"It's Not Accidental at All"—Media Literacy, "Whataboutism," and Occam's Razor

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Abstract

In an era of extreme political polarization, the impact of disinformation on Americans is an issue with which social studies teachers will have to contend. Equipping our students with media literacy skills is no longer a luxury, but is instead a critical component of an effective social studies education. However, it is less about strategies and resources and more about cultivating a "habit of mind" that helps students discern the presence of distortion, manipulation, and falsehood in our current political environment. This article details the role of logical tools like "Occam's Razor" which can help our students maintain an objective foothold on our political narrative.

Keywords: media literacy, partisanship, habits of mind, disinformation, polarization, "Occam's Razor," "whataboutism"

Introduction

On January 6, 2021, a mob of insurrectionist supporters of President Donald J. Trump tried to block the certification of electoral votes at the U.S. Capitol building. In the resulting riot, five people were killed, dozens were injured, and millions of Americans were traumatized by the violence—itself prefaced by two months' worth of incitement, dishonesty, and outright falsehoods from the nation's chief executive. In the wake of the attack, Senator James Langford (R-Oklahoma) issued a press release in which he decried the attack:

> Why in God's name would someone think attacking law enforcement and occupying the United States Capitol is the best way to show you're right? Why would you do that?... We're the United States of America. We disagree on a lot of things, and we have a lot of spirited debate in this room. But we talk it out, and we honor each other—even in our disagreement. That person, that person, that person is not my enemy. That's my fellow American. (Office of Senator James Lankford, 2021)

There is more than a little irony in this statement, in that it was Lankford who was speaking in opposition to the certification of the presidential election—an opposition supported by no believable evidence, rejected by multiple courts, and in defiance of all conventional democratic norms—when the U.S. Senate chamber was hastily cleared before rioters broke down the doors (Polansky, 2021).

The crisis in the American political system, characterized by extreme partisanship and rancor, has multiple causes—and certainly, the sort of disingenuousness practiced by Sen. Lankford, and others in the Republican Party, is one of them. But a greater threat may be the wave of disinformation that has afflicted our public discourse, in multiple formats. The January 6 attack on the Capitol was horrifying, but it was hardly unpredictable, given that the rioters had been, for years, subject to (and participants in) a mass campaign of lies, distortions, and paranoia.

This disinformation is carried over television networks, via the Internet, and across various social media platforms. It would be difficult, if not herculean, to expect social studies teachers to be able to contain it, or even realistically reduce its impact. What we can do, however, is try to equip students with the media literacy skills to navigate it, respond to it, and—where necessary—reject it. This concept, *media literacy*, is not necessarily a set of particular skills or strategies; instead, what students most need to acquire, in order to practice this form of literacy, is the habit of mind typified by logic and rationality. In this article, I discuss the role of logical tools like "Occam's Razor," a law of logic which posits that, of two competing theories, the simpler explanation is to be preferred, and how it can be used to help students maintain an objective foothold on our political narrative.

"It's Not Accidental at All"—The Role of Media (and Civic) Literacy

The idea of an American civic character, born in post-revolutionary republicanism and nurtured in our new public institutions, was central to the Jeffersonian idea of political identity. In the 20th century, mass media became a more ingrained part of American public life, and there were increased calls for programs to increase literacy in that arena. As movies and newsreels became a more common feature of American life, teachers, in many cases, responded in the classroom—Hobbs and Jensen (2009) describe a 1922 article in the journal *Visual Education*, in which a teacher relates his use of motion pictures as a strategy for teaching writing (p. 2). It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, when media literacy became joined, in many

educators' view, with civic literacy, viewed by then "as a critical practice of citizenship, part of the exercise of democratic rights and civil responsibilities" (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 3).

