

GOP and the Rise of Anti-Knowledge

Ben Carson's rise to the top of the Republican presidential field shows that many Republicans, especially Christian fundamentalists, have decoupled from the real world – and are proud of it. The more that GOP candidates embrace “anti-knowledge” the more popular they become, as Mike Lofgren explains.

By Mike Lofgren

In the realm of physics, the opposite of matter is not nothingness, but antimatter. In the realm of practical epistemology, the opposite of knowledge is not ignorance but anti-knowledge. This seldom recognized fact is one of the prime forces behind the decay of political and civic culture in America.

Some common-sense philosophers have observed this point over the years. “Genuine ignorance is . . . profitable because it is likely to be accompanied by humility, curiosity, and open mindedness; whereas ability to repeat catch-phrases, cant terms, familiar propositions, gives the conceit of learning and coats the mind with varnish waterproof to new ideas,” observed psychologist John Dewey.

Or, as humorist Josh Billings put it, “The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so.”

Fifty years ago, if a person did not know who the prime minister of Great Britain was, what the conflict in Vietnam was about, or the barest rudiments of how a nuclear reaction worked, he would shrug his shoulders and move on. And if he didn't bother to know those things, he was in all likelihood politically apathetic and confined his passionate arguing to topics like sports or the attributes of the opposite sex.

There were exceptions, like the Birchers' theory that fluoridation was a monstrous communist conspiracy, but they were mostly confined to the fringes. Certainly, political candidates with national aspirations steered clear of such balderdash.

At present, however, a person can be blissfully ignorant of how to locate Kenya on a map, but know to a metaphysical certitude that Barack Obama was born there, because he learned it from Fox News. Likewise, he can be unable to differentiate a species from a phylum but be confident from viewing the 700 Club that evolution is “politically correct” hooey and that the earth is 6,000 years old.

And he may never have read the Constitution and have no clue about the Commerce Clause, but believe with an angry righteousness that the Affordable Care Act is

unconstitutional.

This brings us inevitably to celebrity presidential candidate Ben Carson. The man is anti-knowledge incarnated, a walking compendium of every imbecility ever uttered during the last three decades. Obamacare is worse than chattel slavery. Women who have abortions are like slave owners. If Jews had firearms they could have stopped the Holocaust (author's note: they obtained at least some weapons during the Warsaw Ghetto rising, and no, it didn't). Victims of a mass shooting in Oregon enabled their own deaths by their behavior. And so on, ad nauseam.

It is highly revealing that, according to a *Bloomberg/Des Moines Register* poll of likely Republican caucus attendees, the stolid Iowa burghers liked Carson *all the more* for such moronic utterances. And sure enough, the *New York Times* tells us that Carson has pulled ahead of Donald Trump in a national poll of Republican voters. Apparently, Trump was just not crazy enough for their tastes.

Why the Ignorance?

Journalist Michael Tomasky has attempted to answer the question as to what Ben Carson's popularity tells us about the American people after making a detour into asking a question about the man himself: why is an accomplished neurosurgeon such a nincompoop in another field? "Because usually, if a man (or woman) is a good and knowledgeable and sure-footed doctor, or lawyer or department chair or any other position that could have been attained only through repeated displays of excellence and probity, then that person will also be a pretty solid human being across the board."

Well, not necessarily. English unfortunately doesn't have a precise word for the German "Fachidiot," a narrowly specialized person accomplished in his own field but a blithering idiot outside it. In any case, a surgeon is basically a skilled auto mechanic who is not bothered by the sight of blood and palpitating organs (and an owner of a high-dollar ride like a Porsche knows that a specialized mechanic commands labor rates roughly comparable to a doctor).

We need the surgeon's skills on pain of agonizing death, and reward him commensurately, but that does not make him a Voltaire. Still, it makes one wonder: if Carson the surgeon believes evolution is a hoax, where does he think the antibiotic-resistant bacteria that plague hospitals come from?

