


[PRINT THIS](#)

Lies of Mass Destruction

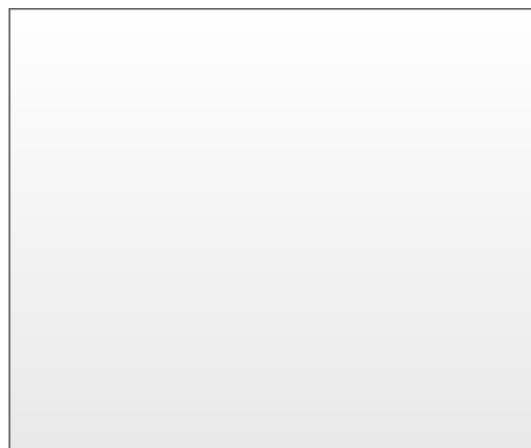
The same skewed thinking that supports a Saddam-9/11 link explains the power of health-care myths.

By **Sharon Begley** | Newsweek Web Exclusive
Aug 25, 2009

Not being a complete idiot (contrary to the assertion of many readers I've been hearing from), I was not exactly surprised at the e-mails I got in response to **my story analyzing why the myths about health-care reform**—even the totally loony ones, like death panels—have gained such traction. One retired military officer called me "nothing more than an 'Obama Zombie' that has lost touch with reality," while a housewife sweetly suggested that I sign up for "socialistic medicine" and die, the sooner the better. (My kids get upset when people wish me dead, but hey, they'll survive.) But now I think I understand people who believe the health-care lies—and the Obama-was-born-in-Kenya lie—even better than when I wrote that piece.

Some people form and cling to false beliefs about health-care reform (or Obama's citizenship) despite overwhelming evidence thanks to a mental phenomenon called motivated reasoning, says sociologist **Steven Hoffman**, visiting assistant professor at the University at Buffalo. "Rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief," he says, "people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe." And God knows, in the Internet age there is no dearth of sources to confirm even the most ludicrous claims (my favorite being that the moon landings were faked). "For the most part," says Hoffman, "people completely ignore contrary information" and are able to "develop elaborate rationalizations based on faulty information."

His conclusions arise from a study he and six colleagues conducted. They were looking at the well-known phenomenon of Americans believing that Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks. Some people, mostly liberals, have blamed that on **false information and innuendo spread by the Bush administration and its GOP allies** (by former members of the Bush White House, too, **as recently as this past March**). (As **Dick Cheney said in June**, suspicion of a link "turned out not to be true.") But the researchers think another force is at work. In a paper to be published in the September issue of the journal *Sociological Inquiry* (you have to subscribe to the journal to read the full paper, but the authors **kindly posted it on their Web site here**), they argue that some Americans believe the Saddam-9/11 link because it "made sense of the administration's decision to go to war against Iraq . . . [T]he fact of the war led to a search for a justification for it, which led them to infer the existence of ties between Iraq and 9/11," they write.



For their study, the scientists whittled down surveys filled out by 246 voters, of whom 73 percent believed in a Saddam-9/11 link, to 49 believers who were willing to be interviewed at length in October 2004. Even after the 49 were shown newspaper articles reporting that the 9/11 Commission had not found any evidence linking Saddam and 9/11, and quoting President Bush himself denying it, 48 stuck to their guns: yup, Saddam Hussein, directly or indirectly, brought down the Twin Towers.

When the scientists asked the participants why they believed in the link, they offered many justifications. Five argued that Saddam supported terrorism generally, or that evidence of a link to 9/11 might yet emerge. These counterarguments are not entirely illogical. But almost everyone else offered some version of "I don't know; I don't know anything"—that is, outright confusion over the conflict between what they believed and what the facts showed—or switched subjects to the invasion of Iraq. As one put it, when asked about his Saddam-9/11 belief, "There is no doubt in my mind that if we did not deal with Saddam Hussein when we did, it was just a matter of time when we would have to deal with him." In other words, holding fast to the Saddam-9/11 belief helped people make sense of the decision to go to war against Iraq.

"We refer to this as 'inferred justification,'" says Hoffman. Inferred justification is a sort of backward chain of reasoning. You start with something you believe strongly (the invasion of Iraq was the right move) and work backward to find support for it (Saddam was behind 9/11). "For these voters," says Hoffman, "the sheer fact that we were engaged in war led to a post-hoc search for a justification for that war."

For an explanation of this behavior, look no further than the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory holds that when people are presented with information that contradicts preexisting beliefs, they try to relieve the cognitive tension one way or another. They process and respond to information defensively, for instance: their belief challenged by fact, they ignore the latter. They also accept and seek out confirming information but ignore, discredit the source of, or argue against contrary information, studies **have shown**.

Which brings us back to health-care reform—in particular, the **apoplexy at town-hall meetings** and the effectiveness of the **lies being spread about health-care reform proposals**. First of all, let's remember that 59,934,814 voters cast their ballot for John McCain, so we can assume that tens of millions of Americans believe the wrong guy is in the White House. To justify that belief, they need to find evidence that he's leading the country astray. What better evidence of that than to seize on the misinformation about Obama's health-care reform ideas and believe that he wants to insure illegal aliens, for example, and give the Feds electronic access to doctors' bank accounts?

Obama's opponents also need to find evidence that their reading of him back in November was correct. They therefore seize on "confirmation" that he wants to, for instance, redistribute the wealth, as in his **"spread the wealth around" remark to Joe the Plumber**—finding such confirmation in the claims that health-care reform will do just that, redistributing health care from those who have it now to the 46 million currently uninsured. Similarly, they seize on anything that confirms **the "socialist" label that got pinned on Obama** during the campaign, or the pro-abortion label—anything to comfort themselves that they made the right choice last November.

There are legitimate, fact-based reasons to oppose health-care reform. But some of the loudest opposition is the result of confirmatory bias, cognitive dissonance, and other examples of mental processes that have gone off the rails.

Find this article at

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/213625>

© 2009