

The New Disrupters / Palestinian Hope / Fall's Best Books

TIME

WHO IS TELLING THE TRUTH?

THE FACT WARS

Romney *<Check one>* Obama



For every private-sector job created in Massachusetts by Governor Romney, six public-sector jobs were lost.

Mitt Romney backed a plan that outlaws all abortion, even in cases of rape and incest.

We cut taxes for 95% of working families.

Obama bin Laden is dead and General Motors is alive.

Obama would pay for Medicare.

Mitt Romney backed a law that would cut the deficit by \$4 trillion.

BY MICHAEL SCHERER

ELECTION
2012
The Race

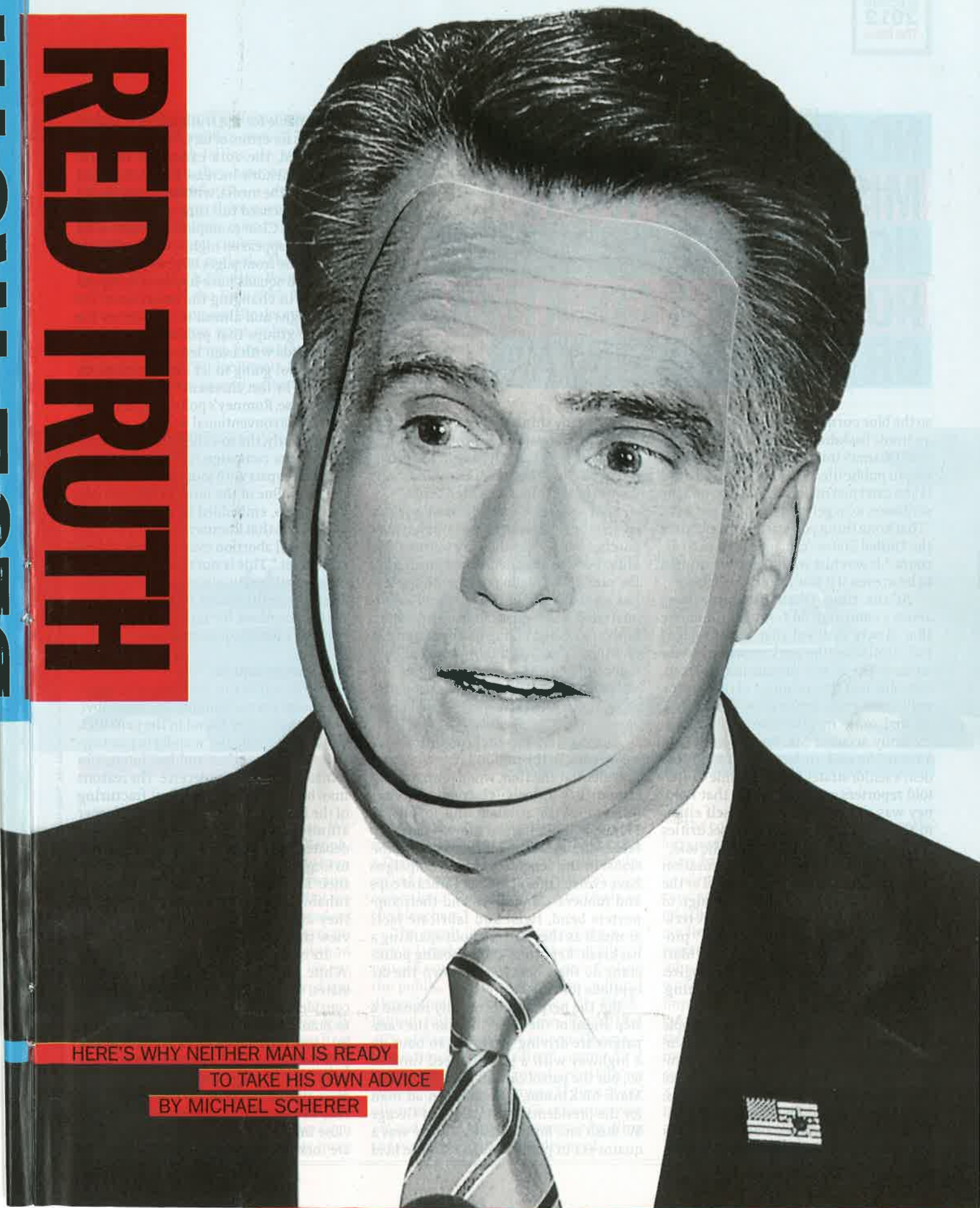


BLUE TRUTH

BOTH CANDIDATES SAY
WHITE HOUSE HOPEFULS SHOULD
TALK STRAIGHT WITH VOTERS.

Photo-Illustration by Ina Jang for TIME

RED TRUTH



HERE'S WHY NEITHER MAN IS READY

TO TAKE HIS OWN ADVICE

BY MICHAEL SCHERER

NO ONE WOULD EVER MISTAKE THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS BRIEFING ROOM FOR A COURTHOUSE OR A CONFESSSIONAL,

so the blue curtains and official seal made an ironic backdrop this summer for President Obama's impromptu homily on honesty in public life. "The truth of the matter is you can't just make stuff up," he told the scribblers who get paid to check his facts. "That's one thing you learn as President of the United States. You get called in to account." It was just what reporters wanted to hear, even if it was not exactly true.

At the time, Obama was speaking about a campaign ad from Mitt Romney that falsely claimed that the President had eliminated the work requirement for welfare. The ad was unmistakably deceptive. But just five minutes earlier in the very same press conference, Obama had offered some misdirection of his own. "Nobody accused Mr. Romney of being a felon," he said. In fact, one of the President's senior strategists, Stephanie Cutter, told reporters a month earlier that Romney was misrepresenting himself either to the American people or to securities regulators—"which is a felony," she said.

Cutter's was a conditional accusation but an accusation nonetheless, and at the time it allowed the Romney campaign to take its turn playing truth teller. "A reckless and unsubstantiated charge," protested Romney campaign manager Matt Rhoades, who asked Obama to apologize. Of course, no apology was forthcoming. So the posturing got worse.

