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The Best of All Possible Americas



By Marty Kaplan

Whenever I'm comforted by the genius of our Founders, the resilience of our institutions and the wisdom of the American people, I know my meds need adjusting.

James Madison famously explained in Federalist 51 that because men by nature are not angels, the Constitution distributes power among the branches and levels of government via the ingenious checks and balances that protect individuals from the tyranny of despots and the injustice of majorities.

Unfortunately, this gives equal power to states containing a few hundred thousand people and states containing tens of million of people. A Wyoming voter has about 70 times the Senate clout as a California voter. The 21 smallest states put together have fewer people than California, but their 42 senators, representing something like 12 percent of the nation's population, can stop anything in its tracks.

The Constitution doesn't spell out the Senate's rules, but it does give the Senate the power to set its own rules, which include the 60 votes needed to shut off a filibuster, which in turn gives Republicans veto power over energy, climate change, immigration and pretty much anything else that could be counted a success for the president.

The Constitution is powerless to prevent the Roberts Supreme Court from declaring that corporations are people whose First Amendment rights entitle them to pour as much money as they want into elections, and it's powerless to prevent Mitch McConnell's minority from blocking a law to make that corporate campaign spending transparent.

And if you want to amend the Constitution — say, to eliminate an Electoral College that lets minorities pick presidents — you run up against the same Great Compromise that hyper-empowers states with more sheep or cows than people.

Since a structural flaw in our system of governance prevents the system from fixing itself, you might think an alternative would be to have smarter voters, who in principle would elect better legislators. This strategy puts a premium on better information, delivered to rational people through quality education and a free press. If you don't

burst into laughter or tears about how that's been working out for America, then I want a month's supply of whatever you're on.

Our free press has been so intimidated by right-wing pressure groups and their media enablers that the job of fact-finding has been replaced by the grotesque practice of “balancing” charges with countercharges. Are Sarah Palin's “death panels” fact or fiction? Our press says, here are both sides — you're on your own, kid. Afraid of bad names like “lamestream” and “liberal,” our news media, rather than treating Andrew Breitbart like Lee Atwater — a partisan propagandist and smear-merchant — instead amplified his lies about Shirley Sherrod and turned what should have been a story about how easily knaves can play the press for fools into a story about the Obama administration's fear of Glenn Beck.

I wish a focus on facts could fix this. But there's something scary about how humans are hardwired, and it was driven home by studies led by University of Michigan political scientist Brendan Nyhan. He investigated how people behave when they're provided with facts that disprove false things they think are true. The depressing title of his report: “When Corrections Fail: The persistence of political misperceptions.” The bleak subtitle of Joe Keohane's *Boston Globe* piece about Nyhan's work: “Researchers discover a surprising threat to democracy: our brains.”

People who believed WMDs were found in Iraq believed that fiction even more strongly when they were shown a news story correcting that mistake. The same was true of people who believed that the Bush tax cuts increased government revenue; a correction — revenues actually fell — also backfired, further entrenching people in their error. This finding transcends ideology: People who believed that Bush banned all stem cell research continued to believe that even when they were shown that only certain federal funding of stem cell work was stopped.

No one has yet produced a neurological map showing where or why this happens, but as Keohane put it, our brains are designed to create shortcuts like inference and intuition in order to avoid the cognitive discomfort required to process and assimilate dissonant information. It hurts our heads to change our minds.

That kind of puts a ceiling on what we can expect from education. I'd like to think that the reason some people think Obama was not born American, or that 9/11 was a secret plot by the U.S. government, is simply cultural. It's not that they don't have the facts, goes this view; it's that they lack a good education, which cultivates critical thinking. Reason, the scientific method, media literacy: it's widely believed that these tools can overcome not only propaganda and superstition, but also the inherent limitations of how we're wired. We may possess lizard brains, but we also possess several centuries' worth of methods for transcending our species' propensity for paranoia, intransigence and irrationality. Education trumps ignorance. Human history can compensate for human nature.

Plato, of course, said it couldn't work. Even the brightest among us are run by the same limbic system that ran us when we roamed the savannahs. Even the best-educated citizens sometimes can't help being bedazzled by illusion, seduced by spectacle and misled by morons. Our public education system may be failing us, but even in the most splendid of educational circumstances, schooling can't prevent smart people from occasionally being totally wrong about the facts.

That, plus the timidity of modern journalism, together with the inequities baked into our democratic institutions, are all worth remembering the next time someone says that Divine Providence is guiding America's destiny. If that's true, it's a pretty perverse God at the helm.

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.