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Cock-and-Bull Candidates



By Marty Kaplan



SCOTT OLSON VIA GETTY IMAGES

Did you make it through Sunday's lunar eclipse okay?

When the moon turned blood red, I bet you didn't shake spears at it, or beat your dogs to make them bark, as the Incas did to scare away the jaguar that had swallowed the moon. I also bet you didn't shoot off cannons, or bang your pots and drums, as the Chinese did, to frighten the dragon that had swallowed the moon. I'm pretty sure you didn't offer your utensils, rice and weapons to the demon Dhanko, as India's Munda tribesmen do, to bail the moon out of debtor's prison, where Dhanko had thrown it for failing to repay his loan. And it's dollars to donuts you didn't believe that the eclipse announced the end of the world, or buy Pastor John Hagee's best-selling *Four Blood Moons*, let alone the *Four Blood Moons Companion Study Guide and Journal* (Includes Full-Color Foldout Timeline, \$11.69 on Amazon).

The reason you didn't swallow any of those stories is that you know the truth about a lunar eclipse: It happens because the earth comes between the sun and the moon. If truth can protect us from jaguars, dragons, demons and preachers, why can't it protect us from presidential candidates whose cock-and-bull stories rank right up there with the Incas' and the Mundas'?

Consider Carly Fiorina. She effortlessly reels off the benchmarks of her success as chief executive of Hewlett-Packard, including doubling revenues. But HP's revenues rose largely because of her disastrous acquisition of Compaq. What counts isn't revenues, but net earnings, which dropped from \$3.1 billion in 1999 to \$2.4 billion in 2005. What also counts is the stock price, which lost half of its value over the same period, while the stock price of its competitors, despite the dot-com bust, fell at half that rate (IBM), stayed flat (Dell) or rose (printer-maker Lexmark went up 30 percent).

How will voters decide whether Fiorina is fit for the presidency? It could hinge on if they decide she's telling the truth about her HP tenure - or about a Planned Parenthood video she said she saw but which no one can produce, or about her Horatio Alger-like rise from secretary to CEO, a claim that the *Washington Post's* fact checker called "bogus."

Facts turn out not to matter much in American politics. It's as if the Dhanko myth were to have the same standing as an astronomer's explanation of a lunar eclipse. Journalists can fact check Fiorina all they want, and political rivals can ding her from dawn to dusk.

The public's trust goes not to the best truth-teller, but to the best storyteller. As Brad Whitworth, an 18-year HP veteran and former senior communications and marketing manager, told the *Post*, "Carly has never let facts get in the way of her being able to tell a story." We don't want a commander-in-chief - we want a narrator-in-chief.

In the post-Reagan era, the grand narrative of the Republican Party is unfettered capitalism. Government is the villain. Business is the hero. This epic has no place for the misery caused by the deregulated financial sector, or for people who falter through no fault of their own. Tax cuts for the captains of capitalism, and spending cuts for public goods like education and infrastructure, have made the United States one of the most unequal countries in the world, but that fact gets no narrative traction. No matter how much money the fossil fuel industry spends on a sham counter-narrative that denies climate change; no matter how many thousands of percentage points some hedge fund bro jacks up the price of a life-saving drug; no matter how cravenly General Motors covered up defective and sometimes deadly ignition switches in 2 million vehicles - the story remains the same: Overreach by government regulators is the root of all evil.

That's the story Mitt Romney told. If he hadn't been caught on video writing off 47 percent of the country as freeloading rabble addicted to government handouts, he might have become president. Instead, the Obama counter-narrative gained power. Its heroes are people of modest means who are still paying for the moral hazard of the billionaire class. This is also the story that Bernie Sanders is telling to huge and enthusiastic crowds. Perhaps because of that, Hillary Clinton has been telling it, too, though her effectiveness as its messenger may be compromised by her dependence on Wall Street money.

This counter-narrative has the facts going for it. Practically every Paul Krugman column is a trove of economic evidence for it. But evidence doesn't win elections. Is that any way to run a democracy? Jefferson said that the success of our system depends on an educated citizenry. The goal of education is critical thinking, but in one of the most critical decisions we make - the presidential vote - we defer to our inner cave-dweller, spellbound by the saga unfolding around the fire. Why do we accept the primacy of stories over facts?

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that two systems govern our brains. One of them - System 1, the fast one - is emotional, comes from the gut, is ingenious at turning anything that happens into a pattern, a story. Slow-thinking System 2 is logical, resides in the prefrontal cortex, is wary of facile narratives. Fiorina's HP fable is catnip to System 1. Fact-checking is the job of System 2, and by the time it turns up for work, the race is over.

Couple that with the way a pluralistic democracy handles differences. In a secular, multicultural society, truth is just someone's, or some group's, point of view. Everything is relative. Under the surface, everything is political. Facts are just opinions backed by the power to enforce them. Objectivity is just oppression dressed up as science. You've got your fact-checkers; I've got mine.

You can spin Fiorina's HP record one way, or you can spin it another. Was she a good CEO, or a nightmare? It depends on whose tribe you ask, how many members it has and what story they tell - in other words, an election, not an analysis. But imagine putting the meaning of Sunday's blood moon to a plebiscite. In some parts of the country, judging by the number of books he's sold, Pastor Hagee's apocalyptic account might win, beating the scientific explanation (and the odd write-in for a jaguar, dragon or demon). Voting would of course be an absurd way to pick the truth from a barrel of bubbe meises. On the other hand, it bears a discomfiting resemblance to the way we pick presidents.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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