

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Metaphor and War, Again

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32b962zb>

Author

Lakoff, George

Publication Date

2003-03-18

Metaphor and War, Again

by George Lakoff

Metaphors can kill.

That's how I began a piece on the first Gulf War back in 1990, just before the war began. Many of those metaphorical ideas are back, but within a very different and more dangerous context. Since Gulf War II is due to start any day, perhaps even tomorrow, it might be useful to take a look before the action begins at the metaphorical ideas being used to justify Gulf War II.

One of the most central metaphors in our foreign policy is that A Nation Is A Person. It is used hundreds of times a day, every time the nation of Iraq is conceptualized in terms of a single person, Saddam Hussein. The war, we are told, is not being waged against the Iraqi people, but only against this one person. Ordinary American citizens are using this metaphor when they say things like, "Saddam is a tyrant. He must be stopped." What the metaphor hides, of course, is that the 3000 bombs to be dropped in the first two days will not be dropped on that one person. They will kill many thousands of the people hidden by the metaphor, people that according to the metaphor we are not going to war against.

The Nation As Person metaphor is pervasive, powerful, and part of an elaborate metaphor system. It is part of an International Community metaphor, in which there are friendly nations, hostile nations, rogue states, and so on. This metaphor comes with a notion of the national interest: Just as it is in the interest of a person to be healthy and strong, so it is in the interest of a Nation-Person to be economically healthy and militarily strong. That is what is meant by the "national interest."

In the International Community, peopled by Nation-Persons, there are Nation-adults and Nation-children, with Maturity metaphorically understood as Industrialization. The children are the "developing" nations of the Third World, in the process of industrializing, who need to be taught how to develop properly and to be disciplined (say, by the International Monetary Fund) when they fail to follow instructions. "Backward" nations are those that are "underdeveloped." Iraq, despite being the cradle of civilization, is seen via

this metaphor as a kind of defiant armed teenage hoodlum who refuses to abide by the rules and must be "taught a lesson."

The international relations community adds to the Nation As Person metaphor what is called the "Rational Actor Model." The idea here is that it is irrational to act against your interests and that nations act as if they were "rational actors" -- individual people trying to maximize their "gains" and "assets" and minimize their "costs" and "losses." In Gulf War I, the metaphor was applied so that a country's "assets" included its soldiers, materiel, and money. Since the US lost few of those "assets" in Gulf War I, the war was reported, just afterward in the NY Times Business section, as having been a "bargain." Since Iraqi civilians were not our assets, they could not be counted as among the "losses" and so there was no careful public accounting of civilian lives lost, people maimed, and children starved or made seriously ill by the war or the sanctions that followed it. Estimates vary from half a million to a million or more. However, public relations was seen to be a US asset: excessive slaughter reported on in the press would be bad PR, a possible loss. These metaphors are with us again. A short war with few US casualties would minimize costs. But the longer it goes on, the more Iraqi resistance and the more US casualties, the less the US would appear invulnerable and the more the war would appear as a war against the Iraqi people. That would be a high "cost."

According to the Rational Actor Model, countries act naturally in their own best interests -- preserving their assets, that is, their own populations, their infrastructure, their wealth, their weaponry, and so on. That is what the US did in Gulf War I and what it is doing now. But Saddam Hussein, in Gulf War I, did not fit our government's Rational Actor model. He had goals like preserving his power in Iraq and being an Arab hero just for standing up to the Great Satan. Though such goals might have their own rationality, they are "irrational" from the model's perspective.

One of the most frequent uses of the Nation As Person metaphor comes in the almost daily attempts to justify the war metaphorically as a "just war." The basic idea of a just war uses the Nation As Person metaphor plus two narratives that have the structure of classical fairy tales: The Self Defense Story and The Rescue Story.

In each story, there is a Hero, a Crime, a Victim, and a Villain. In the Self-Defense story, the Hero and the Victim are the same. In both stories, the Villain is inherently evil and irrational: The Hero can't reason with the Villain; he has to fight him and defeat him or kill him. In both, the victim must be innocent and beyond reproach. In both, there is an initial crime by the Villain, and the Hero balances the moral books by defeating him. If all the parties are Nation-Persons, then self-defense and rescue stories become forms of a just war for the Hero-Nation.

In Gulf War I, Bush I tried out a self-defense story: Saddam was "threatening our oil line-line." The American people didn't buy it. Then he found a winning story, a rescue story -- The Rape of Kuwait. It sold well, and is still the most popular account of that war.

