

Remember the Concern About 'Low-Information Voters'? It's So Much Worse.

Yes, a growing percentage of Americans could be described as "low-information voters," thanks in part to the loss of so many newspapers around our country. This was put forth as an explanation for the rise of Trumpism, and that explanation still rings true.

But that was just the beginning. Factor in the creation of "news" networks which filter out news and facts that don't support conservative beliefs, and you have a class of voters who *believe* themselves to be well informed. Then add in a demagogue like Donald Trump, eager to play on the fears which those voters are being fed, and you have a powerful rightward swing in the nation's politics.

So, here we are in 2021. Enough voters recognized the lies and distortions of Donald Trump, handing him a resounding defeat, which shouldn't be surprising given that never once in his presidency did Donald Trump attain a 50% approval rating. President Biden has, on the other hand, never had less than a 50% approval rating since replacing Donald Trump on Jan. 20th.

Voters recognized Trump's lies and distortions because *they still read newspapers and listen to the network newscasts*. They watch 60 Minutes and CNN, which have been diligent in fact-checking the former president and his right-wing enablers.

Like Rita and me, they also watch The Daily Show and the monologues of the late night talk shows which *uniformly* ridiculed the former president and his administration night after night, always based on a factual reporting of the day's events.

Here's the bottom line of our on-going crisis in America: *The less informed that voters are, the more susceptible they are to manipulation.*

Must reading in this regard is a book I reviewed last year titled *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, by Jason Stanley, author of *How Propaganda*

Works. Fascism begins, he writes, by *creating a mythic past*. Trump did that with his "Make America Great Again" slogan.

Talking Turkey



By Jim Smith

Those of us who don't buy into that mythic past have come to learn and accept, for example, the history of racism in America, while Republicans like Mitch McConnell claim that systemic racism does not exist.

Attacks on journalists and college professors is central to the cultivation of fascism. But those people are the *opposites* of low-information voters. They are voracious consumers of news and factual information. Trump supporters, by contrast, are voracious consumers of memes and opinion shows.

Another book which Rita and I are both reading is *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, by Isabel Wilkerson. In it, the author draws a compelling comparison of how caste (what we're used to calling racism) operated in both the rise of Nazism and the rise of what we recognize as Trumpism. Her earlier book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, is also compelling.

It was Winston Churchill (paraphrasing George Santayana) who wrote "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The low-information voter — rapidly becoming the *disinformed* voter — is fertile ground for cultivating fascism, because without knowing, for example, the history of racism in America, they are unable to experience compassion for those afflicted by it, whether African American or Native American.

Fear is such a powerful tool, and we see Americans manipulated daily by playing to their fears, whether it is fear of immigrants raping our women (two fears for the price of one!), of socialism destroying free enterprise, of taxation taking your money, of "antifa" (which, ironically is short for anti-fascism), or of an American election being "stolen."

Here's another irony: the people yielding to these fears hold most of the 5-10 million AR-15s in this country, making us liberals afraid to speak up when we should. Death threats by Trump supporters against election officials have caused many of them to quit.

If the majority of voters continue to read and listen, *and aren't kept from the polls*, we may just be able to halt the downward spiral into fascism.

[The following paragraphs didn't make it into the published advertisement.]

My first realization that some Republicans were comfortable with willfully lying was in the early days of the Affordable Care Act. That was before social media took off, and *intentional misinformation* — what we now know as *disinformation* — was spread via emails which were forwarded again and again, accomplishing the same effect as the viral retweets of today.

The lie back then was related to real estate. It said that Obamacare included a 3.8% Medicare tax on every real estate transaction. If it passed, you'd pay \$7,600 Obamacare tax on the sale of your \$200,000 home, over \$15,000 tax on the sale of your \$400,000 home. It was a total misinterpretation of the Affordable Care Act *intended* to inflame opposition to it.

When one of my broker associates got an email with that claim, she asked me about it and I explained that the 3.8% tax did not apply at all to the sale of one's primary residence and only applied to high-income taxpayers selling investment properties. I thought it was the perfect opportunity to display real estate expertise, so I "Replied All" to that email since she had forwarded it to me. I also wrote about it more than once in my page 3 "Real Estate Today" column.

Naively, I thought that if I showed the information was wrong, that the lie would be nipped in the bud. What I learned to my dismay was that the big lie about Obamacare served a political purpose, so *it didn't matter to the senders if it was untrue*. I was shocked that anyone would intention-

ally spread a lie for political purposes. What we see today goes so much further.

Mitch McConnell says he will fight all Biden initiatives in order to frustrate his *"radical socialist agenda."* What is socialist about Biden's infrastructure proposals? What is radical or socialist about addressing climate change? What is radical or socialist about addressing childhood poverty and hunger with a \$300-per-month benefit per child?

It may be true that the people being manipulated by Trump and his cronies *are* "low-information voters," but those cronies are themselves *not* uninformed. They *do* read the Washington Post and watch 60 Minutes and CNN, not just Fox News, and *they know the truth*. But they *willfully distort the truth for political reasons*, manipulating the uninformed and misinformed and disinformed Republican base. It is both shameful and anti-American.

It is popular to dismiss mainstream media and the university crowd as liberals. But we journalists and those professors are the *opposite of low information voters*. We are voracious consumers of straight news, not talk shows. We listen to NPR in our cars, we watch the 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock news, and the Daily Show and the late show monologues. *We are mostly liberals because we are mostly well-informed about the facts of the world around us*. We don't respond easily to politicians who would manipulate us by playing to our fears, *because we know better*.

As Winston Churchill famously said, *"A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on."* As Maria Konnikova warned us in a January 2017 article on politico.com about Donald Trump's coming term, *"Sheer repetition of the same lie can eventually mark it as true in our heads*. It's an effect known as illusory truth, first discovered in the '70s and most recently demonstrated with the rise of fake news." Trump is employing this proven technique with his Big Lie about the 2020 election — and 30% of Americans are willing dupes.