How Democrats Should Talk

By Michael Tomasky

The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina
by Frank Rich
Penguin, 341 pp., $25.95

Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear
by Dr. Frank Luntz
Hyperion, 324 pp., $15.00 (paper)

The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation
by Drew Westen
PublicAffairs, 384 pp., $26.95 (to be published June 25)

Washington liberals and Democrats have made many arguments about what they need to do as they try to recover from the low point of their support among the public during the Bush years in 2002 and 2003 and climb toward renewed dominance. Most of these arguments have centered on the big questions of ideology and vision—whether the times demand a calibrated centrism or a bolder liberalism of big plans and ideas. But other arguments, put forward in many a blog post, have ignored ideology and focused more on the question of tactics.

One can dismiss this as superficial if one wishes, but it's demonstrably the case that the gulf between the two parties is frequently greatest in tactical matters. Considerably fewer than 50 percent of Americans are as conservative as George W. Bush, Karl Rove, and Dick Cheney; yet somehow they got 52 percent of the voters to support the administration in 2004. That victory had many sources, but surely high on the list were the Bush campaign's effective verbal assaults on John Kerry's character—and not all of them, incidentally, calumnious; "flip-flopper," alas, wasn't really a false charge. Even so, the election was close enough that a smarter Kerry campaign would have won, whatever the Democrats' long-running internal ideological divisions. So tactics matter.

Specifically, the tactical debate has been about the degree to which liberals ought to mimic the strategies that have succeeded in recent history for the right. Liberals (myself included) have often observed that conservatives and Republicans have done two things far more effectively than liberals and Democrats during the last thirty years. First, they have built an extensive idea-and-messaging network since the early 1970s, when they concluded that "the American economic system is under broad attack," in the words of the Powell Memorandum of 1971, the founding document of the new conservative Republican strategy. Second, they have done a much better job of "packaging" both their ideas and, with a small number of obvious exceptions, such as Bob Dole, their candidates for high office. This has caused Democratic candidates to lose even when they appeared to be positioned for victory—Michael Dukakis and Al Gore, for example—and even when majorities expressed a repeated preference for or at least openness to liberal Democratic views. If "our side," the argument has gone, could reproduce the communications networks of the conservative Republicans and duplicate their ruthless creativity in the marketing of policies and candidates, much that has ailed liberalism would be alleviated. The victories in last fall's elections have lessened the panic that was evident after the 2004 elections but have by no means relieved it entirely; most observers agree that Democrats won last fall chiefly by default and not because of any great tactical brilliance on their part.

A Democratic effort to reproduce Republican campaign methods is, sort of, underway. A consortium of
liberal multimillionaires founded in 2005, the Democracy Alliance, has pooled its money for the purpose of backing existing and new ventures that might collectively amount to something like a progressive message machine. Its members include around a hundred of the country’s richest donors, who each agree to spend at least $200,000 a year on Democratic and liberal organizations that have received the alliance’s endorsement. However, it has been wracked by internal divisions, both ideological and strategic, and has thus far proved a big disappointment.\[21\] In its first two years, the alliance arranged for some $50 million to be distributed to a smattering of think tanks and organizations, including the Center for American Progress and Media Matters for America, the media watchdog organization founded by ex-conservative David Brock. But the amount is a pittance in comparison to the financial resources of the group’s members and to the amount that the benefactors of the right invest in political action—about $300 million a year on think tanks, single-issue advocacy groups, press and television, training institutes, and the like, according to the estimate of Rob Stein, the man who founded the alliance but was pushed out of its leadership position in 2005 (although he still has a role in the alliance).\[4\] It will be years before the alliance or some successor confederation is funneling that sort of money into progressive politics.

