Title
Appreciating Undocumented Americans

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5mt937s8

Author
Lakoff, George

Publication Date
2012-07-09

Peer reviewed
Appreciating Undocumented Americans

by George Lakoff & Elisabeth Wehling

Last week on Independence Day, President Obama greeted new US citizens at the White House, taking the opportunity to speak once more about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, "We have to remain a nation of immigrants. And that's why (...) we're lifting the shadow of deportation from deserving young people who were brought to this country as children. It's why we still need a DREAM Act to keep talented young people who want to contribute to our society and serve our country."

Immigration is an important issue for Obama, and it will be discussed throughout this election campaign. The question is how it will be discussed.

Just about two weeks ago, on June 22, Obama gave his speech on immigration at the 2012 NALEO conference in Florida. In some parts, Obama clearly and beautifully stated his moral understanding of the issue: undocumented immigrants are in many ways already citizens - they contribute to the American society and economy through hard work, they love the country they live in, they are patriots, they share their lives with other Americans every day, they take on individual and social responsibility.

The president offered more than just freedom; he offered appreciation.
Words are not just words. They are acts, meaningful acts, and acts with a moral dimension. The young people freed by President Obama have earned appreciation. They are more than Americans without documents. They are fine Americans already and, through the lives they have been living as Americans, have earned the documentation that other Americans have gotten just by being born, without earning them. It is a moral narrative that tells a truth and needs to be repeated.

It is also a narrative of success -- the President’s success in accomplishing the right thing, despite Republican opposition, opposition that is to large part based on prejudice.

Nonetheless, the speech could have been improved, and as it is repeated across the country, it needs to be made better in important places.

The president, in the same speech and in other places, uses language that hides and even contradicts his moral view: the Criminal Frame and the Citizenship Is A Destination metaphor.
First, Obama repeatedly uses the phrase illegal immigrants. It evokes a conceptual frame in which undocumented Americans are understood first and foremost as criminals.

The President evokes this frame in his Florida speech, stating that current immigration policy "denies innocent young people the chance to earn an education or serve in the uniform of the country they love." Being innocent is the opposite of being guilty. The word cannot be understood outside of the Criminal Frame.

Later in the speech, Obama says about the DREAM act "It's not amnesty," again evoking the Criminal Frame. And worse, the President infers that immigrants who are to be granted legal status in fact are criminals. Amnesty, by definition, is given to people proven guilty of crimes. The president's frame turns children of undocumented immigrants into criminals. It does so because the President negates the idea that the DREAM act means amnesty. Every time you negate an idea, that very idea is evoked and strengthened in people's minds.

Worse, the Criminal Frame does not just assume one act that happens to be a crime - - in many cases a technical crime. A criminal is someone who willfully and typically commits real crimes that constitute harm.

Words matter. They mean things. Conservatives have probably quite carefully chosen their words -- illegal, alien, amnesty -- to fit the Criminal Frame. Using those words, even to negate them, keeps the Criminal Frame. Drop the words. Substitute others that tell an important truth.

The Criminal Frame hides the fact that most undocumented immigrants are fellow inhabitants who contribute to our society and economy, love the country they live in, and share the hopes, dreams, and fears of their fellow Americans. De facto, they already are citizens in many ways but one. They are undocumented Americans.

Second, the fact that undocumented immigrants already act as citizens in most everyday ways is hidden by the president's call for a "path to citizenship." The Path Frame implies the metaphor that Citizenship Is A Destination. The metaphor poses a serious problem: As long as you have not reached your destination -- legal status -- you are not a citizen. You and citizenship are two separate entities. You can arrive at citizenship. But there is nothing inherent in you or what you do -- your contributions to the nation's society and economy, your devotion to American ideals, and so forth - - that makes you a citizen. In the Path To Citizenship metaphor, being a citizen is nothing more than getting legal status. All other aspects of citizenship -- being and acting like an American -- are hidden.
It is at the end of his Florida speech that Obama clearly states his moral understanding of the issue. With regard to the DREAM act he says, "I've met these young people all across the country. They're studying in our schools. They're playing with our children, pledging allegiance to our flag, hoping to serve our country. They are Americans in their hearts, in their minds. They are Americans through and through -- in every single way but on paper. And all they want is to go to college and give back to the country they love." This is Obama's moral narrative, and it is a powerful one. It shines a light on a deep and often hidden truth. The president’s action is one of emancipation and of appreciation for what is best not only for the young people set free, but for our nation.

The president should expand on this. Democrats and progressives should repeat it over and over. They should celebrate the President’s success and humanity. And they should stay away from the words that have framed bigotry, and that not only hide, but contradict, this truth.

This is more important than ever now that the Supreme Court has decided to require immigration checks for those arrested. Not all law enforcement officers, for example many of those working in Arizona for people such as Joe Arpaio, are nice people. Some find reasons to make arrests. For undocumented Americans, this can bring back a climate of fear. Arpaio is looking for ways to overcome the emancipation. The freedom the President has offered can still be challenged in many places in our country if he loses the November election.

That is why it is important to repeat President Obama’s words of appreciation over and over. They impose a frame of truth and freedom, and spreading the Appreciation Frame will be crucial to overcoming lingering bigotry.