The Santorum Strategy
by George Lakoff

The Santorum Strategy is not just about Santorum. It is about pounding the most radical conservative ideas into the public mind by constant repetition during the Republican presidential campaign, whether by Santorum himself, by Gingrich or Ron Paul, by an intimidated Romney, or by the Republican House majority. The Republican presidential campaign is about a lot more than the campaign for the presidency. It is about guaranteeing a radical conservative future for America.

I am old enough to remember how liberals (me included) made fun of Ronald Reagan as a not-too-bright mediocre actor who could not possibly be elected president. I remember liberals making fun of George W. Bush as so ignorant and ill-spoken that Americans couldn't possibly take him seriously. Both turned out to be clever politicians who changed America much for the worse. And among the things they and their fellow conservatives managed to do was change public discourse, and with it, change how a great many Americans thought.

The Republican presidential campaign has to be seen in this light.

Liberals tend to underestimate the importance of public discourse and its effect on the brains of our citizens. All thought is physical. You think with your brain. You have no alternative. Brain circuitry strengthens with repeated activation. And language, far from being neutral, activates complex brain circuitry that is rooted in conservative and liberal moral systems. Conservative language, even when argued against, activates and strengthens conservative brain circuitry. This is extremely important for so-called "independents," who actually have both conservative and liberal moral systems in their brains and can shift back and forth. The more they hear conservative language over the next eight months, the more their conservative brain circuitry will be strengthened.

This point is being missed by Democrats and by the media, and yet it is the most vital issue for our future in what is now being discussed. No matter who gets the Republican nomination for president, the Santorum Strategy will have succeeded unless Democrats dramatically change their communication strategy as soon as possible. Even if President Obama is re-elected, he will have very little power if the Republicans keep the House, and a great deal less if they take the Senate. And if they keep and take more state houses and local offices around the country, there will be less and less possibility of a liberal future.
The Republican presidential campaign is not just about the presidential race. It is about using conservative language to strengthen conservative values in the brains of voters -- in campaigns at all levels from Congress to school boards. Part of the Republican strategy is to get liberals to argue against them, repeating conservative language. There is a reason I wrote a book called Don't Think of an Elephant! When you negate conservative language, you activate conservative ideas and, hence, automatically and unconsciously strengthen the brain circuitry that characterizes conservative values.

As I was writing the paragraphs above, the mail came. In it was material from Public Citizen (an organization I admire) promoting Single Payer Health Care (which I agree with) by arguing against right-wing lies about it. In big, bold type the lies were listed: Single payer is socialized medicine. Single payer will lead to rationing, like in Canada. Costs will skyrocket under single Payer. And so on. After each one, came the negative: Wrong. And then in small, unbolded type, the laundry lists of policy truths. Public Citizen was unconsciously promoting the conservative lies by repeating them in boldface and then negating them.

The same naiveté about messaging, public discourse, and effects on brains is now showing up in liberal discussions of the Republican presidential race. Many Democrats are reacting either with glee ("their field is so ridiculously weak and wacky." -- Maureen Dowd), with outrage (their deficit-reduction proposals would actually raise the deficit -- Paul Krugman), or with incredulity ("Why we're debating a woman's access to birth control is beyond me." -- Debbie Wasserman Schultz). Hendrik Hertzberg dismissed the ultra-conservatives as "a kick line of clowns, knaves, and zealots." Joe Nocera wrote that he hope Santorum would be the Republican candidate, claiming that he is so far to the right that he would be "crushed" -- an "epic defeat," "shock therapy" that would bring back moderate Republicans. Democrats even voted for Santorum in the Michigan primary on the grounds that he would be the weaker candidate and that it would be to the Democrats' advantage if the Republican race dragged on for a long time.

I mention these liberals by name because they are all people I admire and largely agree with. I hope that they are right. And I hope that the liberal discourse of glee, scorn, outrage, incredulity, and support for the most radical conservative will actually win the day for Democrats at all levels. But, frankly, I have my doubts. I think Democrats need much better positive messaging, expressing and repeating liberal moral values -- not just policies-- uniformly across the party. That is not happening.

One of the reasons that it is not happening is that there is a failure to understand the difference between policy and morality, that morality beats policy, and that moral discourse is absolutely necessary. This is a major reason why the Democrats lost the
House in 2010. Consider how conservatives got a majority of Americans to be against the Obama health care plan. The president had polled the provisions, and each had strong public support: No preconditions, no caps, no loss of coverage if you get sick, ability to keep your college-age child on your policy, and so on. These are policy details, and they matter. The conservatives never argued against any of them. Instead, they re-framed; they made a moral case against "Obamacare." Their moral principles were freedom and life, and they had language to go with them. Freedom: "government takeover." Life: "death panels." Republicans at all levels repeated them over and over, and convinced millions of people who were for the policy provisions of the Obama plan to be against the plan as a whole. They changed the public discourse, changed the brains of the electorate -- especially the "independents" -- and won in 2010.

The radical conservative discourse of the Republican presidential race has the same purpose, and conservative Republicans are luring Democrats into making the same mistakes. Santorum, the purest radical conservative, is the best example. From the perspective of conservative moral values, he is making sense and arguing logically, making his moral values clear and coming across as straightforward and authentic, as Reagan did.

