

Luntz on the loose

By Bill Berkowitz

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From helping craft Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America," to advising Republicans to take the gloves off in going after President Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky affair, to frequent memos on how to politically use 9/11, to reams of advice for Republicans on how to talk about the war on terrorism, the environment and other hot-button issues, to being a consultant to NBC's *The West Wing*, to being named by *Time* magazine as one of "50 of America's most promising leaders aged 40 and under," Frank Luntz has been massaging the GOP's messages, occasionally putting a kinder, gentler spin on GOP core issues, and taking the pulse of the nation's voters for more than a decade.

Regardless of the outcome of November's election, Frank Luntz will be giving advice to the Republican Party and its candidates for a long time to come.

In 1992, Luntz founded the Alexandria, VA-based Luntz Research Companies, which according to its web site is "the premier corporate and public affairs communications firm in Washington." According to Dun and Bradstreet, Luntz, the organization's president, owns all 5,000 shares of the company.

Although Frank Luntz more likely prefers the privacy of the "secret" memo to the scrutiny of the media, in late September, the boyish-looking Luntz made the news when he was dropped by MSNBC from the cable network's debate coverage. According to the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz, the network "cancelled his long-scheduled focus group two days before the debate."

Luntz, angered over the dismissal, told Kurtz that he was dismayed over the firing because he hadn't "done" any "GOP work since 2001."

"I think they buckled to political pressure," Luntz told Kurtz. "They caved. ... Why is it that Democrats are allowed to do this" after leaving politics, "but Republicans aren't?"

Luntz's claim of uninvolvedness, according to Media Matters for America (<http://mediamatters.org/>), a web site run by former conservative activist and author, David Brock, was patently false. According to MMFA:

On September 2, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported: "Earlier this year, GOP

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pollster Frank Luntz advised Republicans to never talk about Iraq or homeland security without first mentioning how '9/11 changed everything.'"

On September 1, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported: "Republican pollster Frank Luntz did his best Tuesday to pump up Ohio's Republicans at a delegation breakfast. 'If you guys fail, if John Kerry becomes president by a percent or half a percent, I think you're going to be pretty regretful,' he said."

During California's governor recall campaign, Luntz also worked for Republicans. On September 7, 2003, the New York Times reported: "Frank Luntz... was hired by the group that triggered the recall, Rescue California, Recall Gray Davis." (A USA Today article called this group "Republican-led"). Similarly, an October 23, 2003, Weekly Standard article referred to Luntz's "client Arnold Schwarzenegger."

In addition, a June 2004 memo by Luntz titled "Communicating The Principles Of Prevention & Protection In The War On Terror" coached Republicans on how to connect the Iraq war with the war on terror, including concepts like "It is better to fight the War on Terror on the streets of Baghdad than on the streets of New York or Washington" and "9/11 changed everything," which have been staples of Republican rhetoric for a year.

In 2002, Luntz wrote a similar memo for Republicans advising them "how to discuss environmental issues," MMFA reported. "This memo was particularly memorable for the advice Luntz offered on how to deal with the emerging scientific consensus that global warming is a real phenomenon with potentially dangerous consequences. Luntz advised Republicans to exploit the last 'window of opportunity' for Republicans to argue that the science of global warming is uncertain. He wrote: 'The scientific debate is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.'"

(When I called Luntz Research to ask about these discrepancies, a spokesperson told me that the only person who could comment on this, and whether the company worked for Republican clients over the past few years, was Luntz himself, and he wasn't available.)

Josh Micah Marshall also recently noted on his web log, Talking Points Memo, that a June article in Roll Call had discussed Luntz's love/hate relationship with members of the House Republican Caucus: "At the highest level several leadership sources confirmed that Speaker Dennis Hastert (Ill.) and his office are not fans of Luntz or his work, while Majority Leader Tom DeLay (Texas) has hired him in the past and is an eager customer for Luntz's research," Roll Call reported.

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Luntz has been a busy fellow over the past decade: After helping then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich's draft his "Contract with America," Luntz later wisely recommended the party tone down its rhetoric when an editorial in the New York Times maintained that "it became clear that the Gingrich revolution had gone too far in its attacks on environmental law."

In 1997, Luntz distributed a 222-page report called "The Language of the 21st Century," a wide-ranging work that he claimed was his "most serious effort to put together an effective, comprehensive national communication strategy."

