

SPECIAL REPORT: BUSH'S SECRET GOVERNMENT

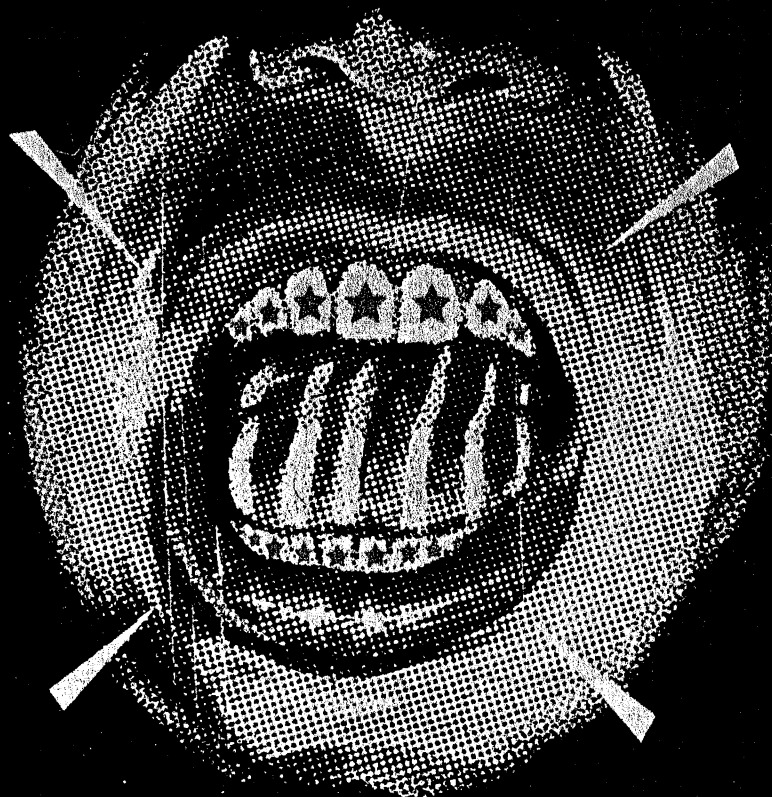
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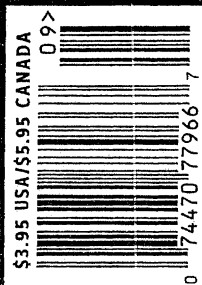
How Republicans Hijack Language