"You know, in the past, when people pointed out that something was inaccurate, why, campaigns pulled the ad," Romney complained about Obama a few weeks later, without any apparent self-awareness. That was followed by Obama aides' announcing that Romney's campaign was built on a "tripod of lies" and that Repub-

licans "really think that lying is a virtue." Romney continued his protests, saying, "The challenge that I'll have in the debate is that the President tends to—how shall I say it—to say things that aren't true."

So it goes in the world's most celebrated democracy: another campaign day, another battle over the very nature of reality. Both of the men now running for the presidency claim that their opponent has a weak grasp of the facts and a demonstrated willingness to mislead voters. Both profess an abiding personal commitment to honesty and fair play. And both run campaigns that have repeatedly and willfully played the American people for fools, though their respective violations vary in scope and severity.

The rules for this back-and-forth were set in 1796, in the nation's first contested presidential election, when John Adams' supporters falsely charged Thomas Jefferson with atheism and loyalty to France while Jefferson's forces made up fables about Adams' monarchist ambitions. In the centuries since, campaigns have evolved into elaborate games of cops and robbers. Candidates and their supporters bend, twist and fabricate facts as much as they can without sparking a backlash. Reporters and opposing politicians do their best to run down the deceptions for voters.

But the perpetrators usually remain a step ahead of the cops. "It's like the campaigns are driving 100 miles an hour on a highway with a posted speed limit of 60, but the patrol cars all have flats," says Mark McKinnon, a Republican ad man for the presidential campaigns of George W. Bush and John McCain. "There was a quaint era in politics when we were held

accountable for the truth and paid consequences for errors of fact. No more."

