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How Dumb Do They Think (Know) We Are



By Marty Kaplan

I know some scary smart people who never graduated from high school, and I know some real doofuses with graduate degrees, so I understand that the number of years of formal education that someone has racked up is no guarantee of intelligence. But every once in a while, I see some poll numbers that pretty convincingly correlate believing idiotic things with having less education, and not believing idiotic things with having more education.

A recent example is a Harris poll that asked whether each of 15 statements about Barack Obama is true or false. In every single case, the less schooling people had, the more likely they were to believe that false things are true.

For example, 18 percent of Americans with high school or less education think that the president may be the Anti-Christ. That's right, nearly one out of five Americans whose education went no farther than secondary school — who are eligible to vote, same as you and me — believe Obama is the bad guy in *The Omen*.^{*} But only 13 percent of people with some college believe that; and 9 percent of college graduates; and down to 4 percent of people who've had some post-graduate education.

It's the same descending scale with "He is doing many of the things that Hitler did." Twenty-four percent of high-school-or-less say yes; 20 percent of some-college; 18 percent of college grads; but only 10 percent of post-grads. "He was not born in the United States and so is not eligible to be president": 32, then 22, then 21, then 7. "He is a Muslim": 43, 30, 24, 9. "He wants to turn over the sovereignty of the United States to a one world government": 37, 28, 21, 12. You get the idea.

I can think of three explanations for this pattern.

One is that it's not a pattern. Correlation isn't causation. It's just a fluke that educated people believe fewer *bubbe meises*.

Or, taking a different perspective, the explanation of those numbers is that liberals run America's schools and colleges, and the longer you stay there, the more chance they have to brainwash you.

A third possibility is that the more education you have, the more you understand that there is a difference between an opinion and a fact, and that there actually is a way to test assertions of fact against reality. No matter how hard you clap to save Tinkerbell, really-really believing in fairies doesn't make them real.

Again, I recognize that some people with advanced degrees think it is a fact that “He wants to use an economic collapse or terrorist attack as an excuse to take dictatorial powers,” and that some other people — kids in middle school, say — have already had enough education to know that “He wants the terrorists to win” is not a fact, it’s an opinion, and that as opinions go, it’s nuts.

I don’t think anything I’m saying here depends on partisanship. “He does what Wall Street and the bankers tell him to do” may well ring false to some Republicans, like bankers. And some Democrats, despite the fate of single-payer health care and the public option, may cling to “He is a socialist” the way that some of Joe Lieberman’s fans cling to “He is a Democrat.”

But when you look at the political affiliation of people who believe things like “He is a racist” and “He is anti-American,” the correlation with being a Republican is even stronger than the correlation with fewer years of formal education. About a quarter of Republicans say that Obama is the Anti-Christ; more than a third agree that “He is doing many of the things that Hitler did”; 45 percent of Republicans say he wasn’t born in the U.S.; a majority of them say yes, he wants to turn over our sovereignty to a one-world government; and 57 percent say he’s a Muslim.

During the final hours of the Senate’s vote on the reconciliation bill, Republicans offered dozens of amendments, most of them intended as traps for mid-term election ads. Knowing that Democrats were going to vote against every amendment — for procedural reasons, no matter what the amendment said — the Republicans had a jolly time coming up with moms, apple pies and American flags for the Democrats to oppose. The most notorious was the I-dare-you-to-vote-against-this from Senator Tom Coburn (R-Ok.) making rapists and sex offenders ineligible for erectile dysfunction drugs.

I have no doubt that, come the fall, Senate Democrats up for re-election will be accused of giving child molesters access to government-paid Viagra. The charge will no doubt be documented with Congressional Record excerpts and video clips. See? It’s true. It’s a fact. Can’t deny it. Red-handed. Voted against it.

I would like to think that Americans are too smart to fall for this, and that the news media will expose the charge as the cynical ploy it is. But it’s naïve of me to believe that, faced with fabrications of Orwellian proportions, the media will be capable of more than on-the-one-hand, on-the-other, and I’m afraid that the answer to “How dumb do they think we are?” turns out to be not much of an insult.

*UPDATE: Fixed to correct an error.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.

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