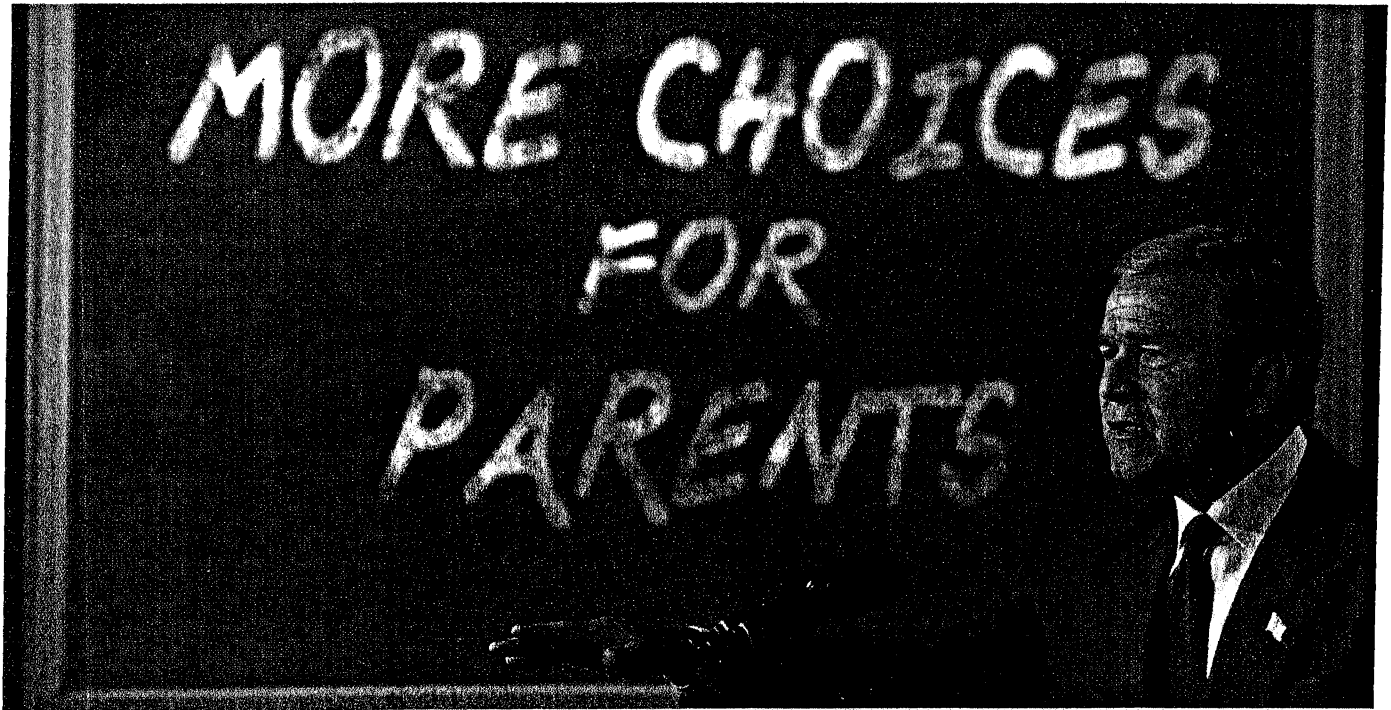
GEORGE LAKOFF · DEBORAH TANNEN



Can Democrats Speak American?

DAVID KUSNET · GEOFFREY NUNBERG
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Let Them Eat Words

Linguistic lessons from Republican master strategist Frank Luntz

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

I'M ONE OF MANY DEMOCRATS WHO WATCH IN FRUSTRATION (mixed with a touch of awe) as Republicans win with words, even as the labels they devise for their policies distort or belie the facts. Take the repeal of the estate tax. An “estate” sounds like a large amount of money. Indeed, before President Bush persuaded Congress to legislate a phase out of the estate tax, only the largest 2 percent of estates were subject to this tax. But change the name to “death tax” and many more Americans become sympathetic to repeal. After all, everyone dies. Death is bad enough without being taxed.

How many would get all worked up about an exceedingly rare abortion procedure (that the Alan Guttmacher Institute estimated represents less than one-fifth of 1 percent of all abortions performed in the United States in 2000)? But attach the name “partial-birth abortion” and a second-trimester fetus becomes a half-born baby. Legislation to outlaw the vaguely described medical procedure then becomes another success in chipping away at constitutionally protected abortion rights—as well as a wedge issue to defeat Democratic candidates. According to an insider in Al Gore’s 2000 Tennessee campaign, the vice president’s opposition to this legislation was one of the factors that turned

many Tennesseans against their home-state candidate.

Who among us wants to call ourselves anti-life? Win the name game and you’re more than halfway toward winning the battle. Win enough naming battles and you’re on your way to winning the war.

During the 2000 campaign, I was a guest on a radio talk show discussing Republicans’ and Democrats’ appeals to women voters. A woman called in to say, “I’m for education and I’m for the environment. Bush is for education and Gore is for the environment, so I don’t know who to vote for.” Beyond the breathtaking oversimplification (reducing a complex set of positions and policies to being “for”), I marveled at the caller’s conviction that because George W. Bush had declared himself for education—who on earth is against it?—his policies were necessarily more likely than Al Gore’s to improve education for all American children.

Recent news reports are filled with stories of a mounting crisis in public education: teachers fired, new hires frozen, class sizes burgeoning, Head Start threatened, even schools closing because the administration’s gigantic tax cuts have caused enormous deficits at the state as well as the federal level—all in the shadow of the shamelessly named No Child

Left Behind Act, which mandates testing and changes the formula for federal aid but provides no new funding to improve the quality of schools or of teaching.

EXPLOITING THE POWER OF LANGUAGE TO PERSUADE, despite the absence of policies to back up the words, is the openly stated goal of Republican strategy as articulated by Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster and tactician who was one of the primary drafters of the GOP's "Contract with America." Luntz tests phrases in focus groups and advises Republicans on how to win votes by changing what they say, not what they do.

The cynicism in Luntz's advice is astonishingly explicit. On the subject of the gender gap, for example, he informed Republican members of Congress that they could woo women with words (no need for troublesome deeds). While acknowledging that women (like the caller to the radio talk show) care about education, he cautions against trying to back up promises with actual programs:

I begin with the premise that we must do no harm. That is, we should not undermine our growing strength among working-class white men (1994 set a modern-day record) in our efforts to reach out and communicate to women. I refuse to advocate an educational strategy that leads to a net loss of votes just to win over a few women and silence a few media critics. It would be unwise and foolish. ...

