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Staying the Course Right Over a Cliff
By George Lakoff
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THE Bush administration has finally been caught in its own language trap.

“That is not a stay-the-course policy,” Tony Snow, the White House press secretary, declared on Monday.

The first rule of using negatives is that negating a frame activates the frame. If you tell someone not to think of an elephant, he’ll think of an elephant. When Richard Nixon said, “I am not a crook” during Watergate, the nation thought of him as a crook.

“Listen, we’ve never been stay the course, George,” President Bush told George Stephanopoulos of ABC News a day earlier. Saying that just reminds us of all the times he said “stay the course.”

What the president is discovering is that it’s not so easy to rewrite linguistic history. The laws of language are hard to defy.

“The characterization of, you know, ‘it’s stay the course’ is about a quarter right,” the president said at an Oct. 11 news conference. “‘Stay the course’ means keep doing what you’re doing. My attitude is, don’t do what you’re doing if it’s not working — change. ‘Stay the course’ also means don’t leave before the job is done.”

A week or so later, he tried another shift: “We have been — we will complete the mission, we will do our job and help achieve the goal, but we’re constantly adjusting the tactics. Constantly.”

To fully understand why the president’s change in linguistic strategy won’t work, it’s helpful to consider why “stay the course” possesses such power. The answer lies in metaphorical thought.

Metaphors are more than language; they can govern thought and behavior. A recent University of Toronto study, for example, demonstrated the power of metaphors that connect morality and purity: People who washed their hands after contemplating an unethical act were less troubled by their thoughts than those who didn’t, the researchers found.

“Stay the course” is a particularly powerful metaphor because it can activate so many of our emotions. Because physical actions require movement, we commonly understand action as motion. Because achieving goals so often requires going to a particular place — to the refrigerator to get a cold beer, say — we think of goals as reaching destinations.

Another widespread — and powerful — metaphor is that moral action involves staying on a prescribed path, and straying from the path is immoral. In modern conservative discourse, “character” is seen through the metaphor of moral strength, being unbending in the face of immoral forces. “Backbone,” we call it.

In the context of a metaphorical war against evil, “stay the course” evoked all these emotion-laden metaphors. The phrase enabled the president to act the way he’d been acting — and to demonstrate that it was his strong character that enabled him to stay on the moral path.

To not stay the course evokes the same metaphors, but says you are not steadfast, not morally strong. In addition, it means not getting to your destination — that is, not achieving your original purpose. In other words, you are lacking in character and strength; you are unable to “complete the mission” and “achieve the goal.”

“Stay the course” was for years a trap for those who disagreed with the president’s policies in Iraq. To disagree was weak and immoral. It meant abandoning the fight against evil. But now the president himself is caught in that trap. To keep staying the course, given obvious reality, is to get deeper into disaster in Iraq, while not staying the course is to abandon one’s moral authority as a conservative. Either way, the president loses.

And if the president loses, does that mean the Democrats will win? Perhaps. But if they do, it will be because of Republican missteps and not because they’ve acted with strategic brilliance. Their “new direction” slogan offers no values and no positive vision. It is taken from a standard poll question, “Do you like the direction the nation is headed in?”

This is a shame. The Democrats are giving up a golden opportunity to accurately frame their values and deepest principles (even on national security), to forge a public identity that fits those values — and perhaps to win more close races by being positive and having a vision worth voting for.

Right now, though, no language articulating a Democratic vision seems in the offing. If the Democrats don’t find a more assertive strategy, their gains will be short-lived. They, too, will learn the pitfalls of staying the course.

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