In the internet age, however, things changed—or, perhaps more to the point, they accelerated. Students' access to information from a staggering array of sources increased exponentially, and what seemed like a windfall for scholarship and education quickly showed another, more harmful dimension—the possibility (even likelihood) of the spread of disinformation. It is important for teachers to recognize that the term *disinformation* is distinct from its corollary, *misinformation*—as Renee DiResta, the director of the nonprofit organization, Data for Democracy, put it recently, the latter is "something that's just accidentally wrong, it's the kind of stuff that your grandma will send you in an email," while the former "is misinformation with an agenda, it's quite deliberately done [,] looking to either spread a message to increase societal divisions ...it's used as a tool. It's a tactic of information warfare. It's not accidental at all, it's quite deliberate" (Johnson, 2018). Various social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube rely on "tracking pixels" which recognize user habits and target them for particular groups, videos, or threads; by collectivizing people who are spreading either mistaken beliefs or deliberate frauds, these platforms are distorting the ability of individuals to navigate a universe of "hoaxes, rumors, and falsehoods" (Frenkel, Alba, & Zhong, 2020; Lytvynenko, 2020a).

This distortion increased alarmingly during the ascendancy of Donald Trump. His willingness to manipulate the media and lie—directly, indirectly, and unceasingly (Kessler, 2021)—meant that America's polarization was (similar to the flood of disinformation via the internet) accelerated over the years of his presidency. By the time of the events of January 6, 2021, when thousands of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol building, the evidence was clear—most, if not all of these people, genuinely believed that the presidential election of 2020 had been rigged and that Donald Trump had really won (Tavernise, 2021). And they believed this because they had been told so—not only by Trump, but also by various media outlets, through a mix of half-truths, distortions, and outright lies (Frenkel, 2021; Hobbs, Kanižaj & Pereira, 2019; Hurst, 2018; Seitz & Klepper, 2020).

Though the effects of this lack of media literacy have been most pronounced in the last few years, it was identified by researchers and educators well before that. A 2016 study from Stanford University (Wineburg, et al., 2016) showed how easily students—a generation that

many teachers believed to be the most media-savvy in American history—can still fall victim to the deluge of "fake news." Students in grades 6-12 and in colleges were asked to evaluate online sources of information (presented in tweets, online comments, and articles). After analyzing almost 8,000 student responses, the authors were "shocked" by the "stunning and dismaying consistency" with which students were fooled by false or inaccurate attestations (Wineburg, et al., 2016, p. 4). Our hope, that students raised as "digital natives," would be able to traverse the complexities of the new media, may have been misplaced.

To be fair, educators and the media industry have tried to respond, with varying degrees of success. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), in 2016, signaled its support for increasing the focus on media literacy, especially the "skills and habits of literacy for print and non-print mediated messages" (Sperry & Baker, 2016, p. 183). These skills were also linked, for social studies educators, with the habits of mind considered essential to an effective civic character—critical thinking, effective communication, and active citizenship (LeCompte, Blevins, & Ray, 2017, p. 17). It was not only social studies teachers, as well; the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) formed a task force in 2020 that was charged with promoting critical media literacy—which it identified as "the practice of critically analyzing media texts and institutions with emphasis on the relationship between power and knowledge, specifically in relation to issues of inequalities in access, representation, and economics" (Hobbs, et al., 2021, p. 4). Media advocacy groups and nonprofit organizations have also researched, promoted, and publicized strategies for critical media literacy among our students and citizens ("Disinformation Immunity," 2020; Kahlenberg & Janey, 2016; Lytvynenko, 2020b; Miller, 2021).

Still, it is difficult to stay ahead of the flood—especially since this is a flood that has been decades in the making. The NCTE, for instance, has been promoting media literacy as far back as 1975, when the group issued a resolution advocating for educators to focus on the "new media" that required "developing a new form of literacy, new critical abilities 'in reading, listening, viewing, and thinking' that would enable students to deal constructively with complex new modes of delivering information" ("Resolution on Promoting Media Literacy," 1975).

