

# Red Family, Blue Family

## *Making sense of the values issue*

Right after the election, I heard the same words over and over: “The country has gone crazy.”

You may have heard something different. I run in liberal circles - east coast, urban, educated, liberal circles, to be more precise. My friends are the kind of people who watch PBS and read *The New Yorker* for more than just the cartoons. They are accustomed to having explanations for things, and get agitated when they don't. They can't just shrug and let mysteries be mysteries.

And that, more than anything, was what had them pulling their hair out last November. Not that we had lost. (Deep down, most of us had expected to lose, even when the early exit polls said otherwise.) But that we could not understand it. The thinking of more than half the country seemed unfathomable. Like Butch Cassidy, we kept looking over our shoulders and asking: “Who are those guys?”

The polls didn't help. Some large number of Bush voters told the pollsters that they based their vote on “moral values.” Well, duh. When we'd voted against Bush - the reverse Robin Hood, the warmaker, the guy who kept hinting (against all evidence) that Saddam had been about to give nuclear weapons to al Qaeda - we'd voted our moral values too. *Moral values* didn't explain any better than *they're crazy* did.

Lack-of-understanding is only about two aisles away from paranoia. If such unfathomable folks really were the majority now, what might they support next? Another war? Patriot Act II? Concentration camps?

We couldn't say.

Fortunately, two men in different fields, on opposite sides of the country, had already been thinking about the moral-values

voters for a long time. Their books, if you read them back-to-back, paint a very interesting picture. Like most accurate pictures, it was a little worse than I hoped but better than I feared.

## **The Families in our Heads**

George Lakoff's friends are probably even more liberal than mine. He's a professor at Berkeley, a cognitive scientist who started applying his work to political cognition in the mid-nineties. His 1996 book *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* still stands as the most complete analysis of the polarized worldviews of the American political scene. For liberals who want a quicker read, he recently published *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. You can also find his ideas on the website of the [Rockridge Institute](#), a think-tank Lakoff helped form.

### **Frames**

Lakoff's general approach, which he developed long before he started writing about politics, is to recognize that the human mind works in metaphors: Life is a struggle; business is a game; time is money - stuff like that. The mind casts every abstract idea in terms of more immediate experiences. Struggles, games, and money, in turn, have their own metaphoric interpretations, and (to make a long story short) it's turtles all the way down. There's no ground floor where we think of things as exactly what they are.

And so, when Lakoff wants to understand how someone thinks about something, he first asks what metaphors the person

uses. He refers to those metaphors as the *frame* around the facts of the situation.

Frames are usually unconscious. When you think about the *flow* of traffic, for example, you aren't consciously deciding to view the highway as a pipe and the cars as a fluid - you just do it. And you effortlessly switch to a hallway metaphor when you think about *entrances* and *exits*.

And frames are not neutral or objective. They have content which is all the more powerful for being unconscious. When you talk about *spending* time or *wasting* time, for example, you invoke the Time-is-Money metaphor, with its implication that time is scarce and valuable. But nothing about the nature of time forces you to think of it that way. You might just as easily talk about *passing the time* - a frame in which time is so abundant that we don't always know what to do with it. Changing the frame you put on a situation can change your whole experience of it.

Common sense, Lakoff came to see, is the unconscious content of our frames. It is the information that has been *added to the situation* by the metaphors we use without thinking. That's why your common sense seems so obvious to you, even if others disagree: Its conclusions have already been baked into the situation *before* you start thinking about it consciously.

Frames can also be sources of conflict. If you frame our discussion as a cooperative search for truth, and I frame it as a game I am trying to win, odds are excellent that you will get angry and I will think you are a sore loser. So long as our frames stay unconscious, we have no way to recognize the true nature of our conflict, much less resolve it.

### **America is a Family**

When Lakoff looked at American politics, he saw two constellations of positions with no obvious connection.

What does opposition to abortion have to do with opposition to environmentalism? What does either have to do with op-

position to affirmative action or gun control or the minimum wage? A model of the conservative mind ought to answer these questions, just as a model of the liberal mind ought to explain why liberals tend to have the cluster of opposing political stands.

It's very difficult to state a simple principle that separates liberal positions from conservative positions. And even if *you* can do so, most of the other liberals and conservatives can't. So the link, whatever it is, must be unconscious for the vast majority of people.