Tomasky expresses astonishment that Carson's jaw-dropping comments make him more popular among Republican voters, but he concludes without fully answering the question he posed. It is an important question: what has happened to the American people, or at least a significant portion of them?

Anti-knowledge is a subset of anti-intellectualism, and as Richard Hofstadter

has pointed out, anti-intellectualism has been a recurrent feature in American life, generally rising and receding in synchronism with fundamentalist revivalism.

The current wave, which now threatens to swamp our political culture, began in a similar fashion with the rise to prominence in the 1970s of fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. But to a far greater degree than previous outbreaks, fundamentalism has merged its personnel, its policies, its tactics and its fate with a major American political party, the Republicans.

An Infrastructure of Know-Nothing-ism

Buttressing this merger is a vast support structure of media, foundations, pressure groups and even a thriving cottage industry of fake historians and phony scientists. From Fox News to the Discovery Institute (which exists solely to “disprove” evolution), and from the Heritage Foundation (which propagandizes that tax cuts increase revenue despite massive empirical evidence to the contrary) to bogus “historians” like David Barton (who confected a fraudulent biography of a piously devout Thomas Jefferson that had to be withdrawn by the publisher), the anti-knowledge crowd has created an immense ecosystem of political disinformation.

Thanks to publishing houses like Regnery and the conservative boutique imprints of more respectable houses like Simon & Schuster (a division of CBS), America has been flooded with cut-and-paste rants by Michelle Malkin and Mark Levin, Parson Weems-style ghosted biographies allegedly by Bill O’Reilly, and the inimitable stream of consciousness hallucinating of Glenn Beck.

Whether retail customers actually buy all these screeds, or whether foundations and rich conservative donors buy them in bulk and give them out as door prizes at right-wing clambakes, anti-knowledge infects the political bloodstream in the United States.

Thanks to these overlapping and mutually reinforcing segments of the right-wing media-entertainment-“educational” complex, it is now possible for the true believer to sail on an ocean of political, historical, and scientific disinformation without ever sighting the dry land of empirical fact. This effect is fortified by the substantial overlap between conservative Republicans and fundamentalist Christians.

The latter group begins with the core belief that truth is revealed in a subjective process involving the will to believe (“faith”) rather than discovered by objectively corroborable means. Likewise, there is a baseline opposition to the prevailing secular culture, and adherents are frequently

warned by church authority figures against succumbing to the snares and temptations of “the world.” Consequently, they retreat into the echo chamber of their own counterculture: if they didn’t hear it on Fox News or from a televangelist, it never happened.

For these culture warriors, belief in demonstrably false propositions is no longer a stigma of ignorance, but a defiantly worn badge of political resistance.

We saw this mindset on display during the Republican debate in Boulder, Colorado, on Wednesday night. Even though it was moderated by Wall Street-friendly CNBC, which exists solely to talk up the stock market, the candidates were uniformly upset that the moderators would presume to ask difficult questions of people aspiring to be president. They were clearly outside their comfort zone of the Fox News studio.

The candidates drew cheers from the hard-core believers in the audience, however, by attacking the media, as if moderators Lawrence Kudlow and Rick Santelli, both notorious shells for Wall Street, were I.F. Stone and Noam Chomsky. Republican National Committee chairman Reince Priebus nearly had an aneurism over the candidates’ alleged harsh treatment.

State-Sponsored Stupidity

It is when these forces of anti-knowledge seize the power of government that the real damage gets done. Under Virginia’s Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli, the Virginia government harassed with subpoenas a University of Virginia professor whose academic views contradicted Cuccinelli’s political agenda.

Numerous states like Louisiana now mandate that public schools teach the wholly imaginary “controversy” about evolution. A school textbook in Texas, whose state school board has long been infested with reactionary kooks, referred to chattel slaves as “workers” (the implication was obvious: neo-Confederate elements in the South have been trying to minimize slavery for a century and a half, to the point of insinuating it had nothing to do with the Civil War).

