

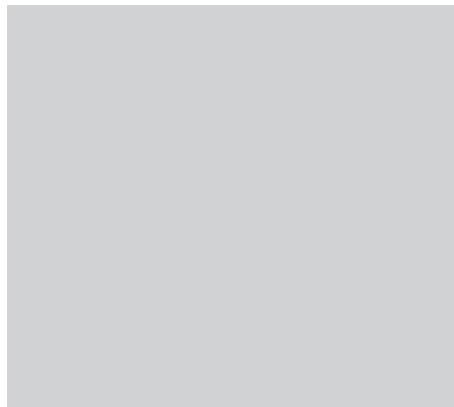
# POLICY *Review*

OCTOBER & NOVEMBER 2006, No. 139

## Partisan Freedom

By PETER BERKOWITZ

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## Partisan Freedom

By PETER BERKOWITZ

GEORGE LAKOFF. *Whose Freedom? The Battle over America's Most Important Idea.* FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX. 277 PAGES. \$23.00.

*J*N 1958, AT the height of the Cold War and on ascending to the Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory at Oxford University, Isaiah Berlin delivered an inaugural lecture that has come to be widely and rightly regarded as a seminal contribution to twentieth-century political thought. In "Two Concepts of Liberty," Berlin addressed his topic with a magisterial display of learning.

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Yet his aim was not exclusively scholarly. He spoke from a vantage point above the partisan politics of his day but with a view to the greatest political issue of the age — the contest between liberal democracy and communist totalitarianism.

At the heart of his lecture was a distinction between negative liberty, or freedom from the coercion of men and laws, and positive liberty, or the freedom to be one's own master or participate in a particular way of life. Berlin showed that protection of the former drove the liberal tradition, while the latter had been appropriated and vigorously championed by opponents of the liberal tradition from both the communist left and fascist right. A liberal and man of the left who devoted much of his career as a historian of ideas to understanding sympathetically the liberal tradition's critics, Berlin was careful in his lecture to bring out not only the nefarious uses to which the language and logic of positive liberty had been put by totalitarian systems, but also positive liberty's genuine human appeal and its irreducible but limited role in any stable liberal and democratic order. He succeeded brilliantly in speaking both as a scholar shedding light on governing ideas and as a public intellectual keen to warn his colleagues and fellow citizens about the threat to individual freedom embodied in the Marxist temptation.

Because of Berlin's achievement, we know that clarifying, at a historic juncture, the core idea of freedom, the variety of its meanings, and the major threats to it is a worthy endeavor. All the more reason to regret George Lakoff's embarrassing attempt to shed light on these grand questions. A pro-

fessor of linguistics at University of California at Berkeley and a partisan Democrat, Lakoff offers scarcely a word concerning the gravest threat by far to freedom in our age, that posed by Islamic extremism. Instead, he seeks to give a veneer of academic respectability to vulgar but increasingly common prejudices among left-of-cen-

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ter intellectuals concerning the menace of American conservatism, why progressives have lost power to conservatives, and what they can do to reclaim power and restore freedom. The result dishonors scholarship and ill serves the partisan cause Lakoff intends it to advance.

Yet there is method to Lakoff's mess. His opinions echo those expressed in books and magazines in the past several years by leading lights on the left, including former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, Boston College professor and prominent public intellectual Alan Wolfe, and *New Republic* editor-at-large Peter Beinart. Exposing Lakoff's dismal performance illustrates the extent to which respectable publishing venues will go today in promoting ridiculous arguments, provided they are made by progressives in the service of demonizing conservatives and conserv-

ative ideas. It also brings into focus how, in writing about conservatives in America, leading progressives violate principles they themselves profess. And exposing Lakoff illuminates the foolishness of progressive intellectuals who make common cause with the least sober elements of their party. For if not the party's intellectuals, who then will guide the Democrats in going beyond preaching to the converted? This should be of central concern to the party, since the formation of a governing majority in the United States still requires persuading that significant segment of the public that prefers fact to fantasy and wants to weigh evidence and arguments in an informed and cogent manner.