Lakoff applied the standard analytic tools of cognitive science to this problem. He looked at the divergent words and phrases that liberals and conservatives use to describe the same situations. He studied the differences between liberal common sense and conservative common sense. And he asked himself: What underlying metaphors would explain all this?

The first piece of Lakoff's answer is surprising, because he found a commonality rather than a difference: Both liberals and conservatives use what he calls the Nation-As-Family metaphor. Both talk about the government as if it were a parent, and citizens as if they were siblings. The government defends, educates, rewards, and punishes its citizens - like parents with children.

The difference Lakoff found between liberal and conservative thinking, however, came from the frame each put on *family*. In other words: What is the stereotypic ideal family that the nation should be modeled on?

From conservative rhetoric, Lakoff constructed a frame he called the Strict Father family. (The red and blue boxed text comes from the Rockridge Institute website.) Liberals, on the other hand, seem to use a frame Lakoff called the Nurturant Parent family.

In a talk at my Unitarian church, I put it this way: Strict Father families focus on children's original sin, and want to train it out of them. Nurturant Parent families focus on children's original blessing, and want to develop it.

Notice a subtle point: Lakoff doesn't say that conservatives *come from* Strict Father families, *have* such a family, or even *want* such a family. He only says that when they use the Nation-as-Family metaphor, this is the kind of family they're assuming. Ditto for liberals and Nurturant Parent families. Naturally, any

### **The Strict Father Family**

The father's job is to protect and support the family. Children are to respect and obey him. The father's moral duty is to teach his children right from wrong, with punishment that is typically physical and can be painful when they do wrong. It is assumed that parental discipline in childhood is required to develop the internal discipline that adults will need in order to be moral and to succeed. Morality and success are linked through discipline. This focus on discipline is seen as a form of love—"tough love."

The mother is in the background, not strong enough to protect and support the family or fully discipline the children on her own. Her job is to uphold the authority of the father and to care for and comfort the children. As a "mommy," she tends to be overly soft-hearted and might well coddle or spoil the child. The father must make sure this does not happen, lest the children become weak and dependent.

Competition is necessary for discipline. Children are to become self-reliant through discipline and the pursuit of self-interest. Those who succeed as adults are the good (moral) people and parents are not to "meddle" in their lives. Those children who remain dependent - who were spoiled, overly willful, or recalcitrant - undergo further discipline or are turned out to face the discipline of the outside world.

When everyone is acting morally and responsibly, seeking their own self-interest in a self-disciplined fashion, everyone benefits. Thus, instilling morality and discipline in your children is also acting for the good of society as a whole.

real parent has to be both strict and nurturing, depending on the situation. Lakoff is merely pointing to a difference in emphasis.

### **What Lakoff's Family Models Explain**

*Moral Politics* fleshes out this thesis to show how conservative positions are the common sense of the Strict Father frame and liberal positions the common sense of the Nurturant Parent

### **The Nurturant Parent Family**

In the Nurturant Parent family, it is assumed that the world is basically good. And, however dangerous and difficult the world may be at present, it can be made better, and it is your responsibility to help make it better. Correspondingly, children are born good, and parents can make them better, and it is their responsibility to do so. Both parents (if there are two) are responsible for running the household and raising the children, although they may divide their activities. The parents' job is to be responsive to their children, nurture them, and raise their children to nurture others. Nurturance requires empathy and responsibility.

In the Nurturant Parent family, the highest moral values are Empathy and Responsibility. Effective nurturing requires empathy, which is feeling what someone else feels - parents have to figure out what all their baby's cries mean in order to take care of him or her. Responsibility is critical, since being a good nurturer means being responsible not only for looking after the well-being of others, but also being responsible to ourselves so that we can take care of others. Nurturant parents raise children to be empathetic toward others, responsible to themselves, and responsible to others who are or will be in their care. Empathy connects us to other people in our families, our neighborhoods, and in the larger world. Being responsible to others and oneself requires cooperation. In society, nurturant morality is expressed as social responsibility. This requires cooperation rather than competition, and a recognition of interdependence.

frame. For example, he describes liberal common sense about social programs like this:

It is natural for liberals to see the federal government as a strong, nurturant parent, responsible for making sure that the basic needs of its citizens are met: food, shelter, education, health care, and opportunities for self-development. A government that lets many of its citizens go hungry, homeless, uneducated, or sick while the majority of its citizens have more, often much more ... is an immoral, irresponsible government.

