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Publication Date
2006-07-04

Peer reviewed
Whose Idea of Freedom Will Shape America’s Future?

by George Lakoff

Editorial from the Boston Globe, Tuesday, July 4, 2006.

Last modified Thursday, December 7, 2006 11:36 AM

Not since the Civil War has America been more divided politically. The Civil War was fought over the question of what freedom in America was to be. The issue was in the open for all to see: human slavery, the bluntest effrontery to the idea of freedom.

The Culture War today is once more about the question of what freedom is to be in America. But it is subtler. No slaves, but ... “detainees” in Guantanamo in chains held for years without due process; more than a million young African Americans imprisoned — and brutalized there — years after year, often for nonviolent or victimless crimes; torture in Abu Ghraib and at secret destinations in Egypt and Syria; government spying on ordinary citizens. No slaves. But illegal immigrants who want to come here to do backbreaking work for very low pay and few rights, soon to be “temporary workers,” virtually indentured to their employers and without voting rights or other rights of self-determination. Remarkably, all of this is in the name of “freedom.” It is a right-wing conservative conception of freedom and it flies in the face of the freedoms declared by the Founding Fathers and expanded upon since.

Over more than two centuries Americans demanded successive expansions of freedom — progressive freedom. Expansions of voting rights, civil rights, education, public health, scientific knowledge, and protections from fear and want: these all made us freer to follow our dreams. These were the ideals of freedom that I grew up with. They are now all under threat, not by guns or bombs, but an under-the-radar redefinition of freedom and liberty to suit right wing ideology. And it is taking place under our noses, with the complicity of the media, where there has been little
noticeable questioning of the President’s use of “freedom” and “liberty.” The media has not made an issue of it.

The mechanism of redefinition is cognitive. It is in our brains. We can’t see it. Freedom is what cognitive scientists call an essentially contested concept, which means there will always distinct and disputed versions of freedom that are inconsistent with each other. There is no single, universal, and objectively “correct” meaning of freedom. There is a single, uncontested, but very limited, core meaning of freedom that we all agree on. But that is the limit of consensus. Progressives and conservatives have utterly different value systems that extend the uncontested core in opposite directions.

**Progressives:** There should be a freedom to marry. The government should not be able to decide who can marry who.

**Conservatives:** “Freely elected” government officials should determine who can marry who. That’s what a “free country” means.

**Progressives:** Social security, the minimum wage, universal health care, college for all are ways to guarantee freedom from want.

**Conservatives:** Giving people things they haven’t earned creates dependency and robs people of their freedom.

**Progressives:** The 45 million working people who can’t afford health care cannot all pull themselves up by their bootstraps. An economy that drives down wages to increase investor profits creates a cheap labor trap. The trap works against freedom from want.

**Conservatives:** Economic liberty comes through the free market; government gets in the way; government works against economic liberty in four ways: regulation, workers’ rights, taxes, and class action lawsuits.

**Progressives:** Freedom of religion includes freedom from having a religion imposed on you.

**Conservatives:** Freedom to practice religion for fundamentalist evangelicals means spreading the good news of the truth of the gospel, which implies
school prayer, “under God” in the Pledge, the Ten Commandments in courthouses, and the teaching of Intelligent Design.

*Progressives:* The President’s spying on citizens without a warrant is a violation of freedom.

*Conservatives:* The President is just doing his duty to preserve our freedom.

What is scary is how consistent the differences are, how closely they stick to the progressive-conservative differences in moral worldview. The differences in the meaning of freedom reflect the major political differences of our time.

President Bush, in his second inaugural address, used “freedom,” “free,” and “liberty” 49 times in 20 minutes. “Liberty” has become the watchword of the radical right. The right has taken over the use of these words as part of their appropriation of patriotism.

Progressives must reclaim not merely the words “freedom” and “liberty,” but the ideas that made this a free country. To lose freedom is awful; to lose the idea of freedom would be worse.

For reviews of Whose Freedom?, see:


http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/29/AR2006062901345.html