



There is Good News!

By Deborah D. Thornton

In the midst of the accusations and smearing of conservatives by the left and denunciations of the liberals by the right following the Tucson, Arizona shootings, a book published in 2008 offers a “reality check.” I received *Reality Check, The Unreported Good News about America*, as a Christmas present.

The authors, Dennis Keegan and David West, are not your normal public policy or political analysts. They are not on CNBC, Fox, or your local radio station. They are American businessmen. Keegan is in banking and investments, working for Salomon Brothers for many years and earning his Masters of Business Administration (M.B.A.) at UCLA. West founded Civicom, a telecom and web-conferencing company, after working for the Nestlé food company. His M.B.A. was from Harvard and he has been active in corporate philanthropy.¹

In *Reality Check*, they emphasize that perception does, eventually, become reality. They argue, convincingly, even if their data is a little dated, that America is indeed the “standard by which the rest of the world defines success.”² Though they don’t specifically say it, they are basically arguing that we need to get off our duffs, stop whining, and get on with it.

The three sections of the book cover the economy, foreign affairs, and domestic issues. In reviewing specific issues such as taxes, Afghanistan, Social Security, and health care, they emphasize that in order to make good decisions you first must use good, unbiased data. If the information you are using is false or slanted, then you will make bad decisions. A quote they rely on, by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, is, “Face reality as it is, not as you wish it were.”

The first chapter on “media chaos” is especially relevant. They argue that the fragmentation of news reporting following expansions in cable television and the internet has seriously harmed our ability to have good, factual data. They don’t argue that these media aren’t useful – just that free access to universal communication of any and all information by anyone with a computer and internet access has removed the professional review and screening boundaries previously in place. This makes the truthfulness and accuracy of the information harder to determine. It has also blurred the line between reporting and opinions. For example, in journalism school in the late 1970s, our professors would red line every unsupported statement or idea, questioning its validity. They emphasized that the journalist’s role was to report the news as it happened, not to make it or attempt to influence it. They were also fiendish grammarians.

Reality Check emphasized that this is not true, however, of many media sources today. Keegan and West refer to something they call “biased for effect” reporting and opinions. Because of the fragmentation of media, the resulting decrease in advertising revenues and subscribers, and increased demands on the audience’s time and attention, the media target their message for their specific audience – knowing what they want to hear. In addition, the number of staff reporting on the news has dropped drastically. The Center for the Project for Excellence in Journalism estimates that almost 12,000 newsroom jobs have been lost since the recession began.³ Network television is working with approximately half of the staff they used in the 1980s.

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At the same time, they recognize and document that the supposedly “unbiased” mainstream media are, and were, in fact biased toward liberal viewpoints. They cite a 2004 Pew Research Study, done in conjunction with the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which documents that “five times more national journalists identify themselves as ‘liberal’ (34 percent) than ‘conservative’ (seven percent).”⁴ The general public self-identified as 33 percent conservative and only 20 percent liberal. The same study revealed that in Washington, D.C., the news media were 12 times more likely to vote for Democrats than Republicans, and that Democrats did, in fact, receive more coverage of their issues and events than Republicans, 49 to 31 percent. This coverage was also more favorable to the Democrats, 35 to 26 percent.

In a time of tragedy, we all look for someone or something to blame. It seems to make it easier. Because Congresswoman Giffords is a Democrat, it was a shooting, and conservative Republicans had worked to defeat her in 2010 yet failed, it became easy to blame the Tea Party, Sarah Palin, gun owners, and others for the actions of one individual. This is not factual. We should not use these ideas to make decisions. As *Reality Check* discusses, we as individuals, a country, or a state cannot make good decisions about mental health care or gun ownership based on false information. Given time, the facts will be revealed. Then we can act.

At the Public Interest Institute, we are aware of our obligation to search out original data, not to just accept statements at face value. We watch for plagiarism and probably over-attribute information. Our professional proofreaders correct unintentional grammar mistakes and reorganize our commas. We are, however, a “non-partisan, limited-government, free-market public policy think tank,” and therefore do evaluate issues through that filter. Are the Governor, our Senators, the State Legislature, and our city or county officials (whether they have an “R” or a “D” after their name) proposing a plan that supports the free-market? Does it act to increase government control and intervention, or limit it? Does it encourage personal responsibility and independent decision making? What are the unintended consequences?

We encourage you – our members and readers – to hold us accountable and true to high standards of fact-gathering and decision-making in our public policy analysis. If we’re off base, call, write, or e-mail us and let us know. Sometimes we all need a reality check. And that is the good news about being an American.

(Endnotes)

¹ Dennis Keegan and David West, *Reality Check, The Unreported Good News About America*, “About the Authors,” Regnery Publishing, 2008.

² Ibid, pp. xi.

³ “State of the News Media 2010,” Executive Summary, The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, pp. 3 & 9.

⁴ Ibid, pp xvi.

Deborah D. Thornton is a Research Analyst with Public Interest Institute, Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

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