

# CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE

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by Paul Chilton and George Lakoff

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This newsletter is distributed by the CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN LANGUAGE, a research center at the University of California, San Diego that unites the efforts of disciplines such as Linguistics, Cognitive Science, Psychology, Computer Science, Sociology, and Philosophy, all who share an interest in language. We feature papers related to language and cognition (1-10 pages, sent via email) and welcome response from friends and colleagues at UCSD and institutions. Please forward correspondence to:

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*Competent Scientist Meets the Empiricist Mind*

**Valerie Walker**  
Department of Philosophy, UCSD  
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To: The Linguistics and Cognitive Science Communities  
From: Paul Chilton and George Lakoff

The paper that follows is our first attempt to apply the theory of conceptual metaphor to the area of foreign policy. We see this as a natural part of our duties as linguists and cognitive scientists. It is our job to study conceptual structure in all domains of thought, and international relations is one such domain. The fact that it is an inherently important domain makes such a study more urgent than the analysis of conceptual structure usually is. It also makes it important that it be written in accessible language, language suitable for publication in a magazine with wide circulation. So pardon the absence of the usual scholarly apparatus: the listing of examples, the arguments for generalizations, the statements of the mappings and their entailments. They are easy to supply, but that is not our purpose here.

We would appreciate feedback. Please send comments to [lakoff@cogsci.berkeley.edu](mailto:lakoff@cogsci.berkeley.edu) and [RC.PAC@Forsythe.Stanford.EDU](mailto:RC.PAC@Forsythe.Stanford.EDU).

## Foreign Policy By Metaphor

### Paul Chilton and George Lakoff

Paul Chilton, of the University of Warwick, U.K., is a MacArthur Fellow visiting at the Stanford Center for International Security and Arms Control. He is the author of *Nukespeak*.

George Lakoff is Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. He is co-author of *Metaphors We Live By* and *More Than Cool Reason*, and author of *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

The scenario was right out of Dr. Strangelove. General Tommy Power, commander of the Strategic Air Command in 1960, a man with his hand directly on the button, was defending the policy of massive retaliation against a more limited, restrained use of weaponry. A description of the consequences of all-out nuclear war failed to sway him. "Look," he said. "At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian left, we win!"

The scene was real: a maverick general with a metaphor and the power to command the use of nuclear weapons. The scene has changed, of course. But the metaphors and the bombs in service of them are still with us.

Metaphors are not mere words or fanciful notions. They are one of our primary means of conceptualizing the world. What has been learned over the past decade in cognitive science and in linguistics is that a vast proportion of our conceptual life is metaphorical. We think automatically, effortlessly and without notice using metaphors we have grown up with and accepted without question. We see our lives as purposeful, as journeys toward goals. It is important to Americans to 'have direction, to know where one is going,' and it is useful to have 'a head start.' What is more frustrating to an American than a sense of 'not getting anywhere with your life'—an idea that would be meaningless in much of the world.

Time, in America as in much of the industrialized world, is understood as a money-like resource. We can 'save time, waste time, spend time, budget time, and use time wisely or foolishly.' When we understand our experience through metaphorical concepts and act on those concepts, our metaphors appear real to us. If you live by a time-as-resource metaphor, someone really can 'waste' an hour of your time. If you understand life as goal-oriented, you may really feel 'lost' and 'without direction' and worry about whether you are 'getting anywhere with your life.'

### The World Community

Person-states are seen as members of a 'world community'—a community of nations. Treaties are promises, and keeping one's word is important if one is to be trusted. The community is often conceptualized in the US as a kind of frontier town, with law-abiding citizens and outlaw states. Because there are outlaws, a sheriff is needed, and the U.S. has been playing sheriff for the past four decades. Without the sheriff, there would be anarchy.

Other widespread, natural-seeming metaphors help to structure and legitimize policies and programs. For hundreds of years we have used the metaphor of the 'body politic'. If the state is a person, it has a body—and bodies can grow, mature, decline, be healthy, developed, underdeveloped, weak, strong, diseased. Metaphorical foreign policy sees the health of a person-state in terms of national wealth and military force—instead of, say, the health or well-being of its individual citizens. An 'underdeveloped country' is seen as one which is less industrialized than Western countries. 'Growth' and 'development' are seen in economic terms. States that are not 'fully developed' are therefore seen as metaphorical children, who need the help of their elders if they are to grow up to be mature adults. They are thus seen as natural dependents requiring both paternalistic help and a strong hand to keep them in line if they get naughty. Given this metaphor, it is impossible to see a third world country as knowing more than the grown up industrialized nations about the kind of economic system that will best suit its culture and geography.

