

Knowledge, Truth and Human Action: America Hits the Wall

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“Believe nothing just because a so-called wise person said it. Believe nothing just because a belief is generally held. Believe nothing just because it is said in ancient books. Believe nothing just because it is said to be of divine origin. Believe nothing just because someone else believes it. Believe only what you yourself test and judge to be true.” [paraphrased Buddhist saying]

Americans have a problem with the truth. They seem to be unable to accept it, which is difficult to understand at a time in history when knowledge plays a larger and larger role in determining human action. Recognition of this problem is widespread. Beliefs and lies somehow always overwhelm truth, even when they are so contradictory that any effective action becomes impossible. A kind of national, psychological paralysis occurs. Nothing can be done because one belief contradicts another, and for some unknown reason, the facts don't matter. Even during those times when an overwhelming belief does compel action, Americans rush headlong into it neglecting the adage that headlong often means wrong.

The number of programs enacted by the Congress that don't work is huge. The war on drugs which began in 1969 has shown no measurable results; yet it continues unabated and has resulted in destabilizing other nations, especially Mexico. Various immigration reforms have proven so ineffective that the people are turning to their own solutions. Tough on crime programs have been enacted numerous times without any measurable reduction in criminal behavior. Educational reforms have proven to be illusionary. Inconclusive wars have been and continue to be fought. No one, it appears, ever wants to measure anything by its results. The nation continues to do the same things over and over again expecting different results, an activity Einstein described as insanity.

Paul Craig Roberts [writes](#), “Today Americans are ruled by propaganda. Americans have little regard for truth, little access to it, and little ability to recognize it. Truth is an unwelcome entity. It is disturbing. It is off limits. Those who speak it run the risk of being branded ‘anti-American,’ ‘anti-semite’ or ‘conspiracy theorist.’ Truth is an inconvenience for government and for the interest groups whose campaign contributions control government. Truth is an inconvenience for prosecutors who want convictions, not the discovery of innocence or guilt. Truth is inconvenient for ideologues.” Unfortunately he casts the blame on the characters of people: “economists sell their souls for filthy lucre. . . . medical doctors who, for money, have published in peer-reviewed journals concocted ‘studies’ that hype this or that new medicine produced by pharmaceutical companies that paid for the ‘studies. . . .’ Wherever one looks, truth has fallen to money.”

Honoré de Balzac said, “behind every great fortune lies a great crime.” So too, behind every

dumb practice lies a dumb idea.

This debasement of truth stems from two misguided beliefs that many Americans hold. They affect much of American society and define the American psyche. One belief is that the truth emerges from a debate between adversaries. The other is the belief that everyone has a right to his/her own opinion.

Many American activities are based on these beliefs. In law, the system is called adversarial. The prosecutor and defense attorneys are adversaries. Each side presents its evidence and the truth is somehow supposed to emerge. In journalism it is called balance. Two adversaries are asked to give their sides of an issue, and the truth is somehow supposed to emerge. In politics, it is called the two party system, where the majority party and the minority party, often called the opposition, are adversaries who present their sides of the issue. Again, somehow it is believed the truth will emerge and effective legislation will then be enacted. But it doesn't work, never has, never will.

Suppose two people who lived in the same community at a specific time in the past are talking about the weather on February 14th of some year. One says, "We had three inches of snow that day." The other says, "No, we had heavy rain and flash flood warnings." Who is right? Unless someone checks the weather bureau's records, the argument can't be resolved. And what if the weather bureau's records show that the weather on that day was clear with no precipitation? Neither adversary is right; the truth never emerges.

So do these adversaries have the right to their own opinions? The belief that everyone has a right to his/her own opinion is ludicrous. If your bank sends you a notice saying that you've overdrawn your account, can you counter with, "Not in my opinion"? If this maxim had any validity, truth and falsehood would have equal value. No dispute could ever be settled because the facts don't matter. Yet many in America seem to hold this view.

The point is that no debate between adversaries will reveal the truth if neither is willing to check the facts, or as is often the case in politics, just lying. But why would adversaries do that? In a legal action, because both sides want to win and will reveal only what is favorable to their sides. "[As everybody knows](#), at least one of the lawyers in every case in which the facts are in dispute is out to hide or distort the truth or part of the truth, not to help the court discover it. . . . The notion that in a clash between two trained principle-wielders, one of whom is wearing the colors of inaccuracy and falsehood, the truth will always or usually prevail is in essence nothing but a hang-over from the medieval custom of trial by battle and is in essence equally absurd."