Indeed, the 2012 campaign has witnessed a historic increase in fact-checking efforts by the media, with dozens of reporters now focused full time on sniffing out falsehood. Clear examples of deception fill websites, appear on nightly newscasts and run on the front pages of newspapers. But the truth squads have had only marginal success in changing the behavior of the campaigns and almost no impact on the outside groups that peddle unvarnished falsehoods with even less accountability. "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers," explained Neil Newhouse, Romney's pollster, echoing his industry's conventional wisdom.

Similarly, the so-called Truth Team for the Obama campaign has found itself in recurring spats with journalists brandishing facts. One of the most galling Obama deceptions, embedded in two television ads, asserts that Romney backed a bill outlawing "all abortion even in cases of rape and incest." This is not true. Romney has consistently maintained, since becoming a pro-life politician in 2005, that he supports exceptions for rape and incest and to protect the life of the mother.

No Consequences

SO WHAT EXPLAINS THE FACTUAL RECKlessness of the campaigns? The most obvious answer can be found in the penalties, or lack thereof, for wandering astray. Voters just show less and less interest in punishing those who deceive. The reasons may be found in the political fracturing of the nation. As some voters feel a deeper affinity for one side or another in political debates, they have developed a tendency to forgive the home team's fibs. No matter their ideology, many voters increasingly inhabit information bubbles in which they are less likely to hear their worldview contradicted.

In 1960, when John Kennedy won the White House by just 0.2% of the vote, 20 states, with 52% of the population, were considered highly competitive, according to Emory University's Alan Abramowitz. By 2000, only 12 states, with 28% of the population, had a margin of victory of less than 5 percentage points. This year no more than nine states are in play, and the vote in several of those may not even be close in the final tally. Persuadable voters are increasingly hard to find. As Brendan

Nyhan, a Dartmouth professor who studies falsehood in politics, puts it, "The incentives for truth telling are weaker in many ways than they have been in the post-Watergate era."

At the same time, chances are high that your neighbors mostly agree with you and that the media you choose to consume rarely rattles your outlook. The pundits on MSNBC, the Huffington Post and the editorial page of the *New York Times* do a fine job of calling out the deceptions of Romney, but if you want to hear where Obama is going wrong, you might be better served on the Drudge Report, Fox News or the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page.

pronounced among those with college educations than among those without. The President is a Christian. There is no credible information to suggest otherwise. But for many caught up in the passions of politics, the facts are not conclusive.

Instead the public increasingly takes issue with those who deliver the facts. Gallup recently recorded the highest levels of distrust in the media since it began measuring this sentiment in 1998. Only 40% of the country, including just 26% of Republicans and 31% of independents, express a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. "In

Two Men, Two Realities

TO SEE JUST HOW EASY IT IS TO BE FOOLED, one need only visit the controlled confines of the university laboratory. In the spring of 2006, Nyhan and his research partner Jason Reifler of Georgia State University gathered conservative and liberal students to test their resistance to factual information. They asked the group to read an article that included President George W. Bush's claim that his tax cuts had increased revenue for the U.S. Treasury, which was provably false. Then they added a factual correction: the Bush tax cuts led to a three-year decline in tax revenue, from \$2 trillion in 2000 to \$1.8 trillion in 2003.



Romney has distorted Obama's record on welfare, immigration and the stimulus



Obama has misrepresented Romney's views on immigration and abortion

"We don't collect news to inform us. We collect news to affirm us," explains Republican pollster Frank Luntz, who has been studying the 2012 electorate in swing-state focus groups. "It used to be that we disagreed on the solution but agreed on the problem. Now we don't even agree on the problem." All of this contributes to an environment in which, for some voters, unwelcome facts are simply filtered out and flushed away.

