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Obama Reframes Syria: Metaphor and War Revisited

by George Lakoff

President Obama has reframed his position on Syria, adjusting the Red Line metaphor: It wasn't his Red Line, not his responsibility for drawing it. It was the Red Line drawn by the world, by the international community -- both legally by international treaty, and morally by universal revulsion against the use of poison gas by Assad. It was also America's Red Line, imposed by America's commitment to live up to such treaties.

The reframing fit his previous rationale for the Red Line: to uphold international treaties on weapons of mass destruction, both gas and nuclear weapons. By this logic, the Red Line therefore applies not just to Assad's use of sarin, but potentially to Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

The new version of the metaphorical policy has broad consequences, what I have called systemic causation (that goes beyond the immediate local situation) as opposed to direct causation (in this case applying just to the immediate case of Assad's use of sarin).

Some will call the reframing cynical, a way to avoid responsibility for his first use of the Red Line metaphor. But President Obama's reframing makes excellent sense from the perspective of his consistent policy of treaties and international norms, which he has said was the basis for the Red Line metaphor in the first place.

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Metaphors can kill, as I wrote in my original [Metaphor and War](#) paper in 1991 on the eve of the Gulf War. Why can metaphors kill? Because metaphors in language are reflections of metaphorical thought that structures reasoning, and thus our actions, both in everyday life and in politics. In politics, they are rarely isolated. They usually come as part of a coherent system of concepts -- usually a moral system.

The Red Line metaphor can stand a bit of linguistic analysis. The metaphor is based on a conceptual frame: "Drawing a line in the sand" means that the person who draws the line issues a threat to the person on the other side: you cross the line and I'll hurt you. This frame presupposes another common conceptual metaphor: Performing A Kind of Action Is Being In A Bounded Location, and Changing a Kind of Action is Moving to a New Location.

Examples are "He pushed me into running for office" and "I stopped short of punching him in the nose." The Red Line metaphor says that some actions are characterized as being located on one side of the line, and other actions are seen as being located on the other side. Switching from the first kind of action to the second is seen as crossing the line. The "red" in Red Line can stand either for danger: high alert, or for blood -- the harm that will come from crossing the line will be bloody.

The Red Line metaphor is part of a system that includes the Punishment metaphor and the Send-A-Signal metaphor. The Punishment metaphor comes from the application of [Strict Father morality](#) to international politics. People commonly construe international politics in terms of [family dynamics](#), based on a World Community as Family metaphor. Within this metaphor, some countries are seen as "heads of the family" while others are construed as children whose behavior must be regulated. One common version of this metaphor is based on the Strict Father family. In a Strict Father family, the father is assumed to know right from wrong, to set rules that are right, and to teach his children to do what is right by punishing them painfully when they do wrong. The punishment must be painful enough so that the child will refrain from acting immorally. The father is morally required to punish. If he doesn't, he shows weakness and the children will start doing what they are not supposed to do because they can get away with it.

Versions of the Punishment metaphor are typically used by conservatives in many domains: No "amnesty" for "illegal aliens" (who crossed the line). Punitive drug laws. Stand your ground laws. And so on.

In President Obama's use of the Punishment metaphor, America is the Strict Father, and bad political actors like Assad are bad children, ready to do bad things at the least sign of weakness in America, the Father who knows right from wrong and is the only one strong enough to enforce the rules -- as John Kerry says, "The Indispensable Nation" in maintaining a moral order in the world.

Why is Obama using the Punishment metaphor as the basis of his policy? The Punishment metaphor is not a mere metaphor. When it is the basis of policy it comes with a form of scenario planning, a literal account of what is expected to happen. Scenarios are conceptual narratives -- stories -- that have become part of the policy-making process. In the Obama scenario, Assad, when punished, will stop his bad behavior of using poison gas on his citizens.

At this point, the Send-A-Signal metaphor fits. In the Strict Father family, the Father has to warn the children of what will happen if they do wrong. In Obama's use, there is a further conceptual metaphor, the Actions Speak Louder than Words metaphor, in which Acting Is Forceful Communication. This fits the Punishment scenario: the act of punishing Assad will communicate to other bad actors that America will

seriously harm them too if they cross the line. In the scenario, the bombing of Assad's military is thus a moral act -- preventing the use of gas and other weapons of mass destruction and hence, saving countless lives, not just in Syria but around the world.