Conservative common sense is quite different:

To them, social programs amount to coddling people – spoiling them. Instead of having to fend for themselves, people can depend on the public dole. This makes them morally weak, removing the need for self-discipline and will-power. ... A morally justifiable social program might be something like disaster relief to help self-disciplined and generally self-reliant people get back on their feet after a flood or fire or earthquake. ... If people were not rewarded for being self-disciplined and punished for being slothful, there would be no self-discipline, and society would break down. Therefore, any social or political system in which people get things they don't earn, or are rewarded for lack of self-discipline or for immoral behavior, is simply an immoral system.

He goes through the full spectrum of issues - abortion, environment, taxes, crime - explaining in each case how the conservative and liberal positions follow from their respective images of family.

The message of the book for liberals (with whom Lakoff identifies) is that they need to stop letting conservatives portray themselves as pro-family and liberals as anti-family. Instead, conservatives are pro-one-kind-of-family and liberals are pro-another-kind-of-family. And there's a case to be made (as I put forward in [my last article](#)) that our kind of family works better than theirs.

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## Real Families

Lakoff's theory is a brilliant intellectual achievement, an ingenious analysis of words and concepts. But I found myself wishing that it had more dirt under its fingernails. Somebody, I thought, ought to get out there and see how real liberal and conservative families live.

Somebody had. Or at least some other academic with a bunch of liberal friends had gone out to study conservative families - and hadn't been totally repelled by them.

In the 1980's James Ault was a struggling young sociologist with a simple question: Why weren't more working-class women attracted to feminism? He started by studying working-class women in the right-to-life movement, but before long he got interested in the small, upstart, Falwell-style church in Worcester, Massachusetts that he calls Shawmut River Baptist. Eventually, he made the PBS documentary *Born Again*, which, coincidentally, was part of his own professional rebirth as a film-maker.

Apparently Ault lost his publish-or-perish discipline when he left academics, because it took until 2004 for him to finish a book on his experiences - *Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamental Baptist Church*. In exchange for the wait, we get the kind of book no academic sociologist would write: a first-person account of Ault's Northern-Exposure-style culture shock and the personal re-evaluation it caused him. Whether you are fascinated or disgusted, envious or intimidated by the members of Shawmut River, you'll keep turning pages to find out just how far native Ault is going to go.

As you would expect from Lakoff's theory, Ault noticed a profound difference between the families of Shawmut River and the ones he was used to finding among his friends. But the nature of the difference is somewhat surprising: The families Ault found at Shawmut River - extended families in which multiple generations remain deeply involved in each other's lives - aren't sup-

posed to exist any more, especially not in a Massachusetts edge city like Worcester.

Though a life of mutual dependence within a family circle was commonplace among members of Shawmut River and other new-right activists I met, it was foreign to people I knew in academia and the New Left, as well as to other educated professionals I knew. Most of us were prepared, from the moment we left home for college, to leave family dependencies behind and learn to live as self-governing individuals. This left us free to move from one city to another for graduate education or for those specialized jobs for which our training qualified us. In the process, we learned to piece together a meaningful life with new friends and colleagues alongside old ones. Our material security did not rest on a stream of daily reciprocities within a family-based circle of people known in common, but rather on the progression of professional careers, with steadily increasing salaries and ample benefits to cover whatever exigencies life would bring.

Like Lakoff, Ault makes the connection between family structure and moral outlook:

As I looked around, I realized that virtually all the unmarried men and women at Shawmut River ... still lived “at home.”

By contrast, by the time my friends and colleagues and I married - even if just out of college - we generally had established ourselves as independent individuals removed from daily cooperation with parents and other relatives. Rather than conform to an existing moral code shared by our elders, to whom we were bound in daily cooperation, we were encouraged and needed to fashion our own moralities within an environment where diverse and unreconciled ones jostled uneasily with each other, and in which perhaps the only standard we might readily share was mutual tolerance for different values. We did not choose to be moral relativists; the lives we lived, in some sense, required it.