LAKOFF CAME TO national attention during campaign 2004 with a short book, *Don't Think of an Elephant*. He applied theories that he had developed over a 40-year career in the field of cognitive science to show progressives that it is not enough for their ideas to be true and just. To win over voters they must appreciate the need to craft their message with a view to how people think and talk about politics. One would have thought that fancy academic theories were not necessary to persuade the party of Bill Clinton — whose campaigns and administrations, after all, cheerfully enshrined the term “spin” in the national lexicon — of what every high school student who has cast a vote in an election for class president knows full well: that how an issue is couched affects its popular appeal. Nevertheless, fueling the comforting conviction that their problem with the electorate had nothing to do

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with their message but was only a matter of how they communicated it, Democrats, after Kerry's defeat, sent Lakoff's stock soaring. Lakoff's new book is meant to elaborate his advice for Democrats. It aims to demonstrate the centrality of freedom to almost all political debates in America; to vindicate the rightness in virtually all respects of the progressive interpretation and the wrongness of the conservative alternative; and to reveal the terms in which the mind grasps moral and political life so that Democrats can convince the country.

The first step is to recognize that "There are two very different views of freedom in America today, arising from two very different moral and political world views dividing the country." Enjoying the paradox, Lakoff asserts that in America, "The traditional idea of freedom is progressive." As evidence, he observes that America is a "nation of activists" and the history of our country is marked by the steady expansion of democratic participation, the extension of civil rights, and the growth of opportunity. True enough. Yet that same history is also marked by a celebration of rugged individualism, a devotion to free markets, a preference for local government over a far-away federal government, public moral crusades, strong religious faith, and periodic religious awakenings. In equating progressive freedom with the traditional idea of freedom in America, Lakoff commits a common error of argument, conflating a feature of a thing with its essence. Or perhaps he is slyly urging, as part of the new rhetoric of the Democratic Party, the specious reduction of the conflicting visions that constitute the American political tradition

to a single progressive dimension

The alternative to progressive freedom is not, in Lakoff's telling, conservative freedom. Rather, it is freedom as understood by today's "radical conservatives" or the "radical right." However, insofar as he can find no nonradical conservatives in the present or the past worth taking seriously, and

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insofar as he equates radical conservatism with one of the two fundamental orientations of the American mind today, in practice, for Lakoff, radical conservatism is synonymous with conservatism.

The radical conservative concept of freedom, he says, represents the "reversal" of progressive freedom and is "in many ways the very opposite." Its aim is to abolish the welfare state, return women to the home, keep minorities in second-class positions, and exploit workers for the sake of management. In Lakoff's account, this second fundamental form of freedom is the hypocritical construction of the Christian right and George W. Bush. It does not appear to occur to Lakoff to consult the writings of James Burnham, Russell Kirk, Leo Strauss, William Buckley, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, and George Will, among others, to deter-

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mine the content of conservatism in America. Instead, as evidence of what conservatives in America believe, Lakoff offers highly tendentious characterizations of Bush administration policies and risible descriptions of social and religious conservatives.

Blithely building on this severely flawed foundation, Lakoff asserts that the good or progressive concept of freedom and the bad or radical conservative concept of freedom represent alternative interpretations of a core or “simple understanding of freedom.” But what he identifies as freedom’s core meaning is neither simple nor uncontroversial:

Freedom is being able to do what you want to do, that is, being able to choose a goal, have access to that goal, pursue that goal without anyone purposely preventing you. It is having the capacity or power to achieve the goal and being able to exercise your free will to choose and achieve the goal.

On this spoiled-child definition of freedom, one is unfree if one fails, for almost any reason, to obtain what one wants. Lakoff suggests that freedom is denied not only by the interference of another human being or the prohibitions of law — the core meaning of coercion in the liberal tradition — but also by lack of ability, natural obstacles, or misfortune. In purporting to put forward an “uncontested” definition of freedom, Lakoff commits one of the abuses against which Isaiah Berlin warned: collapsing the distinction between doing what one wants unimpeded by men or laws, or negative liberty, and the actual attainment of concrete goals, which is a form of positive

liberty. Moreover, Lakoff puts this abuse of terms to partisan ends. He uses it to justify the assertion that individual freedom requires government not only to protect individual rights and secure certain basic minimums, but also to undertake the massively more ambitious task of guaranteeing substantive outcomes, an undertaking shown by history — a subject about which he says almost nothing — to result very often not in more freedom but in autocracy and oppression.

Lakoff contends that his two concepts of freedom correspond to two “radically different” moral and political world views, both of which are “grounded in the metaphor of the family.” The differing images of the family “play a deep conceptual role in our politics.” For progressives, all questions about freedom are framed in terms of the “nurturant parent model,” which emphasizes empathy and responsibility. In contrast, radical conservatives frame freedom in terms of the “strict father model,” which assumes that there is “absolute right and absolute wrong” and that it is the job of men to know and enforce that morality, while the job of women is to do as men instruct them. Walking among us, Lakoff says, are “biconceptuals” who apply both family models, but the existence of such individuals, who find truth in a variety of perspectives, appears to be of no particular political or theoretical relevance to him.

