

State of the punditocracy cries for improvement

BY: D. DOWD MUSKA - NOVEMBER 19, 2012

Ignorant, lazy, narcissistic, sheltered, and unaccountable.

America's teenagers? No, America's pundits.

Election 2012 offered superfluous evidence that the men and women who provide commentary and "analysis" to media outlets are solipsistically shallow. Every liberal predicted an Obama victory. Nearly every right-winger saw a Romney win — possibly by big numbers.

To anyone who followed opinion surveys — particularly the aggregations of Real Clear Politics and statistician Nate Silver's invaluable blog — it was obvious that Romney hadn't a prayer. The GOP nominee gained desperately needed ground after the Denver debate, but in the final weeks, swing states weren't trending the ex-governor's way. An Electoral College win for the incumbent was all but a foregone conclusion.

Those who refused to accept the polling figures, Silver admonished, "should abandon the pretense that [their] goal is to inform rather than entertain the public."

Ouch. And true. But not for Larry Kudlow, Glen Beck, Peggy Noonan, Ari Fleischer, Charles Krauthammer, and the rest of the Republican cheering squad. Ensnared in groupthink, conservative media personalities went with their faith — not informed estimation, but faith — that Americans wouldn't endorse another four years of Obama's "socialism."

The most distressing off-the-mark prognostication emanated from an "expert" who ideologues of all stripes regard as sober and insightful: Michael Barone. For decades, the FDR-admiring neoconservative's Almanac of American Politics has been the "nation's most authoritative source of information about members of Congress, their districts, the governors and the states."

Barone's prediction had Romney securing 315 Electoral College votes. The result: 332 votes for the president. Memo to Mike: If you want to remain a respected political guru,

spend less time in front of Fox News Channel cameras, and more time poring over cultural, demographic, and economic indicators.

Bubble-dwelling conservatives are a pathetic lot, but liberals' appraisals are marked by partiality, wishful thinking, and fabulism, too. And like their ideological frenemies, the left's whoppers can bungle policy as much as politics.

Exhibit A: Bill Maher. In the 1990s, today's moonbat darling was a bottom-feeding standup. Politically Incorrect — probably the most misnamed program in the history of American television — gave him a platform to bash conservatives and frequently disseminate inaccurate factoids. In 1997, ranting that media bias was a myth, Maher claimed, "Rupert Murdoch ... owns pretty much every newspaper in the country." At the time, the Australian-born mogul owned one U.S. newspaper, the New York Post.

Maher's reign of error marches on in the new century. In 2010, appearing as a guest on This Week, he claimed that Brazil "got off oil in the last 30 years." (The country is the planet's seventh-largest consumer of petroleum.) Last month, on his HBO show Real Time, Maher averred that "something like 42 percent of our total budget" is spent on defense. (Actual share: 18 percent.)

They'll continue to ink book deals and land lucrative speaking engagements, but only fools find Ann Coulter, Dick Morris, Karl Rove, Sean Hannity, and Donald Trump to be credible. Keeping it fair, Paul Krugman, Alec Baldwin, Chris Matthews, Janeane Garofalo, and James Carville also have zilch to offer thoughtful citizens.

Fortunately, myriad resources exist for seekers of political and public-policy truths. Many think tanks eschew the right-left duopoly's superficiality and blatant conflicts of interest. (The Cato Institute and Reason Foundation deserve mention.) The federal government — e.g., the Census Bureau, Energy Information Administration, and Bureau of Labor Statistics — puts data online in easily accessible formats. For the Supreme Court, Congress, and the White House, go with the venerable C-SPAN.

In 1985, Firing Line debated the Strategic Defense Initiative. Panelists included retired general Daniel O. Graham, nuclear engineer Albert Carnesale, and physicist George Keyworth. An exchange between William F. Buckley and Democratic Party hack Robert Shrum presaged today's fatuous punditry:

Shrum: I'm telling you we shouldn't waste money on Star Wars. I can define a reasonable level of expenditure —

Buckley: How? How?

Shrum: — and to spend beyond that —

Buckley: How? How?

Shrum: Because I think we can reasonably —

Buckley: Now, Mr. Shrum. Don't try to fool anybody. You don't know the slightest thing about —

Shrum: How did you define your reasonable level?

Buckley: — what expenses are required to research this program. [pointing to Graham] He does.

Shrum: Do you? Do you?

Buckley: No.

Shrum: I know you don't, but they do. [laughter, applause]

Buckley: But —

Shrum: Which leads, Mr. Buckley, to the question: What are you and I doing up here talking about this?