Being *at home* has another connotation, one that is similar to Lakoff’s notion of common sense: a place just feels right to you. Ault puts his finger on a key distinction that accounts for the immediate at-homeness members reported feeling at Shawmut River:

I came to see ... why some people felt immediately “at home” when they first attended Shawmut River, even if raised in quite different churches or in no church at all. Its villagelike atmosphere was simply an extension of the kind of sociability prevailing in their own family circles, within which ... relationships were seen and acted on as *given* rather than *chosen*.

## Given Families and Chosen Families

As impressed as I was by *Moral Politics*, I was not completely happy with it, for a couple of reasons. First, making the parent/child relationship central to American political discourse marginalizes a lot of people. Singles, childless couples, non-custodial parents, and empty-nesters who either don’t have grandchildren or rarely see them - all wind up on the outside looking in while our-kind-of-parents argue with their-kind-of-parents. My wife and I are childless, for example, but we’ve managed to remain happily married for more than twenty years while playing a positive role in our church community. I’d like to think that our moral values should be part of the conversation too.

Second, the Strict Father family is too unattractive. Lakoff does a good job of explaining *how* someone lives this way, but not *why*. *Moral Politics* tries hard to be fair to Strict Father families, and clearly Lakoff put a lot of time into translating their language and getting inside their heads. But it always remains foreign territory to him. The Strict Father family seems unsustainably joyless. Surely the majority of the country does not live this way.

Ault's insights about fundamentalist families give a clue as to where Lakoff went wrong. The right distinction isn't between the conservative nuclear family and the liberal nuclear family, but between two completely different ways of experiencing family. Those two modes of experience may express themselves in families that are not nuclear at all.

The key distinction in Ault's account is not strictness vs. nurturance, but the Given vs. the Chosen. What, in other words, is the source of your responsibilities to other people? Are you born with obligations? Or do you choose to make commitments? As with strictness and nurturance, every actual person experiences some combination of obligation and commitment. But emphasizing one or the other makes a striking difference.

I, for example, feel some sense of obligation to my 82-year-old parents, but its practical value is limited by the fact that they live a thousand miles away. I maintain a relationship with my similarly distant sister and nephews, but this feels more like a choice than an obligation. My marriage is almost entirely a negotiated commitment, even if it looks fairly traditional from the outside.

With Ault's distinction in mind, I have constructed descriptions of the Inherited Obligation family and the Negotiated Commitment family. Consider them not as replacements for Lakoff's Strict Father and Nurturant Parent family models, but as envelopes that contain them. Lakoff's two family types each exist inside a much wider context.

### **The Inherited Obligation Family**

Life is defined by roles and relationships that are given, not chosen. One has parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and eventually a spouse, children, and grandchildren of one's own. Each of those relationships defines a set of mutual obligations. Your well-being depends on the faithfulness of others in meeting their obligations to you, and your character is judged by how you meet your obligations to them. *Choice* and *freedom* are fine in the economic sphere, but in family life they undermine obligation and put everyone at risk. Fulfilling your obligations is not always pleasant and may even at times be thankless, but in the long run such faithfulness leads to a sense of deep satisfaction.

In difficult times, you depend on those who are obliged to help you: First, on your extended family, and on the larger community only if necessary.

Continuing and extending the family by having children is a duty, not a option. This entails men taking on the roles of husband and father, and women taking on the roles of wife and mother. These roles are timeless and not up for negotiation. Although the obligations of these roles become primary, prior obligations to other family members do not go away, nor do theirs to you. Parents and children remain linked for life in a special relationship. Grandparents, if they are able, have a major role in the child-raising project. And when they become feeble, the grown child is obliged to care for them.

single lifetime rather than being passed down through the generations, and the recognition of overpopulation as a potential problem.

## Values and Issues

Several liberal/conservative issues become much clearer in this analysis than they are in Lakoff.

**Abortion.** In the Inherited Obligation model, having children is an obligation, not a choice. Of course a pregnant woman may find it inconvenient to have a child at this point in her life, but that's no reason to let her opt out - obligations are almost always inconvenient. In the long run, however, children are a good deal; their obligation to you pays off when you are old. In demanding that a young woman carry a fetus to term, then, society is looking out for long-term interests she may not yet have the perspective to see.