In Gulf War II, Bush II is pushing different versions of the same two story types, and this explains a great deal of what is going on in the American press and in speeches by Bush and Powell. If they can show that Saddam = Al Qaeda -- that he is helping or harboring Al Qaeda, then they can make a case for the Self-defense scenario, and hence for a just war on those grounds. Indeed, despite the lack of any positive evidence and the fact that the secular Saddam and the fundamentalist bin Laden despise each other, the Bush administration has managed to convince 40 per cent of the American public of the link, just by asserting it. The administration has told its soldiers the same thing, and so our military men see themselves as going to Iraq in defense of their country.

In the Rescue Scenario, the victims are (1) the Iraqi people and (2) Saddam's neighbors, whom he has not attacked, but is seen as "threatening." That is why Bush and Powell keep on listing Saddam's crimes against the Iraqi people and the weapons he could use to harm his neighbors. Again, most of the American people have accepted the idea that Gulf War II is a rescue of the Iraqi people and a safeguarding of neighboring countries. Of course, the war threatens the safety and well-being of the Iraqi people and will inflict considerable damage on neighboring countries like Turkey and Kuwait.

And why such enmity toward France and Germany? Via the Nation As Person metaphor, they are supposed to be our "friends" and friends are supposed to be supportive and jump in and help us when we need help. Friends are supposed to be loyal. That makes France

and Germany fair-weather friends! Not there when you need them.

This is how the war is being framed for the American people by the Administration and media. Millions of people around the world can see that the metaphors and fairy tales don't fit the current situation, that Gulf War II does not qualify as a just war -- a "legal" war. But if you accept all these metaphors, as Americans have been led to do by the administration, the press, and the lack of an effective Democratic opposition, then Gulf War II would indeed seem like a just war.

But surely most Americans have been exposed to the facts -- the lack of a credible link between Saddam and al Qaeda and the idea that large numbers of innocent Iraqi civilians (estimates are around 500,000) will be killed or maimed by our bombs. Why don't they reach the rational conclusion?

One of the fundamental findings of cognitive science is that people think in terms of frames and metaphors -- conceptual structures like those we have been describing. The frames are in the synapses of our brains -- physically present in the form of neural circuitry. When the facts don't fit the frames, the frames are kept and the facts ignored.

It is a common folk theory of progressives that "The facts will set you free!" If only you can get all the facts out there in the public eye, then every rational person will reach the right conclusion. It is a vain hope. Human brains just don't work that way. Framing matters. Frames once entrenched are hard to dispel.

In the first Gulf War, Colin Powell began the testimony before Congress. He explained the rational actor model to the congressmen and gave a brief exposition of the views on war of Clausewitz, the Prussian general: War is business and politics carried out by other means. Nations naturally seek their self-interest, and when necessary, they use military force in the service of their self-interest. This is both natural and legitimate.

To the Bush administration, this war furthers our self-interest: controlling the flow of oil from the world's second largest known reserve, and being in the position to control the flow of oil from central Asia as well. These would guarantee energy domination over a

significant part of the world. The US could control oil sales around the world. And in the absence of alternative fuel development, whoever controls the distribution of oil throughout the world controls politics as well as economics.

My 1990 paper did not stop Gulf War I. This paper will not stop Gulf War II. So why bother?

I think it is crucially important to understand the cognitive dimensions of politics -- especially when most of our conceptual framing is unconscious and we may not be aware of our own metaphorical thought. I have been referred to as a "cognitive activist" and I think the label fits me well. As a professor, I do analyses of linguistic and conceptual issues in politics, and I do them as accurately as I can. But that analytic act is a political act: Awareness matters. Being able to articulate what is going on can change what is going on - at least in the long run.

This war is a symptom of a larger disease. The war will start presently. The fighting will be over before long. Where will the anti-war movement be then?

First, the anti-war movement, properly understood, is not just, or even primarily, a movement against the war. It is a movement against the overall direction that the Bush administration is moving in. Second, such a movement, to be effective, needs to say clearly what it is for, not just what it is against.

Third, it must have a clearly articulated moral vision, with values rather than mere interests determining its political direction.

As the war begins, we should look ahead to transforming the anti-war movement into a movement that powerfully articulates progressive values and changes the course of our nation to where those values take us. The war has begun a discussion about values. Let's continue it.