Human beings are simply more willing to believe falsehoods that confirm their worldview. In July, 17% of voters told pollsters for the Pew Research Center that Obama is a Muslim, an increase from just 12% in October 2008. Within the GOP, this fiction was believed by 30%, up from 16% in 2008, and the increase was more

the past, the press effectively played the role of umpire," explains Chris Lehane, a Democratic campaign consultant who served as press secretary of Al Gore's 2000 campaign. "Now they are effectively in the bleachers."

The result is a landscape where accuracy is largely in the eye of the beholder. If you ask voters which candidate is fooling the public, the answers vary by political disposition. A recent poll by the *Washington Post* and ABC News found that 76% of Romney voters believe Obama is "intentionally misleading" voters. As it happened, the exact same share of Obama supporters believe Romney is "intentionally misleading." Only 17% of Romney voters and 12% of Obama voters were willing to say their own man had deceived.

The correction worked among liberals, but among conservatives it produced a curious backfire effect: conservatives were nearly twice as likely to say the Bush tax cuts increased revenue after they had been told this was not true. Such distortions are not limited to the conservative mind. The researchers presented an article showing John Kerry's claim from 2004 that he would "lift the ban on stem-cell research" imposed by Bush, followed by corrective information: Bush never actually banned stem-cell research; he prevented federal money from funding research on a subset of embryos. The true information had a corrective effect for conservatives and moderates but no impact on liberals. Once again, personal views had intervened. "The more we care about politics and the

WHO LIES MORE? YET ANOTHER CLOSE CONTEST

To find out who shaded the truth most, TIME asked each campaign for a list of its rival's worst deceptions. After examining those claims and consulting independent fact-checking websites, we selected some of the most prominent falsehoods and prevarications of the 2012 campaign*—at least so far. Compared with the Obama campaign's, the Romney operation's misstatements are frequently more brazen. But sometimes the most effective lie is the one that is closest to the truth, and Obama's team has often outdone Romney's in the dark art of subtle distortion. On both sides, the dishonesty is "about as bad as I've seen," says veteran journalist Brooks Jackson, director of FactCheck.org.

The lying game unfolds on many levels. Campaigns obfuscate, twist the truth and exaggerate. They exploit complexity. Most of all, they look for details—real or unreal—that validate our suspicions. There was no Obama "apology tour," but the canard flourished because some voters are wary about his sense of American exceptionalism. If you read the whole paragraph, the President's "You didn't build that" riff seems a lot more reasonable, but context fell victim to a perception that Obama disdains free enterprise. Bain was never the beneficiary of a taxpayer bailout, and yet 75% of Americans believe the contrary, partly because Democrats have cast Romney as the kind of plutocrat for whom the rules are rigged.

Even for the most open-minded and informed voters, truth is often subjective. Discerning it is that much harder when the campaigns cater to two different groups of voters who seem to prefer two very different sets of facts.
—ALEX ALTMAN

*These quotes come from the candidates or campaign ads they personally approved, with the exception of the Obama team's claim about Bain Consulting, which was repeated by Vice President Biden

OBAMA CAMPAIGN

1
'We do not need an outsourcing pioneer in the Oval Office.'

REALITY Like many firms, Bain Capital invested in companies that outsourced jobs, but it was not the first to do so, and Romney was no longer directly responsible when the outsourcing occurred

VERDICT This claim is a distortion by Obama's team



5
Obama has 'a balanced plan to reduce our deficit by \$4 trillion over the next decade.'

REALITY Obama counts \$1 trillion in budget cuts that have already been signed into law, some \$850 billion from foreign wars already set to end and substantial savings from tax increases

VERDICT The plan relies heavily on budget gimmickry

8
'My opponent says the Arizona law should be "a model for the nation.'"

REALITY At a Republican primary debate on Feb. 22, 2012, Romney said Arizona's E-Verify provision, which requires employers to check worker eligibility, was a model—not its controversial immigration law, SB 1070

VERDICT Untrue and deceptive

2
'After a decade of decline, this country has created over half a million new manufacturing jobs.'

