

## WE NEED AN INFORMED CITIZENRY

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One of the more disturbing pieces of news that came out during the Iraq war was the large number of Americans who believed that Saddam Hussein was involved with the September 11 terrorists. There has never been any evidence for such a link.

You can pass off this widespread belief as simple confusion, or the result of misleading statements by those with a vested interest in pursuing the Iraq war, but it's nothing to be shrugged away. In a democracy, public misperceptions carry an enormous cost.

Consider the federal budget. If you look at polls surveying how Americans think Congress spends their money, you'll find that Americans consistently respond that Congress spends a large proportion of the federal budget on foreign aid. One-third of respondents to the Pew Research Center's October 2014 poll said that Congress spent more money on foreign aid than any other programs. Another quarter of respondents said that servicing the national debt took more of the federal budget than anything else.

This is just wrong. In truth, the largest single portion of the overall federal budget – some 39 percent of it in 2014 – goes to programs for seniors, primarily Social Security and Medicare. This is followed by defense, which got 22 percent of the budget; welfare, including food stamps and unemployment insurance, at 11 percent; and interest payments of the federal debt, at 6 percent. Foreign aid checked in at just around 1 percent. So

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when someone stands up at a public forum and talks about cutting foreign aid as a way of reducing the budget deficit, the truth is that it wouldn't get us very far.

You could argue, I suppose, that this mismatch between the facts and Americans' beliefs doesn't really matter, so long as their representatives in Congress understand what's what. But it's not a very big step from there to suggesting that we should just forget all this talk of democracy and leave the difficult art of governing in the hands of our betters.

The truth is that for our democracy to work, it needs not just an engaged citizenry, but an informed one. We've known this since this nation's earliest days. The creators of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 thought the notion important enough to enshrine it in the state's founding document: "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people," they wrote, are "necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties."

Getting the basic facts right is essential to governing well. The late Senator Patrick Moynihan put it well when he said to an opponent during a floor debate, "You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts." One of the most critical jobs facing political leaders in a society as complex as ours is to forge a consensus among the many people and interests holding competing views. This is difficult enough to do when everyone agrees on the underlying facts; it is virtually impossible when there is no agreement. Voters' misperceptions, in other words, can become formidable obstacles to the functioning of our system of representative democracy.

These misperceptions develop for many reasons. Public policy is often complex. It can be wearying to sort through all the sources of information – the media, advocacy groups, the internet, politicians, commentators – on any given subject. And there are always political leaders, lobbyists, and others who are willing to have misperceptions linger. After all, if you're opposed ideologically to spending tax dollars on foreign aid, it doesn't hurt your cause if people believe we spend ten or twenty times more on it than we actually do.

By the same token, there is no single fix for the problem. Part of the answer lies with members of Congress and other public officials, who should feel great responsibility to correct public misperceptions when they surface. These officials should feel an ever greater responsibility not to lie to the American people or misuse their authority to withhold facts that Americans need to assess and respond to what their government is doing. Yet, in the context of pervasive federal surveillance programs, public officials have too often failed to meet these responsibilities.

Part of the answer lies with the media, which in recent years has shown a worrisome tendency to downplay its role as in-depth civic educator and focus instead on entertainment or once-over-lightly reporting. Too often,

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journalists strive to give the appearance of even-handedness by creating a false balance between two sides that do not deserve equal weight.

Part of the answer lies with civic groups – some of them do their level best to counter the flood of misinformation, but they often seem entirely outmatched.

In the end, though, the burden lies with each of us citizens. There are a lot of powerful groups and interests in this country that try to manipulate public opinion, and they're very good at it. Yet, a democratic society depends on the ability of its citizens to separate the fact from the fiction, to form good judgments, and to put pressure on their representatives to act accordingly. If ordinary people can't do this or don't want to devote the time and energy to it, the country suffers.

No matter how good our leadership, if we don't have discriminating citizens, this nation will not work very well. There is an old observation that a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves. Living in a democracy may be a basic right, but it is also a privilege, and it is one that must be earned by living up to the fondest dreams of our founders for a well-educated and knowledgeable citizenry. We need citizens with discriminating judgment who grasp core principles in areas such as law, ethics, economics, and science, and understand how to use these to explore and address our collective challenges.

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be," Thomas Jefferson once wrote to a friend. Our first duties may be to our families and our immediate communities, but our freedom depends on all of us gaining the civic knowledge and skills needed to identify, and serve, the public interest as well.