Duplicating conservative methods for marketing candidates could be achieved more quickly, but it is an even trickier matter, since it presents not only an organizational challenge but a moral one. During campaigns or while attempting to govern, should liberals and Democrats engage in the moral equivalent of Willie Horton ads and lies about an opponent’s war record and false claims about weapons of mass destruction? Most liberals would say “no,” but few choices in the world of politics are quite as stark as the above three examples. Most would also agree that Democrats, particularly in the last two presidential campaigns, have let themselves be bullied by conservative attacks and need to play a better game of hardball. This was most notable in Kerry’s failure to respond to the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a conscious decision made by his campaign in the belief that the group’s charges wouldn’t stick.\[5\]

By definition, though, a more aggressive game means a kind of politics that goes against liberal instincts and preferences. Democrats are certainly not above naked pandering or delivering the occasional cheap shot. For example, in 2004, some Democratic arguments against appropriating money for Iraq—arguments often made by legislators who voted for the war in the first place—were rooted in a simple-minded nativism (why are we spending $87 billion there when we have so many needs here?). But the fact is that for the most part, liberals would prefer that working- and middle-class Americans set aside “irrelevant” matters like the Swift-Boaters’ charges or the famous “Harry and Louise” ads, backed by the insurance industry in 1993, which were similarly deceitful and helped derail the Clinton health care plan. Instead they hope that voters will reason their way toward the conclusion that the Democrats better represent their interests. In recent years, this hasn’t worked out so well.

These days in Washington, when talk turns to the 2008 presidential campaign, it is the conservatives who tend to be morose and the liberals upbeat. Those states of mind could, and should, intensify in coming months, since things seem likely to get even worse for Republicans, both with regard to Iraq and the scandal involving the firings of the eight US attorneys, to name the two most embarrassing issues. But Democratic partisans have seen their leaders snatch defeat from the jaws of victory enough times in presidential elections to know that overconfidence is ill-advised. One question, then, is whether the Republicans’ modus oper-andi of smearing opponents and selling their own “product” with carefully tested and misleading rhetoric has exhausted itself along with the Bush administration. A second is whether Democrats have learned anything from the tactical errors they made in 2000 and 2004 and can present themselves in a way that answers conservative attacks, puts forth their own vision in more convincing ways, and accomplishes both of those without debasing political discourse even further.

As guides to conservative cleverness in packaging candidates, few are more useful, in their very different ways, than Frank Rich and Frank Luntz. Rich’s weekly columns in the Sunday New York Times provide the best glimpse we have into how, to paraphrase Bismarck, the sausages of modern conservatism are made. His ear for the self-incriminating quote, his Didionesque command of detail, and the controlled anger of his prose make reading the news you thought you knew (he mostly comments on the biggest story of the previous week) into a fresh and even startling experience.
So it is a compliment to say that *The Greatest Story Ever Sold* reads like one long, blistering Rich column. As the subtitle suggests, the book is a history, fully documented and footnoted, of the Bush administration’s lies and diversions, chiefly about Iraq, but covering as well the bungling of Hurricane Katrina, the Enron debacle, the outing of Valerie Plame, and the smearimg of her husband, Joe Wilson, among other matters. As he does in his columns, Rich catches the small but telling piece of information that escaped the notice of the average or even of the obsessive reader—for example, the fact that, to build the $200,000 stage set for General Tommy Franks in Qatar from which he would brief the media on the Iraq war, the Pentagon hired the illusionist David Blaine.

Rich, a former theater critic, is particularly good, in fact, on the question of sets and backdrops, which in its early days the Bush administration used to such Napoleonic effect to lead television viewers toward the desired conclusion. Rich documents the ways that Scott Sforza, a former ABC producer who worked for the Republican propaganda machine, created many of the backdrops against which Bush delivered key speeches. It took a special sort of chutzpah in the summer of 2002, during the Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, and other scandals—many of them compounded by Republican-inspired legislation to limit shareholder lawsuits or by lax enforcement by Bush’s Securities and Exchange Commission—to shove Bush in front of a backdrop for a speech that said, over and over, "Corporate Responsibility,” or one, at an economic forum in Waco, Texas, that repeated the phrase "Strengthening Our Economy."

For Bush’s speech on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, Sforza and his team settled on Ellis Island, positioning cameras so that the Statue of Liberty would loom in the background. Rich describes how Sforza rented “three barges’ worth of giant Musco lights, like those used to bathe sports stadiums in a twinkling glow for prime-time television, and put them at the base of the statue, pointed upward to illuminate its entire height.” It is no surprise that Sforza visited the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, scene of the infamous “Mission Accomplished” speech, days before Bush landed on the carrier in his pilot’s jumpsuit. Sforza looked over the deck to find the most favorable camera angles.