REALITY The U.S. has lost about a million manufacturing jobs since 2009 but regained more than half that number in the comeback

VERDICT Without context, Obama's number is misleading

3
'BOTH ROMNEY AND RYAN BACKED PROPOSALS TO OUTLAW ABORTION, EVEN IN CASES OF RAPE AND INCEST.'

REALITY Romney has repeatedly said he would not seek to prohibit abortions in cases of rape or incest or when the health of the mother is endangered

VERDICT Obama's ad is untrue. Many Republicans have supported an absolute abortion ban, but Romney has never embraced one

4
'Romney would give millionaires another tax break and raise taxes on middle-class families by up to \$2,000 a year.'

REALITY Romney hasn't specified how he'd pay for marginal tax cuts he says he'd give all Americans. The nonpartisan Tax Policy Center concluded that he would have to close tax loopholes that benefit the middle class to do so

VERDICT The accusation is speculative

6
'WE'VE DOUBLED OUR USE OF RENEWABLE ENERGY.'

REALITY Electricity generated by wind and solar energy has doubled. But other types of renewable energy—including geothermal, hydroelectric and biomass—have not

VERDICT Untrue. Renewable-energy production is up about 25%

7
'The way Bain Consulting reorganized cost the government and American taxpayers \$10 million.'

REALITY Bain wrote off \$10 million in debt to a failed bank at the expense of the FDIC, which is funded by banks. Taxpayers paid nothing

VERDICT The charge is untrue

9
'The U.S. is less dependent on foreign oil than at any time in the past two decades.'

REALITY The nation's dependence on foreign oil has been dropping steadily since 2005

VERDICT The statement is true, but Obama shouldn't take sole credit for the trend

10
'What rights would Romney deny [for gay couples]? Adopting children together.'

REALITY Romney supports adoption rights for same-sex couples

VERDICT False

ROMNEY CAMPAIGN

1
'We are only inches away from no longer being a free economy.'

REALITY The conservative Heritage Foundation ranks the U.S. in the top 10 for economic freedom worldwide, ahead of Japan, Germany and the U.K.

VERDICT Highly misleading

5
'President Obama's trillion-dollar federal takeover of the U.S. health care system is a disaster.'

REALITY Under Obamacare, private doctors and hospitals will continue to deliver nearly all care. Most Americans with private, employer-based insurance will keep their coverage

VERDICT False. The merits of the law are up for debate, but Obamacare is not a "federal takeover of the U.S. health care system"

2
'I HAVE A PLAN TO CREATE 12 MILLION NEW JOBS.'

REALITY Independent economic forecasters predict the economy will gain about 12 million jobs over the next four years regardless of who is President

VERDICT Misleading. There's less to this pledge than meets the eye

3
'Under Obama's plan [for welfare], you wouldn't have to work and wouldn't have to train for a job. They just send you your welfare check.'

REALITY Obama granted waivers to states that asked for flexibility in making welfare-to-work more effective at ending dependency

VERDICT Romney's claim is false

4
'Romney's plan? Reverse Obama's defense cuts, strengthen our military, create over 700,000 jobs for Florida.'

REALITY The cuts are part of a 2011 debt-reduction deal agreed to by the White House and congressional Republicans, including Paul Ryan

VERDICT Blaming Obama alone for the cuts is misleading

6
'President Obama told America that if Congress approved his plan to borrow nearly a trillion dollars, he would hold unemployment below 8%.'

REALITY Obama never said that, but before he took office, two of his economists predicted that a large stimulus might have that effect

VERDICT Romney's assertion is misleading

7
'Where did all the Obama stimulus money go? ... Electric cars from Finland.'

REALITY The Administration made a \$529 million loan to Fisker Automotive, which has a plant in Finland, but the money moved through a Bush-era program, not the stimulus. In any case, much of the money has been spent in the U.S.

VERDICT The claim is misleading

8
'We have to open up markets for our goods ... [Obama] has opened up none.'

