

The Psychology of Fact vs. Fiction

By Dr. Dan Bishop

Experiments in psychology have convincingly demonstrated that we humans have a tendency to resist changing our opinions even when confronted by overwhelming evidence that we are wrong. Often, this is of little consequence. If I strongly believe that little green men are abducting humans, my neighbors may think I'm wacky, but so what?

But there are times when reluctance to change our minds works against our own best interests. Consider the firm belief some hold that childhood immunizations cause autism. Studies have conclusively shown that this belief is false. Yet parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated are not only putting their own children at risk for mumps, measles, whooping cough, etc., but by creating a fracture in "herd immunity" they are opening the door for these diseases to re-emerge in the community as a whole, thus endangering my children and grandchildren as well as their own.

In the past few years we have seen the emergence of a populist movement that believes that government regulations should be reduced or eliminated. The Republican party has embraced this philosophy and is being cheered for its efforts in rolling back regulations and reducing spending by eviscerating agencies such as the EPA, NIH, NSF and CDC. Unfortunately, this serves mostly to benefit the major corporations and financial institutions. The regulations and agencies being attacked were put in place to provide us with protections from the greed and corruption often exhibited by these very entities.

Consider for example the financial protections put in place in 1933 to prevent another Great Depression. These protections were removed when President Clinton repealed the Glass-Seagal Act in 1999. Ten years later the financial markets nearly collapsed, resulting in great losses to many Americans and an agonizingly long recession. Today, Republicans are working hard to eliminate the Dodd Frank Act, including the Consumer Financial Protection Act, protections (regulations) put in place after the 2008 financial collapse. The banks are already frothing at the bit. Will we never learn? (Re-read the opening paragraph.)

Of grave concern today are the insidious consequences of climate change. Whether you choose to believe it or not, climate change is real. The mountain of evidence supporting this fact is overwhelming, with supporting data covering decades of research in dozens of scientific disciplines. Only through immediate strong and effective federal action can there be any hope at this point of reducing the consequences of climate change in our children's and grandchildren's lives. Yet many Republicans insist on eliminating regulations and tearing down what little progress has been made, firmly believing that climate change is a hoax. (Re-read the opening paragraph).

If you are convinced that dismantling government protections is a good thing, how much evidence will it take for you to consider that just maybe you have been wrong? How much harm to our economy and environment are you willing to endure before accepting that government regulations are necessary protections from corporate exuberance for our own well being? How much more degradation to our world's environmental health will you ignore before waking up to the fact that climate change is real and that the problem is too big for any entity but the federal government and its scientific agencies to effectively deal with?