

Metaphor of Terrorism

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The visual parallel between the planes piercing the World Trade Center Towers and bullets piercing a human head may have inspired “metaphoric horror,” but, as in all of George Lakoff’s “Metaphors of Terror,” this narrative effectively screens out the brutal reality of September 11th: human beings were trapped in those “bullets” and “heads.”

In his seminal work on the metaphoric structuring of thought, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff, with co-author Mark Johnson, stresses that metaphors both reveal and conceal: “In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept..., a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept.” In deploying any metaphoric frame to make sense of an event, the human mind flattens the reality into a known image or narrative, foregrounding certain elements while editing out others. This process is entirely unconscious, and thus, we may momentarily lose sight of the human losses of September 11th when we recall the buildings collapsing.

However, with the benefits of hindsight and exposure to new discourses, we can interpret the world through the lenses of other metaphors. Within Lakoff’s list of “Metaphors of Terror,” one can detect an evolution of ideas: from a species-basic corporal metaphor (“things that perpetuate over time [are] ‘standing.’”) to the social-religious (“building as temple”) to the psycho-sexual (“towers are symbols of phallic power”). Still, all of the metaphors that Lakoff selects ignore the deaths of thousands of people, and perversely, the analyses that he teases from them read the event just as the terrorists would, as a victory over a prideful hegemony.

Terrorists dehumanize their enemies as ciphers in a noxious belief system. Thus, they can destroy buildings without thinking of real human loss. To them, the Towers may have been, to use a Lakoff metaphor, “the temple of capitalist commerce;” the occupants, if considered at all, were then the priests of that temple, servants of an enemy god.

In arguing against the Bush administration’s approach to the war in Afghanistan, Lakoff similarly casts Bush and his colleagues in a metaphoric role: not priests, but “Strict Fathers,” cruel tyrants with a retributive, self-protective agenda. Rather than considering the complexity of the administration’s war policy, its attempts to build international consensus and attend to the future of the Afghan people, he vituperates against the public rhetoric of men he considers puppets of a predetermined agenda: “The reaction of the Bush administration is *just what you would expect* a conservative reaction to be — pure Strict Father morality.” (italics mine).

Certainly, the Bush administration has been typically sloppy in its rhetoric (the most recent example arriving in Bush’s astonishment that the phrase “axis of evil” relies on a historically loaded concept) and in its approach to a truly engaged international coalition. Lakoff’s preferred metaphoric structuring of their actions, though, selects out all but the flaws and injustices, with little regard for what is concealed in its sweep.

Thus, while his counter-approach of “nurturant” morality may be on-target for solving the long-term problems afflicting world peace and security, his discussion of September 11th and its aftermath is flummoxed by another metaphor, the one with which he opens *Metaphors We Live By*: “argument is war.” Like a terrorist, he would have his worldview dominate the interpretation of events, his enemies speechless to offer other narratives. It’s high time that political discourse in this country casts off the simple binarism of right and left, with each side sniping at stereotypes of the other. To truly practice what he preaches, Lakoff should show the same sympathy for his political adversaries that he does for the terrorists. True dialogue involves acknowledging complexity in approaches and actions, not attacking straw men.