

The Pollster in Exile

Frank Luntz Runs Into a Wall of GOP Denial

By Robert D. Novak

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Pollster Frank Luntz for the past decade has issued warnings to his fellow Republicans that they did not want to hear, but never has he been so out of touch with them as he is today. "The Republican message machine is a skeleton of its former self," Luntz told me. "These people have no idea how the American people react to them."

Luntz sees a disconnect between Republicans and voters that projects a grim future for the party. That contradicts what House and Senate Republicans are saying to each other in closed party conferences. While Luntz views 2006 election defeats as ominous portents, the party's congressional leaders see only transitory setbacks and now dwell on bashing Democrats.

Like those of Cassandra of ancient Troy, Luntz's prophecies of impending disaster have been both accurate and disregarded. Republicans have never been very comfortable hearing critics in closed conferences. He is not invited to such meetings today. "They do not want to hear the truth," Luntz told me. While truth-telling is celebrated by Republican reformers such as presidential front-runner John McCain, it is a decidedly minority view in the GOP.

Luntz's truth is summarized in a 10-page "addendum," inspired by the 2006 election fiasco, to his new book, "Words That Work" (about the political use of language). He delayed publication and lost Christmas sales in order to deliver a



wakeup call to his party.

"The Republican Party that lost those historic elections was a tired, cranky shell of the articulate, reformist, forward-thinking movement that was swept into office in 1994 on a wave of positive change," Luntz wrote. He went on to say that the Republicans of 2006 "were an ethical morass, more interested in protecting their jobs than protecting the people they served. The 1994 Republicans came to 'revolutionize' Washington. Washington won."

Except for a momentary defection to independent candidate Ross Perot in 1992, Luntz has been a Republican operative who has counseled Newt Gingrich, Rudy Giuliani and Trent Lott. But he often has worked for the media and made comments too harsh for the ears of reclusive Republicans. He has clashed frequently with Rep. John A. Boehner, the Republican leader of the House who stifled ethics legislation last year when he was still majority leader.

Boehner, elected chairman of the House Republican Conference when the party took control in 1995, tried then to keep Luntz from addressing closed-door meetings but was overruled by Speaker Gingrich. When Luntz warned publicly in October 2005 of rejection by voters in 2006, he was forced to deliver an abject apology before he could speak at a retreat of House Republicans held at the Library of Congress. After seven straight years on the program, Luntz was kept off last week's 2007 session at Cambridge, Md., by Boehner.

In keeping with his belief that words work, Luntz deplors the language Boehner used publicly shortly after his election as majority leader last February: "While I would hope that we could agree on one big issue that we would fight for, you know, it is really for the members to decide. What I have got to do is provide the process to see if we can get ourselves there."

In fact, there was no Republican theme for 2006, as individual members of Congress make clear in private sessions with Luntz. Yet, the Republican minority overwhelmingly reelected Boehner as leader against the reform candidate, Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana. Immediately after the 2006 election returns were accompanied by exit polls indicating voter concern with scandals, Pence said: "The greatest scandal in Washington, D.C., is runaway federal spending." Luntz agrees, and so do McCain and a few other members of Congress.

Indeed, Luntz is not alone in his gloomy prognosis. Republican pollster Bill McInturff believes his party "underestimates" the 2006 outcome and thinks the outlook for Republicans is as dangerous as it has been "at any time since Watergate." Sen. Jim DeMint, a reform Republican from South Carolina, says the newly minority Republicans are like the Israelites yearning for the fleshpots of Egypt. The question is whether the party will heed warnings or follow the route of its leaders, who mainly want to trash Nancy Pelosi.