

Don't Think of a Maverick!
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by: George Lakoff, t r u t h o u t | Perspective

Could the Obama campaign be improved?

Throughout the nomination campaign, I was struck by how well the Obama campaign was being run, especially how sophisticated the framing was. I was heartened that my five books on the subject might have had a real effect. But recently I have begun to wonder. It looks like, in certain respects, the Obama campaign is making some of the same mistakes of the Hillary campaign and the Kerry and Gore campaigns.

The Dayton speech on education had fine policy, but was the first really deadly dull Obama speech I've heard. It started out with lots of numbers. True, but dull. And he is promising more of the same policy wonk speeches. He's right that we are facing serious realities, and he's right to say what he intends to do, but the old inspiring Obama just isn't there. And the surrogates - Biden and Hillary - are policy-wonking it too.

I hope I'm wrong. Given my great respect for those who ran the nomination campaign so well, I wonder if I should say anything at all. But, as I predicted, Palin has turned out to be effective and the Obama campaign has not been effective in dealing with her. I've been getting loads of email asking me to say something to the campaign. So, with some hesitation and a great deal of respect, I will simply point out what I see.

Four years ago, I wrote a book called "Don't Think of an Elephant!". The title made a basic point: Negating a frame activates that frame. If you activate the other side's frame, you just help the other side, as Nixon found out when he said, "I am not a crook," which made people think of him as a crook.

The Obama campaign just put out an ad called "No Maverick". The basic idea was right. The Maverick Frame is central to the McCain campaign and, as the ad points out, it's a lie. But negating the Maverick Frame just activates that frame and helps McCain. You have to substitute a different frame that characterizes McCain as he really is. There are various possibilities. Let's consider one of them. Ninety percent of the time, McCain has been a yes-man for Bush. Think in terms of questions at a debate. If the question is, is McCain a maverick?, you are thinking about him as a maverick, even when you are trying to find ways in which he isn't. McCain wins. If the question is whether McCain is a yes-man for Bush, you put McCain on the defensive. People think of him as a yes-man 90 percent of the time, and try to think cases when he might not have been. This is not rocket science. It's the first principle of framing.

The "No Maverick" ad also misses an opportunity. It correctly observes that McCain's campaign is loaded with "lobbyists." But most of the people the ad is trying to reach don't know just what a "lobbyist" is. McCain is saying he is fighting against the Washington power structure. A lobbyist is a "member of the Washington power structure." If you use such a phrase, you can point out that McCain campaign itself is part of the Washington power structure, the old-boy network.

But these are small, easily fixable problems. Just change a word here or there. The campaign is facing bigger internal problems. Let's start with the statement by Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager, that the campaign is "not about the issues."

In 1980, Richard Wirthlin - Ronald Reagan's chief strategist - made a fateful discovery. In his first poll he discovered that most people didn't like Reagan's positions on the issues, but nevertheless wanted to vote for Reagan. The reason, he figured out, is that voters vote for a president not primarily on the issues, but on five other "character" factors; values; authenticity; communication and connection; trust; and identity. In the Reagan-Carter and Reagan-Mondale debates, Mondale and Carter were ahead on the issues and lost the debates because the debates were not about the issues, but about those other five character factors. George W. Bush used the same observation in his two races. Gore and Kerry ran on the issues. Bush ran on those five factors.

In the 2008 nomination campaign, Hillary ran on the issues, while Obama ran on those five factors and won. McCain is now running a Reagan-Bush style character-based campaign on the Big Five factors. But Obama has switched to a campaign based "on the issues," like Hillary, Gore and Kerry. Obama has reality on his side. And the campaign is assuming that if you just tell people the truth, they will reason to the right conclusion. That's false and they should know better.

Chris Cillizza, in his Washington Post column, made the mistake of calling this a matter of "personality." DLC theorists Bill Galston and Elaine Lamarck have previously made the same mistake. Voters are smarter. Since they don't know what the situation will be in a couple of years, it is rational to ask if a candidate shares your values, if he's saying what he believes, if he connects with you, if you trust him and if you identify with him. That is a rational thing to do, not just a matter of personality.

Unfortunately, it is also easy to manipulate these things with marketing techniques. As Cillizza points out, McCain and Palin are being marketed as American icons: the war hero and the ideal mom. Obama and Biden were marketed (honestly) as realizations of the American Dream, living hope that it is still possible - with Obama as the lone figure with the charisma, character and talent to actually unite the country and bring back the dream.

So far, the McCain-Palin narratives are proving powerful. Palin has enormous charisma of her own. Meanwhile the Obama narrative is being given up in favor of "the issues." It is as though, after the Republicans attacked Obama's charismatic leader persona, the Obama campaign gave up on it, instead of realizing that they could capitalize on it.

Barack Obama's campaign manager David Plouffe released the following statement: "We appreciate Senator McCain's campaign manager finally admitting that his campaign is not in fact about the issues the American people care about, which is exactly the kind of cynical old politics people are ready to change." But Plouffe, very much to his credit, beat the Clinton campaign in just that way. Hillary played the policy wonk and lost. Barack ran on what his biography showed about his values; his willingness to say what he believed (authenticity); his ability to connect, communicate and build trust through his sincerity; and on the use of his biography to get voters

to identify with him. The beauty of Obama's nomination campaign, right through his acceptance speech at the convention, was his ability to frame realities through running on those five character factors. The campaign performed brilliantly.

