselves as “conservatives,” but from the point of view of political theory that term is a misnomer. Both conventionally and etymologically, a conservative is one who seeks to conserve existing resources, institutions, and social relationships. Instead, the radical right seeks deep and sweeping change. Ordinary politeness suggests that we should usually call a group or movement by the name that they prefer, but there is no obligation to do so when their chosen name is also an inaccurate propaganda slogan, as in “pro-life” or “true path.”

nurturing parents who broadly protect and support those who are in need.<sup>6</sup> This identification applies not only to private roles as parents and business leaders but also to public roles as voters and policymakers.

The metaframe for both frames involves two types of actors (parent and child) and one kind of relationship (parent-child). This is a relatively limited metaframe. In contrast, the Transactional Analysis psychology of Eric Bern<sup>7</sup> (for example) considers three kinds of actors: parent (P), child (C), and adult (A), potentially leading to six kinds of relationship or interaction (PP, AA, CC, PC, AC, PA). However in Transactional Analysis just two of the six interactions – namely parent-child (PC) and adult-adult (AA) – tend to be viewed as normative and socially most significant. Below we propose an alternative (or supplemental) metaframe based on a community (i.e. AA, adult-adult) metaphor.

As suggested by C. R. Snyder<sup>8</sup> (a professor at the University of Kansas who was the seminal researcher on hope), we identify fear as the predominate driving emotion in the strict father frame. Children trust and submit to the father figure because they are afraid and need his protection. Citizens are encouraged to feel fear, which places them in a child-like relationship to the strict father/leader. At the same time, since fear and dependency are demeaning and unpleasant feelings, citizens are taught to practice denial of fear. Policies based on violence are very suitable for responding to fear while denying its existence. This leadership style is especially effective when the policy of violence is implicit rather than explicit.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> We follow other writers on framing in speaking schematically, as if for example the rhetoric of left and the right in general could be characterized accurately using simple stereotypes; of course they cannot. However, we believe these schema do represent real truths, but of a statistical or average nature rather than a set of invariant rules. The rules might be especially accurate when applied to particular propagandists such as Frank Luntz, but we should recognize that other propagandists may vary the pattern. Independent thinkers who have goals other than partisan domination are less susceptible to stereotyping.

<sup>7</sup> Erick Bern, 1964, *Games People Play*, Grove Press: New York NY.

<sup>8</sup> Based on a speech given in Kansas City at the Kansas and Western Missouri ACLU Biennial Meeting, February 19, 2005. His research is described popularly in C. R. Snyder, 1994, *The psychology of hope: You can get there from here*, The Free Press: New York NY. For a scholarly compendium, see C. R. Snyder (Ed.), 2000, *Handbook of hope: Theory, measures, and applications*, San Diego, CA: Academic Press. Professor Snyder passed away on January 18, 2006; he will be missed.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to distinguish individual psychology from political psychology. However, the political leadership style described here is closely related to the individual parenting style known as “authoritarian.” The children of such parents often develop coping mechanisms known as “dismissive attachment styles,” persistent into adulthood, which not merely deny the existence of anxiety-provoking stimuli (fear, or threat of interpersonal loss) but do so at a subconscious level. Because these individuals do not consciously analyze threats, they are not able to focus on long-run consequences or make full use of their cognitive abilities in formulating a response. At the political level, regressive politicians not only attempt to manipulate those individuals who have a habitually dismissive style, but also attempt to induce a dismissive style in other individuals who are psychologically less committed to the denial of fear. It is especially this latter group that progressives must attempt to convert back to full consciousness.

It is important to understand that a suppression of fear learned over time is a very different psychological mechanism from the short-term highjacking of cognition that fear triggers. The results however are comparable: a greatly reduced capacity for higher order cognition.

