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Why Are Republicans Better Storytellers?



By Marty Kaplan

Democrats make lousy narrators.

If you're a movement conservative — the only kind of Republican in the media, which means the only kind of Republican who exists — then everything that happens can be explained by the same simple story:

Once upon a time, there was a free market. Businesses were left alone to create jobs and wealth; traditional values endured; America ruled the world. But when Democrats had their chance, they killed business with big government; they destroyed the American way of life with immorality and coddling; they blamed America and romanticized our enemies.

No truths are too inconvenient to fit that frame. The Reagan and George W. Bush deficits had nothing to do with big government, nor does Medicare; hanky-panky from Enron to AIG proves nothing, nor does 9/11 on Bush's watch, nor the lack of WMDs in Iraq; discrimination went away by itself; and there was no cause for the trade union movement to exist; the Pentagon needs every weapon system it asks for, no matter how obsolete or bloated; we love our veterans, no matter how much they're shafted by the system when they come home from war.

But Democrats are tongue-tied. Whatever the issue — health care, energy, the economy, trade — it's complicated. Everything is always about everything else. Policies have seven sub-points. Issues have six sides. Progress is about compromise. Democracy is messy. Let me explain to you one more time why the banks are too big to fail.

Democrats may have the facts on their side, and things may well be too complex to explain with slogans, but that doesn't mean that locating events on a simple story line is beneath the dignity of educated people. Columnists like Frank Rich and Paul Krugman and Tom Friedman manage to fit the news of the world into a comprehensible, coherent, ongoing accounts of how we got to where we are. Why can't Democratic politicians?

You can't just blame the right-wing echo chamber. Yes, they're amplifiers of the Republican mythology; "journalism" is the wrong word to describe what Fox does with facts, and "entertainment" is too benign a term for Rush's

demagoguery. But even if Glenn Beck and company didn't exist, the Democrats' account of how the world works would still be frustratingly unsatisfying.

Money explains a lot of this. The campaign finance system in this country is a cesspool, and it's led Democrats to become supplicants to predators on Wall Street and K Street. It's hard to tell the truth about paymasters you depend on for your media budget.

But I think there's a deeper reason that Democrats aren't good storytellers. It's their fundamental suspicion of story. The smarter you think you are, the more you're supposed to believe that stories are merely "narratives." They're necessary fabrications, secular parables. Fictions are the opiate of the masses. Irony, knowingness, the postmodern wink: that's honesty. Reagan's advantage as a storyteller was his sincerity; there was no gap between what he said and how he saw the world. But Democrats can't tell stories without giving the impression that they realize they're just scripts.

Our species is hardwired to pay attention to stories. We may no longer live in caves, but if Democrats want to hold their audience, maybe they need to remember that the professor at the blackboard is no match for the storyteller who holds us rapt around the fire.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director