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The Hidden State of the Union
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We all heard what the President said in the State of the Union address on Tuesday night, but what did he mean? The speech, like most right-wing discourse these days, is in a kind of code, based on a moral system that not all Americans share.

Lying below the 50-50 political schism in this country are two opposing worldviews. Each sees national politics through the lens of an idealized family, either a conservative strict-father family or a progressive nurturing parent family.

The strict father sees the world as a dangerous and difficult place, where evil lurks, and competition will always produce winners and losers. His job is to protect and support his family, and as moral authority, teach his kids right from wrong. Through example and painful punishment, he instills in them an internal discipline to act morally and become self-reliant.

Moral people are disciplined and deserve to prosper. Those who are undisciplined are not moral and should not prosper. Mothers may comfort, but must be prevented from coddling, lest the children become undisciplined, immoral, and dependent. When the children are mature, they are on their own and parents should not meddle in their lives.

This family moral system, projected onto the nation, defines a radical form of conservative politics that Bush supporters implicitly understand and that provides the internal logic that lies behind the speech.

Let's start with foreign policy. As moral authority, the strict father president knows right from wrong and it is his job to protect the nation and punish "evildoers" -- and he doesn't need "a permission slip" or anyone's help to do it. "America will never seek a permission slip to defend the security of our people."

Literally, terrorism doesn't fit the frame of war: There is no other nation, no organized
army, no country to sign a peace treaty, not even a formal end. It more closely resembles crime, as Wesley Clark, who knows what a war is, reminds us. Bush’s rejection of the crime frame and adoption of the war frame extends his strict father powers: The commander-in-chief is an absolute authority figure. The war frame, but not the crime frame, allows him to attack Iraq and reshape it as he sees fit.

Now consider social programs. In the strict father framework, they are immoral; they give people things they don’t earn and lead them to become undisciplined, dependent, and incapable of moral behavior. Cutting taxes to produce a huge deficit rewards good -- successful -- people, and in addition takes away money from immoral social programs, which are referred to as "wasteful spending."

From the Bush perspective, it is thus a moral obligation to eliminate social programs that lead to dependence. He calls it "reform" -- Social Security reform, Medicare reform, education reform, and so on. If the reform is moral, those who oppose it are immoral and opponents of progress: "The status quo always has defenders."

The Bush strategy in these cases is the slippery slope -- take the first step or two and you can’t get back. The prescription drug benefit for Medicare was such a first step. You are lured down the slope by the drug benefit. Since the government is not allowed to compete for lower prices, people will leave Medicare for private insurance that provides temporary savings. After two years, they can’t get back into Medicare. The slippery slope draws more and more people out -- forever -- and the system collapses. The president calls these proposals "strengthening Medicare."

The Bush health care proposal is another slippery slope. The lure is 100 percent tax deductions for catastrophic health care coverage, but only "as part of our new health savings accounts." The goal is to get the government out of all health care: "A government-run health care system is the wrong prescription."

In these examples, the ultimate goal of the proposal is not in the proposal itself. Take another case. In the strict father framework, massive tax reductions are rewards for those good people, the wealthy, whose discipline has made them self-reliant and deserving. But
an equally important goal is to eliminate the funding for social programs.

In the speech, the President talks repeatedly about "tax relief." For there to be "relief" there must be an affliction and an afflicted party. The reliever removes the affliction, and is therefore a hero. Anyone who tries to stop him is a villain. Add "tax" to "relief" and you have a new metaphor: Taxation is an affliction, Bush is the hero, and the Democrats are the villains.

But not all Americans see politics from the Bush strict-father perspective. The progressive or liberal view is based on a very different family model: the nurturing parent. In this model, both parents have equal responsibility. Their job is to nurture their children and to raise them to be nurturers of others.

Nurturance here is defined by two central values: empathy and responsibility, for oneself and others. From these two values other values follow. If you empathize with a child, you protect the child, care for her, treat her fairly, and promote her fulfillment in life. To be fulfilled, she will require sufficient freedom and opportunity. Communication must be open, honest, and two-way. Trust and cooperation are essential. And since no one does it all alone, you need to build community. And above all, you have to be strong to be a good parent.

In progressive politics, the core values again are empathy and responsibility. From these, all the other progressive political values follow. For example, protection becomes consumer protection, worker protection, and environmental protection, as well as security. Fairness becomes social justice. Open communication becomes open government. Trust and cooperation become central values in many areas, especially trust in business and cooperation in foreign policy. Strength translates to political will, courage, dedication, and effectiveness. And care translates into social programs, such as Social Security and Medicare.

These are moral values. They characterize progressive morality. From this perspective, social programs are moral and eliminating them is immoral. Unilateral preemptive war is immoral. So is degrading the environment. Harming or defrauding consumers, hiding
governmental operations, and betraying trust in business are all immoral.

Conservatives see this model as permissive and refer to it as "the mommy state" coddling those who should be disciplined. It isn't, of course, since everything about the strength and responsibility of nurturance is left out.

The people we call conservatives and progressives think about politics almost exclusively in terms of one of these two models. But everyone has both models, either actively or passively. Any liberal who can understand a John Wayne movie is using the strict-father model, at least passively. Any conservative who understands The Bill Cosby Show is using the nurturing parent model.

People in "the middle," the swing voters, use the strict father model in some areas of their lives and the nurturing parent model in others. Blue-collar workers are often strict fathers at home and nurturing parents when it comes to union politics. Liberal professors are often nurturing parents at home and strict fathers in the classroom. When conservatives talk to their base, this is the model they are using.

The president and his speechwriters know all too well that they do not have majority support in the country for their policies. They sometimes need to hide their intent in language that sounds acceptable to those who do not share their strict-father worldview: "Tonight, members of Congress can take pride in great works of compassion and reform that skeptics had thought impossible."

Each side interprets "compassion" differently. In both systems, compassion means feeling another's suffering and sincerely wanting to help. But what constitutes help is very different in the two systems; for the strict father it is imposing proper discipline and refusing to coddle. For the strong nurturer, compassion is shown through relieving suffering. The difference is striking, and when projected onto politics it matters enormously.

You have now seen the code at work. It is everywhere in right-wing discourse. And all liberals need to learn how it works if they are to understand the conservative mind.