The state-as-person metaphor also permits a body-politic to be seen as 'diseased,' and thus as a patient requiring treatment. George Kennan, in his famous 1946 Long Telegram that set the tone of US foreign policy for decades thereafter, urged that we must 'study' the Soviet Union with the same 'objectivity ... with which the doctor studies the unruly and unreasonable individual'. If the Soviet Union is mentally deranged, the United States must take on the role of doctor. One way of treating mental patients is to strap them in a strait-jacket, which in political terms is precisely what the policy of 'containment' was to be.

If a body-politic is sick, its 'disease' can 'spread', and 'infect' other bodies. Kennan telegraphically told the State Department that 'World communism is like the malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue'. It followed from metaphor that American society must be kept in a condition of 'health and vigor,' which meant military 'strength'. Dean Acheson in 1947 appealed to Congressmen to extend American intervention in Europe : 'the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east. It would also carry infection to

### Fistfights and Games

Seeing the state metaphorically as a power-hungry person seeking domination leads naturally to a metaphorical conception of foreign relations as competition above all else. There are two special cases of this metaphor: First, war is a fistfight, typically between two opponents. The other fighter, the Soviet Union from our point of view, is seen as a bully, rational enough not to fight someone as strong as he is, but bully enough to beat up on anyone weaker with or without provocation. Here strength is measured by number of troops in some cases and total nuclear capability in others. The United States, in this metaphor, is seen as having to be strong enough to stand up to this bully, not only to protect itself, but also the weaker kinds in the schoolyard. The theory of nuclear deterrence is defined in this metaphor: The United States must be strong enough to deter the Soviet bully from starting a fight. This, of course, depends crucially upon the bully's rationality and accurate judgment. It also depends upon the bully's assumption that the hero is willing to fight. If the hero looks like a bumbling giant, then deterrence doesn't work.

The second metaphor sees international competition as a game, typically with two players. This metaphor, taken seriously, is the basis of the common use of the mathematical theory of games in theorizing about international relations. In a zero-sum game there is a winner and a loser. There are also games in which no party can win but one can minimize losses. The Vietnam War was analyzed by American policymakers as such an unwinnable game, and hence the US did not attempt an all-out victory.

A race is a special case of a game, and for the past four decades, our foreign policy has placed us in an arms race with the Soviets. In such a metaphorical race, having enough weapons to blow up the world many times over doesn't matter, nor does having enough submarine-based missiles to assure the destruction of the enemy. The metaphorical imperative is to stay ahead or at least close in total armaments. It is unlike other races in that no one ever talks of 'winning' the arms race.

These contest metaphors have long been at the center of our nuclear policy. Paul Nitze and others have spoken of the need to have a capability to 'beat the Russians' in a nuclear contest. Robert McNamara saw the impossibility of a nuclear victory and in its place introduced the idea of a minimum deterrence: nuclear missiles that will 'survive' a first strike and thus deter an enemy from striking first. In current strategy, the emphasis is to 'house' missiles so that that they will be 'survivable'. A 'kill' in contemporary strategic discourse is the destruction of a missile, not a person.

inclusive inside, an excluded outside, and a separating line around them. Medieval Europe was a collage of multiple and overlapping political and religious allegiances. It is only with the emergence of the modern nation state that the container concept becomes relevant and so well rooted in the mind that it is difficult to think of the present state-in-a-container system as anything other than a natural and immutable fact.

But this metaphor reached its full elaboration only around the middle of the twentieth century. The key terms of American foreign policy after World War II are 'security' and 'containment'. They are defined relative the state-in-a-container metaphor.

Security for a state is conceptualized in terms of being inside an overwhelmingly strong container that stops things from getting in or out. We have 'security leaks' on the one hand, and 'security penetration' on the other, 'internal' and 'external' security threats. This metaphor sees the boundary as all-important—the 'security perimeter' of American post-war policy.