During the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Luntz prepared a confidential memo for congressional Republicans urging them to "'speak out' on the sexual allegations swirling around President Clinton," columnist David Corn reported. "It was right not to rush to judgment," Luntz advised in the four-page memo. "It was right to let the media carry the weight of investigation. It was right to give the president time to respond. But... it's time to speak out."

In a 2002 memo to GOP leaders, Luntz instructed Republicans to make Tom Daschle the Newt Gingrich of 2002, saying that it was "time for Congressional Republicans to personalize the individual that is standing directly in the way... Remember what the Democrats did to Gingrich? We need to do exactly the same thing to Daschle."

In 1997, according to Salon's Dante Chinni, "Luntz was formally reprimanded by the American Association for Public Opinion Research for his work polling on the GOP's 1994 "Contract with America" campaign document."

Luntz is "possibly the best example of what we could call the pollster pundit: someone who both purports to scientifically poll the opinions of the public, and then also interpret that data to support his own — in Luntz's case, conservative — point of view," Chinni reported in a May 20, 2000 Salon piece. "This is what allows Luntz to face a room full of journalists and, in all seriousness, proclaim George W. Bush's jittery, time-delayed appearance on David Letterman — the one which prompted boos from the audience — a total success.

"It's what allows Luntz to proclaim that Giuliani would've been no more hurt from his admission of marital difficulties than his admission that he has cancer. 'He beat crime, he beat drugs, he beat unemployment, he beat welfare, he beat trash in the streets, he beat the squeegee guy,' Luntz said. 'He's like a mayor machine.'

"What's more, it's what allows Luntz to do this without citing a single polling result, a single number, and yet still be taken quite seriously as a pollster."

Luntz is an Adjunct Fellow at the Hudson Institute, a profoundly partisan anti-

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environmental Washington, D.C.-based right wing think tank founded in 1961 to advocate for “free markets”, “individual responsibility”, and “the preservation of America’s national security.” According to GM Watch, an organization founded in 1998 “to report on the growing concerns about genetic engineering” (genetic modification), and “about the rapid release of genetically modified (GM) foods and crops into the environment and into our food chain” the Hudson Institute has been funded by, amongst others: AgrEvo, Dow AgroSciences, Monsanto, Novartis Crop Protection, Zeneca, DuPont, DowElanco, ConAgra, Cargill, Procter & Gamble.”

Between 1987 and 2002, the Hudson Institute received 205 grants totaling more than \$13.5 million, according to MediaTransparency.org. Included amongst the coterie of the Institute’s benefactors are The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, The Carthage Foundation, Sarah Scaife Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation and the Earhart Foundation.

About three weeks before the invasion of Iraq, the New York Times reported that Bush Administration officials, concerned that they were taking a beating over its environmental record, “softened their language to appeal to suburban voters, speaking out for protecting national parks and forests, advocating investment in environment technologies and shifting emphasis to the future rather than the present.”

This new awakening was the direct result of a memorandum prepared by the Luntz Research Companies. Luntz’s memo wasn’t aimed at re-ordering the administration’s environmental priorities; it was intended to change the public’s perception of that record. Luntz warned that “the environment is probably the single issue on which Republicans in general — and President Bush in particular — are most vulnerable.”

The memo suggested administration officials moderate their language: For example, instead of using the term “global warming,” the memo advised substituting “climate change” because “while global warming has catastrophic communications attached to it, climate change sounds a more controllable and less emotional challenge”; and it suggested substituting “conservationist” for “environmentalist” because the latter had the “connotation of extremism.”

The Luntz memo had been given to the New York Times by the Environmental Working Group, an organization described by the newspaper as “an advocacy group critical of Bush administration policies.”

Upon further investigation, the Times found that the terms “global warming” and “environmentalist” had been removed from the president’s environmental vocabulary and replaced with, you guessed it, “climate change” and “conservationist.” Now that’s a classic example of LuntzSpeak!

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“For spinmeister Frank Luntz, objective truth counts for naught,” Scott Silver, the executive director of the Oregon-based environmental group, Wild Wilderness, recently told me in an e-mail. “Beating an opponent is all that matters. Unfortunately, when it comes to issues involving our in environment, politically motivated choices based upon spin often have disastrous real world consequences. Protecting clean air, water and other natural resources should never be looked upon as a game and no amount of spin can change the reality resulting from bad choices. To Luntz, it is all game and for the gamesmanship advice he provides his clients, he is royally rewarded.”