

Framing 101: How to Take Back Public Discourse

—January 21, 2004—

On this date I spoke extemporaneously to a group of about two hundred progressive citizen-activists in Sausalito, California. Some updates have been made.

When I teach the study of framing at Berkeley, in Cognitive Science 101, the first thing I do is I give my students an exercise. The exercise is: Don't think of an elephant! Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant. I've never found a student who is able to do this. Every word, like *elephant*, evokes a frame, which can be an image or other kinds of knowledge: Elephants are large, have floppy ears, tusks, and a trunk, live naturally in jungles, are associated with circuses, and so on. The word is defined relative to that frame. When we negate a frame, we evoke the frame.

Richard Nixon found that out the hard way. While under pressure to resign during the Watergate scandal, Nixon addressed the nation on TV. He stood before the nation and said, "I am not a crook." And everybody thought about him as a crook.

This gives us a basic principle of framing: When you are arguing against the other side, do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame—and it won't be the frame you want.

Let me give you an example. On the day that George W. Bush arrived in the White House, the phrase *tax relief* started coming out of the White House. It was repeated almost every day thereafter, was used by the press in describing his policies, and slowly became so much a part of public discourse