



## Lee Russ: The Short Trip From Corporate Propaganda To ‘Fake News’

Lee Russ

March 30, 2017

It strikes me that in all the furor over “fake news” we are missing an important point: American susceptibility to fake news is just a natural progression from our inundation with corporate propaganda. The big business propaganda blitz can be traced at least as far back as 1971, when soon-to-be-Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell wrote his famous memo on how to defend business interests against what he and the Chamber of Commerce thought was an “attack” on the “American free enterprise system.”

Following Powell’s recipe, there was soon an explosion of extremely conservative, “pro-business” organizations, billed as “think tanks,” that began spewing out studies and theories that, as they say, “beggar belief.” Funded by incredibly rich people who were frequently zealous Christians, these groups did their best to mainstream ideas like:

- The best way to help the poor people? Ensure that rich people grew even richer.
- The best way to increase tax revenue? Reduce taxes.
- Want to reduce gun violence? Get everybody a gun.
- Why do we have so much poverty? It’s caused by programs created to combat poverty.
- What’s killing jobs? Efforts to protect workers’ health and safety, to keep them from getting killed on the job.
- What’s really bad for consumers? Protecting them from the reckless and predatory practices of the finance industry — an industry known for well over a century for being reckless and predatory.

These ideas defy common sense. If further enriching the rich helps the poor, does feeding the well-fed help the hungry?

But people have endlessly seen this nonsense offered up by respectable people in expensive clothes, bearing impressive titles, with impressive credentials. They have seen it over and over and over again.

They have heard that this “institute” and that “foundation” not only believes these ideas, but thinks that any contrary ideas are misguided, if not actually crazy. They have heard that over and over and over again.

A large chunk of America came to accept these absurdities as facts. And the defenders of business and wealth moved ever farther into fantasy. They pushed the idea that the government was showering the nonworking poor with far more money than middle class people earned by working full time. They beat the public over the head with the idea that taxing the estates of incredibly rich people was a “death tax.” In fact, they said (and said and said) that taxes themselves were nothing more than “armed robbery” by a devious government cabal. Not to mention that:

- Sending more and more work to cheap labor countries was actually good for American workers.
- Wealth and business success was a sign that God loves you; lack of it was a sign that God thinks very little of you, indeed.

And, of course, the one that is right now biting America’s collective back side: having a national health care plan — like the successful one we already have for older people, and like every other major nation had long ago — would destroy access to health care.

If you have been inundated with these ideas for decades — from birth for a lot of people — is it really a big step to think that massive fraud has been distorting our elections, or that Bill and Hillary Clinton have murdered countless people, or that the terror attacks of 9/11 and the insane school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, were carried out by the government? And if those are plausible, is it not plausible that there is a child sex ring being run out of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., by a candidate for the presidency?

And if you believe those ideas, isn’t it all but guaranteed that you will find it highly suspicious that they aren’t reported in the “lamestream media?” The press MUST be in on it, how else could they ignore these atrocities? And, of course, those outlets which do report these theories are, by definition, more reliable than those scoundrels in the lamestream media.

While the raving paranoia regularly disseminated by Alex Jones may seem at first glance to be incomparable to the forms of irrationality regularly disseminated by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and Grover Norquist and the Freedom Caucus and the Cato Institute and the Family Research Council and Heritage and on and on, how different are they, really? They all require that beliefs be divorced from basic common sense and provable facts. They all require a fundamental suspicion that “something” is going on that is unseen, that this unseen thing is bad for “us” and that there is some group of powerful people who don’t want ordinary folks to understand.

In a country where fundamentally irrational ideas have been pushed hard and pushed incessantly for over 40 years, how are people to suddenly recognize that a new class of irrational ideas is irrational? What is there about the new irrational ideas that would signal their irrationality to people who have fully accepted the old irrational ideas?

Long ago we might have hoped that the media and the leaders of our fundamental institutions would help us sort out the crazy from the plausible. But the media has been largely complicit in spreading the business propaganda, and is almost completely owned by the very corporations that benefit from it. Our elections are largely won by the candidates that wrap themselves in the irrational beliefs. Our community leaders are frequently elevated to leadership by playing on the fears the irrational beliefs have sown.

In this swarm of irrationality and self-serving use of the irrational for personal, political and social gain, is it any surprise that a growing portion of the public has simply lost the ability to recognize irrationality when it confronts them? That's the result I would expect. I would expect the problem to be most prevalent among those people who do not understand how the mechanisms of society and government work, who do not spend much time analyzing things, who do not often deal with abstract thought.

I also suspect — strongly suspect — that it is far, far easier to create this kind of paranoia and fantasy than it is to bring a society back from it once it has taken hold. If only I could convince myself that the destruction of reason and judgment is the best way to build a reasonable society capable of good judgment.