Rich’s book is really a story of two cultures that fed symbiotically on each other to produce the illusion of leadership. The first culture, of course, is that of the Bush administration itself, for whom symbolism means practically everything. During Bush’s reelection campaign, when hellish images from Iraq were appearing with increasing frequency, Rich took note of Karl Rove’s reflections on the *Lincoln* stunt:

> Through the cruel accident of timing,...troubling images from Iraq were in turn cross-cut on television with a rethead of Bush standing under the MISSION ACCOMPLISHED banner of a year earlier. "I wish the banner was not up there," Karl Rove told a newspaper editorial board in the swing state of Ohio. Not "I wish that we had planned for the dangers of post-Saddam Iraq before recklessly throwing underprepared and unprotected Americans into harm’s way." No, Rove had his eye on the big picture: better political image management through better set design.... If only that [banner] on the USS Lincoln had said STRENGTHENING IRAQ, everything would be hunky-dory now.

The second culture that made this illusion possible is the national press and television, which by and large went along with every sleight of hand purveyed to them. When Bush pulled his *Lincoln* stunt, some pundits gushed with admiration (“this president has learned how to move in a way that just conveys a great sense of authority and command,” asserted David Broder). *Meet the Press*, in order to draw a contrast, hauled out of storage a video clip of Dukakis’s ill-advised tank-driving photo op. Uncharacteristically, Rich somehow missed *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert telling Donald Rumsfeld in early 2002, "Sixty-nine years old, and you're America's stud!"

Rich observes that ”only an overheated 24/7 infotainment culture that had trivialized the very idea of reality (and with it, what was once known as 'news') could be so successfully manipulated by those in power.” That the Bush administration was seriously embarrassed after Katrina, he writes, will have no long-term effect. The culture in which the administration thrived "still rides high, waiting to be exploited by another master manipulator from either political party if Americans don’t start to take it back." Rich is a critic and analyst,
so it's not necessarily his job to describe how "Americans" are supposed to do battle against Disney, General Electric, and Viacom, the parent companies of the three traditional television networks, to say nothing of Rupert Murdoch. I'd like to think that we'll not see an administration that can equal the current one's cynical malevolence for some time. And we can hope that The Greatest Story Ever Sold will be read in disbelief by future generations as stark documentation of the way that powerful forces in government and the press conspired after September 11 to keep alive the fiction that a traumatized nation was in steady and capable hands.

Conservatives, of course, would take issue with Rich. But the surprising thing about Frank Luntz's Words That Work is the extent to which he rather gleefully acknowledges that his job, as the Republicans' most famous spin doctor of the past fifteen years, has been to take ideologically extreme proposals (with which he agrees) and find the words that will make them sound sensibly appealing to the average American. He did this most famously in 1994, by helping to compose the Contract with America for Newt Gingrich. By the same token, he notes, in a brief addendum at the end of the book that he wrote immediately after last fall's elections, the GOP's 2006 failures did not stem from the fact of the mess in Iraq, or Hurricane Katrina, or the Terri Schiavo case, or the Dubai ports deal, but merely from the Republicans' repeated use of the wrong language to defend their positions on these matters. Perhaps inevitably from the author's point of view, the loss is also owing to the fact that Republican Congressman John Boehner, long hostile to Luntz on personal grounds, banished him from the party's strategic deliberations after he became the House majority leader.

Luntz calls himself "a committed advocate of political rhetoric that is direct and clear." He invokes George Orwell as a hero, advising his readers at one point to put Words That Work down and "walk—no, run" to their local bookstore and read Orwell's famous essay "Politics and the English Language," from which he quotes and paraphrases liberally. He asserts repeatedly that to be effective in political or corporate communication, language must be accurate and credible.

