Framing, Death, and Democracy

by George Lakoff
Last modified Tuesday, February 13, 2007 07:46 PM

Share your comments about this article on the Rockridge Nation Blog.

We live in a time when comedians outdo pundits. Here's Jay Leno:

"President Bush is expected to announce that he is now sending more troops to Iraq, despite the fact that his generals, his military analysts, members of Congress, and most of the American people are against the idea. The reason he is doing it? To give Iraq a government that responds to the will of the people."

The first duty of Congress is to be Congress, to provide a check on the executive through the power to hold hearings, write legislation, and tighten the purse strings. The central issue raised by the President's speech last Wednesday is not whether Iraq will have a democracy, but whether we will.

Framing is about the ideas expressed by language and how well those ideas accord with reality and moral values. So far, opponents of the President's policy are doing pretty well on the framing front. They are using "escalation" and "civil war" to describe an escalation and a civil war. Some are even using "occupation" to describe our occupation of Iraq.

They are rejecting the McCain-Bush "surge" framing. The word "surge" indicates a short-term increase in force that has an effect and naturally goes back to its previous level. In military parlance, a "surge force" is the opposite of a "base force": troops come in to do a job that can be done quickly, and then leave. They are not "based." That is not the Bush plan. Only one major combat unit will be sent that was not
scheduled to go. Other units will go earlier and leave later — indefinitely later, since there is no end date or condition. It is also questionable whether they will be effective, since previous "surges" (without the use of the word) have been failures. To use the word "surge" is to subscribe to Bush's misleading frame.

It is interesting that the President has pretty much stopped talking about "victory" in the usual sense and has attempted to redefine it. "Victory will not look like the ones our fathers and grandfathers achieved. There will be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship." "Victory" is not a military win by us over an opposing army. It is the Iraqi people being able to govern themselves. In place of "victory," Bush substitutes "success" — the achievement of American goals for American interests.

Conservatives opposed to social programs use the dependency frame: Government help makes the poor "dependent." If they are to help themselves, government help must be ended. But Bush rejects the same logic in Iraq, refusing to impose a timetable and leaving American military help indefinite. "Many are concerned that the Iraqis are becoming too dependent on the United States." He then rejects the argument. Interestingly enough, the argument is given by liberals, e.g., Dick Durbin in the official Democratic response.

The all-too-common metaphor that third world countries are children and industrialized countries are adults resonates in a telling sentence: "The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people — and it is unacceptable to me." It is up to Bush, the Decider in Iraq as in America, what Iraqi behavior is acceptable, and if it is not, to use more force.

One of the most telling sentences in Bush's speech is, "Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me." He does not say who made the mistakes or what they were. The disastrous past holds no lessons for the
future, as the slogan "the way forward" indicates. And though he "takes responsibility," there are no consequences for him. He does not resign, does not admit his own mistakes, he does not even change his policy. "Responsibility" without consequences is not responsibility.

Congress now has a responsibility, one given by the Constitution, to check and balance the executive. "Harsh scrutiny," in Nancy Pelosi’s words, is the nonpartisan duty of every member of Congress. Iraq was the major issue in the November election. The newly-elected Congress has a mandate to extricate our troops from Iraq without removing "support" for the troops already there. That is the reason for the carefully chosen language of "a phased redeployment of troops out of Iraq." "Redeployment" is neutral between basing them nearby or bringing them home, but definitely getting them out the way of the civil war.

Words are not just words. They are not just there to "work" to please the public, as Frank Luntz would have it. Words come with conceptual frames, imposing an understanding on a situation. What that understanding is can be a matter of life and death, and can raise the question, as it has here, of whether America remains a democracy.