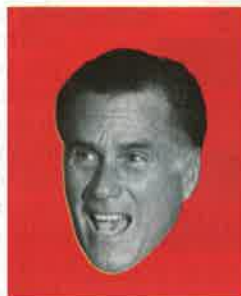
REALITY Obama signed previously negotiated trade deals with Colombia, Panama and South Korea

VERDICT False

9
'He was President for the last three and a half years, did nothing on immigration.'

REALITY Obama lobbied for the Dream Act in Congress, where it was blocked by Republicans. In June, the President issued an executive order protecting young illegal immigrants from deportation

VERDICT Untrue. No law was passed, but Obama wasn't idle on immigration



10
'[The fact that Obama is] claiming it is unconstitutional for Ohio to allow servicemen and -women extended early-voting privileges during the state's early-voting period is an outrage.'

REALITY Obama tried to restore early voting for all Ohioans

VERDICT Misleading

more it becomes central to our worldview, the more threatening it becomes to admit that we are wrong or our side is wrong," Nyhan concludes. The studies show that facts that contradict our biases actually have the effect of reinforcing them.

Even more factual information might seem like a good solution to this problem. But the reality is more complex. Researchers have demonstrated in similar conditions that pieces of false information, once heard, establish themselves as "belief echoes" that can persist even after a falsehood is corrected. There is also a tendency among those with more information to be more biased against reality. In 2006, Danielle Shani, then a Princeton graduate student, analyzed a large-scale election survey taken in 2000 that asked voters for evaluations of the Clinton presidency while gauging their levels of political knowledge. She found that more-knowledgeable voters actually showed more bias. Democrats and Republicans, for example, differed predictably on whether the Clinton presidency had improved or damaged national security. But among highly informed Democrats and Republicans, the differences were more stark. When asked if the budget deficit had increased under President Clinton, those with more information exhibited a bias 5.5 times larger than those who knew less.

The bias extends to how people digest news. In a 2007 study published in the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, participants were asked to rate the bias contained in a single news report that was alternately identified as originating from Fox News, CNN and a fictional television station. Simply changing the brand attached to the report changed people's views of the information. People made assumptions about the veracity of the news independent of what the news actually reported. "As a result, individuals sometimes create bias even when none exists," concluded authors Matthew Baum of Harvard and Phil Gussin of UCLA. The effect was stronger among those who knew more about politics.

One hint as to why this is the case can be found in other research on the interaction between emotion and fact. Some of the same emotional impulses that lead voters to seek out more information—concern, insecurity and fear, for example—skew their ability to accept accurate information. A 2008 Nyhan and Reifler study asked some research subjects to write a few

sentences about a time when they had upheld a value that was important to them. The idea was to get subjects feeling good about themselves before they had their political biases challenged by facts. The exercise worked: when presented with evidence that the 2006 Iraq troop surge had reduced the number of insurgent attacks there, supporters of withdrawing U.S. forces from the country were more likely to accept the validity of the surge after a self-affirming exercise than without the exercise. Self-confidence allowed people to overcome their biases.

The Fact-Checking Movement

CAMPAIGN STRATEGISTS, ESPECIALLY AT the presidential level, know well just how easy it is to fool the public. No ad goes out without significant data from polls and focus groups to ensure its effectiveness. Glenn Kessler, who writes the Fact Checker column at the *Washington Post*, tells a story about the head of a super PAC who chewed him out after Kessler called him on a deceptive ad. "This was after he was screaming at me about something I had written, and he laughed and said, 'I actually don't give a hoot what you say, because these ads work.'"

This is the challenge now facing the political press, which has largely embraced the cause of correcting politicians when they run astray. As recently as the 1980s, journalists stayed on the sidelines when politicians fibbed, preferring to report on the back-and-forth rather than get involved in adjudicating the underlying merits of each claim. There were some early efforts to fact-check Ronald Reagan, who argued, among other things, that vegetation was the major source of air pollution. But when George H.W. Bush ran an ad in 1988 falsely claiming that Michael Dukakis "opposed virtually every defense system we have developed," including the Stealth bomber, his charge went mostly unchallenged. Dukakis did support the Stealth bomber and other defense systems.

