

Just Say No to Truthiness

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News –October 21, 2012

The guy you're voting for in the Presidential election is a liar. But, before you get upset, those aren't fighting words. My choice is a liar too.

As harsh as that sounds, I don't know what else to make of the ample evidence candidates Obama and Romney continue to play fast and loose with the truth, as do their respective running mates and surrogates. Don't even get me started with the Super PACs who have no need to even feign truthfulness beneath cloaks of anonymity.

In the age of fact checkers, even they can't keep up with the pace of the untruthful spins. But, they try. Following Tuesday's Presidential debate on Long Island, I was curious to see how the candidates' statements stack up against facts.

Checking with PolitiFact.com, the Pulitzer Prize winning website of the Tampa Bay Times, I viewed the file of ratings on claims made by each candidate. Every item checked by the Times is rated on a scale of True, Mostly True, Half True, Mostly False, False, or Pants on Fire.

Summing Trues with Mostly Trues alongside the Mostly False, False, and Pants on Fire ratings, I tried to gauge the record each candidate has for accurately telling his story and/or characterizing the record and positions of his opponent. For the sake of clarity, we'll ignore those sneaky but dangerous half truths.

It's not a pretty picture. Considering True and Mostly True Statements, 45% of President Obama's claims hit the mark. For Governor Romney, that figure is 30%. Tallying Mostly False, False, and Pants on Fire ratings, Obama rates 28% and Romney 42%. Those figures include 440 claims by Obama and 190 claims by Romney.

Lest we simply compare scores and declare a winner, that's not the point. All lies are not equal. And, when each side is being truthful less than half of the time, we have much to sift through as voters to make an informed choice.

The FactCheck.org Project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center provides pointed analysis of each Presidential and Vice Presidential debate. The facts show the sides not only distorting the truth, but vehemently repeating claims long since proven false.

This is nothing new, but, we seem to have crossed a line. At the highest level, and in the races down the ballot, getting caught in a lie is no longer embarrassing. Perhaps Romney pollster Neil Newhouse spoke for a generation earlier this year when he said "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers."

But, comedian Steven Colbert nailed it back in 2005 when he coined and satirized the word “truthiness.” Truthiness, said Colbert is “what you want the facts to be as opposed to what the facts are. What feels like the right answer as opposed to what reality will support.”

Campaign strategists knew it before Colbert spelled it out. We are all suckers for truthiness. Truthiness is the chocolate bar filled with creamy caramel and toasted nuts we can’t stop thinking about, even when we know we need to eat the broccoli of truth. We like to hear what we want to hear.

So, what’s the point? If both sides lie more often than not, why bother to check the facts? Why even participate in the political process by voting? Why bum people out by writing this column?

Well, first of all, don’t get bummed out. Even though I called both men liars, I believe Mitt Romney and Barack Obama are decent, caring men with good intentions. But, they’re caught up in a game where they’ve been taught to believe lying is what everyone does. And, sooner or later, expectations drive behavior. It’s not unlike the latest doping allegations against Lance Armstrong and a host of other professional cyclists. At some point, when “everyone is doing it,” contestants convince themselves it’s no longer cheating. Or, in this case, it’s no longer lying.

I encourage you to visit multiple fact check sites. Do this not to catch the “other guy” in a lie or to prove one man is the better choice or a lesser evil. Do this now because it’s going to matter later. In the 21st century, political campaigns may be won or lost in the land of make believe. But, our real problems are and always will be solved in the world of cold, hard facts. One man will emerge this November tasked to solve those problems; the opposing party will stand in opposition armed with? You guessed it: truthiness.

You and I must insist both sides do better.