I do not subscribe to the notion that we must change our substance or create a separate women's agenda. Listening to women and adapting a new language and a more friendly style will itself be rewarded if executed effectively and with discipline.

These excerpts come from a document that Luntz circulated to Republican members of Congress in 1997 titled "The Language of the 21st Century." The section that came to my attention was "Addressing the Gender Gap," but it provides a blueprint reflected in Republicans' rhetoric in other areas as well. Luntz's advice boils down to this: Forget action. Improve your image by revising the way you talk. Let them eat words.

LUNTZ'S WORDS IN BUSH'S MOUTH

Prominent among the words Luntz advises Republicans to use in their speeches is *children*:

Women consistently respond to the phrase 'for the children' regardless of the context. From balancing the budget to welfare reform, 'for the children' scores highest of all arguments offered. Therefore, rather than creating a 'Compassion Agenda,' Republicans need to create a communication framework that involves children ...

Luntz also advised, "'Conservative' is a more popular label than 'Republican.'" Put these pieces of advice together and you get "compassionate conservatism." This is not to claim that Frank Luntz advised George W. Bush directly, but the president's speechwriters seem to have absorbed the lesson. From the beginning of his campaign for the presidency, Bush's speeches have employed the linguistic manipulations that Luntz recommended.

During Bush's presidential campaign, *children* darted in and out and played around in speech after speech. For example, toward the end of a campaign speech to the New

Hampshire Chamber of Commerce, Bush proclaimed, "In all the confusion and controversy of our time, there is still one answer *for our children*." In a speech he delivered in Indianapolis on the economy, children appear 12 times; in the New Hampshire talk, a dizzying 35 times. This last is less surprising because the speech was, after all, about education. But that in itself does not account for the thrumming repetition, not only of the word *children* and its variants but also of the words *heart* and *dream* (three each), *love* (eight times, including *lovely* and *loveless*), and the runner-up, after *children*, *hope* (which, along with *hopeful* and *hopeless*, appeared a whopping total of 10 times).

STUN THEM WITH FEAR, LURE THEM WITH HOPE

The welter of words that stir emotions—and in particular the word *hope* repeated as an incantation—can also be heard as echoes of Luntz's advice. "Politics remains an *emotional arena*," he writes, "and television has made fear a very salable commodity. But fear alone is not enough. *The commodity Americans most desire—and the one in shortest supply—is hope.*"

First, however, the fear. For example, in his New Hampshire speech on education, Bush reminded parents, "In an American school year there are more than 4,000 rapes or cases of sexual battery, 7,000 robberies and 11,000 physical attacks involving a weapon."

Then, following Luntz's advice that the GOP must "re-store the American dream of hope," Bush claimed that the problem with education is not a matter of education per se—surely not a matter of how much funding is made available to schools—but of "the diminished hopes of our current system." He went on: "Safety and discipline are essential. But when we dream for our children,"—there's that phrase "for the children"—"we dream with higher goals. We want them to love learning. And we want them to be rich in character and blessed in ideals."

Bush further declared, "Everyone must have a first-rate education," not because of the value of education itself or because it provides opportunities for upward mobility and escape from poverty but "because there are no second-rate children, no second-rate dreams."

True to Luntz, these emotionally evocative words were backed up by no concrete proposals to make schools better, just the cost-free promise that charities and faith-based organizations would be invited to establish after-school activities on school grounds, and that students who attend dangerous schools "will be given a transfer to ... a safe school." (The practical implications of this proposal are mind-boggling: Would the schools in poor neighborhoods stand empty as their students are bused en masse to wealthier counties?) Bush did propose additional funding—not to hire more teachers or improve schools but for "prosecutors and the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives]" to prosecute and convict children who bring guns to school.

"IT'S GOVERNMENT'S ROLE TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT where everyone can dream and flourish," to "help people ... build and dream." The purpose of prosperity is to "make the American dream touch every willing heart. ... Because changing hearts will change our entire society. The greatness of America is found in the loving and generous hearts of its people."

