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“Denial” in American Life  
by Daniel Rose

35% of registered U.S. Democrats believe George W. Bush knew in advance of the 9/11 World Trade Center attack, according to Rasmussen polls; and between 31% and 46% of registered Republicans believe Barack Obama is a Muslim, according to other polls. Neither group seems troubled by lack of supporting facts.

Most of us casually dismiss holders of those views as oddities, and we are equally casual about our public’s growing inability to engage in rational exchanges of opposing views on a large number of important questions.

“Denial”—the refusal to accept the reality of unpleasant facts—has become a common feature of American life. We hear what we want to hear, and the ancient concept “audi alteram partem”—“hearing the other side”—has been forgotten. The absence of reasoned discourse and thoughtful examination of opposing positions is itself a subject meriting discussion, since the price we will pay without it will be painful.

On some subjects, our denial is self-evident; on others, it is curious; on others still, it is self-destructive.

The state of the American economy, for example, is a clear instance of “self-evident denial.” One half of our Congress refuses to entertain any thought of revenue increase (called taxes), the other half refuses to consider substantial decreases in expenditures (called entitlements); yet

both realize that our current and projected deficits indicate impending catastrophe.

To be specific, the 40-year average of our debt-to-GNP ratio has been 37%; today it is twice that and rising. Interest charges on that debt have historically averaged 5.7% per annum but today our interest rates are at an artificial low of 2.5%. Unchecked, those interest payments must in time rise and strangle our economy.

Without a major immediate restructuring of our short term, intermediate term and long term economic thinking, all our economists acknowledge the likely prospect of a severe crisis whose timing, depth and length defy prediction. The example of Greece is very much on everyone's mind.

At a moment when militant extremists in Congress control their respective political parties, virtually no discussions of compromise are taking place in Washington, while the nation at large watches in stunned fascination like a mesmerized frog about to be eaten by an approaching snake.

The International Monetary Fund's annual report discusses the prospect of a "profound shock" to global financial markets if the U.S, protector of the world's reserve currency, defaults on its debt payments. Moody's Investor Service foresees the possible downgrading of U.S. debt to Double A from its present Triple A rating, with other ratings (such as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac) dropping accordingly, with unpredictable consequences.

Meanwhile, "back at the ranch," that prominent economic savant Michele Bachmann dismisses such talk as "scare tactics." Her team tells her that if our debt ceiling of \$14.3 trillion is not raised by August 2<sup>nd</sup>, our government can easily pay its monthly interest charges of \$18 billion by "greatly scaling back other functions." What that will do, both to

domestic peace and to international confidence in our bonds, is not mentioned.

So much for the short term. For the longer term, the IMF forecasts U.S. economic growth at below 3% per annum through 2016, and Laura Tyson, former Chair of Bill Clinton's Council of Economic Advisors, says the U.S. might not see employment reach pre-recession levels until 2023.

"Self-evident denial" seems the appropriate term for the American public's present relative serenity concerning our economy. With the world's highest medical costs, its largest military, an aging population, taxes that are among the world's lowest and relentlessly growing deficits, we refuse to look ahead. The level of national debate is embarrassing—"irritable mental gestures that seek to resemble ideas" (Lionel Trilling's phrase) have displaced thoughtful presentations of facts and their consequences; Tea Party leader Grover Norquist's characterization of bipartisanship as "date rape" is one example among many. Debaters on both sides seem oblivious of where—absent compromise—their respective positions are leading us.

"Curious denial," on the other hand, is demonstrated by the total lack of discussion in the American Jewish community of the long term ramifications of a two-state vs. one-state solution for the Israelis and Palestinians.

American Jews are generally considered a rather astute group; and they care deeply about the well-being of Israel. However, the "blank check" they are encouraging for Israel's leaders (who are being driven by domestic politics of which most Americans are unaware) may in time make a viable Palestinian state impossible.

No rational person dismisses the complexities of the problems involved: the profound mutual distrust and the fears they engender, the ancient grievances, the troubling “facts on the ground”; and no one thinks successful resolution will be either easy or quick. But few American Jewish voices are heard asking whether time is working for or against the Israelis.

The ramifications of the failure to create two stable adjoining states receives almost zero discussion among your Jewish neighbors or friends. The 1.3 million Arabs living in Israel today seem willing now to accept second-class status. At some point in the 21st century, however, with one man/one vote and an Arab majority in “one state,” life will look different. Failure to contemplate the demographics of a one-state solution—with a Muslim majority—is one case of “curious denial” by those who should know better, and the dismaying possibility of a “failed state” like Somalia or Yemen on Israel’s borders is another. “Curious” today, perhaps “tragic” tomorrow.

“Self-destructive denial” is the saddest of the cases because, as with a self-inflicted wound, seeking someone else to blame just exacerbates the problem. The complex, evolving situation of blacks in America today is a case in point. The remarkable contrast in all aspects of life between those American blacks who are successfully entering the American mainstream and those who remain trapped in a mindset of anger, nihilism and alienation is profound.

The traditional black American narrative of disenfranchised, victimized, marginalized people angrily pounding on closed doors, demanding admission, is becoming less and less relevant. In our increasingly pluralistic and ever-evolving society, the time has arrived for a new black American narrative, one that looks forward with hope and determination rather than backward with despair, and one that

acknowledges the growing diversity—in mindset and in socio-economic conditions—among blacks in America. Those with education and with stable families, with the skills, high aspirations and determination to invest in their own “human capital,” are rising in all areas of our society.

The situation of many blacks in the inner city, however, where prominent demagogues send a counter-productive message of defeat to nihilistic, semi-literate young people trapped in a “dead end” counter culture, is a fact of life that should be faced.

Despite heart-breaking rates of school dropouts, unmarried teenage births, prison incarcerations and HIV-AIDS infections, painfully few voices are heard encouraging inner city youth to stay in school, to acquire the education required for upward mobility, or to change the anti-social mindset that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will prevent young people from competing successfully in an increasingly automated, globalized and competitive world.

Is “denial” of the importance of education today “self-destructive?” Yes: Necessary, no. Society loses, but the greatest losers are inner city young people themselves. Education is the true Civil Rights issue of our day. It is the great equalizer, the only “magic bullet” we know to bring submerged groups into the economic and social mainstream; and we must shout that from the rooftops.

Americans are in denial about many other problems—our short term reliance on fossil fuels, for example, and our long term ecological challenges among them. If Japan has a nuclear crisis and Germany forswears all atomic energy while France embraces it wholeheartedly, we should at least discuss the question.

What, then, can be done to raise the level of public debate today? First,

no subjects should be “off the table” for examination, research and discussion. Second, we must rethink how we consider these subjects. Two approaches would help—remembering the Moynihan Dictum and forgetting ad hominem reasoning.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s statement that, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts,” should be pounded into every undergraduate. Objective and dispassionate examination of all relevant facts, especially those of “the other guy,” would be an important first step for all of us to take.

A second step would be to recall the concept that “facts are not responsible for those who believe them.” Just because I find, say, Noam Chomsky’s anti-American diatribes repellent doesn’t mean that every word out of his mouth must be mistaken; and just because I admire, say, Albert Schweitzer, doesn’t mean that I must necessarily agree with everything he says.

Dispassionate consideration of all the factors involved in the major questions facing us should concern us all. It may no longer be a luxury, but a necessity for us to recognize and combat what Richard Hofstadter called *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and for us to return to civilized discourse. Our well-being and survival may depend on it.

(Daniel Rose’s talks may be found on [www.danielrose.org](http://www.danielrose.org))