Where conservatives tend to think in Strict Father terms, liberals tend to think in terms of a different morally-based family model -- the Nurturant Parent model, which two equal parents whose main concern is empathizing with their kids, being responsible for their safety and fulfillment, openly communicating with them, and expecting them to act that way toward others. Diplomacy in foreign policy is more along the lines of the liberal model, open discussion and reaching agreement without punishment. Obama's instincts are liberal. He has tried diplomacy over and over, to no avail. His goals are nurturant and caring. But he also sees himself as a pragmatic liberal: when nurturance fails, you resort to strictness. You use strict means to a nurturant end.

There are two scenarios for this. Obama is taking the broad systemic causation route pointing to the maintenance of treaties and the deterrence of other bad actors. But liberals like the *NY Times*' [Nick Kristof](#) take the direct, not systemic, route: How can we save lives in Syria now? His argument: Degrading his ordinary weaponry will make it harder for Assad to kill at the rate of 5,000 people a month, and thus can save immediate lives. "...It's plausible that we can deter Syria's generals from deploying [sarin] again if the price is high." This is a version of the rational actor model, with Syria's generals as the rational actors seeking to maximize utility. But there is no reason to think that Assad and his generals are rational actors. Saddam Hussein was not a rational actor either. He fought to the end. Will Assad? Is he trying to show that he is more masculine than Obama, or is he standing up for the superiority of the Alawite/Shiite version of Islam, or for his family's dominance? Will a limited form of punishment and rational actor considerations bring him to the bargaining table? If the answer is no, then the Obama initiative is likely to fail.

In the Nurturant family, Dad and Mom are equals, diplomatic discussion is the norm, and painful physical punishment is not. Map that onto the Syria situation and you can see why Obama is at odds with traditional liberals, whose Nurturant metaphor for politics tells them to avoid the use of force. With Congress, he is trying diplomacy -- the Nurturant means to achieve Punishment, the Strict goal. The result is confusions and strange bedfellows. Conservatives would naturally tend toward punishment. But in a Strict Father family, the father's authority over everyone else must be maintained. Conservative morality, following this principle, leads conservatives to value the authority of conservatism over liberalism, which tends to make them vote against Obama, even when they agree with the content of what he is proposing.

In a true strict father family, the father is the ultimate authority, over not just the kids but also the mother. Dad doesn't have to ask Mom for support when he punishes Junior for disobedience. To those with strict values Obama looks weak both when he tries diplomacy and when he turns to Congress as a statement of democracy. Donald Rumsfeld, George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense who helped take the nation into the Iraq War, stated the position as follows: "...leadership requires that you stand up, take a position, provide clarity and take responsibility..."

In the strict father model, you fight to win, not to help your side gain a limited advantage and then back off. That is the John McCain model. It is not an argument over the details of a limited strike. It is an argument over the goals, but put forth as an argument over details.

The president says the "military action" is "limited." Secretary Kerry says that we don't want war, and he frames the "military action" as "not war"-- No boots on the ground. No attempt to take over the country ourselves. But the president can direct further action to prevent poison gas from falling into the wrong hands. The generals respond -- call it what you want, it's war. If you're a sailor on a boat shooting missiles at Syria with 13 Russian boats nearby monitoring the missiles you shoot, you will experience it as war.

Korean War vet Rep. Charlie Rangel [says](#), "There is no such thing as a limited war." Those of us with memories that long remember when Vietnam was seen as a limited war, as was Iraq. The metaphor of concern is the Mission Creep metaphor: as the ultimate goal is seen to be harder and harder to achieve, the scope of the war slowly expands, and the Mission creeps bit by bit past its limits. The Mission Creep and Limited War metaphors contradict each other.

The Limited War metaphor depends on another metaphor, the Surgical Strike metaphor: the missiles are so carefully calibrated that they can strike only the projected military targets and no innocent civilians. We were told this in Iraq. It wasn't true. The use of the Surgical Strike metaphor raises hackles among Democrats who remember its use in Iraq.

