Title
Obama Returns to His Moral Vision: Democrats Read Carefully!

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6f03z5v9

Author
Lakoff, George

Publication Date
2011-04-17

Peer reviewed
Obama Returns to His Moral Vision: Democrats Read Carefully!

by George Lakoff

Last week, on April 13, 2011, President Obama gave all Democrats and all progressives a remarkable gift. Most of them barely noticed. They looked at the president’s speech as if it were only about budgetary details. But the speech went well beyond the budget. It went to the heart of progressive thought and the nature of American democracy, and it gave all progressives a model of how to think and talk about every issue.

It was a landmark speech. It should be watched and read carefully and repeatedly by every progressive who cares about our country -- whether Democratic office-holder, staffer, writer, or campaign worker -- and every progressive blogger, activist and concerned citizen. The speech is a work of art.

The policy topic happened to be the budget, but he called it "The Country We Believe In" for a reason. The real topic was how the progressive moral system defines the democratic ideals America was founded on, and how those ideals apply to specific issues. Obama's moral vision, which he applied to the budget, is more general: it applies to every issue. And it can be applied everywhere by everyone who shares that moral vision of American democracy.

Discussion in the media has centered on economics -- on the president's budget policy compared with the Republican budget put forth by Paul Ryan. But, as Robert Reich immediately pointed out, "Ten or twelve-year budgets are baloney. It's hard enough to forecast budgets a year or two into the future." The real economic issues are economic recovery and the distribution of wealth. As I have observed, the Republican focus on the deficit is really a strategy for weakening government and turning the country conservative in every respect. The real issue is existential: what is America at heart and what is America to be.

In 2008, candidate Obama laid out these moral principles as well as anyone ever has, and roused the nation in support. As president, as he focused on pragmatics and policy, he let moral leadership lapse, leaving the field of morality to radical conservatives, who exploited their opposite moral views effectively enough to take over the House and many state offices. For example, they effectively attacked the president's health care plan on two ideas taken from the right-wing version of morality: freedom ("government takeover") and life ("death panels"). The attacks
were successful even though Americans preferred the president's health care policies (no preconditions, universal affordable coverage). The lesson: morality at the general level beats out policy at the particular level. The reason: voters identify themselves as moral beings not policy wonks.

All politics is moral. Political leaders put forth proposals on the assumption that their proposals are the right things to do, not the wrong things to do. But progressives and radical conservatives have very different ideas of right and wrong.

With his April 13, 2011 speech, the president is back with the basic, straightforward idea of right and wrong that he correctly attributes to the founding of the country—as UCLA historian Lynn Hunt has observed in her important book *Inventing Human Rights*.

The basic idea is this: Democracy is based on empathy, that is, on citizens caring about each other and acting on that care, taking responsibility not just for themselves but for their families, communities, and their nation. The role of government is to carry out this principle in two ways: protection and empowerment.

Obama quotes Lincoln: "to do together what we cannot do as well for ourselves." That is what he calls patriotism. He spotlights "the American belief... that each one of us deserves some basic measure of security... that no matter how responsibly we live our lives, hard time or bad luck, crippling illness or a layoff, may strike any one of us." He cites the religious version of this moral vision: "There but for the grace of God go I." The greatness of America comes from carrying out such moral commitments as Medicare, Social Security, and Medicaid.

Analogous moral arguments can, and should, be given constantly for all progressive policies at all levels of government on all issues: the environment, education, health, family planning, organizing rights, voting rights, immigration, and so on. It is only by repetition of the across-the-board moral principles that the voting public gets to hear how all these ideas fit together as realizations of the same basic democratic principles.

**Systems Thinking**

President Obama, in the same speech, laid the groundwork for another crucial national discussion: systems thinking, which has shown up in public discourse mainly in the form of "systemic risk" of the sort that led to the global economic meltdown. The president brought up systems thinking implicitly, at the center of his budget proposal. He observed repeatedly that budget deficits and "spending" do not occur in isolation. The choice of what to cut and what to keep is a matter of factors external to the budget per se.
Long-term prosperity, economic recovery, and job creation, he argued, depend up maintaining "investments" -- investments in infrastructure (roads, bridges, long-distance rail), education, scientific research, renewable energy, and so on. The maintenance of American values, he argued, is outside of the budget in itself, but is at the heart of the argument about what to cut. The fact is that the rich have gotten rich because of the government -- direct corporate subsidies, access to publicly-owned resources, access to government research, favorable trade agreements, roads and other means of transportation, education that provides educated workers, tax loopholes, and innumerable government resources taken advantage of by the rich, but paid for by all of us. What is called a "tax break" for the rich is actually a redistribution of wealth from the poor and middle class whose incomes have gone down to those who have considerably more money than they need, money they have made because of tax investments by the rest of America.

The president provided a beautiful example of systems thinking. Under the Republican budget plan, the president would get a $200,000 a year tax break, which would be paid for by cutting programs for seniors, with the result that 33 seniors would be paying $6,000 more a year for health care to pay for his tax break. To see this, you have to look outside of the federal budget to the economic system at large, in which you can see what budget cuts will be balanced by increased in costs to others. A cut here in the budget is balanced by an increase outside the federal budget for real human beings.