Despite his insistence on the role of metaphor in shaping judgment, Lakoff is no relativist arguing that morality is merely a construction of language. The progressive or nurturant family model, he believes, deserves to be realized in its fullness, while the radical conservative

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or strict father model is irredeemably warped and destructive. Of course, morals and politics rarely, if ever, present dichotomies as neat and clean as those Lakoff believes are undergirded by his linguistic theories. Accordingly, one would have to be mighty credulous to resist the suspicion that his nurturant parent model gives expression to an idealized self-image of the progressive mind — and that his strict father model reflects progressivism's angry and ignorant caricature of its principal rival for power, a nasty depiction of the sort that one expects more from a petulant child than a nurturant parent.

Undaunted, Lakoff maintains that progressives and radical conservatives differ not only in their conclusions, but right down to their understanding of cause and effect in politics. Progressives, he claims, tend to think in terms of complex causation, so they accurately observe the variety of factors and the systemic forces that underlie actions and events. Alas, Lakoff's example of progressive analysis of Iraq illustrates just the opposite:

The war (a complex system) has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis and the maiming of hundreds of thousands of others. It has brought devastation to much of the infrastructure of the country, it has resulted in an unemployment rate of about 50 percent, it has led to women being far less free than before, and it has brought civil chaos to much of the country. In each case, the causation of lessened freedom is systemic.

Yes, Operation Iraqi Freedom has resulted in tens of thousands of Iraqi dead, but to judge the significance of

this number one must know something of the complexities that Lakoff ignores: Between Iraq's summer 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, Saddam killed approximately 250,000 Iraqis, and UNICEF estimated that in 2002 alone 60,000 Iraqi children died as a result of Saddam's theft of money under the cover of the UN-backed Oil-for-Food Program. Moreover, the damage to its infrastructure from which Iraq suffers today is due in large measure to the devastation wrought by Saddam's regime. In addition, contrary to Lakoff, the best estimates for the unemployment rate in 2005 were not 50 percent but 25 to 30 percent. Of course, these numbers are meaningless without information, of which Lakoff supplies none, concerning unemployment, wages, and opportunities before the invasion (according to the CIA's *World Factbook*, no information on unemployment in Iraq in 2002 is available). As for his assertion that women were far freer under Saddam, one can only wonder which freedoms exactly he believes women enjoyed in Saddam's brutal police state that they do not enjoy under their democratically ratified constitution and democratically elected national unity government.

Lakoff's illustration of the "simple causation" analysis that guides radical conservative thinking about Iraq is no less preposterous:

Bush toppled Saddam Hussein (direct causation in the war frame), freeing Iraqis by direct action from his tyranny. Those killed and maimed don't count, since they are outside the war frame. Moreover, Bush has done nothing via direct

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causation to harm any Iraqis and so has not imposed on their freedom.

The first proposition is true. Does Lakoff doubt that Operation Iraqi Freedom liberated Iraqis from Saddam's tyranny? As for the propositions that follow, when has any member of the Bush administration ever argued that Iraqi casualties "don't count" or that the disarray in Iraq today does not impair Iraqi freedom? Lakoff provides not one scintilla of evidence that a conservative of note or a substantial segment of the population holds such views, and so it is reasonable to see Lakoff's arguments here as part of a zealous attempt to frame conservatives as contemptible.

**D**ESPITE THEIR inhumane moral code and false and pernicious views about causality, contemporary conservatives, argues Lakoff, have effectively stood truth on its head and managed to portray progressives as freedom's enemies. To fight this grotesque perversion of the truth, progressives must not only vigorously insist on the wisdom of their principles, but also learn to vilify conservatives and portray them as the enemy within that they truly are:

A progressive populism will also have to see ordinary Americans as progressives and conservatives as a threatening elite — not merely wealthy and/or powerful, but as having values that represent a visceral threat to morality, identity, and patriotism: a threat to preserving the land, strengthening nurturant communities, living progress-

sive religious values, supporting nurturant family life, making a living helping others and the community in general, finding security, identifying with one's country, devoting oneself to traditional progressive values.