Conversely, in the Negotiated Commitment model nurturance is a gift, not an investment. A child is more like a work of art and less like a retirement plan. Having a child out of obligation, without a sense of commitment, is seen as a recipe for disaster. Pregnancies that result from rape, ignorance, or a birth-control failure are set up for such a disaster. If society is going to hold a prospective mother responsible for the welfare of her child - and it should -

she must be given a chance to decide whether this child is her project or not.

**Same-sex marriage.** The husband/father and wife/mother roles in the Inherited Obligation model are timeless, unchangeable, and necessary. Someone has to be the husband/father and someone has to be the wife/mother. Same-sex couples just can't cover both roles, no matter how well-intentioned they may be.

But no comparable difficulty exists in the Negotiated Commitment model. A child has needs, and the parents have to negotiate a plan to meet those needs. Whether the parents are a mixed-sex couple or a same-sex couple - or even a single parent with a lot of committed friends - the problem is the same.

If the government recognizes same-sex marriages and same-sex couples as parents, then it is tacitly siding with the Negotiated Commitment model of marriage and parenthood, and undermining the Inherited Obligation model. This is why conservatives believe that marriage

needs to be "defended" from same-sex relationships. But from the Negotiated Commitment point of view, "defense of marriage" is nonsense. How a same-sex couple negotiates its

### The Negotiated Commitment Family

Your responsibilities come from the commitments you have chosen to make, and not from congenital obligations. Voluntary commitments form the substance of life; a life without them is superficial and empty.

Adult relationships are negotiated to be mutually acceptable. Although traditional forms of relationship have stood the test of time and contain much folk wisdom, people are free to amend them as needed.

Because young children are incapable of meaningful consent, you can't attach strings to your nurturance of them - it is a gift, which they may or may not reciprocate when they are grown. Only those who feel that they have the psychological and material resources to fulfill that commitment should take it on. As long as children's basic needs are being met, the members of a household are free to distribute child-raising responsibilities in whatever way seems best to them.

You depend on a social safety net to catch you if you are unable to support yourself: Social Security when you are old, disability and unemployment insurance if you are unable to work. While you may maintain relationships with your parents and other family members, you are not obliged to do so if they do not treat you well. If they are unable to support themselves, they rely on the social safety net just as you do.

relationship has no effect on the negotiated relationships of mixed-sex couples.

**Social programs.** The social safety net is an absolute necessity for the Negotiated Commitment model. Negotiated relationships, by their nature, are based on some notion of fair exchange. But what happens to people who have little to offer? In the absence of a prior obligation, who would volunteer to take responsibility for an indigent person in an irreversible coma? Unless the government steps in, people will fall through the cracks.

The Inherited Obligation model, on the other hand, is ambivalent about the social safety net. On the one hand, it is good that people don't just die when they have no one to take care of them. But on the other hand, the safety net weakens the network of familial obligations. A young adult who moves to the big city to seek his fortune doesn't come home when he fails, he draws unemployment. Social Security and Medicare may provide an excuse not to take care of aging parents.

**Freedom.** The Inherited Obligation model is likewise ambivalent about freedom. Freedom to fulfill your obligations according to your best judgment is a good thing. But the kind of freedom that releases people from their obligations is not. In the Negotiated Commitment model, a life without commitments is empty, and there can be no commitment without freedom.

**Taxes.** As Ault observed, the Negotiated Commitment household is mobile. Particularly if it is educated and professional, it could easily move to another country. Consequently, the Negotiated Commitment individual views his citizenship as a voluntary commitment, and sees taxes as part of the deal. (If you don't like American taxes, go somewhere else and pay their taxes.) The Inherited Obligation individual is not aware of any such deal, because the network of obligations binds him to this country. As long as the government is helping the individual fulfill his obligations (to defend the country, for example, or to provide basic infrastructure) taxes are just another obligation. But to the extent that government is doing something else with the

money (supporting immoral art, say, or paying for abortions), taxes are predatory.

## Why now?

If the Inherited Obligation family is the older, more extended form, and the Negotiated Commitment family was streamlined in the wind tunnels of modern capitalism, why doesn't liberalism have the political momentum? The pressure of mobility and the diversity of cosmopolitan society have only increased in the last few decades. Why aren't there more Negotiated Commitment families now, and therefore more liberals?

The answer, as best I can put it together, is that there almost certainly are more Negotiated Commitment families every year, which is why previously unmentionable issues like same-sex marriage can arise now at all. But Democrats used to get a large number of votes from Inherited Obligation families, and now they don't. Which raises another question: Why not?