But post-Palin, the Obama-Biden campaign seems to have become the Gore-Kerry-Hillary campaign. They are running on the 18th century theory of enlightenment and reason: If you just tell people the facts, they will follow their self-interest and reason to the right conclusion. What contemporary cognitive scientists have discovered (See my new book, "The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st Century Politics with an 18th Century Brain"), and what Republican marketers have known for decades, is that the enlightenment theory of reason doesn't describe how people actually work. People think primarily in terms of cultural narratives, stereotypes, frames and metaphors. That is real reason.

Realities matter. To communicate them, you have to make use of real reason. That's what Obama did in the nomination campaign when he used his personal narrative to communicate about the country's needs. Obama needs to go back to being Obama. The Obama campaign's job is to shine a light on those realities through Obama's unique personal qualities as a leader and communicator.

The Obama campaign has problems with conservative populism. They don't seem to understand it. Conservative populism on a national scale was invented in the late 1960s. At the time, most working people identified themselves with liberals. But conservatives realized that many working people were what I have called "biconceptuals" - they are genuinely conservative in their mode of thought about patriotism and certain family issues, though they are progressive in their understanding of nature (they love the land) and their commitment to communities where people care about each other etc. So conservatives have talked to them nonstop about conservative "patriotism" and "family values", thus activating their conservative mindset. At the same time, conservative theorists invented the ideal of "liberal elitism": that liberals look down upon working people and are not like them. Conservatives have been working at constructing this mythology for nearly 40 years and liberals have stood by and let it happen. Palin is a natural for the conservative populists. She understands their culture.

Conservative populism is a cultural, not an economic, phenomenon. These are folks who often vote against their economic self-interest and instead vote on their identity as conservatives and on their antipathy to liberals, who they see as elitists who look down on them. Simply giving conservative populists facts and figures won't work.

They tend to vote for people they identify with and against people who they see as looking down on them. The job for the Obama campaign is to reverse the present mindset that the Republicans have constructed, to reveal the conservatives as elitist Washington insiders who cynically manipulate them, to get conservative populists to identify with Obama and Biden on the basis of values and character, and to have them see realities through Obama's leadership capacities. Not an easy job. But it's the real job.

Debate Preparation

I am concerned about the upcoming debates. There are two aspects of debate prep: internal and external. Let's start with the external, since it's less obvious. What happens in a debate depends very much on questions asked and the framing used to ask them. It's the job of a campaign to get questions asked that use their own framing and language, not the opposition's framing and language. The McCain campaign has been very active in prepping the press to ask his questions with his frames: The Maverick Frame, the Country First Frame, The Surge Is Working Frame, the Victory Frame, The Drilling Frame, the Change Washington Frame, and so on. McCain can answer questions based on these frames easily and forcefully, as he did at the Saddleback debate, which he won handily.

Obama's On Your Own Frame for McCain is one the press should bring up. And whether our economic problems are all psychological, as McCain has said. And Obama's riff on empathy, and caring for one another being the basis of our democracy. This is a matter for Obama to decide, but the press should be prepped about what the moral and character issues are for Obama, as well as what the policy issues are.

McCain won because he used short answers, and answers that reflected deep conservative values. Obama hesitated, tried to give nuanced answers, and came off looking like he had no values. Obama needs to train, to give fast, straight-on, inspiring responses that link his major themes - empathy, responsibility (both social and personal) and aspiration - to the foundational ideals of our country. Obama's values are America's values, and that has to come out loud and clear.

Additionally, he must show just how extremist the McCain/Palin ticket is.

Drilling

Senator Obama occasionally uses a rhetorical strategy that I believe is counterproductive. In response to a conservative position he rightfully opposes, he will sometimes try to sound sweetly reasonable by using a conditional sentence, as in: If A, then B. Here B is the conservative position he is against, and A consists of one or more reasonable proposals that he knows conservatives would never accept. If we raise fuel efficiency standards on cars, get rid of the oil company subsidy, invest hundreds of billions in renewable sources of energy, ... , then I might be in favor of limited offshore drilling. This is reported in the news as Obama changes his position on drilling, when he hasn't changed it at all. Knowing that the if-clause could not be accepted by conservatives, he isn't really making a commitment to offshore drilling. But the fact is that, to many people, it looks like he supports drilling, and in so doing, he is helping to legitimize drilling.

Meanwhile, an opportunity is being lost. The Drilling Frame is being accepted. The Drilling Frame works like this:

You drill. You hit oil. You pump it up. There's lots of it. Prices go down.

What are left out of the frame are all the crucial facts.

The timeline: It's ten years from drilling to getting gas at the pump.

The amount: It's very small compared to what we use. We'll barely notice it. There isn't enough to significantly bring down prices.

The danger: Drilling is killing: Offshore spills can destroy fishing grounds.

The world market: The oil will go on the world market, which means that China, India, and other countries will drive up the price. There may be no saving at all.

Global Warming: More oil can only increase global warming.

A Diversion: Drilling takes investment away from alternative energy.

Just stating the facts won't change the frame. But the right visuals might. Start with the existing frame and visuals. Add each pitfall visually, one by one, so that it becomes clear at each stage what will go wrong. Visuals are powerful, and they can be used to put McCain on the defensive.

The Moral: Obama needs to be Obama again, the inspiring figure who gives us hope, not the dull policy wonk. He underestimated McCain's debating abilities, and needs to prep both externally, by giving the press new questions to ask, and internally, by being precise and making his values clear. And he has to remember that voters vote on the basis of values, authenticity, communication, trust and identity. If he is going to bring realities into the campaign, he has to do it via a strategy that includes all of those.

Natural charisma and brilliance are not enough. There's some hard work to be done.