

Progressive thinkers to have forum

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Birthing a think tank is analogous to the animal in the title of UC Berkeley linguistics professor George Lakoff's best-selling political book, "Don't Think of an Elephant." That is, long and ponderous.

After seven years' gestation, Lakoff is prodding his Rockridge Institute out of its academic womb and onto the national political stage after obtaining his own federal nonprofit status in late January.

Lakoff envisions a progressive think tank unlike any other, one that provides an ongoing, well-funded chorus of progressive voices to counteract their conservative counterparts.

"Conservatives, largely through think tanks, have successfully framed the issues for years," he said. "Progressive think tanks tend to focus on one issue and one policy paper at a time. No one has tied it all together with unifying themes for progressives. That's what we are going to do."

The Rockridge Institute will frame everything from taxes to the selection of Supreme Court judges to the environment through a progressive's point of view. (And yes, Lakoff intentionally uses the term "progressive" instead of "liberal" because polls show that people like progressives more than liberals.)

Its first project is a progressives manual set for release to elected leaders, candidates and the public later this year that will articulate the shared values of progressives. The manual will serve

as the foundation for an online progressives handbook.

"The primary criticism of existing intellectual thought on the left is that it has been too passive and allowed conservatives to define the terms of the debate," said San Francisco State University communication professor Joe Tuman. "The real audience for Lakoff's work will probably be candidates and elected officials because he is basically telling progressives not to be afraid to be progressives and that language and words matter."

Lakoff argues that progressives must learn from conservatives, who have invested nearly \$4 billion in think tanks and spend roughly \$400 million per year promoting their values. Right-leaning institutes such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute outnumber their liberal counterparts 8 to 1 and deploy thousands of experts to appear on television or radio, comment in news articles, and publish journals and books, he said.

"Some of them even have their own television studios, which means that if CNN wants you, all you have to do is walk down the hall," Lakoff said. "During the Terry Schiavo controversy, the conservatives had 15 full-time booking agents working around the clock to get their people on the air."

Researchers at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy echoed Lakoff's conclusions in a 2004 study, which found that conservative think tanks "have undoubtedly helped advance, market and strengthen the conservative agenda in all policy realms, including international affairs, defense, social policy, tax policy, education and civil rights."

Lakoff gained national notoriety after the 2004 presidential election with his book, "Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate." Lakoff offered depressed Democrats another explanation for the loss of the presidency to Republican George Bush: framing.

A cognitive scientist, Lakoff theorizes that people base their political decisions not solely on facts, but on the ways they view the world. Politicians tap into these world views through the use of "frames," or the way they present issues.

Both sides deploy frames that match their points of view, such as gay marriage versus freedom to marry, anti-abortion versus pro-choice or wiretapping versus anti-terrorism plan.

In one of the many examples Lakoff cites, conservatives use the term "tax relief," which implies that taxes are a painful condition that require treatment. But progressives, he said, view taxes as essential community investments designed to improve everyone's quality of life.

Lakoff offers idealized metaphors for the two dominant world views, although many people possess characteristics of both models:

- Conservatives view the world through a strict father model, in which a moral authority figure rules the family through punishment and reward. Advocates of this world view say this atmosphere produces self-sufficient and prosperous adults who elevate society through the pursuit of their self-interests.
- Progressives see the world through a nurturing parent model, in which the adults raise their offspring to care for others and value social responsibility. Advocates believe this creates a community of individuals who willingly pool a portion of their common wealth to fund shared needs such as education and highways.

Not everyone shares Lakoff's linguistic view on the political world.

Critics on both the left and the right say "framing" is nothing more than old-fashioned spin and disguising it as neuroscience will not help liberals retain control of Congress. What Democrats need, they say, are new ideas, not old ones dressed up with pretty words.

Marc Cooper, a contributing editor to the liberal journal *The Nation*, described Lakoff's book as a salve for despairing middle-class liberals who feel marginalized and oppressed.

"Do you really think that the average single family in America, which makes \$50,000 a year, is

going to feel better about taxes because a Berkeley professor with a gourmet kitchen and a six-figure income tells them it's an investment?" Cooper said. "It's that attitude that puts off a lot of regular people who perceive rightly or wrongly that the leaders in the Democrat Party are arrogant and disconnected."

Ron Nessen, a Brookings Institution scholar who writes a think tank blog for the Washington Post, offered a less scathing but equally skeptical observation. (Brookings is considered a neutral think tank, with scholars of all political stripes.)

"There all kinds of think tanks out there, but the fact is, politics is all about new ideas, not euphemisms," Nessen said.

Lakoff has heard these arguments for years. His best seller is a much-abbreviated version of his 500-page 1996 tome, "Moral Politics: How Liberals and Progressives Think."

He remains undeterred and thoroughly convinced that progressives have solid ideas the American public will embrace if progressive leaders seize control of the debate and stop allowing conservatives to frame the issues.

Others agree, as evidenced by the fact that Lakoff has attained near-rock-star status in some crowds.

House Minority Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, and other Democrats have plied him for advice. He frequently sells out the room when he lectures, and liberals hand out his book like candy at holiday parties.

Meanwhile, the institute faces a more immediate challenge: raising money. Lakoff has attracted only a handful of grants since he founded the original institute seven years ago.

That could change and Lakoff may well be among the pioneers of the progressive think-tank

movement, said Simon Rosenberg, president of the New Democrat Network in Washington. He helped found the Democratic Alliance last year, which has pledged to help raise cash to promote the progressive agenda.

"There will be a new wave of well-funded progressive institutions, and not all of them in Washington, D.C.," Rosenberg said. "George has rightfully pointed out that we must be more cognitive of the language we use, and my guess is that in a few years, if he does what is needed, Rockridge will be among the top 10 progressive think tanks in the country."

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