Part of the Limited War scenario is the Degrading metaphor: our current goal in bombing is to "degrade" Assad's military capacity. It is hard to that to be false, since any lessening of the military capacity, no matter how small, would degrade the military capacity, at least somewhat. Since it is not said how much "degrading" is to count, that means that "success" is assured, at least in the short run.

But what about the long run? What about systemic causation?

It is interesting to hear members of the House and Senate providing most of the arguments against the bombing. Will it just not help? Will it spur a wider war? Will Israel be bombed and gassed? Will Russia enter? Will America be hated and targeted for revenge? Then there is the Slippery Slope metaphor: Once you start bombing, you slowly get pulled into a regional war one step after another.

Metaphor after metaphor. Scenario after scenario. On all sides. To have an opinion is have metaphors and a scenario, that is, a story. Why? Every policy that is proposed is seen by those who propose it as being right -- not wrong or irrelevant. Different policies have different moral views about right and wrong. Since moral systems all make use of conceptual metaphor, there will be metaphors and accompanying scenarios.

One of the most interesting is the Force-of-Shame metaphor: Put the money we would otherwise use on bombing into serious and obvious humanitarian aid for the two million Syrian refugees. Instead of money going for bombs and missiles that may not help and even make matters worse, do some very obvious good. The sight of Americans just doing something unquestionably good for Arabs -- mostly followers of Islam -- would do unquestionable good, and make America look good in the Arab world. In the metaphorical scenario, this would shame Assad and bring most of the Arab world to the support of the rebels. That's the scenario.

Would it work? From the wide-ranging interviews on Al Jazeera America, most of the Arabs and followers of Islam interviewed seem to see the world in fairy-tale terms -- with villains, victims and heroes. Many want America to be the hero, defeat the villain Assad, and save the Syrians. Others see America as a villain for wanting to bomb or for standing aside while 100,000 died. But, the refugees, being outside the hero-villain narrative, are outside the fairy tale. The hero defeats the villain and gets a reward. The hero doesn't give humanitarian aid.

We cannot think about a situation as complicated as Syria without conceptual metaphors and scenarios driving policy proposals. In many cases, the conceptual metaphors are unconscious. But with Syria, the policy-defining metaphors are being put into language and are showing up front and center.

In summary, I can't help but think of a great paper by Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon called "[Why Hawks Win](#)" (2006) about those who planned and carried out the Iraq War. The authors listed examples of all the forms of what they call "System 1 thinking" -- fast, unconscious, effortless, nonrational forms of thought and all too real.

Here is their list as it might apply to Syria:

- *Optimism bias*: John Kerry speaks very optimistically about how a strike will necessarily deter Assad, send a message to would-be gassers, and maintain America's standing in the world.
- *The fundamental attribution error* (assigning actions to inherent essences, rather than external reasons): there are bad people out there who want to harm us -- just because they want to.
- *The illusion of control*: We can keep the military action limited. There will be no boots on the ground.
- Reactive devaluation: Those against the military strike are unrealistic.
- *Risk aversion*: We cannot risk not acting. We should just punish Assad and do no more. We don't want to go to war.
- The [salient exemplar effect](#) (with striking cases people tend to overestimate probability): Look at the dead gassed children and think of that happening to your children. We must stop this now.

These are real forms of thought and they occur naturally.

[Kahneman](#) proposes that we can avoid the effect of unconscious, fast, nonlogical thought by using slow, conscious, logical System 2 thinking (this is the classical view of conscious rationality). But brain and cognitive science research suggests otherwise. Linear, conscious reasoning makes use of massively parallel unconscious reasoning that makes use of conceptual frames, metaphors, and narratives -- and the forms of thought just described above. In the case of Iraq, the policy-makers Kahneman and Renshon correctly cite were conscious, slow-thinking policy-makers using logic and statistics -- and in doing so used unconscious System 1 thinking. No matter how slow or conscious or logically you think about Syria, you will still use metaphors and scenarios of the sort discussed above. They are inevitable in a situation like Syria.

It is vital that we be made aware of all this. Metaphorical and scenario-based thinking is not necessarily false. Conceptual metaphors and scenarios have real inferences that may or may not fit the world. America will act, or act by not acting. There will be real-world consequences in either case. We need to keep track of the metaphors and scenarios that lead to those consequences.