This brings us back to Ben Carson. He now suggests that, rather than abolishing the Department of Education, a perennial Republican goal, the department should be used to investigate professors who say something he doesn’t agree with. The mechanism to bring these heretics to the government’s attention should be denunciations from students, a technique once in vogue in the old Soviet Union.

It is not surprising that Carson, himself a Seventh Day Adventist, should receive his core support from Republicans who identify as fundamentalists. Among the rest of the GOP pack, it is noteworthy that it is precisely those seeking

the fundamentalist vote, like Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum, who are also notorious for making inflammatory and unhinged comments that sound like little more than deliberate trolling to those who haven't drunk the Kool-Aid (Donald Trump is sui generis).

In all probability, Carson will flame out like Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann and all the other former panjandrums of a theological movement conservatism that revels in anti-knowledge. But he will have left his mark, as they did, on a Republican Party that inexorably moves further to the right, and the eventual nominee will have to tailor his campaign to a base that gets ever more intransigent as each new messiah of the month promises to lead them into a New Jerusalem unmoored to a stubborn and profane thing called facts.

Mike Lofgren is a former congressional staff member who served on both the House and Senate budget committees. His book about Congress, *The Party is Over: How Republicans Went Crazy, Democrats Became Useless, and the Middle Class Got Shafted*, appeared in paperback in August 2013. His new book, *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*, will be published in January 2016.

A Glimmer of Hope for Syria

Exclusive: With new negotiations starting in Vienna and with Iran now allowed to participate there is finally a glimmer of hope that the Syrian slaughter might end. But that will require concessions from all sides and President Obama standing up to the neocons who put "regime change" ahead of peace, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Despite all the ranting from armchair-warriors across Official Washington urging attacks on the Syrian military and even Russian warplanes inside Syria cooler heads may have finally prevailed with Secretary of State John Kerry agreeing to a formula that will let Iran participate in Syrian peace talks set to begin Friday in Geneva.

The point here is that Iran and Russia, as allies of the Syrian government, are in a strong position to urge concessions from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, much as Russian President Vladimir Putin did in 2013 when he pressured Assad to surrender Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. Also, in late 2013, Putin helped wrest concessions from Iran over its nuclear program.

Assuming Kerry shows corresponding flexibility by relenting on the U.S. demand that “Assad must go” as a precondition to negotiations and puts pressure on the U.S.-backed Syrian opposition to accept some compromise with Assad perhaps this humanitarian catastrophe can be brought under some measure of control.

It is way past time for sanity and realism to replace the endless “tough guy/gal” posturing that has consumed Official Washington since 2011 as a quarter million Syrians have been killed and millions have fled as refugees across the Mideast and into Europe.

The only narrative that’s been allowed in the mainstream U.S. press is that Assad is responsible for nearly every bad thing that’s happened, ignoring the support that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and even Israel have provided to jihadist fighters, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and Al Qaeda’s spinoff, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh).

President Barack Obama has been part of the problem, too, as he has bent to the “regime change” demands of “liberal interventionists” and their close cousins, the neoconservatives.

To appease those political/media voices, Obama has “covertly” intervened in the Syrian conflict by arming and training some rebel forces. Though the administration insists that it has armed and trained only “moderate” rebels, the reality is that such a “moderate” force is largely mythical, with many of the CIA’s recruits later joining Islamist armies and surrendering U.S.-supplied weapons to these extremists.

How U.S. officials have defined “moderate” is also in question. A source briefed on this strategy told me that the CIA supplied 500 TOW anti-tank missiles to Ahrah ash-Sham, an Islamist force founded, in part, by Al Qaeda veterans. Ahrah ash-Sham collaborates with Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front as the two leading militias in the Saudi-backed Army of Conquest.