Schools, for their part, have also been tilting at this windmill for a long period of time. But Americans, through their elected officials, have signaled again and again that the value of a civic education is not comparable to, or as desirable as, other subjects. Danielle Allen, the

director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, made this point when she noted that, nationwide, the U.S. now spends “$54 per year per kid of federal dollars on STEM education and only 5 cents per year per kid on civics” (Anderson, 2020). It is clear, all the same, that schools play an important role—maybe the most important one—not in necessarily debunking false claims, but equipping students to do so themselves.

As the saying goes, “a lie can be halfway around the world before the truth is still putting on its shoes”—an ironic phrase, in a way, since the figure to whom it is most often attributed (Mark Twain) did not say it (Chokshi, 2017). A more appropriate characterization, perhaps, can be found in the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia,* in which a character says acerbically, “A man who tells lies, like me, merely hides the truth. But a man who tells half-lies has forgotten where he put it” (Lean, 1962). The spread of “half-lies”—falsehoods that have the sheen of truth—make it difficult for teachers to employ effective strategies to promote literacy among our students. A 2018 Rand Corporation report, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public,* identifies “truth decay” as “an inability to agree on an established set of facts or to take into account expert analysis,” a feature of contemporary society that the report framed “as serious a threat to the United States as any adversary or terrorist group in the world today” (Bauman, 2018). The features of this syndrome—an erosion in civil discourse, the paralysis of local, state, and federal government institutions, and “uncertainty in federal policy” (Bauman, 2018, p. xvi)—mean that teachers, despite all best efforts, are confronting a landscape where individual strategies and resources may avail us comparatively little.

The danger of all this is hard to quantify, but equally hard to overstate. The emergence of paranoid conspiracy theories, like the “QAnon” family of half-baked mythology, onto the national stage in recent years—and their endorsement by national figures like Trump—have made the very idea of a shared epistemology difficult to imagine. After the 2020 presidential election, polls indicated how far these theories had spread—according to one such poll, nearly 40% of respondents believed that a “deep state” was working to undermine President Trump, while 17% (nearly a fifth of adults in the U.S.) believed that “a group of Satan-worshiping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics” (Jackson, Silverstein, & Newall, 2020). This latter conceit is the central plank of the “QAnon” fantasy structure, if one can be said to exist; and though its believers are not by default political extremists, they do typically share

“conspiratorial worldviews, dark triad personality traits, and a predisposition toward other non-normative behavior” (Enders & Uscinski, 2021). How are teachers supposed to combat these realities—when the conspiracies that afflict large segments of the population are not the result of policy choices or candidate preferences, but are instead the product of embedded, quasi-pathological worldviews?

The real impact of these perspectives is starting to become more evident, in the wake of the 2020 election and the months of lies and distortions that followed. Shortly after the election in November 2020, a poll for CBS News and cited in *The Washington Post* asked individuals who identified as Democrats and Republicans about their views of the opposing political party. While neither set of people regarding the other side as especially ethical or principled, Democrats were twice as likely to believe that Republicans cared about the middle class, while Republicans were three times *less* likely to agree that Democrats were respectful and tolerant of others. Even more alarmingly, Republicans largely believe that Democrats are “unpatriotic, immoral, or lazy,” and that rather than seeing them as political enemies, Republicans are far more likely to see Democrats as “enemies” (Bump, 2021). Other cases point to the danger in the divergence of worldviews. In North Carolina, for example, the state school board recently approved new standards that required social studies teachers to discuss racism—hardly what one would think was a controversial position—whereupon the state’s lieutenant governor and other Republicans criticized the move as “anti-American” and a thinly disguised effort to “indoctrinate” children (Iati, 2021). In Oregon, the state Republican Party adopted a resolution affirming their official belief that the January 6 attack on the Capitol was, in truth, a “false flag” operation, in which leftist opponents of President Trump infiltrated the crowd and spurred the riots, with the goal of using it as a pretext to seize control, similar to the 1933 burning of the Reichstag building (Berman, 2021). These are anecdotal, but indicate troubling political headwinds for social studies teachers.