For evidence on President George Walker Bush’s use of “empty rhetoric” intended to induce fearful

Fear is also present in the nurturing parent frame, but in a more muted way. The child is aware of his/her dependency on the parent, and the child feels anxiety that the parent will not be reliable. Parents in turn feel anxiety that the child may be at risk. However the dominant emotion in the nurturing parent frame is love.<sup>10</sup> Citizens are invited to nurture each other out of love, and citizens are invited to trust that they will be nurtured out of love when they are in need.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, political struggle in the Lakoff metaframe boils down to fear versus love. We suggest that fear holds the high ground in this struggle. Fear is a fast logic, nearly unconscious, primitive reptilian or limbic response, triggering right-brain emotional activity that drowns out other forms of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> It directs attention forcefully to that which is feared, so that any information counteracting fear is simply not noticed. It narrows action choices to fighting, fleeing, or freezing, so that no other options seem salient. Fear is also a natural emotion to feel in large group interactions (i.e. in politics) because large groups always involve strangers, who are natural objects of fear because they are unknown. (Currently, regressives also hold the commanding heights of the media, which makes it especially easy for them to disseminate fear.) Love on the other hand is focused on the small group of those we know, and it is hard to generalize love to a large community. Love is a higher-level mammalian emotion that invokes slower, more detailed and conscious cognition than fear.

It would be foolish of course to suggest that progressives have a monopoly on love. Many strict and controlling fathers do feel love for their children. However, regressive voters are encouraged to act like children rather than like fathers, at least in their political role. The children of dominating fathers may feel gratitude, but they do not have an opportunity to practice nurturance, which is the hallmark of a skilled and unalloyed parental love.

Both the strict father frame and the nurturing parent frame are primarily concerned with rationalizing power relationships, but in different ways. Regressive power is power over others, i.e. domination (and especially the domination of child-like citizens by the strict father figure).

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helplessness, see Renana Brooks, "A Nation of Victims," *The Nation*, June 12, 2003 (available at <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030630&s=brooks>).

<sup>10</sup> "Love" is a complex and contested term for which there is no good substitute. The term sometimes refers to an attachment based on insecure desire, but we have in mind a more self-confident form of love. In a private communication (2005), Hal Shorey suggested the alternative words "security" (in the sense used in his work on attachment, security means an internal belief in the goodness of self and the consistent availability of others), and "trust" (the ability to accurately predict cause and effect relationships in a given context).

<sup>11</sup> Fear is present in a less muted way in a pathological form of liberalism that has been described by Corey Robin as "the liberals of fear" ("The Fear of the Liberals," *The Nation* 182(9), September 26, 2005, pp. 13-17). Rather than hoping for what Judith Shklar called the "summum bonum" of a better society, fear liberals support a violent and empirical foreign policy based on fear of the "summum malum" of foreign tyrannies. See also Robin's 2004 *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ledoux shows that this override mechanism takes place in the brain center known as the amygdala (*The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Progressive power is power in Hannah Arendt's sense,<sup>13</sup> i.e. the ability of people working together to accomplish what they cannot accomplish separately. Progressive power at its best consists in empowering people to work together as equals, with commensurate benefits for all. The regressive concept of power also enables people to work together, but only within authoritarian and unequal relationships (including those forms of market relationship that result from unequal power).<sup>14</sup>

## **The community metaframe**

Snyder suggests that the most powerful answer to fear is not love, but courage. Snyder gives a very precise definition of courage, which is derived from his definition of hope.

Hope is not an emotion, but rather a three-element cognitive activity, which consists in: having a goal; developing alternative strategies to reach that goal ("waypower"); and having the gumption to keep on pursuing alternate strategies in the face of setbacks ("willpower"). Hope is a left brain, slow, conscious cognitive activity. It is hard to maintain that activity in the face of fear.

Courage consists in the manifest demonstration of hope in the face of fear. While hope is an individual activity, courage is an innately communal activity, in which one individual in the face of danger communicates hope to his or her peers. Courage is the best possible political response to fear. Courage on the part of a lone individual is contagious. Standing up to bullies is the only way that they can be defeated.

This point is crucial, because regressive politics is the politics of bullying: without exception regressive political strategy and dynamics include personal attacks intended to induce fear in opponents, and also to rally and discipline supporters who both want to be on the winning side and fear themselves becoming targets.

Love often contributes to courage (and courage to love), but love alone is not a match for fear. Indeed, love can be a source of fear, as when we fear for our children.

Courage occurs within an adult-adult interaction; hence it focuses on community, not family. Courage is exhibited within a war party (bravery, or physical courage) or in public discussion in the polis (moral courage). Since courage depends on hope, it involves high level cognitive activities: the development of strategies, and the communication of those strategies to others. (While there is a significant archetype in which a parental figure exhibits bravery in the defense of a child, it constitutes courage in this sense only when the act is communicated to the parent's peers.)