The sophisticated TOW missiles have been “credited” with enabling the Army of Conquest to make major advances around the city of Idlib and block counter-offenses by the Syrian army. In other words, U.S. support for “moderate” rebels has strengthened the military position of Al Qaeda, even if the administration can technically argue that it isn’t giving weapons to Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front.

A Grave Danger

The grave danger of such U.S. calibrations about ratcheting up the war pressure on the Assad government just enough for Assad to leave but not for his government to collapse is the high probability of a miscalculation that could lead to a disintegrating Syrian army and open a path for Al Qaeda and/or the

Islamic State to capture Damascus, raising the black flag of Sunni terrorism over a major city in the Middle East.

As grim as the human rights situation in Syria is now, a victory by the Sunni terrorists would very possibly lead to genocide against the Alawites, Christians, Shiites and other "infidels." Millions more Syrians would flee the slaughter, destabilizing not only Turkey and other Mideast nations but Europe as well.

Then, Official Washington's "regime change" tough-talkers would surely demand a full-scale U.S. military invasion and occupation of Syria, an extraordinarily costly and likely futile attempt to restore some semblance of order in the region.

So, any sign that President Obama and Secretary Kerry have gotten down off their "Assad must go" high horses represents a glimmer of hope that a political solution may finally be possible. But a deal would also require Obama and Kerry getting tough with Sunni "allies" and aggressively clamping down on the continued flow of money and weapons to the Islamist rebels.

If a political power-sharing arrangement between Assad's side and the U.S.-backed "moderate" Sunni politicians can be arranged and if the borders can be sealed off to prevent resupply of the extremists then Syria might eventually restore enough order to conduct elections so the Syrians themselves can decide who they want as their leaders.

But Official Washington's neocons/liberal interventionists seem determined to wreck any possible peace deal. These influential opinion leaders bolstered by the "human rights" community continue to insist on "regime change" in Syria, a top neocon goal since the 1990s. The Assad family's ouster was expected to be the quick follow-on to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, except that the Iraq operation didn't turn out exactly as the neocons had drawn it up at their think tanks.

The neocons also wanted to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran and force another "regime change" there. But their fuzzy dreams of installing their favorite Iraqi/Syrian/Iranian puppets were dashed by the hard realities of the Middle East. Still, the dreams did not die. They were just put on hold until a more advantageous moment presented itself.

That moment almost came on Aug. 21, 2013, when a sarin gas attack outside Damascus killed hundreds of civilians. Though the whodunit was never clear, U.S. officials and mainstream media rushed to pin the blame on Assad and demand that Obama launch a major military strike to punish Assad for crossing a U.S. "red

line" against using chemical weapons.

That dangerous plan was only averted at the last minute because of growing doubts among intelligence analysts that Assad was responsible, with later evidence suggesting a "false flag" attack by extremist rebels trying to draw the U.S. military into the war on their side. The bombing plans were also derailed because Russian President Putin came up with a compromise in which Assad gave up all his chemical weapons while still denying any role in the sarin attack.

The Putin-Obama Team

Later in 2013, Putin also teamed up with Obama to work on a tentative agreement to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb, a move that derailed neocon hopes for a military strike by U.S. or Israeli warplanes against Iran. In other words, the neocons were again thwarted in their plans for violently remaking the Middle East.

By January 2014, it also seemed possible that this Putin-Obama collaboration could make progress on Syrian peace talks in Geneva with Iran invited to join the negotiations, holding out the prospect that Russia and Iran could extract concessions from Assad while the Obama administration could twist the arms of its Syrian proxies.

But Official Washington's neocons rose up in fury over the idea of Iran in the negotiations. After all, Iran was still Israel's *bête noire* and the neocons had not given up their hopes for a bombing campaign. Faced with this political/media fury, Obama and Kerry buckled under the pressure and insisted that United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon disinvite Iran from the talks, which then degenerated into a shouting match, with the U.S. side demanding that "Assad must go" and the Assad side leaving in a huff.