If you think these exhortations sound like an inspirational sermon, or a seminar led by a New Age guru, you're right. They do sound like that. But in fact they were part of a plea for campaign contributions on the Web site georgewebush.com. Indeed, just about all of Bush's campaign speeches were studded with hearts. When speaking in Iowa on farm policy, he called agriculture "the heart of our economy." On the military, he proclaimed that we need to tell veterans' stories to the next generation "to raise a monument in their hearts." And just as preachers and inspirational speakers craft their rhetoric to reach an emotional peak toward the end, so, too, did Bush in his campaign speech to the New Hampshire Chamber of Commerce: "[O]ur problems as a nation," he intoned, "... will only be solved by a transformation of the heart and will. This is why a hopeful and decent future is found in hopeful and decent children." This last sentence reflects another Luntz directive: Not only does it give us one *heart*, one *children* and two *hopes*, it looks to the future rather than the past.

TAKING A TIP FROM CLINTON

At several points, Luntz's "The Language of the 21st Century" pays homage to the public-speaking skills of the Republican Party's nemesis, President Clinton. "When Bill Clinton trumpeted his 'bridge to the future' theme at the Democratic convention," Luntz writes, "it really was over for Bob Dole." Luntz applies this lesson to women voters in particular. "Women want their elected officials to plan for the future, not just live for today," he writes. But again, this doesn't mean that Republicans, when elected, need to actually plan for the future; it's just a prescription for rhetoric. "Every speech must end with your vision of the future," Luntz advises. "Every speech should conclude with the message of 'limitless dreams, unending possibilities and the promise of a better future for ourselves and our children.'" And there it is: Bush's New Hampshire speech ends, "In all the confusion and controversy of our time, there is still one answer for our children. ... If we love our children, this is the path of duty and the way of hope."

By adopting emotional language without changing policies, Luntz tells them, Republicans can have it all: Like Pavlov's dogs, voters will come running if you ring the right verbal bells. When applied to women voters, this advice makes me cringe with particular unease because it's reminiscent of my book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. In it, I explained that many women are frustrated when they tell a husband or boyfriend about a problem and he tells them how to fix it; more often than not, what she's looking for is the reassurance that he's willing to listen and that he understands how she feels. This sounds frighteningly (to me) like what Luntz has to say on the gender gap. He writes: "From getting the kids out of bed, fed and off to school to the demands of work outside the home, women are working longer and harder than ever, and they want to know that their elected representatives understand this. *Tell them. Empathize.* Take the time to let them know

you truly understand what they are going through."

But wait. Understanding may be all that a woman is looking for when telling her husband or boyfriend about something that frustrated her that day. But when they go to the polls to elect a leader, women as well as men are selecting not a soul mate but a public official whose job is to solve at least some of the country's problems—or at least to address them honestly.

I see another parallel, too, between lessons women have learned when their styles contrast with men's and lessons Democrats can learn when their styles contrast with Republicans'. By harnessing the power of language in the absence of action, Republicans have managed to have their cake and eat it, too: On the one hand, they pursue policies that benefit the few; on the other, they garner votes from the many. Perhaps it is the very fact that Democrats have the policies and the record to justify their appeal to the many that they haven't thought as much as Republicans have about what words will galvanize voters. It's a bit like women who believed that if they did a good job it would be recognized—only to see their male colleagues getting the credit, and the promotions.



Language-meister Luntz

TRIUMPH THROUGH REPETITION

Recall the excerpts I quoted at the start. Luntz promised that changing words, not works, would be successful "if executed effectively and with discipline." This caveat was not casually tossed out. He cautioned Republicans that "good communication is more than just words, phrases and messages." I'll pause here for a moment to give you a chance to predict how you expect Luntz's next sentence to

read. OK, here it is: "As a party and as a movement, we will fail if we continue to go it alone or change messages daily. We can only succeed when we work together and talk together and stick together as a team. Only through a movement-wide effort and constant repetition can our voices unite in perfect harmony."

Devising labels and phrases that win over audiences, regardless of the facts, is only a beginning. The big trick is getting the labels to stick. And that's where unity and repetition come in. Democrats have long envied the Republicans their party discipline. Now they can add discipline in agreeing on the words and phrases to use when describing the policies that Democrats oppose or support.

Frank Luntz wrote "The Language of the 21st Century" in 1997, before President Clinton succeeded in balancing the budget and President Bush succeeded in creating the largest budget deficit in American history. Now that the tables have turned, Democrats could take Luntz's advice. "We need simply to state: 'We must not mortgage our children's future to pay for the mistakes of today.' We need simply to ask: '*What does this do to the children?*'" ■

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