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Hannah Arendt, 1970, *On Violence*, Harcourt Brace and World: New York NY.

<sup>14</sup> Note that power as a horizontal empowerment relationship makes a poor fit with Lakoff's vertical parent-child metaframe, but makes a good fit with the horizontal adult-adult or community metaframe developed below.

Progressives excel at the development of government policy strategies, and they prefer to communicate them in adult-adult interactions—which is say, they excel in rational policy analysis. Progressives can win in the face of fear mongering if they have the courage to pursue goals based on love, to develop sensible strategies for reaching those goals, and to show consistency in working towards those goals – and if they can communicate these virtues to ordinary people in honest and direct language.

As with love, it would be foolish to suggest that regressives do not exhibit courage. However it is essential to the regressive program that fear be perpetual; it cannot ever be alleviated, lest citizens rediscover their underlying love. (Hence the political need for denying that fear exists – it is hard to address fears that are not admitted.) This means that regressive courage must be kept on a short leash, lest it overcome fear and undermine the program. Regressive politics encourage running with the pack, not standing up to it. Hence progressive courage has a natural advantage over regressive courage: progressive courage is potentially expansive and unrestrained.

And of course regressives can also do policy analysis. But again there is a difference. For regressives, policy analysis is subjugated to the analysis of political strategy; policy proposals are primarily a means of taking power. Since modern regressives do not believe in government as a force for good, they are nearly incapable of analyzing objectively how government can best be used for good ends. (In the limit, we have the Bush II administration, which has been described by several commentators as having a political analysis wing but no policy analysis wing.<sup>15</sup>) For progressives, policy analysis is primarily a means of discovering right action to improve the well-being of those we love, and only secondarily a means of taking power.

## **Metaframes and the hierarchy of needs**

To understand how the psycho-political dynamics play out, it is helpful to consider the relationship of basic emotional drives to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.<sup>16</sup> Fear is properly concerned with Maslow's two lowest levels of need: physiological needs and safety needs. Fear is the emotion that results from a perceived threat to these primary needs. As a biological imperative, these needs must be met before other needs become salient, and they must be met rapidly – hence the need for emotional circuits that bypass higher level cognition. By representing primary needs as endangered, regressives hope to short-circuit higher level cognitive activity. However, the fear they evoke is false – for most Americans, basic needs are being met and are not in serious danger. Ironically, this is especially true in the case of voters appealed to by regressives (very few of whom are among the very poor). For that reason,

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Krugman, November 20, 2003, “Strictly Business,” *The New York Review of Books*; Thomas L. Friedman, May 13, 2004, “Dancing Alone,” *The New York Times*; Al Gore, May 28 2004, Speech at New York University; *The Economist*, March 17, 2005, “The Shortcomings of the Bush Economic Team.”

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Maslow, 1999, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, John Wiley and Sons, New York NY.

regressive politicians typically mix the specter of threats to primary needs (law and order breakdown, national security risks, sexual menace) with threats to higher level needs, especially status needs (patronizing and elitist limousine liberals). In that way, regressive voters are conditioned, both to respond to status threats with fear and anger, and to perceive actual status threats as legitimating their false sense of threat to primary needs. However, false fear can be overcome by good leadership.

Love is especially concerned with Maslow's third level: the need for belonging. There are many forms and dimensions of love, but what they all have in common is the emotion of desire to be with another person (either physically or in memory). In this most general sense, to belong is to love and to be loved in return.

Courage is especially concerned with Maslow's fourth level—the need for esteem from others and from self. When one acts courageously, one feels self esteem and also receives esteem from others. Conversely, pre-existing esteem is degraded by acts of cowardice. Courage is not the only legitimate source of esteem – indeed, any trait considered to be a virtue can be a source of esteem. However, in the context of political action, courage has been described by Hannah Arendt as the highest virtue.



