

Editor's opinion: 3 wise phrases as Election Day nears

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I like to read, and as I do, I collect quotes that inspire, provoke, enlighten or entertain. Occasionally, I post them to my Facebook page, but today I share a few with you because they offer meaning and insight as the Nov. 8 presidential election nears.

1. "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

-- *James Madison, Federalist 51, 1788*

Madison, the nation's fourth president, has been widely hailed as the Father of the Constitution. His simple message might serve as common ground amid the partisanship that often divides rather than unites. Madison's entire essay is one of the most important documents in U.S. history, offering justification for the checks and balances in the three branches of government and for the Constitution itself. It's well worth the read, but if you can't spare the time, consider this sentence in the context of a few others that follow.

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

2. "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts."

-- *Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003), U.S. ambassador, senator and adviser to four presidents*

One unfortunate hallmark of this presidential race is that so many fans of either front-runner -- Democrat Hillary Clinton or Republican Donald Trump -- are willing to accept even the most outlandish lie their chosen one spouts as truth while rejecting even the most easily verifiable fact from the other, or any critic, as a falsehood. That's nothing new, but the degree and pervasiveness of this blind faith are higher than I can remember.

Renowned historian and documentary filmmaker Ken Burns explored the danger of this in a June commencement address at Stanford in which he never mentioned Trump but obviously derided him as dangerously unqualified. History offers no shortage of strongmen, demagogues and

dictators who nurture and exploit "an environment where the truth doesn't seem to matter," Burns said, often to the ruin of those who supported him in the first place.

3. "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."

Winston Churchill, British prime minister during World War II

Ilya Somin, a law professor at George Mason University, has studied this issue for years. Before the 2008 presidential election, I cited [a study by Somin](#) that found average American voters know little about politics or public policy, and what they think they know is often distorted or incorrect.

Somin says much the same in a 2013 essay for the Cato Institute called "[Democracy and Political Ignorance](#)." He cites numerous examples, including one 2006 survey that found 42 percent of Americans can't name the three branches of government.

Voter apathy and ignorance, though irresponsible, also might be rational if you believe some of the essays and studies on the issue. A whole school of thought has emerged, described in academic circles as the "theory of rational ignorance." Somin suggests that to many, the perceived costs -- spending time and energy researching topics most people find boring or getting involved in campaigns or political activities themselves -- outweigh the perceived benefits.

"Some people react to data like the above by thinking that the voters must be stupid," he wrote. "But political ignorance is actually rational for most of the public, including most smart people. If your only reason to follow politics is to be a better voter, that turns out not be much of a reason at all. That is because there is very little chance that your vote will actually make a difference to the outcome of an election (about 1 in 60 million in a presidential race, for example). For most of us, it is rational to devote very little time to learning about politics, and instead focus on other activities that are more interesting or more likely to be useful."

Rational? Maybe.

Dangerous for democracy? Definitely.