### The New Deal Coalition

We can ask the same question in a different way: Why were Midwestern farmers, urban Catholics, rural white Southerners, and blue-collar workers key members of FDR's New Deal coalition two generations ago, but mainstays of the Christian Right now? Their families didn't get more traditional in the last 70 years. Why do they vote more conservatively?

Lakoff addressed the question like this:

Because people do not use the same models in all aspects of their lives, ... a political liberal could use Strict Father morality in his family life but the Nurturant Parent model in his political life. ... Contemporary conservative politics tries to link the family use and the political use of the models more closely ... to convince others with the Strict Father model of the family that they should be political conservatives. I suspect they are being successful. ... For example, blue-collar workers who may previously have voted with liberals be-



cause of their union affiliation or economic interests may now, for cultural reasons, identify with conservatives and vote for them, even though it may not be in their economic interest to do so.

Although this passage does tell us who the swing voters are - people who have both models in their heads and can be persuaded to apply either one to the political issues of the day - it does little to resolve the conundrum. Why now? Why couldn't Alf Landon or Wendell Wilkie have connected with Strict Father values the way that Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush have?

### **The Liberal Backlash**

FDR's coalition, which gave Lyndon Johnson a landslide as recently as 1964, and kept returning Democratic majorities to Congress into the 1990s, was all about economic interest. Its diverse component groups shared a sense of oppression by richer, more powerful groups: labor by management; poor immigrant Catholics by the Protestant establishment; the rural South by the industrial Northeast; and farmers by the railroads, banks, and big commodity traders.

To many liberals, the New Deal economic alignment is the natural state of things. They are enraged when hamburger-flippers vote for politicians whose first priority is to cut rich people's taxes. Working-class conservatives, they believe, are just being stupid. The rich have used hot-button emotional issues to dupe them into voting for a plutocratic agenda.

This kind of indignation ripples through the book *What's the Matter With Kansas?* by Thomas Frank, who describes the working-class conservatism of his native Kansas as *derangement*.

If you earn over \$300,000 a year, you owe a great deal to this derangement. Raise a glass sometime to those indigent High Plains Republicans as you contemplate your good fortune. It is thanks to their self-denying votes that you are no longer burdened by the estate tax, or troublesome labor unions, or

meddling banking regulators. Thanks to the allegiance of these sons and daughters of toil, you have escaped what your affluent forebears used to call "confiscatory" income tax levels. It is thanks to them that you were able to buy two Rolex watches this year instead of one.

Frank concludes on this far-from-uplifting note:

The fever-dream of martyrdom that Kansas follows today has every bit as much power as John Brown's dream of justice and human fraternity. And even if the state must sacrifice it all - its cities and its industry, its farms and its small towns, all its thoughts and all its doings - the brilliance of the mirage will not fade. Kansas is ready to lead us singing into the apocalypse. It invites us all to join in, to lay down our lives so that others might cash out at the top; to renounce forever our middle-American prosperity in pursuit of a crimson fantasy of middle-American righteousness.

Satisfying as this line of thought may be to an educated liberal, politically it is a dead end - even if plutocrats share the perception that they have Kansas duped. Working-class conservatives know that Republicans are cutting taxes for the rich and tailoring government regulations to suit large corporations. They don't expect the federal government to solve their personal healthcare problems or revitalize the dying centers of their small towns. If they've been duped at all, it is by politicians who campaign against abortion and homosexuality, but soft-pedal these issues once they get to Washington. Even if such duped Kansas voters catch on, they're not going to help the Democrats.

### **Fundamentalist History, and What It Explains**

Christian fundamentalism, oddly enough, started in cities like Boston and New York around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only later did it spread to the small towns and rural areas of the South and Midwest, which are its power centers today. Even now, Ault notes, it has not penetrated some communities where we might expect it to dominate.

Later in my research, I met a young anthropologist who had just completed fieldwork in a rural white community in South Carolina, where a family-based economy was still so strong that land changed hands largely outside the marketplace, through family ties. She noticed that members of the Southern Baptist church in this community had so little comprehension of the conflicts then raging between liberals and conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention that they had to have a special representative sent out from the convention to explain it to them. Where mutual dependence among kin was not threatened, new-right enthusiasms might not only hold little interest but even be incomprehensible.