It would have been extremely interesting to see Lakoff explain how teaching his fellow citizens to blame conservatives for all that is bad in America and to marshal resources to "destroy conservative populism" in the country comports with the empathy and responsibility that he asserts are hallmarks of progressive thought. And while he was at it, Lakoff might also have commented on how an absolute division of American politics into good guys and bad guys reflects the appreciation of the complexity of social and political life that he ascribes to the progressive mind.

Instead, he directs his conceptual bludgeon to the domain of religion. Avoiding discussion of Christian doctrine and the great disputes that have animated Christianity for two millennia, Lakoff asserts that its truth is embodied in progressive Christianity, which, when properly understood, is indistinguishable from progressive freedom:

Realizing the values of Jesus in the world requires not just personal action but also political action — action through the state. The politics of progressive religion is not narrowly about matters of the church; it is about the broadest range of issues that have an effect on human flourishing. Today, following in the footsteps of Jesus

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means being a political activist as well as a virtuous individual.

In his best of all possible syntheses, progressives are both the genuine traditionalists in America and the authentic Christians.

Needless to say, Bush's brand of Christianity — the hopelessly archaic sort which centers around faith in God — represents the opposite extreme. Lakoff purports to finds evidence of its thoroughly corrupting character in Bush's Second Inaugural Address, in which the president made the case for promoting liberty and democracy abroad. Yet Lakoff's exegesis only serves to further diminish his own credibility.

He contends that Bush's "association of democracy and freedom with fundamentalist Christianity and creationism is made by referent to the 'the Maker of Heaven and earth,' followed up by 'the imperative of self-government,' where 'imperative' suggests obedience to God's commandments." Could it be that Lakoff is unaware that the Declaration of Independence — certainly not a document of Christian extremists — proclaims that democracy and freedom are rooted in the inalienable rights with which human beings are endowed by the Creator? Does he not realize that plenty of Christian progressives as well as Jews of all political persuasions embrace the Bible's teaching that human beings are holy because they are made by the Maker of heaven and earth in His image? Can he be oblivious of the fact that Bush's words are fully in line with the modern liberal tradition, which teaches that self-government has special imperatives that can be derived from human nature

without reference to God's commandments? Lakoff goes on to insist that in Bush's speech, "The fundamentalist battle of good against evil is echoed in 'life is fragile, and evil is real.'" But one does not have to be a fundamentalist — indeed, one need only know something of oneself, observe others, and study history — to conclude that life is fragile

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and evil is real.

At the end of his book, Lakoff turns to practical matters. To win back America, he says, it will be necessary for progressives to achieve a "higher rationality," which appreciates the political importance of the truths about framing laid out in his book. This will be "hard to achieve," he warns, because of the polarization of American political life:

It is hard to go beyond the Punch-and-Judy journalism where people with different world views scream past each other. It is hard to go beyond the Punch-and-Judy show of everyday life, at the office, at the holiday dinner table, with neighbors, hard not to feel anything more than frustration and anger at people you find immoral, irrational, and uniformed, and proud

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of it, proud of their patriotism and their common sense. It is hard to recognize that what passes for common sense can be terribly mistaken.

Even more hard to understand is why Lakoff believes that a book proclaiming that one party is the natural home of all that is good and just and the other party represents freedom's implacable enemy will do anything but encourage the divisiveness he purports to deplore.

If, in thinking about the idea of freedom, Lakoff actually had exercised some of the empathy and responsibility with which he maintains progressives are so uniquely and richly endowed, he might have discovered that progressivism's truths are at best partial and that it suffers from characteristic errors and excesses. This would have prepared him to make the further discovery that conservatism's errors and excesses are not the whole story and that its distinctive priorities and expertise make a critical contribution to the theory and practice of liberal democracy in America. These discoveries in turn would have laid the foundation for understanding the many facets of the idea of freedom — the liberal idea of the natural freedom of all — on which America was founded. And that the vitality of democracy in America depends on the continuing contest in our political and intellectual life between the progressive and conservative interpretations of freedom to which the larger liberalism that constitutes America naturally gives rise.

Those who step forward to address the public on such issues of broad con-

cern as the meaning of freedom — especially those, like Lakoff, playing up their scholarly credentials — should aim to elevate the national debate. This is what Isaiah Berlin achieved so memorably during the Cold War and what Lakoff, at this moment of peril for liberal democracy, fails so spectacularly to do. Indeed, Lakoff's book provides an excellent example of what progressives, Democrats, and all who care about freedom in America don't need, especially now.