The move to push for more accuracy began in earnest in the 1990s and evolved into the fact-checking outfits of today. It is grueling, sometimes messy work, given the complexity of the claims made in the course of a campaign day. Obama routinely says, for example, that use of renewable energy doubled under his watch, which is true only if you define *renewable* to mean just wind and solar energy. Rom-

ney claims that he can cut income tax rates 20% and still raise the same revenue with the same progressivity by eliminating deductions and loopholes. Using traditional budget scoring, this is not possible, though some conservative economists say the cuts should be judged outside traditional metrics, assuming new economic growth that would make the math add up. But there is much debate over the legitimacy of such predictions. "Truth is not a binary," says Bill Adair, who founded PolitiFact, a site that employs 35 reporters and won the Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 2008 campaign. "We recognize that truth is in shades of gray and different interpretations can be valid."

But even when there is little gray area, the fact checkers often find themselves sidelined or, worse, used as tools of dishonest campaigns. Both the Romney and Obama operations often cite fact checkers to underscore their opponents' deceptions but have resisted changing their own behavior. More and more, the worst deceptions fly under the radar, with micro-targeted mailings and radio spots that can escape the attention of fact checkers. One of the most deceptive spots of the 2008 campaign was an Obama radio ad that claimed McCain "stood in the way" of stem-cell research despite McCain's long record of support. Though it's easy to track down television spots posted on YouTube, reporters and fact checkers then had to find out about the ad from the McCain campaign.

In late September, Brooks Jackson, a veteran CNN reporter who runs FactCheck.org, convened his colleagues, including Kessler, Adair and Jim Drinkard of the Associated Press, to discuss their craft at the National Press Club. "Do you see places where either campaign has paid

a price for misrepresenting facts?" Jackson asked them. Several seconds of silence followed. "Well, that's kind of depressing," Jackson said. Eventually, Kessler chimed in by noting that Romney has stopped saying in stump speeches that the U.S. is the only country on earth where hands are put over hearts during the national anthem. Kessler disproved the claim with YouTube video from other countries. "He dropped that the very next day," Kessler said. Not exactly a huge score.

The Question of Character

THE GREAT IRONY IN THIS CURIOUS CHAPTER in American politics is that both campaigns have made telling the truth a central message and a core qualification in each man's case to be President. In the run-up to the first of three debates in October, both campaigns charged that deceptions by the other guy would be a window into his essential character. "He's trying to fool people," Romney told reporters on his plane. "Facts will matter," said Obama aide David Axelrod in a memo in response.

As a strategic matter, this makes sense; the best defense is often a strong offense. But when politicians speak of truth telling in such high-minded terms, they risk hypocrisy. In the final weeks of September, Obama seemed to acknowledge this risk by admitting in an interview with CBS News that his campaign sometimes goes "overboard" and that this is something that "happens in politics." Romney has refused to waver. "We've been absolutely spot on," he told CNN.

The October debates will offer one of the last chances to expose falsehoods. "What debates are really good at is dispensing a caricature of the other side," explains Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a communications professor at the University of Pennsylvania who helped found FactCheck.org. "Except for debates, you don't get a lot of two-sided information."

But when the final book is written on this campaign, one-sided deception will still have played a central role. As it stands, the very notions of fact and truth are employed in American politics as much to distort as to reveal. And until the voting public demands something else, not just from the politicians they oppose but also from the ones they support, there is little reason to suspect that will change.

—WITH REPORTING BY ALEX ALTMAN AND ALEX ROGERS/WASHINGTON

**FACT CHECKERS
OFTEN FIND THEM-
SELVES SIDELINED
OR, WORSE, USED AS
TOOLS OF DISHONEST
CAMPAIGNS**