In other words, Ault is saying, fundamentalism is not the natural state of the Inherited Obligation family. It is, rather, a kind of antibody that such families generate when they feel threatened. He fleshes this idea out:

In an early and influential article, Richard Niebuhr, dean of American religious studies, interpreted American fundamentalism as a movement “closely related to the conflict between rural and urban cultures,” a movement he found most prevalent in “isolated communities ... least subject to the influence of modern science and industrial civilization.” Revisionist scholars criticized Niebuhr’s view, pointing out, rightly, that fundamentalism first arose in cities. But if we consider fundamentalism as a defense of a rural *way* of life, a life organized in family-based networks of mutual dependence, whether in city, town, or countryside, would not such a defense arise only where it was eroded and threatened - first, among rural and small-town migrants to the new urban centers of industrial society on the threshold of the twentieth century, and then, two generations later, in the burgeoning cities of the New South and, in the case of Shawmut River, in rural and small-town communities overrun by the suburban expansion of Worcester in the 1960s and 1970s?

The virtue of this explanation is that it makes sense of the Inherited Obligation family’s swing to the Right, rather than making nonsense of it. The family consistently chooses its politics in

order to face what it perceives to be the greatest threat to its continuance as a social system. In FDR’s day, that threat was economic and came from big business. Today, many Inherited Obligation families believe that the threat is cultural: the pressures of modern capitalism and the rise of a competing vision of family threaten to break the bonds of obligation that hold the family together.

## What’s a Liberal To Do?

In this section I’m going to drop the small amount of objectivity I have managed so far, and speak as a liberal to other liberals.

It’s always nice to understand things, but understanding is an empty experience if it doesn’t help us figure out what to do. In order to profit from the work of Lakoff and Ault, liberals need to re-vision not just the Christian Right, but ourselves as well.

### What’s So Scary About Liberalism?

Liberals tend to view themselves as live-and-let-live people. It’s the other side, we believe, that wants to start wars, keep the poor in their place, and make second-class citizens out of gays, non-Christians, non-English-speakers, and anyone else who didn’t come out of their cookie-cutter. We’re the nice guys. We believe in tolerance, diversity, and letting people be what they have to be. It’s hard for us to credit the idea that someone could be afraid of us.

Someone is. And for good reasons. Understanding that uncomfortable fact is the first step towards grasping what has been going on in this country’s politics for the last quarter century.

Our belief in negotiated commitment - that people are not obligated to relationships they did not choose - is like one of those devastating European germs that white settlers spread throughout the world three centuries ago. We are immune; our families are based on negotiated commitments and (though they are far from perfect) work quite well in that environment - as long as we can maintain the social safety net.

But Inherited Obligation families are not doing nearly so well. Blue states consistently lead red states in statistical measures of familial success - low divorce rate, low drop-out rate, low violent crime, low teen pregnancy. Divorce rates in particular seem to vary inversely to liberalism: conservative Baptist marriages fail far more often than those from more liberal Christian denominations.

We have trouble grasping how tolerance can be threatening. Ault explains:

Liberally minded people often do not realize ... that rather than respecting fundamentalists views, they are denying them by insisting that religious beliefs or ethical standards be seen as personal, private matters we must all tolerate in one another - that moral standards are relative, not absolute. ... Shawmut River's commitment to absolutes was in keeping with the binding character they saw in the family obligations through which their world was organized. To see moral standards as personal and relative, on the other hand, widened the scope of individual autonomy and freedom in ways that denied and threatened to undermine lives that depended upon seeing family obligations as nondiscretionary - not as something individuals can choose or not choose, but as absolutes they have to accept.

### **Should We Just Give Up?**

As I have discussed these ideas with my friends, surprisingly often they jump to the conclusion that I'm advocating surrender. "So what are saying? That *they're right*? What do you want us to do, give up?"

Not at all. But I am saying that we have to drop our self-image as nice guys. The mere fact that people think I'm advocating surrender demonstrates just how attached we are to that image. It's comforting to think that we only want what's best for everybody, and that the only reason people oppose us is because they're stupid. But it's not true.

Liberals have a vision of how the world should be. I believe in that vision. It is a fairer, more just world than has ever existed before. It is better adjusted to the realities of modern life. And it is, in my opinion, the only vision of the future that does not eventually lead to competing fundamentalisms fighting a world war.