It is surprising now to recall that the very term 'national security' was not current until 1945-6, when it began to emerge in Washington as a unifying 'concept'. But it is not so surprising, given the naturalness of container metaphors, that it should be appealing and get developed in the way it did.

Nor should it be at all surprising that the most central foreign policy concept of all—the concept of 'containment'—should have been so quickly adopted. It works like this. States are containers and their contents have a tendency to get out, say, by leakage, spillage, boiling over or even explosion. Another possibility is that the container itself may expand. Essentially, this is how the Soviet Union is conceptualized in post-war foreign policy. It follows from the U.S. perspective, that it needs to be 'contained'.

This is such a natural-seeming nexus of metaphors that George Kennan's notion of 'containment' could scarcely be resisted in the 1940s. It was indeed taken up with amazing alacrity and eclipsed more moderate and, many would argue, more realistic assessments of Soviet aims and abilities. And still, in 1989, the generation that grew up with these metaphors as well as the generations of political 'scientists' who have been trained to think in terms of them, cannot get outside of this conceptual universe.

### The Metaphorical Nexus

All of these metaphors form a single coherent nexus with the state-as-person at the center. States are thus seen as having personalities, being members of a world community, having stages of development, being subject to

Even this position is not always feasible. If the pull of one pole is stronger than that of the other, if one of the great powers is more threatening than the other, then independence requires not equidistance but closer association with the orbit of the other to offset the threat from the first.' (The Fate of Nations, p.201)

The magnet metaphor does at least two things. It makes international power politics seem as inevitable as the laws of physics, and therefore divorced from questions of freedom and rights; and it makes it seem both natural and necessary that international power politics should result in two and only two antagonistic coalitions, alliances, or blocs.

### The World System Metaphor

The celebrated sociologist Emile Durkheim, who wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century, theorized that a society is a 'system,' a mechanistic universe of its own in which people and institutions are 'units' bearing structural relations to one another. This system of relations, he claimed, defines social meaning and social identity and restricts the possibilities for social action.

Durkheim's theory of social structure plus the state-as-person metaphor yields the superstructure of contemporary international relations theory. States become 'units' and the world community becomes a system of relations, primarily power relations, among states. This system defines political meaning and political identity and restricts the possibilities for political action at an international level.

By an additional metaphor, power is seen as money and international politics becomes metaphorical microeconomics. The state-person becomes economic man and rationality for the state-person is the rationality of classical economics: maximize gains and minimize losses. With rationality defined by this metaphor, the mathematical theory of games, as it has been applied to economics, comes to define rational action for states. This coheres with the metaphor of war as a game. From within the metaphorical nexus, game theory appears to be the natural mathematics governing international relations. The laws of this self-contained metaphorical universe are game-theoretical laws.

Since the system is inherently mechanistic, its laws cannot be changed any more than can the laws of physics. The system metaphor thus coheres very well with the physics metaphor. As Waltz puts it, "A political structure is akin to a field of forces in physics." The international system metaphor thus makes it seem like a law of nature that states should act to maximize their power and that bipolar balances of power should result.



accept our guidance.

Another possibility for the self-serving use of metaphors is in their application to particular situations. Why was Cuban intervention in Angola seen as expansionism while American intervention in El Salvador was not? As is often the case, our foreign policy experts apply their metaphors to serve American interests. Such cases are anything but a characterization of an objective reality.

### What Metaphors Hide

Metaphors also hide important aspects of what is real, and it is vital that we know what realities our foreign policy metaphors are hiding.

Let us return to the Tommy Power incident, where General Power saw nuclear war as a kind of fistfight between two person-states which one could 'win' by delivering a 'knockout punch.' The hidden reality, of course, is the lives of hundreds of millions of individual people, real people, not person-states, lives that would be lost in such a 'win.'

The state-as-person metaphor hides the most basic realities of the lives of individual citizens. The state may be secure in its home while many of its citizens are not. The state may be 'healthy' in that it is rich, while its citizens may not be able to afford real health care.

Security for individual people is very different from 'national security'. Individual people need food, shelter, employment, health care, and education in order to be secure. The metaphorical notion of 'national security' has little to do with this. Spending more money on 'national security' means spending less on what makes individual people secure.

