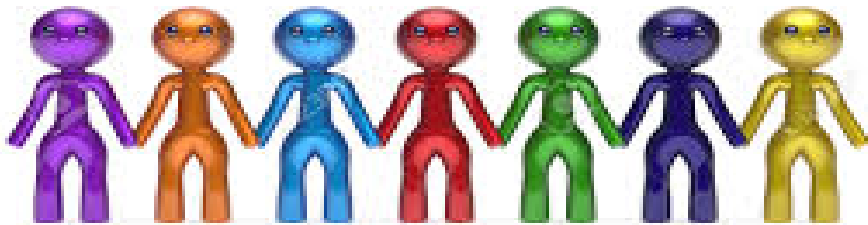


Sticking Up for the Facts

Written by Jack Sparacino
Wednesday, 11 January 2017 09:32



"I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts." — Abraham Lincoln

"Given a choice between their worldview and the facts, it's always interesting how many people toss the facts." — Rebecca Solnit

Recently, I wrote a piece here called "Saddle Up." It reflected an exchange between me and an old high school friend who practices law in Minnesota. We began with, "So, Kent old timer, where are we after this deplorable election?" Readers' reactions were gratifying. We decided to continue our interchange and include more folks in a roundtable. One member is from Seattle, Ira. The other half dozen are lowcountry locals.

Combined we have 60-plus years in aerospace, 70-plus in law, and well over 100 in the military, education, construction, and consulting. We have kids and grandkids. We are well educated, read broadly, and care deeply about preserving a terrific America. All of us found the 2016 election cycle abysmal, a deeply frustrating exercise in deceit, self-aggrandizing, and vitriol. A sinking sickening swamp.

Roundtable names below—except mine of course and our two out of towners, Kent and Ira—are pseudonyms. My challenge was to integrate numerous conversations, meetings, and correspondence with readily fact-checked articles and reference material. I have done my best to accurately reflect our sentiments and stick to actual facts and quotes. Any surviving misrepresentations are my responsibility.

Ready, set, off we go on Part 1!

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Jack: Solnit's right about people bailing on the facts. She nailed one of my biggest frustrations about this past election and greatest concerns (apart from my darned arthritis) as we begin a new year. I was also struck by political savant Nate Silver's reference to Trump's gross errors of fact in a recent fivethirtyeight.com award article. The reality of unemployment in America is that per the Labor Department it's been roughly cut in half in the past six years.

Trump, however, won an award from Silver's team for "Willful Misinterpretation of Government Statistics" for repeatedly saying the unemployment rate could be as high as 42%. This vs. about 25% during the horrible soup line days of the Great Depression. For Trump to be right, you need to smoke a lot of weed: count students as unemployed, along with retirees, folks staying home to raise kids, and people who don't want to work or don't need to. Like me. His gross misstatements of fact are legendary. Yes, Mr. Trump, Russia hacked our election process maliciously. No, climate change is not a "Chinese hoax." No, millions of illegal votes did not go to Hillary Clinton. She won the popular vote by a slim but honest 2.1%-- 2.9 million votes. On and on goes this list. What is to be done about public figures who virtually lie for a living? We could all join the Al Franken fan club, right Kent? The guy who wrote "Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them"?

Kent: Yeah, right, Franken. One of our senators here in Minnesota. I wish that lying was just commonplace and normative. It appears that many people prefer lying to reality and that lying really works as a political strategy. At least the election seems to bear that out. People want so badly to hear what they believe that apparently they would prefer lies to the truth. And they'll often vote for the guy who is by far the biggest liar.

Tom: I was really interested to learn that there are people out there using algorithms--formulas-- to pick the false stories that will generate the most interest. And, of course, that's designed to enable the so called post-truth purveyors to increase their readership and make more dough.

Kent: It seems awfully callous. Spreading lies to generate interest and revenue. But on a more visceral level I've got to agree with the commentators who blame us media consumers for shaping the facts to fit our own individual truths. And it's not surprising that we search for "facts" to justify that version of reality. That said, the concept that lies sell and the biggest liar gets the most attention is a real concern.

Jack: Now that it's clear that the person with the biggest "pants on fire" or Pinocchio quotient gets the most media attention, it would almost seem irrational (I'm just playing cynic with this) for future political candidates to just tell the truth to get into office. Trump spent a lot less than Clinton on his media campaign because his lies—which were formally documented for heaven sake-- got more media attention. Why bother telling the truth when lies bring you more free press? And she lied too! This trend bothers me no end. It's just got to change.

Wayne: A lot of what we're seeing is still financial meltdown hangover.

Jack: Whoa, you think so too, eh?

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Tom: Can I jump in on this? Yikes, you guys are onto something. I saw some fascinating data that showed how Trump voters inhabit their own world of falsehood and gobbledygook.

Example: nearly 40% of Trump voters said they thought the stock market was down under Obama whereas the market roughly doubled in his time. Second example: two thirds of Trump voters think the unemployment rate is up under Obama. As you just mentioned, unemployment is way down in recent years.

Kent: Exactly. What to do about that kind of malarkey?

Joe: It's tough, man. Keep on plugging, tell the truth and stick to the actual facts no matter what. Hey, I've got a strong union background, worked with the building trades for years. I hate to see union members vote against their own self-interests, which many of them just did in this election. That Carrier deal Trump pushed to keep jobs in Indiana . . . remember the union boss there, Chuck . . . Chuck Jones? He called Trump out on his numbers. Said he was lying his you know what off when he claimed he'd saved 1,100 jobs at Carrier. The reality was he saved 800 factory jobs. The other 300 jobs? They were white collar, engineering and admin jobs that Carrier never planned to push into Mexi co.

Jack: I've gotta say, by the way, United Technologies is an excellent company, I spent most of my career there with Sikorsky. Great co-workers, certainly including Carrier, excellent pay and benefits. But can this administration go one company at a time across the U.S. and bribe them into keeping jobs here with taxpayer money?

Ira: It seems that anything goes these days and it's not just the ignorant who voted for Trump; lots of very smart people did who who just dismiss the lies as "he really didn't mean that or do that." Well, he did say that and he did do that. But people don't seem to care. Unfortunately, the internet has allowed everyone to become an expert and say and post anything they want. It doesn't have to be true but if it gets passed around enough it becomes the truth. The thing about Trump that's different is that his lies are so blatant, completely unsupported by any data.

Jack: We surely live in a changing world. What hasn't changed is that people tend to believe what they want to believe. Trump voters are especially troubling. Many of them—and I respect this-- are just looking for decent jobs, but they're in fields that are bound to keep shrinking due to efficiency improvements like automation.

Hey one more thought for now... I was reading Ruth Marcus in the Washington Post. Quote: "Today we have the conjunction of a president unconstrained by facts with a media environment both siloed into partisan echo chambers and polluted by fake news. This development poses an urgent challenge — for journalism and for democracy."

I think nearly all Americans kind of dropped the ball on this stuff recently. We all need to do a better job of sticking to the facts. Even when they hurt.

Kent: Amen, pal. Speaking of which, I'm getting a headache. Can we take a break and find some wine or something?

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Alex: Yeah, no whining, just maybe more wining.

Jack: Or in my case maybe just my new supercharged heating pad and meds. Let's take five y'all!