He does not ask what Orwell would have made of the words "death tax," one of the more famous Luntz coinages, and one of which he is particularly proud. Republicans were having trouble selling Americans on the idea that the "estate tax" was an evil state intrusion into private affairs. But along came Luntz and suddenly there was no more "estate tax." He admits that he was against helping his Republican friends on this issue at first—not because he opposed the idea on the merits but because he feared that "Republicans advocating the elimination of a tax on the heirs of millionaires would play badly with the electorate." But then, well, he just took an accurate look at the facts, and came up with the term that set off all the right associations, conjuring an image of some belligerent beadle banging on the grieving family's door in Dickensian England. The problem was solved:

Sure, some object that the term "death tax" is inflammatory, but think about it. What was the event that triggered its collection? You pay a sales tax when you are involved with a sale. You pay an income tax when you earn income. And when you die, if you've been financially successful—and forgotten to hire really smart and expensive accountants—you may also pay a tax. So what else would you call that, if not a "death tax"?

In 2004, two groups named the American Family Business Institute and the Free Enterprise Fund launched a $15 million television ad campaign aimed at selected Democrats and implying that virtually anyone who had a farm or business to leave to children could be destroyed by the tax. In that year, 2,429,024 Americans died. But since all estates valued under $1.5 million were subject to no tax at all under federal law at the time, only 18,431 of these who died, or just 0.76 percent, left behind enough money to owe any federal tax. And the tax bite didn't reach its maximum percentage (36.7 percent) until estates were valued at $20 million or more.[6]

Luntz has no use for such facts; he prefers the vague formula "if you've been financially successful" to describe the people he portrays as victims of the inheritance tax. Phrases like these appear regularly in Luntz's book and in his work as a consultant, and conservative politicians dispense them like "a cuttlefish
spurting out ink,” as Orwell put it in the essay Luntz says he likes. And such phrases have often produced the desired effect, this one no exception. Whereas, Luntz writes, only a narrow majority of Americans supports eliminating the "estate tax," more than 70 percent favor abolishing the "death tax."

Much of *Words That Work* is innocuous enough. There are lists of the author's "Ten Rules of Effective Language" (use small words, use short sentences, offer something new, visualize); analyses of why the top advertising tag lines of all time—such as "tastes great, less filling" and "let your fingers do the walking"—are effective; and even advice on how to talk one's way out of a speeding ticket. And Luntz has certainly been successful (his heirs will surely pay a large "death tax" one day), not only in America but globally. In Britain, he offers advice to Tory leader David Cameron, and in Italy, he advised Silvio Berlusconi on an Italian version of the Contract with America.

Some Democrats seem to admire him. The *Chicago Sun-Times* has reported that liberal Democratic Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Senate majority whip, has seen to it that everyone on his press staff got copies of *Words That Work*. But Democrats should not put themselves in the business of packaging, for example, proposed legislation that would strictly limit the amount an injured worker could receive in punitive damages under a deceptive name like "The Common Sense Legal Reform Act" (item nine of the Contract with America). Democrats on the prowl for their own Frank Luntz need someone whose advice is not simply to mirror conservative manipulation but to learn how to present more emotionally convincing versions of the truth.

What Luntz does understand that many Democratic consultants do not is that language used by a politician sets off a network of associations in voters' minds. These associations, even for people who follow current events closely, are more likely to be emotional than rational, and voters "reason" their way toward emotionally biased conclusions. This is "the political brain" of Drew Westen's new book, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of a Nation*, and Westen, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University, has set out to show Democrats how to connect to it.

Westen's central insight is both obvious and simple: Democrats, he writes, have generally assumed that voters make their choices based on reason, and this leads to failure because "the political brain is an emotional brain." The Democrats' belief in "the dispassionate vision of the mind" has an honorable lineage going back to the Age of Reason and is useful for other purposes in life. But Westen suggests that electorally, it's a total loser:

> Republicans understand what the philosopher David Hume recognized three centuries ago: that reason is a slave to emotion, not the other way around. With the exception of the Clinton era, Democratic strategists for the last three decades have instead clung tenaciously to the dispassionate view of the mind and to the campaign strategy that logically follows from it, namely one that focuses on facts, figures, policy statements, costs, and benefits, and appeals to intellect and expertise.