Not only does the welfare of individual citizens stand outside the state-as-person metaphor, but so does the possibility of the contributions of individual citizens to international cooperation and communication. European Nuclear Disarmament (END) has proposed a citizens assembly for a Europe foreseen as a united community. It, like groups of scientists, artists, scholars, and businessmen, plays no role in foreign policy as conceived of in terms of this nexus of metaphors.

Not only are individual citizens absent from the state-as-person metaphor, but so are multi-national corporations, which have an enormous influence both on matters of state and on the lives of individuals. A set of foreign policy metaphors that hides the role of multi-national corporations also hides much of their impact on all our lives, and does not provide an adequate public way to monitor and regulate their activities.

### Gorbachev's Challenge

Gorbachev's New Thinking is a conceptual challenge to the West. It is in large part a metaphorical challenge. Gorbachev has proposed, in tantalizingly inexplicit terms, his own 'house' metaphor: the common European house. It is presumably thought of more as an apartment house than the American one-family ideal. It is a new container metaphor, one that challenges what we now see as the wall of security through the middle of Europe.

American foreign policy needs to be reconceptualized. But the metaphor nexus that defines our foreign policy is so tightly woven that it is hard to change one part without changing others. Rethinking will not be easy, especially since these metaphors have come to be seen as virtually definitional of our foreign policy. Try to imagine American foreign policy without our present metaphors—without seeing states as persons each with a personality, a standing in the world community, an economic conception of health and maturity, a nuclear conception of strength, a benefit-maximizing notion of rationality, and a concept of stability in terms of a bipolar balance of power.

### Limits and Possibilities

It is probably impossible to formulate a concept of what a state is without metaphor. Moreover, the folk version of the state-as-person metaphor may not be entirely eliminable since it is an automatic, largely unconscious, and long-standing conventional of conceptualizing states. The possibilities for change are limited by our everyday metaphors. What can be changed, however, are the theorist's elaborations of the folk metaphors. They need to be changed because both because they are unrealistic and because they do not serve the interests of the citizenry of states. Among the things that policy makers can do is to find new metaphorical elaborations that both serve more humane values and highlight realities that their current metaphors hide.

One way to reveal part of what has been hidden is to conceptualize the properties of the state-person in terms of the corresponding properties of the least fortunate quarter of its citizenry. —Imagine conceptualizing the health of a state in terms of the health of the least healthy 25% of its citizens. —Imagine defining the educational level of a state in terms of the education of the least educated 25% of its citizens. —Imagine defining the wealth of a state in terms of the wealth of the least wealthy 25% of its citizens. —Imagine defining the security of a state in terms of the personal security of the least secure 25% of its citizens. —Imagine defining the rationality of a state in terms of the degree

with increased efficiency. The brunt was borne by Japanese workers who worked harder and were denied cheap American goods. America's trade debt was not reduced, and Japanese companies were able to buy American property cheaply. The Japanese saw internal and external policy as a single unified whole, while the Americans, via the state-as-person metaphor, saw only the external.

### Openness Here

The concepts used by our government and our international relations experts are of vital concern to us all. Those concepts are metaphorical through and through. The metaphors have important entailments for our lives and for the lives of millions of others. Yet the metaphors and their entailments have largely gone unrecognized and unexamined. The reason is simple. It concerns the structure of the profession. In the social sciences, the technical seems to drive out the nontechnical: international relations scholars must appear as scientific and objective as possible, and metaphorical concepts seem neither objective nor scientific. The result is a set of concepts that are not only inadequately examined, but are also very far from the realism that is claimed for them.

As cognitive scientists whose job is to study the concepts used in language and thought, we are appalled by this situation. We think that the time has come for an open and public discussion of the concepts used by the 'experts' in thinking about and formulating foreign policy. The role of the media is crucial in this. Only the media can bring about such an open discussion.

We have two suggestions for theorists in the area of foreign policy. — Learn to analyze the metaphorical nature of the conceptual tools you are using and learn the consequences of those metaphors. — Test their consequences in terms of what is real: the basic human experiences and needs of real people.

Metaphors are among our most important tools for comprehending the world. They may well be necessary tools for understanding the nature of world politics and for formulating policy. They need to be better understood and they could certainly be put to better use.