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[Home](#) / [news](#) / [opinion](#) /

Hinkle: My Facts Matter, but Your 'Facts' Are Irrelevant

By A. BARTON HINKLE

Facts are stupid things," Ronald Reagan once said. It was a slip of the tongue; he was quoting John Adams, who said facts are stubborn things. Although Reagan promptly corrected himself, he might have been right the first time. A growing body of research on the psychology of conviction shows that for true believers, facts are indeed stupid things.

Facts are stupid things," Ronald Reagan once said. It was a slip of the tongue; he was quoting John Adams, who said facts are stubborn things. Although Reagan promptly corrected himself, he might have been right the first time. A growing body of research on the psychology of conviction shows that for true believers, facts are indeed stupid things.

"It's absolutely threatening to admit you're wrong," Brendan Nyhan recently told The Boston Globe. Nyhan was explaining the results of a study he conducted in which political partisans were given news stories confirming their existing beliefs. The news stories contained factual corrections contradicting those beliefs. Rather than adjust their views to accommodate the new information, partisans exposed to the truth tended to dig their heels in even deeper -- a phenomenon known as backfire. "Rather than driving our beliefs," writes Joe Keohane for The Globe, "our beliefs can dictate the facts we choose to accept."

Ignoramuses tend to be highly resistant to correction. But another study, by Charles Taber and Milton Lodge of Stony Brook University, found that political sophisticates tend to be even less open to new information than comparative naifs. Their depth of knowledge about some things "makes it nearly impossible to correct the 10 percent on which they're totally wrong," Keohane explains.

Those findings build on others, such as the work of Drew Westen at Emory University. Using MRI scans, Westen showed that when political partisans reject new information that does not square with their beliefs, the reward centers of their brains light up, the same way the reward center lights up when you eat a piece of chocolate.

Another study, by the University of California's Jonas Kaplan, looked at blood oxygenation in the parts of the brain dealing with emotion. Normally, the brain tries to minimize displeasure. Kaplan found that partisans presented with images of politicians they dislike "jealously guard[ed] against anything that

might lower their antagonism." People form their opinions first, he says, "and then spend the rest of the time making themselves feel good about their decision."

All of which helps explain why conservatives enjoy tuning in to Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, while liberals get their kicks from Jon Stewart and Keith Olbermann. They're always pointing out how the other side is made up of dangerous fruitcakes -- thus proving we were right to pick our side all along.

It helps explain why partisans pass around e-mails "proving" President Obama is a closet Muslim, or that 9/11 was an inside job by the Bush administration, or that conservatism -- or liberalism -- is a mental disorder resulting from improper potty-training.

And it helps explain the maddening experience most of us have had -- the experience of explaining an obvious point to a seemingly intelligent person of a different political persuasion who simply . . . Will. Not. See. Reason. And how that experience can lead us to demonize perfectly decent human beings.

The first impulse is to assume that folks on the other side of the argument are merely ignorant -- because no one in full possession of the facts could possibly think as they do. So you explain things to them.

Armed with the facts, they are no longer ignorant. But still they do not agree. Therefore they must be stupid. But as the discussion wears on it becomes apparent that they are not stupid. They are actually pretty smart -- perhaps even almost as smart as oneself. (Almost!)

And still they do not agree. But if they have both enough facts and enough smarts to see reason, yet do not, then they are willfully defending a position they must know to be wrong and harmful.

What else do you call people like that, except evil?

Are they really evil? Of course not -- or at least not usually, at least not in contemporary American politics. For one thing, people often view the same event through different moral lenses. University of Virginia professor Jonathan Haidt has spent a lot of time examining the foundations of morality. He identifies five: harm, fairness, authority, in-group, and purity -- and says liberals and conservatives place different emphasis on different dimensions.

The Cato Institute's Will Wilkinson compares the five dimensions to a music equalizer, and glosses it this way: "If you're a sharia devotee ready to stone adulterers and slaughter infidels, you have purity and ingroup pushed up to eleven. PETA members, who vibrate to the pain of other species, have turned ingroup way down and harm way up."

To make matters worse, even people who agree on the primacy of, say, fairness might define the term very differently. What's more, as Haidt explained recently, "Morality, like politics, is really a team sport. [H]uman morality was shaped in part by the competition of tribe versus tribe." While you are busy explaining why your side is right, I am not really listening. I am thinking up reasons to explain just how wrong you are.

So perhaps we should not be surprised that politics can be so bitter. Perhaps we should be surprised that it can be as civil as it often is. Facts may or may not be stupid things -- but next to people, they are absolute geniuses.

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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