

# The Chilling Reality of Alternative Facts

BY JOHN C. GREGORY JR.

I recently attended a meeting in that venerable Philadelphia institution, the Union League. I am not a member, but I have been a guest and occasionally attend events held there. In any case, located in the grand center hallway on the first floor, about midway between the front door on Broad Street and the rear door on 15th Street, there is a large painting. Actually, there are several large paintings, but the one that caught my eye during this last visit was a large painting of Thomas Phillip “Tip” O’Neill, a Democrat and former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, sitting at President Ronald Reagan’s bedside, consoling him with a hand laid gently on the president’s near arm.

What made me stop, look and think about that painting is that it struck me how far the members of our present government have digressed from such a wonderful showing of bipartisanship. To me, this painting represented a time when our elected representatives—from Congress to the president—acted with civility toward one another as a tenet of our democracy, as important as the transition of power through peaceful elections.

Perhaps it was because of their shared Irish heritage, but when Tip O’Neill and President Reagan crossed party lines, it was for the common good of the country. Just as important, when they did not agree, they did so with a dignity and respect befitting their positions of leadership.

Where has all this goodwill gone? Today, our government is infected with a political rancor unlike anything I have witnessed in my five-plus decades. I have vivid recollections of the civil rights movements, the anti-war movement, the inception of the women’s movement, but nowhere have the battle lines between political beliefs been more entrenched and polarizing than they are today.

It seems to me the system is broken. But what is also strikingly obvious to me is that the proverbial fish is rotting from the head down. In other words, I attribute the entire problem for the gulf which currently separates us as Americans to the president. His use of hate speech, threats, taunts and verbal attacks on his fellow Americans is seemingly designed to purposefully incite the strong divisive feelings that permeate our political climate. His misleading and outright lying - the use of “alternative facts”

as his handlers have described it - to the American people is without precedent. It is more akin to a third-world country and reminds me of the long-rambling, sometimes incoherent speeches of a Fidel Castro or Pedro Morales than of an American president. It’s like one of those quizzes on social media, where everyone looks at the same image but disagrees on what’s shown. Two-thirds of the respondents say “I saw a yellow dress” and the other third says “I saw a blue dress.” How can we all be hearing the same antagonistic rhetoric, but comprehend two completely different meanings?

This demarcation was never as apparent as with the hearings for Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Keep in mind, the words and actions of the Republican majority followed their political maneuvering to avoid appointing President Obama’s candidate, the fully qualified Judge Merrick Garland in 2016. Taking specific, concerted steps to curtail the hearings and limit any investigation when the sexual assault

allegations were made against the candidate illuminated their disregard for the feelings of women and the crime of sexual assault. Ironically, these actions were upstaged by a hysterical, disingenuous candidate who demonstrated a completely injudicious temperament as he loudly blamed others for his problems, asserted conspiracy theories and overtly castigated and lashed out at the Democrats and his accusers.



A moderate, my allegiance was based more on financial motives than social policy, but a Republican all the same. This president took my party from me. I am now proud to say I am on the side of intelligence.

It is not coincidental that the ABA withdrew its endorsement of Justice Kavanaugh, and that John Paul Stevens, a former U.S. Supreme Court Justice, said the candidate was not fit for the court. Despite the candidate's breach of the Judicial Canon of Ethics, in some scholars' opinions, and lack of propensity for the highest court in the land, the president doubled down on the chasm dividing the American people. He taunted and criticized the assault victim and called the Democrats evil, among other things.

In my opinion, the emperor has no clothes. It is as plain as the scowl on his face that he is not a president for all the people. He doesn't even try. Instead, he is not only forcing America to be nationalistic in the international arena, but he is rupturing the bond that joins Americans on the hope he can leverage his core followers into further political gain—not for all Americans, but for one American: him.

To think that I used to share a political party with this president is not easy for me to comprehend. I had been a card-carrying Republican since Ronald Reagan. A moderate, my allegiance was based more on financial motives than social policy, but a Republican all the same. This president took my

party from me. I am now proud to say I am on the side of intelligence. I am on the side of the political spectrum that embraces diversity, invites immigrants and deplors hate speech fraught with self-serving alternative facts.

This piece will publish before the mid-term elections. These elections are a Rorschach test for the American people. How do we see our democracy? How do we hope our image as Americans is seen throughout the world? How can we grow and thrive as a people, a culture, not only for those with stability in their lives, but for the least of us as well?

I urge the American people to stand up to this tyranny and hold it up to the glaring light of day for what it is. I urge the American people to show those sowing these seeds of division and hatred that they are out-of-touch. Let us stand on the shoulders of the great leaders whose statesmanship and love of country created the cornerstones of our democratic principles.

This Editorial is dedicated to the memory and spirit of Senator John McCain. ■

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