**What is a "system?"

Systems have the following properties:

- **Homeostasis:** Stable systems are self-correcting or are correctable; they have indicators that have to stay within a certain range for the system to be stable. In an economy, there are indicators like unemployment, GDP, and so on. In global ecology, the temperature of the earth is a major indicator.
- **Feedback:** Feedback can be controllable or uncontrollable. In our economy, the Federal Reserve uses indicators as feedback in an attempt to control certain aspects of the economy, using interest rates and the money supply. In the global environment, the global icecaps are an uncontrollable feedback mechanism. They reflect sunlight and heat, which has a cooling effect. As the earth gets warmer, they melt and get smaller, which lowers their ability to reflect and to cool, which makes the earth get warmer, which melts them more, which heats the earth more, and on and on.
- **Non-local and network effects:** Global warming in the Pacific increases ocean evaporation. Winds blow the additional water vapor toward the northeast, pushing cold arctic air down over the East coast of the US, and the excess water
vapor falls as a huge snowstorm. Warming in the Pacific can produce huge
snowstorms on the East Coast of the US via such non-local effects.

- **Nonlinear effects**: A small cause can produce a large effect. A few percentage
points lowered in the tax rates of the wealthiest percent or two of Americans can
produce a trillion dollars of debt over the whole country over a decade.

When a system has causal effects, as in the above cases, we speak of "systemic
causation." "Systemic risks" are the risks created when there is systemic causation.
Systemic causation contrasts with direct causation, as when, say, someone lifts
something, or throws something, or shoots someone.

Linguists have discovered that every language studied has direct causation in its
grammar, but no language has systemic causation in its grammar. Systemic
causation is a harder concept and has to be learned either through socialization or
education.

Progressives tend to think more readily in terms of systems than conservatives. We
see this in the answers to a question like, "What causes crime?" Progressives tend to
give answers like economic hardship, or lack of education, or crime-ridden
neighborhoods. Conservatives tend more to give an answer like "bad people -- lock
'em up, punish 'em." This is a consequence of a lifetime of thinking in terms of social
connection (for progressives) and individual responsibility (for conservatives). Thus
conservatives did not see the president's plan, which relied on systemic causation, as
a plan at all for directly addressing the deficit.

Differences in systemic thinking between progressives and conservatives can be seen
in issues like global warming and financial reform. Conservatives have not
recognized human causes of global warming, partly because they are systemic, not
direct. When a huge snowstorm occurred in Washington DC recently, many
conservatives saw it as disproving the existence of global warming -- "How could
warming cause snow?" Similarly, conservatives, thinking in terms of individual
responsibility and direct causation, blamed homeowners for foreclosures on their
homes, while progressives looked to systemic explanations, seeking reform in the
financial system.

**A Golden Opportunity**

It is rare that a presidential speech provides such opportunities for Democrats,
whether in office or not. The president has made overt the moral system that lies
behind every progressive position on every issue. He has done it with near
perfection. He went on offense, not defense. He didn't use conservative language tied
to conservative ideas. He correctly tied his moral vision to the American moral vision
and the very idea of American democracy -- and patriotism. He used systems
thinking throughout. He tied every part of his budget proposal to the American
moral vision. And he showed clearly how the Republican budget rejected those American moral ideals in every case. It was not merely high political art. It is a model to be studied and followed.

There is one big problem with the speech that he apparently felt he could not avoid: He stayed within Republican issue-framing, keeping to the Republican's definition of the issue as the deficit and the budget -- even while the main features of the talk were his moral vision and systems thinking. The media and the politicos have mostly not been able to get beyond issue-thinking, that the speech was about the deficit and the budget, missing the larger themes. And the president, since the speech, hasn't pressed the political public on those major themes. He needs help. He needs progressives to start talking publicly about that moral vision and about the importance of systems in our lives and in our politics.

Finally, Democrats need to understand why expressing their moral views is so vital. The crucial voters in recent elections have been misleadingly called "independents," "moderates," and "the center." In reality, they are what I will call the "duals" -- people who are conservative on some issues and progressive on others, in all kinds of combinations. They have both moral systems in the neural networks of their brains, but applied to different issues. When one moral network is activated, the other is inhibited -- shut down. The more one moral network is active, the stronger it gets and the weaker the other gets. In 2008, the Obama campaign activated and strengthened the network for the progressive moral system -- and won over the duals. In 2010, the Democrats stopped talking morality and kept on talking policy, ceding morality to the conservatives, especially the Tea Party radical conservatives. In doing this, they ceded the election. Policy without an understandable moral basis loses.

Democrats need to both activate their base and activate the progressive moral vision dormant in the duals among the voters. They can only do this with an overt appeal to the progressive moral vision inherent in our democracy. It's time for the Democrats to shout their patriotism out loud.

Details and Vision

Many progressives are skeptical about the president's ability -- or even his desire -- to live up to his moral vision. For example, the Progressive Caucus in the House has produced its own People's Budget, put forth as an alternative to both the president's and the Republicans'. But the People's Budget is an instance of the same moral vision articulated by the president. In short, progressives should look at this speech separating out the necessary budget details from the moral vision they all need to be expressing on every issue.
In addition, all progressives need to start thinking and talking in terms of systems. The nature of systems is central to understanding what is going wrong in ecosystems, financial systems, social systems, educational systems and even in particular systemic enterprises like deep-water drilling, fracking, nuclear energy, food production, and so on.

I would like finally to thank President Obama for bringing these issues to the fore.