But no matter how peaceful and good our vision is, eggs will be broken to make our omelet. Eggs have already been broken. We need to take responsibility for that. And we can't expect people with cartons of half-broken eggs to simply shrug and let us do our thing.

### **The Shadow Frame**

Because we don't admit that people have reasons to be afraid of us, we end up scaring them unnecessarily. We communicate badly with the Christian Right, and just as our incomprehension of them leads to paranoia, so does their incomprehension of us.

Republican propagandists take advantage of that misunderstanding by projecting a shadow frame onto us. Their demonic liberal is a person with no moral depth or seriousness. Convenience is his only true value. Words that we revere, such as *freedom* and *choice*, rebound against us: We like these words because we want to be *free* of our obligations and *choose* the easy way out.

Just as married people sometimes imagine the single life as far more licentious and libidinous than it ever actually is, so people born into life-defining obligations imagine a life free from such obligations. The truth about liberals - that we more often than not choose to commit ourselves to marriage, children, church, and most of the other things conservatives feel obligated to, and that we stick by those commitments every bit as faithfully, if not more so - easily gets lost.

The virtue of the Negotiated Commitment model is that it is flexible and efficient. The negative framing of those qualities is *slippery* and *slick*. Democrats cooperate with their own demoni-

zation when they talk about “moving to the center.” Such tactical moves emphasize our slipperiness: We feel free to re-choose our positions whenever they become inconvenient to our quest for power.

This explains why Democrats never seem to get to the center, no matter how far they move. Swing voters aren’t waiting for us to say something different, they just doubt that we mean what we say. The more we change our message to court them, the more our slickness turns them off.

### **Framing Liberal Positions**

The most important fact that conservatives don’t know about liberals is this: *We believe that a life without commitments is superficial and empty.* Unlike the demonic liberals you hear about on Fox News, real liberals are morally serious people who are not looking to take the easy way out when there are greater issues at stake.

Consider, for example, liberal parents. The Negotiated Commitment model offers them very little in exchange for the effort and expense that they put into parenting. They don’t have to do it, and they can’t demand that children reciprocate after they grow up. Most liberal parents understand the situation. *But they volunteer to raise children anyway.* Liberals join the Peace Corps, work in soup kitchens, and stand together with unpopular oppressed peoples rather than walking away from. Why? Because liberals are serious, committed people.

Our rhetoric needs to capture the seriousness of our beliefs and commitments. We should, for example, miss no opportunity to use words like *commitment* and *principle*. Our principles should be stated clearly and we should return to them often, rather than moving towards a nebulous center whenever we are afraid of losing.

John Kerry didn’t lose because he was a liberal. He lost because people couldn’t figure out what he was. They couldn’t recite his principles or predict where he would come down on fu-

ture issues. Republican slanders stuck to him because he projected no clear image of his own.

There is a lot to promote about liberalism and the Negotiated Commitment model behind it. We take people as they are, rather than demanding that they fit themselves into an increasingly outdated set of roles. We face problems directly, rather than making people jump through hoops that may or may not be relevant. And so, for example, we ask: “Who is going to feed the child, teach the child, protect the child, and love the child?” rather than “Who is going to be the father and who is going to be the mother?”

The Negotiated Commitment model is tolerant by its nature. It recognizes the freedom of other people to negotiate their own commitments differently than we negotiate ours. In a country whose citizens have so many different backgrounds, and a world with so many cultures - each with its own notion of inherited obligations - such tolerance is a necessity.

We are committed to maintaining and extending the social safety net. We are committed to giving everyone an opportunity to succeed. We are committed to finding common ground with other countries and building a global consensus that works.

And, in spite of the cultural values that currently divide us from the working-class families of Kansas and Shawmut River and thousands of other communities around the nation, we remain allied with their economic interests. For some people that will never be enough, and we will never get their votes.

But many, given an accurate view of liberals and the values that motivate us, may come to see that we are not so scary, and that their differences with us can be bridged. And as the plutocratic agenda of the Right lets jobs continue to be lost, wages continue to stagnate, and the gap between rich and poor stretch ever wider, they may recall that the New Deal was not such a bad idea after all.

*Doug Muder  
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