In his early chapters Westen discusses the physiology of the brain and the different ways in which we respond to rational and emotional stimuli. Whatever the views of other experts on these neurological matters may be, I can say that, for electoral politics, Westen's analyses almost always seem to me correct and something that Democrats need desperately to hear.

Their devotion to the rational mind has prevented Democrats from doing two main things: presenting their own affirmative case in the most convincing way and responding to conservative attacks. On the first matter, Westen (a liberal himself) cites numerous examples of the disastrous ways Al Gore and John Kerry each relied excessively, indeed pedantically, on pending legislation, empirical data, and the like instead of simple and forceful language in making their case. To a question in a 2000 debate about gay and lesbian rights, Gore began his answer by citing "a law pending called the Employment Non-Discrimination Act." In another debate, Gore muffed a question about "character" after Bush cited the attack on Gore during the Clinton presidency for allegedly fishy campaign-finance practices, including the famous fund-raising event...
at a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles. In response, Gore did no more than pledge his support for the McCain-
Feingold campaign-finance bill. Gore also explicitly refused to respond directly to Bush's other attacks. It's
the Democrats' fear of a fight, and their constant appeals to "get back to discussing the issues" and such talk,
that really get under Westen's skin.

In a perceptive section on terrorism and the Bush administration's manipulation of fear after September 11,
Westen draws on research showing that intimations of mortality shift most people's reactions to the right
politically, and he demonstrates how Demo-crats, in trying to sound as "tough" as Bush, were unwittingly
reinforcing Bush's worldview. His discussion of the Kerry camp's response to the Swift-Boaters is especially
sharp. He describes a weak, and entirely rational, letter—sent three weeks after the attacks—by Kerry's
campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill to Ken Mehlman, her Bush-campaign counterpart, urging Mehlman to
persuade Bush to denounce the attacks and return to the issues. Westen writes:

If the letter hadn't been signed by Cahill, I would have wondered if it had been written by Rove
himself. It sent virtually every message you wouldn't want to send under these circumstances.
First, from a symbolic standpoint, you don't send your mother out to fight for you when
another boy bullies you in the schoolyard. Kerry's response should have been man to man, and
it should have been live, on the air, not in print. Second, the form and goal of the letter had a
groveling, beseeching quality, which gave Bush the power to do with it what he wanted.... Third,
instead of making the entire incident a condemnation of the president's character, it gave Bush
the opportunity to look magnanimous....

What should Democrats do differently? This is where the fun starts. Usually, books like these end with
one somewhat perfunctory prescriptive chapter. But The Political Brain has many examples, filling
chapter after chapter after chapter, describing how Democrats could have made in the past, and could make
in the future, strong emotional appeals that are rooted in truth. Westen's recommended language—on issues
ranging from abortion to gay rights to terrorism to taxes to race to the nature of modern conservatism—is at
least an improvement over what the Democrats say currently and at best exhilarating to imagine. For
example, he thinks that the Democrats could have reframed the debate over the Iraq war resolution in 2002
by gathering en masse on the steps of the Capitol and issuing a statement along the following lines:

The Republicans are demanding that we vote for this resolution without discussion, without
knowing whether a deployment of troops to Iraq would prevent us from finishing the job in
Afghan-istan where Osama bin Laden is still at large, and without knowing whether fighting a
war on two fronts will require reinstatement of the draft.

The resolution we are being asked to vote for demands that we abridge the Constitution that
our founding fathers so artfully crafted, which gave Congress the sacred duty to provide
oversight over the executive branch, not only in times of peace but also in times of war, when
American lives are most at stake. And the reason we are being asked to sign this resolution
now—the reason it cannot wait until the facts are more clear—is not national security. This
resolution is designed for no other purpose than the partisan interests of the Republican
Party....

I recall no more than a small handful of Democrats who said anything remotely like this. It would have
altered the tenor of the debate considerably if more had done so. Nor have either Harry Reid or Nancy
Pelosi since adopted similar language.

