

## Metaphors We Die By: George Lakoff's "Metaphors Of Terror"

Franklin E. Horowitz

George Lakoff's response to September 11, "Metaphors of Terror," first appeared in the on-line magazine *In These Times* of October 29, 2001. In it he introduces himself as a "metaphor analyst"; yet his metaphor analysis has only minimal bearing on his primary objective, which is to influence policy. He expresses legitimate concerns over the Bush administration's almost exclusive focus on military action rather than on addressing the "culture of despair that leaves people vulnerable to the idea of martyrdom," and over its lack of compunction about curtailing individual liberties. On the other hand, he tends to be cavalier about the immediate external dangers that September 11 made apparent. For instance, he points out that "most security experts say that there is no sure way to keep terrorists out," as though this were an all-or-nothing proposition.

When Lakoff, in collaboration with Mark Johnson, brought out *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, it was a trailblazing event in linguistics. They showed that metaphor, in the sense of "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," was not simply a device of poetic literature but was central to everyday language and everyday living. Now in "Metaphors of Terror," Lakoff asserts: "The physical violence was not only in New York and Washington. Physical changes—violent ones—have been made to the brains of all Americans." These changes involve the impact, often unconscious, of the images of the events themselves on metaphorical systems already present in our neural networks. Thus buildings are visualized as heads (windows are like eyes, a door like the mouth); therefore the image of the plane going into the South Tower calls up a picture of a bullet going through the head. Similarly, tall buildings are like people standing erect; in our unconscious, "each tower falling was a body falling."

There follows a litany of other metaphorical images which "turn external literal horrors into felt metaphorical horrors." But in the context of his subject matter and his closeness in time to the event, something is not quite right. It's like the inappropriateness of responding with "uh-huh" to one's conversational partner at points where "That's awful!" or "Oh my God!" is called for. It is only after several paragraphs of abstract analysis that we first hear of "people in the building," and that reference is immediately dropped, never to return. He constantly talks of the planes as missiles, with no suggestion that there were people on those planes. Has metaphor blotted out reality?

Consider this statement by Lakoff: "The World Trade Center was built to last 10,000 years." It's hard to imagine any American architect of the mid-twentieth century thinking in those terms. Lakoff goes on as follows: "When it crumbled, it metaphorically raised the question of whether American power and American society would last." Is Lakoff really reading the unconscious workings of the post-9/11 American mind, or has he wandered into a different metaphorical universe, the universe of Shelley's "Ozymandias," with its haunting images of fragments of a once powerful kingdom now submerged in sand? This was probably the metaphorical world of the hijackers, who

fantasized bringing down America by bringing down the structures that symbolized it, and Lakoff has entered that world by the process of empathy.

As in *Moral Politics* (1996), Lakoff offers a morality based on empathy as an alternative to the conservative vision of an unremitting battle against evil. Empathy is “the ability to understand others and feel what they feel.” When Bush characterized the terrorists as “cowards,” Lakoff called them rather “martyrs who willingly sacrificed their lives for their moral and religious ideals.” Not that Lakoff aligns himself with those “ideals”; later on he calls for “an organized, moderate, nonviolent Islam.” But in rejecting Bush’s inept choice of words, Lakoff can’t bring himself to offer an appropriate alternative, such as “cold-blooded”; that would not be empathetic. That Lakoff is less successful in gauging how Americans feel is understandable; it’s more challenging to empathize with others than with one’s own.

Still, even when it clouds one’s judgment, empathy is less morally culpable than dehumanization. Lakoff, to his credit, calls Bush to account for having “spoken of ‘smoking them [Al Qaeda] out of their holes’ as if they were rodents.” Even if initially applied to those who have committed the most monstrous acts, dehumanization has a way of spreading. It allows all the carelessness with human life in warfare to be dismissed as “collateral damage”; we have also witnessed it in the United States in the “rounding up” (note the cattle metaphor) of masses of non-citizens and their virtual disappearance. Of all the metaphors we die by, dehumanization is the most insidious.