**The Moral Value Systems**

The basic moral values in the progressive moral system are empathy and responsibility, both for oneself and others. This leads to a view of government as having certain moral obligations: providing protection and empowerment for everyone equally. This requires a vibrant commitment to the public -- public infrastructure (roads, buildings, sewers), public education, public health, and so on. No private business can prosper at all without such public provisions. The private depends on the public.

These values follow from certain ideal progressive family values, as projected to larger institutions. The progressive family has parents of equal authority. Their central moral role requires empathy with each other and their children, it requires self-responsibility, and responsibility for the well-being of other family members. This means open communication, transparency about family rules, shared decision-making, and need-based fairness.

This is an idealized view. Because our first acquaintance with being governed is in our families, we come to understand ideal versions of governing institutions (e.g., churches, schools, teams, and nations) in terms of idealizations of families.

The idealized conservative family is structured around a strict father who is the natural leader of the family, who is assumed to know right from wrong, whose
authority is absolute and unchallengeable, who is masculine, makes decisions about reproduction, and who sets the rules -- in short, the Decider. Children must be taught right from wrong through strict discipline, which is required to be moral. This maps onto the nation. To be prosperous in a free market, one must be fiscally disciplined. If you are not prosperous, you must not be disciplined, and if you are not disciplined, you cannot be moral, and so you deserve your poverty.

When this idealized family model is projected onto various governing institutions, we get conservative versions of them: conservative religion with a strict father God; a view of the market as Decider with no external authority over the market from government, unions, or the courts; and strictness in other institutions, like education, prisons, businesses, sports teams, romantic relationships, and the world community. Control over reproduction ought to be in the hands of male authorities.

For conservatives, democracy is about liberty, individual responsibility and self-reliance -- the freedom to seek one's own self-interest with minimal or no commitment to the interests of others. This implies a minimal public and a maximal private.

We can now see why the Santorum Strategy is so concerned with family values. Strict father family values are the model for radical conservative values. Conservative populism -- in which poor conservatives vote against their financial interests -- depends on those poor conservatives having strict father family values, defining themselves in terms of those values, and voting on the basis of those values, thus selecting strict fathers as their political leaders.

The repetition of language expressing those values leads to more and more working people becoming political and accepting those values in their politics. As long as the Democrats have no positive moral messaging of their own, repeated over and over, the Santorum Strategy will go unchallenged and conservative populism will expand. Moreover, repeating the Santorum language by mocking it or arguing against it using that language will only help radical conservatives in propagating their views.

Democrats are concentrating on the presidential race, hoping that if Obama wins, as it looks like he will, all will be fine. They are missing the bigger picture. The Democratic strategy of getting the independent women's vote for Obama is not sufficient, because independent women may still vote for their local conservative leaders as the strict fathers they want to see in office.

Democrats have been gleeful about the Santorum birth control strategy, taken up by conservatives in the House as a moral position that if you want to use birth control, you should pay for it yourself. Democrats see this as irrational Republican self-
destruction, assuming that it will help all Democrats to frame it as a "war against women." I hope they are right, but I have doubts.

This is anything but an irrational position for radically conservative Republicans. Quite the contrary. It fits conservative moral logic -- the logic used by conservative populists, male for sure and for many women as well. In some respects it embodies the most powerful aspects of conservative moral logic, strengthening conservative moral logic in the minds not only of conservatives, but also of independents who have both conservative and progressive world views and swing between them.

Here's how that logic goes.

• The strict father determines what happens in the family, including reproduction. Thus reproduction is the province of male authority.
• The strict father does not condone moral weakness and self-indulgence without moral consequences. Sex without reproductive consequences is thus seen as immoral.
• If the nation supports birth control for unmarried women, then the nation supports immoral behavior.
• The conservative stress on individual responsibility means that you and no one else should have to pay for your birth control -- not your employer, your HMO, or the taxpayers.
• Having to pay for your birth control also has a metaphorical religious value -- paying for your sins.
• This is a classical slippery slope narrative. If no one else should have to pay for your birth control, the next step is that no one else should have to pay for any of your health care.
• And the step after that is that no one else should be forced to pay for anyone else. This is, everything should be privatized -- no public education, safety nets, parks, or any public institutions or services.

That is what makes conservative moral logic into such a powerful instrument. And conservative and independent women can be pragmatic about the birth control details, while accepting the moral logic as a whole.

Incidentally, Rush Limbaugh's "slut" and "prostitute" remarks, while even more extreme than Santorum, make sense to conservatives in terms of the same conservative moral logic. Limbaugh apologized for those two words, but not for the logic behind them. Even after the apology for the two words, the logic lingers.

All moral logic in politics, whether progressive or conservative, is based on metaphorical thought processes, applying family moral values to political moral values. Republicans understand this and Santorum carries it out masterfully for the
benefit of all conservative Republican office seekers at all levels, today and in the future.

The Santorum Strategy does not end with this election. It is part of a permanent campaign that has been going on since the Gingrich revolution of 1994, and will continue into the indefinite future.

Democrats tend to be literalists, assuming that the presidential campaign is only about the presidential campaign and that birth control is only about birth control. In 2010, they thought that health policy was only about health policy, even as conservatives were metaphorically making it about freedom ("government takeover") and life ("death panels").

It is vital that Democrats not make that mistake again.