Peter Murphy in his Practical Guide to Evidence cites this story (likely apocryphal): A frustrated judge in an English adversarial court, after witnesses had produced conflicting accounts, finally asked a barrister, "Am I never to hear the truth?" "No, my lord, replied counsel, merely the evidence."

In politics, each side has a favored constituency to protect. In journalism, the journalist doesn't want to be accused of bias. In 2006, Dan Froomkin, former columnist at the Washington Post, wrote, "There's the fear of being labeled partisan. . . ." But that fear would be dispelled if journalists checked the facts.

Listening to politicians or pundits debate issues should prompt listeners to ask, "Am I never to hear the truth?" The answer would always be the same, "No, just our opinions." Yet basing

public policy on the opinions of journalists, pundits, politicians, and even jurists is a hazardous endeavor. Since everyone has a right to his/her own opinion, why should anyone care about the opinions of others? None of us should, but somehow the establishment believes we do.

Consider so called experts, for example. Can two “experts,” each with different points of view really be experts? “Expert” economists contradict each other all the time. One “thinks” this and another “thinks” that, but neither “knows” anything. Writing teachers routinely tell students, “Don’t tell me what you think. Tell me what you know.” Apparently our economists never studied composition. Harry Truman once said, “If you took all the economists in the world and laid them end to end, they’d still point in different directions!” Right up until the economic crash of 2007, experts were telling us that “the economic fundamentals were sound.” After the crash occurred, the logical thing to do would have been to conclude that the fundamental economic indicators were misleading at best and shouldn’t be relied upon. Yet three years hence, economists are still basing their conclusions (estimates, opinions) on the same fundamental economic indicators. But suppose a chef had an oven that consistently undercooked his baking. Would s/he continue to rely on the thermostat’s readings or would s/he replace it? How can such people be considered experts? Nevertheless they are.

Republican politicians, political consultants, and political commentators are fond of saying that Social Security was never meant to serve as a retirement program but only as a supplement. Ed Rollins made this claim on CNN even though the claim can’t possibly be true, not even in one’s wildest imagination, and Ed Rollins and others should know it. Social Security was signed into law in 1935, but in the 1930s, fewer than 25 percent of workers were covered by private pension plans. So exactly what was Social Security supposed to supplement? Only the pension plans of this 25 percent of workers? What about the 75 percent of workers not covered by private plans? Social Security certainly applied to them too, but they had no private plans to supplement. Even by 1960, only about 30 percent of the labor force had private pension plans, which means that 70 percent had no plans to supplement, and 1960 was a good year. Surely, in the 1930s Social Security was not meant to supplement personal savings, since there were hardly any, and IRAs were not authorized until 1974. Yet Ed Rollins, politicians, and political consultants are still considered “experts.” No interviewing journalist ever questions their veracity even when all s/he would have to do is look up some facts.

Military officers, especially generals, are often cited as experts. But for every general who wins a battle there is another on the other side who loses. Is the losing general an expert too? And what general, facing a upcoming battle would have the integrity to say he can’t win it?

By calling people with opinions experts and relying on adversarial debate between them, not only is the language debased, so is thought. Conclusions drawn from false premises are always false. Just as something cannot be created from nothing, truth cannot be revealed by falsehood. Belief never yields knowledge, but questioning belief often does.

Public policy based on mere beliefs or opinions sooner or later crashes headlong into the wall of reality causing disastrous consequences, for in the end, the truth cannot be denied. “Trust, but verify,” a phrase often used by Ronald Reagan when discussing relations with the Soviet Union is a translation of the Russian proverb Доверяй, но проверяй. Perhaps better maxims would be, “Reject when suspect” and “Belief brings grief.” Yet the

fundamental question that goes unanswered is why so many people continue to trust all those “experts” who have shown themselves to be inveterate liars? Has the populace really become that dumb? If the truth is emancipating, the false is enslaving. Indeed Americans are serfs ruled by an oligarchy devoted to the promotion of dumb ideas.

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