It also became clear to the neocons that the Obama-Putin collaboration presented another danger. It carried the possibility of the two major powers pressing Israel and the Palestinians into an agreement on a Palestinian state, another prospect that upset the neocons who prefer giving Israel free rein over the Palestinian territories.

So, this Obama-Putin cooperation itself had to be blown up and it was. In February 2014, U.S. neocons including Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, Sen. John McCain and National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman helped orchestrate a coup in Ukraine, ousting a democratically elected government friendly with Moscow and replacing it with a fiercely anti-Russian regime that even deployed neo-Nazis to help put down resistance among Ukraine's ethnic Russians.

When the people of Crimea many of them ethnic Russians voted by 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the neocon-dominated U.S. news media pronounced the referendum a “sham” and detected a Russian “invasion,” although Russian troops were already in Crimea under an agreement for the Russian naval base at Sevastopol.

As the Ukraine crisis worsened, a wave of Putin bashing swept through U.S. and European political and media circles. Rather than resist this “group think,” President Obama joined it. He agreed that Putin and Russia had to be frozen out of polite international society. The neocons and the liberal interventionists were again riding high.

But the situation in Syria continued to worsen. In summer 2014, the Islamic State, which had begun a decade earlier as “Al Qaeda in Iraq” fighting the U.S. occupation of Iraq, suddenly emerged as a potent force, seizing large swaths of Syria and then Iraq. The Islamic State’s lightning military strikes and its gruesome videos of beheading Westerners and other “infidels” shocked the world and prompted Obama to hit back both in Iraq and Syria.

Half-Hearted Campaign

Yet, the U.S. alliance of anti-Islamic State forces was half-hearted, since Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states had been supporting Sunni jihadists in Syria, including elements of the Islamic State. Thus, many Sunni participants in the U.S.-led alliance were less than enthusiastic partners, with their principal goal still the ouster of Assad, an Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam.

The ineffectual campaign against the Islamic State and the embarrassing results of Obama’s \$500 million plan to train “moderate” Syrian rebels, which ended up inserting only about five fighters into the field, helped convince Putin that stronger measures were needed to prevent the eventual collapse of the Syrian military and a victory for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Since Putin had already been turned into an international pariah over Ukraine, there was also less downside for his acting more assertively in Syria. With the permission of the Assad government and Iran’s help on the ground, Russia launched an ambitious air campaign, hitting a variety of “terrorist” targets, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

Howls went up from the neocons, liberal interventionists and much of the mainstream U.S. media that Putin’s air offensive was killing “our guys.” In an extraordinary interview aired Oct. 11 on CBS’ “60 Minutes,” correspondent Steve Kroft baited President Obama to do something to stop Putin.

“[Putin’s] bombing the people that we are supporting,” Kroft wailed. “He’s

challenging your leadership, Mr. President. He's challenging your leadership. [People] say you're projecting a weakness."

Though Obama had gone along with the demonization of Putin even listing Russia along with Ebola and the Islamic State as the three top threats to the world he appears belatedly to have recognized that the only solution to the Syrian conflict is a political compromise in which all sides make concessions and Russia and Iran play key roles in assuring more give from Assad.

Thus, with negotiations resuming in Vienna on Friday, it appears there is finally the possibility of progress toward ending the horrific war in Syria. But that result will not come easily. Secretary Kerry will have to demand significant concessions from both the U.S.-funded Syrian "moderates" and from the regional Sunni powers to get serious about cutting off their "covert" assistance to the Sunni jihadists inside Syria.

If some stability can be restored in Syria, the ultimate solution might be an election that will let the Syrian people decide who their leaders should be.

But President Obama will have to contend with Official Washington's neocons, liberal interventionists and "human rights" community which will continue to put their "regime change" agenda ahead of a pragmatic effort to end the slaughter and to stanch the destabilizing flow of refugees across the Mideast and into Europe.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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