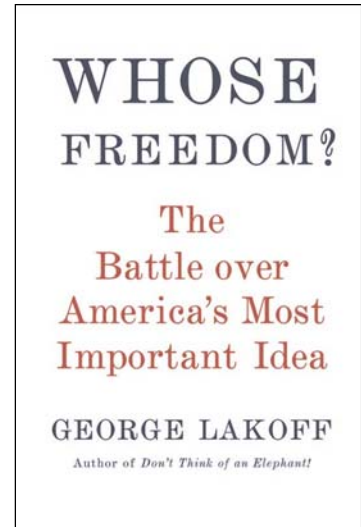


# WHOSE FREEDOM?

The Battle over America’s Most Important Idea

by **George Lakoff**

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller  
*Don’t Think of an Elephant!*



288 pages • 0-374-15828-2

“George Lakoff’s new book is as enjoyable to read as it is important to understand. It comes at a critical time for our country. Because freedom has always been a progressive concept, it is time for progressives to reclaim the word and its meaning in today’s context. Mr. Lakoff shows us how.” —former Senator Tom Daschle



Bart Nagel

## INTRODUCTION

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of George Lakoff’s *Whose Freedom?* We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore Lakoff’s provocative exposé of the rhetoric that empowers America’s conservatives.

Hailed by Howard Dean as “one of the most influential political thinkers of the progressive movement,” George Lakoff is a revered adviser within the Democratic Party, a bestselling author, and a renowned scholar in the field of cognitive linguistics. *Whose Freedom?* combines all three perspectives for an engaging, authoritative, passionately argued survey of America’s war over the word “freedom.”

Since 9/11, the Bush administration has relentlessly invoked the word “freedom,” using it to justify everything from preemptive strikes on Iraq to the privatization of Social Security. Yet many Democrats see President Bush’s use of the word as mean-

ingless and opportunistic—and ultimately leading to the curtailment of the very freedoms he claims to support. *Whose Freedom?* reveals the ways in which language and repetition in the media have been used to enact a devastating, calculated redefinition of freedom. Surveying a broad swath of the American political and cultural landscape—including religion, the economy, foreign policy, and science—Lakoff explains the mechanisms that have been used by the right to hijack our most cherished political idea. In the high-stakes duel over the beliefs most central to American life, *Whose Freedom?* offers a rousing strategy to restore the traditional American idea of freedom, while strengthening the very foundation of our democracy.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you define freedom before reading *Whose Freedom?* Did you consider your definition to be progressive? Were you surprised to discover that the progressive definition is also the more traditional one, as George Lakoff maintains in the book's opening pages?
2. What “frames” or cultural influences have shaped your political opinions throughout your life? In an enlightened society marked by considerable scientific discovery, why do frames still trump facts in shaping opinions?
3. In what way can the contested nature of language be an advantage for progressives?
4. Using Chapter 2 as a reference point, identify the folk theories that prevail in your community. Which folk theories have been the most difficult for you to reject?
5. Applying the author's logic of simple freedom, which cornerstones of freedom seem to be most in jeopardy today? How would you counter an argument that said equality and fairness are not inextricably linked to the definition of freedom?
6. Which aspects of freedom are currently not being contested in America?
7. Lakoff argues that the nation is understood metaphorically as a family, and that there are two very different models of parenting that reflect two opposing world-views. Which model shapes your political views? Why has the authoritarian, paternalistic strict father model been allowed to flourish in so many cultures throughout history?
8. Which of the subgroups described in Chapters 5 and 6 (socioeconomic progressives, identity-politics progressives, environmental progressives, civil liberties progressives, spiritual progressives, antiauthoritarian progressives, idealists, pragmatists, militants, financial conservatives, libertarians, social conservatives, fundamentalists, and neoconservatives) do you predict will prevail in future American political structures?
9. In Chapter 7, “Causation and Freedom,” Lakoff begins with the observation that “the progressives argue on the basis of systemic causation (within a social, ecological, or economic system) and the conservatives argue on the basis of direct causation (by a single individual).” He goes on to explain the ways in which our understanding of causation can have profound effects on public policy. In what way does it empower us to be aware of the two models of causation?

10. How should “free” be defined in the notion of free markets? Do free markets undermine democratic freedom? Were the premises of the economic liberty myth, outlined in Chapter 9, readily believed by the American public?

11. In your opinion, is it right that American corporations in many ways act like governments, as discussed in Chapter 9? Should corporations be entitled to the same freedoms and liberties as an individual citizen?

12. How has religious rhetoric shaped American perceptions of freedom in recent years? How does the rhetoric of progressive Christianity differ from that of fundamentalist Christianity? What would the American political landscape look like without the influence of religion?

13. Based on what you read in Chapter 11, what seems to be the ultimate goal of George W. Bush’s foreign policy? How did framing help him persuade Congress (and a substantial number of voters) to back many of these policies? Who has been liberated by his initiatives? Have Bush’s policies been effective at spreading freedom abroad? What kind of freedom?

14. What fallacies can you identify in the radical conservative definition of freedom and liberty? To whom are those arguments appealing? How are these groups able to downplay FDR’s goals of freedom from want and fear?

15. What would it take to enact the calls to action that form the closing paragraphs of Chapter 11?

16. How was 9/11 framed in terms of freedom? What were the consequences, in domestic and foreign policy, of this framing?

17. Is it possible to create a truly inclusive freedom—one in which the answer to “Whose freedom?” is “Everyone’s”?

18. What does the author’s closing anecdote (regarding the use of MRIs in examining partisan thinking) say about the future of political rhetoric? Where does the greatest hope for reframing freedom lie? In the media? Universities? Popular culture?

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PRAISE FOR  
WHOSE FREEDOM?

“In the battle of ideas, George Lakoff is one of the progressive movement’s five-star generals. Here he shows what we must do to take back precious ground lost to the right—the concept of ‘freedom,’ on which America’s very foundation is built. Read this and arm yourself.” —Robert B. Reich, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, and former U.S. Secretary of Labor

“George Lakoff has made pathbreaking contributions to cognitive science. In *Whose Freedom?* he uses several of his discoveries and much wisdom to produce a systematic analysis of contemporary society and political thinking. The result is illuminating.” —Antonio Damasio, author of *Descartes’ Error*, *The Feeling of What Happens*, and *Looking for Spinoza*

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#### FURTHER READING

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*What We've Lost: How the Bush Administration Has Curtailed Our Freedoms, Mortgaged Our Economy, Ravaged Our Environment, and Damaged Our Standing in the World*, by Graydon Carter; *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, by Thomas Frank; *Going Nuclear: Language, Politics, and Culture in Controversial Times*, by Geoffrey Nunberg; *Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties Are Bankrupting Our Future and What Americans Can Do About It*, by Peter G. Peterson; *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, by Kevin Phillips

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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George Lakoff is Richard and Rhoda Goldman Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, and a founding senior fellow of the Rockridge Institute, a center for research devoted to promoting progressive ideas. He is the author of the influential books *Don't Think of an Elephant!* and *Moral Politics*, as well as seminal books on linguistics, including *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* and *Metaphors We Live By* (with Mark Johnson). He lives in Berkeley, California.

For more information on *Whose Freedom?* visit [www.whosefreedom.com](http://www.whosefreedom.com).