In recent years, a small number of experts on language and rhetoric have been touted as the Democrats'
savior. None of these panned out. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff was supposed to lead the Democrats
in from the wilderness, and Lakoff produced good insights into the contrasting approaches to moral
questions of liberals and conservatives; but when he engaged in actual political work, as he did with House
Democrats in 2004, the result couldn't have been more banal because his descriptions of conservatives' and
liberals' moral systems did not lead to clear strategic conclusions.
Many people are therefore skittish about anyone being heralded as the next source of advice. But Westen's analyses and suggestions speak precisely to Democrats' greatest tactical failures of the last quarter-century, and they do so without descending to the level of "Mission Accomplished" banners and the "death tax." It will be fascinating to see how *The Political Brain* is received among the Democratic political professionals, who are for the most part insular and arrogant and have an explanation for everything. But Westen's explanations sound better than the ones that have long been circulating in Washington.

**Stopping the Robocalls**

—from *The Political Brain* by Drew Westen

Democrats should have aggressively inoculated...for the misleading "robocalls" and fliers Republicans have used at the end of the last three elections. Rove had used similar tactics in state politics in Texas for two decades, which had been well documented. And Republicans used them liberally in 2004, when the Republican National Committee sent direct mail to voters in West Virginia and Arkansas warning them that if the Democrats got elected, they would ban the Bible. In several swing states, voters received automated calls allegedly from pro-gay groups, targeted to anti-gay voters, urging them to vote for Kerry, and men dressed in unconvincing drag held up pro-gay signs while hassling voters all over the country.

All the Democrats needed to say a week before every election since Rove came to town was something like, "If you get computerized calls that won't stop, calls in the middle of the night, or fliers allegedly from a Democratic candidate taking a position that anyone knows would make you angry—telling you how excited the Democratic candidate is about taking away your rifle, banning the Bible, or allowing gay people to get married in your church—send a message to the Republicans on Election Day that Republican candidates who run on values and morality but show such a deep disrespect toward both the Constitution and the Ten Commandments will get what they deserve."

Doing so would have prevented exactly what happened across the country again in 2006, as voters received repeated calls, often in the middle of the night or during major sporting events, that sounded at the beginning as if they were from the [Democratic candidate].

**Notes**

[1] The memorandum was written in 1971 by Lewis Powell, then a corporate lawyer, just two months before he was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Nixon. Powell had been asked by the head of the US Chamber of Commerce how corporate America should respond to liberal and radi-cal assaults that, as business saw it, threatened the very existence of the free-enterprise system. Powell's six thousand-word response advised that corporate America should invest heavily in politics. Its recommendations—among them underwriting scholars, creating media watchdog organizations, and fighting liberal influence in the academy and the courts—have been put into effe ct with uncanny precision. Googling "Powell Memorandum" or "Powell Memo" will yield several sites on which one can read the text and various assessments of its influence.

[2] For example, a much-discussed Pew survey from March 22 shows that the percentage of Americans agreeing with the statement "government should take care of people who can’t care for them-selves" has been above 60 percent, and climbing, since 1999; the same goes for the statement that government should "guarantee food and shelter for all." See people-press.org/reports/pdf/312 .pdf.


Matrix," in which he documented the major conservative groups, the "bankers" who dictated where money should go, and the ways in which the message machine had altered political debate. It became a sort of Rosetta Stone for liberals. He showed it to me over lunch in the summer of 2004.

In his book *Politics Lost* (Doubleday, 2006), Joe Klein reports that Bob Shrum, Kerry's media adviser, feared that "the Republicans were trying to get them to chase another rabbit," and campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill thought "an aggressive response would only balloon the story." Shrum also didn't want to spend money on television ads in August, when the Swift Boat group began its campaign.

These numbers are from a study by the liberal public-interest group Citizens for Tax Justice and can be found at www.ctj.org/pdf/wherethemoneygoes.pdf. A more recent study by Public Citizen, at www.citizen.org/documents/EstateTaxFinal.pdf, estimates that in 2006, the percentage of all estates subject to tax had gone down to just 0.3 percent.

In a dramatic reversal, the Trump administration says the entire Affordable Care Act should be struck down. President Trump really has chutzpah to say ‘oh well we’re going to come up with an alternative plan that’s better than Obamacare.’ CNN is a #SuperPac. Someone should call the FCC about it. How Democrat Healthcare Talking Points Become CNN Programming.