

Briefing: Luntz Memo on the Environment

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"The aide who tangled most often and most vociferously with Cheney was [Senior Counselor to the President and long-time confidant] Karen Hughes. ... as Cheney said in a speech in Toronto in April, while conservation might be a "personal virtue," conservation alone was not "a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy."

Hughes strenuously disagreed. In the 1990s, the environment had emerged as a defining issue for millions of voters, and especially women voters. These voters did not want power plants and power lines built near their homes. They did not like or trust energy companies. They wanted to believe in the promise of conservation and alternative energy.

— (*The Right Man*, pp. 62-63) by recently departed Bush speechwriter David Frum.

It's common knowledge that high-powered corporate lobbying interests and their allies in government use elite public opinion researchers to coach them on how best to mask their efforts with inoffensive language to advantageously slant public perception.

However, it's rare to actually get an under-the-hood glimpse of the formulation behind such propaganda.

Environmental Working Group (EWG) recently obtained documents from a briefing book compiled by the lobbyists' top public opinion researcher. Frank Luntz is known as the architect of House Speaker Newt Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America," and he has a "who's who" corporate lobbyist client list along with a large number of conservative politicians. The attached 16 pages are part of a briefing book for lobbyists and Republican politicians on how to spin a variety of topics to roll back environmental and public health protections while avoiding a public backlash — like the one they experienced in 1995-96.

It was Luntz who helped sweep Republicans into power in 1994, and it was also Luntz who warned them a year later that they were overreaching on the environment:

Republican pollster Frank Luntz, whose work steered much of the "Contract" campaign, warned GOP leaders in a memo last July that 62 percent of American voters — and even 54 percent of Republican voters — would prefer to see Congress do more to protect the environment rather than cut regulations.

— *The Plain Dealer*, 10/22/95

Recent news accounts have reported that powerful monied interests are preparing multimillion-dollar advertising and public relations campaigns to support a renewed effort roll back environmental and public health protections. These efforts will be aimed at providing new and effective cover for long-standing influence peddling goals. The resulting advertising and PR messages will almost certainly reach your readers. We are providing you with this memo as a reporting tool, in case it proves useful to your readers in decoding the lobbying spin they will soon see.

Highlights

According to Luntz, when Republicans and lobbyists explain their positions "correctly," (p. 136), 70% of the public agrees with them. While some parts of the document delve into sophisticated dos and don'ts, Luntz begins with advice that adheres to time-tested public relations maneuvers:

- "convince them of your sincerity and concern" for the environment" (p. 132)
- make use of broad, clear principles – promote "common sense" policy (p. 131); "people don't understand the technicalities of environmental law – but they do understand the benefits of conservation of water, land, and open spaces" (p. 135)
- unite Americans by emphasizing our shared rights and beliefs: "we all want to move towards a healthier, safer future" (p.131); "we all want/deserve clean air/water" (p.134)

Consider the wide swath of voters to whom such broad phrases may appeal.

Consider the middle-class, suburban women that both parties have sought to court over the past decade; not coincidentally, they might be the same voters Karen Hughes had in mind in her debates with Vice President Cheney. If Frum's description above is right, then it would seem Luntz has aided his clients wisely with this message coaching.

Recent news reports show Luntz's advice is being widely adopted, as the table below shows. In it, news articles from *National Journal* (a Washington-based magazine covering government), *The Washington Post* and other news outlets show Bush administration officials closely following Luntz's advice.

LUNTZ'S DOS AND DON'TS			
Avoid this:	Instead, do this:	How it looks in practice: <i>National Journal</i> 11/23/2002	How it looks in practice: <i>The Washington Post</i> 12/21/2002
Don't focus on the present (p. 131)	Focus on the future	Responding to the lack of trust between environmental community and administration: "If you don't start the experiment of trust, you can't learn from it. ... We've got tens of millions of acres, so we've got the opportunity to see if this exercise will work without any threat to the overall forest heritage." (p. 3477) Consider even the name of the program in question: "Healthy Forests Initiative"	From a 12/21/02 story entitled, "EPA Jettisons Clinton Rule on Cleaning up Waterways:" "EPA and states will continue to cooperate to identify impaired waters and set protective standards for those waters," Whitman said."
Don't focus on process (p. 135)	Focus on benefits	"The aim is better-integrated decisionmaking ... That's good government." (p. 3476); "Then it's [breakdowns] just a classic case of using the tools that are available to you to gum up the works. Hopefully, we can reduce that potential in a way that preserves the confidence in the system." (p. 3476)	"The new approach would ... develop new quality standards for achieving the "highest attainable" uses of those waterways."
Economic terms such as "risk assessment," "cost-benefit analysis"	"Talk about the real world day-to-day effects that proposed environmental remedies would have on their everyday lives" (p. 139).	"From a good government perspective, from a straight economic perspective, prompt decision-making is at a premium" (p. 3476)	
Weak, passive language	Assure the public of your values and intentions. Use strong, active words: "preserving and protecting" (p. 135)	"I personally have not seen — nor would I condone — an outcome that in any way violates any environmental laws"; "This administration is committed — and the president has spoken quite forcefully on this ... " (p. 3477)	"Whitman said her agency would continue to enforce the law"
Rollback/deregulation	Protection/Common-sense legislation	"I prefer to use the word, 'modernization'" (p. 3476); "streamlining," "expedite" (p. 3477)	"The Bush administration is considering an alternative approach to reduce federal oversight and instead 'trust states' to clean up ... "

The administration officials leave readers with a strong impression that their intention is to protect, preserve and strengthen the National Environmental Policy Act, that their efforts are not rollbacks, but just common-sense approaches.

More Examples of Luntz Advice in Action

Other examples show that language is being used as an administration public relations weapon, almost as much as the policies themselves.

Luntz advises that, "Climate change" is less frightening than "global warming." ... While global warming has catastrophic connotations attached to it, climate change suggests a more controllable and less emotional challenge" (p. 142).

And, despite years of intensive study by and near-universal scientific agreement that global warming is happening and that human beings are at least contributing to it, Luntz urges his readers to assert that the country needs more accurate, "up-to-date" information before deciding to take action. By coaching his clients and allies to portray the scientific community as divided on the issue when it is not, they can block action on the problem while appearing well intentioned.

In presenting a policy change giving timber companies the go-ahead to log environmentally sensitive lands in the name of "protecting" them, administration officials make statements right from Luntz's playbook.

Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman states that the program's goal is to "streamline unnecessary, burdensome red tape" (*The Washington Post*, 12/12/02). Similarly, *The New York Times* paraphrases Veneman's announcement by stating that the new regulation is "intended to streamline the bureaucratic process" (12/12/02).

Over time, the Luntz phrases repeatedly and continually used by administration officials are showing up in the reporting of news stories. A recent story on land use law, for example, states that new rules will "make it easier" and are "essential to clearing up ... controversies" (*The Washington Post*, 1/7/03). Administration official Patricia Morrison is quoted saying that the ruling will "help our federal land managers more clearly define who owns what."

Conclusion

Our system of government is premised on an informed public. To make informed decisions about the environmental and public health policy, citizens will need help deciphering the language they hear from the administration and its boosters. The importance of the Luntz memo and its coaching is that the administration and its allies from polluting industries are using language as a weapon – one nearly as potent as the policies that they need to obscure. Recent polling shows the administration is weakest on its environmental and public health record, and Luntz offers this as a frank warning. (p. 132).

Author and former Bush aide David Frum says the same — "She [Karen Hughes] told *Time*: "Green issues are killing us."

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