Courage is also implicated at Maslow's fifth level, which is the need for self-actualization. While the exact interpretation of Maslow's concept of self-actualization is controversial, one reasonable definition would be acting with integrity. Integrity refers to internal consistency and to

consonance between the outer self and the inner self. Courage is closely connected with integrity, because courage is needed in order to show one's true self to others, or to act out one's true values in the face of opposition.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of Maslow's hierarchy, progressives speak to the higher needs, regressives to the lower. Because lower needs take biological precedence over the higher needs, regressives appear to have the stronger position. Nevertheless, progressives have a long run advantage, because their task is to ally themselves with the truth. If survival and safety are truly in danger, progressives should address that danger. If fear is unwarranted, progressives should say so.

## **Reconciling metaframes**

Lakoff's most general point is that progressive political discourse should start with emotions and be rooted in emotions; and that stories or cognitive "frames" are needed in order to evoke those emotions. That point does not lead to any particular frames or metaframes.

We have suggested that the family metaframe is not sufficient for progressive purposes and that we need a community metaframe as well. However, there is no fundamental value conflict between the two metaframes. (Indeed Lakoff includes community values among the core implications of his nurturing parent frame.) Courage refers to acting on one's values, but it is neutral as to what those values are. Progressives in particular should be courageous in acting out of love. Also, while he does not emphasize it, Lakoff assumes throughout that progressive programs should be based on thorough and rational policy analysis.

At the same time, there is a conflict between the two metaframes at the level of resource allocation. In politics, the scarcest resource is the swing voter's time and attention. If we focus our message on one story then we must downplay other stories. The general approach we are advocating gives relatively more emphasis to appeals at the adult-adult level, and relatively less at the adult-child level, than Lakoff's. In other words, we are arguing that the traditional progressive use of rational policy analysis as a tool of political persuasion is not a fundamental political error. Indeed, we would argue that appeal to reason (as well as courage) were the core tropes in the greatest speeches of our liberal and progressive presidents, including Washington, Lincoln, FDR, and Kennedy.

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<sup>17</sup> According to a more recent critique, or elaboration, of Maslow's hierarchy, the need for belonging is actually a security need: primitive humans depended on the tribal group to live, and exclusion meant eventual death. Self-esteem can then be understood as a sense of confidence about one's own standing within the group (Mark R. Leary's "Sociometer Theory" of self-esteem; see "The Social and Psychological Importance of Self-Esteem," Chapter 7 in Hoyle, R. H., Kernis, M. H., Leary, M. R., & Baldwin, M. W., 1999, *Selfhood: Identity, esteem, Regulation*, pp. 197-221.) Regressive efforts to manufacture apparent threats to the group from within and without have the effect of fragmenting the group and reducing the individual's sense of self-esteem, in turn making the individual more fearful and more susceptible to perceiving threats (as argued by Hal Shorey, private communication, 2005).

We agree with Lakoff however that data and rational analysis have been greatly overemphasized in modern progressive political argumentation. Also, we agree that rational analysis needs to be packaged in emotion-laden stories that telegraph the policy argument.<sup>18</sup>

In particular, detailed analysis is not a useful way of persuading swing voters. Almost by definition voters who are undecided are weakly attached to the political process and have a limited toleration for policy analysis. We largely accept Lakoff's ideas for appealing to swing voters, with a slight difference in emphasis: it is fundamentally important to show swing voters that progressives have coherent values and consistent programs that grow out of those values, and to demonstrate that progressives are courageous and not fickle in standing up for their ideas.

But progressives must also devote substantial resources to energizing and expanding their base. When addressing the base of core voters, rational policy analysis is an essential part of the package. Not all progressives actually want to spend time thinking rationally about policy, but nearly all progressives do want to feel that progressive programs are based on careful analysis. We need to make that analysis available to them.

In brief, progressives do not need to give up who they are to win – and if they did, they would no longer be progressives. They do, however, need to learn how to communicate to swing voters the depths of their love, courage, and skill in planning and carrying out governance. The bloodless language they have been using hasn't been working; to find an effective language they must get back in touch with their own deepest and best emotions.

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<sup>18</sup> As a further point of agreement, we believe it is very important to prioritize and package issues strategically, with a careful eye on their political consequences. A rational adult does not pursue good policy goals with ineffective political means, because policies that are not implemented are of no value to anyone. The difference between progressive and regressive strategic issue selection is that progressives logically should choose only among those policy proposals that actually make sense according to competent policy analysis. Modern regressives face no such constraint because they do not actually want government policies to work.