Even worse, there are recent reports that some teachers themselves are engaged in spreading conspiracy theories in their own classrooms. BuzzFeed News reported in January 2021 that several of the participant in the January 6th riots were educators, and that they were continuing to espouse conspiratorial thinking to their students—in one case, a teacher from Virginia told his students that the riot was “a setup,” and in another, a Wisconsin teacher claiming that the election result was the product of rampant fraud (Fox, 2021; Reinstein, 2021).

Changing (and Unchanging) Attitudes

There has been, in the last several years, a concerted effort by educators to create strategies to help teachers develop critical media literacy, and in so doing to help stem the wave of falsehoods choking our public discourse. While these strategies are undoubtedly useful and well-intentioned, they also all share a common feature that may tend to disable them, in actual classroom use—they are predicated on the idea that, when presented with falsehoods, the people that believed them will willingly let them go.

This is hardly likely. When confronted with "the facts," people will often resort to cognitive dissonance (essentially, holding contradictory thoughts to avoid psychological stress) to avoid accepting a new reality, even in the best of circumstances (Hurst, 2018). Given the current political environment—in which being a "good" Republican means, effectively, unswerving fealty to one person (Herndon, 2021)—the efforts to convince partisans of an alternative reality bears more than a passing resemblance to reeducating former members of a cult. This may sound hyperbolic, but consider the defining characteristics of a cult: an "all-encompassing belief system, extreme devotion to the leader, reluctance to acknowledge criticism of the group or its leader, and a disdain for nonmembers" (Lalich, 2016). Any reasonable observer—and, most likely, a fair number of his own supporters—would agree with this characterization as applied to followers of Donald Trump, a group characterized by intense loyalty to a single individual and a shared sense of grievance, of being "culturally dislocated, disdained, and in danger of being left behind" (Hurst, 2018). And the usual approach for convincing a person about the failings of their position is insufficient in cases of such extreme devotion. Dubrow-Marshall and Dubrow-Marshall (2016) point out that criticizing the group of which a person is a member, is typically perceived as an attack on the person him/herself—"for all intents and purposes, they *are* the group" (p. 1).

The negative connotations of this behavior can be amplified when they derive from a place of moral conviction. Skitka and Morgan (2014) explored how such conviction—which they define as "a meta-cognition that people may have about a given attitude, that is, that the attitude is grounded in core beliefs about fundamental right and wrong" (p. 96)—can internally empower people to pursue actions outside traditional normative guidelines:

> When people have moral certainty about what outcome authorities and institutions should deliver, they do not need to rely on standing perceptions of fairness or legitimacy as a

> proxy to judge the fairness of the system. In these cases, they can simply evaluate whether authorities get it "right." "Right" decisions indicate that authorities and institutions are appropriate and work as they should. "Wrong" answers signal that the system is somehow broken and is not working as it should (Skitka & Morgan, 2014, p. 101).

Their conclusion is that such individuals find it appropriate to reject legitimate authority in pursuit of a "morally correct" outcome, and that such conviction "is associated with rejection of the rule of law and can provide a motivational foundation for violent protest and acts of terrorism" (p. 95). The January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol was, for many participants, undoubtedly borne from a sense of moral conviction—but that sense was nurtured by half-truths and outright lies.

Tools vs. Habits of Mind

It is natural for teachers to seek out pragmatic solutions for educational dilemmas. "What's the best way to teach the concept of Manifest Destiny?" is a question that many teachers have faced, and it infers the need for (and existence of) tools—strategies, resources, materials, or activities which can equip educators to engage with a topic. It also comes with a *prima facie* assumption—that "Manifest Destiny" is worth teaching. The underpinning of that assumption is rarely challenged; what matters to teachers, for the most part, are the "nuts and bolts" of pedagogical choices.

For teaching about critical media literacy, those issues remain, but there are deeper, foundational questions that can (and should) drive our pedagogy. John Dewey, in his 1922 work *Human Nature and Conduct,* refers to a disposition as the underlying motivational/organizational force for our behaviors. We develop these dispositions through experience, every one of which is "a moving force" (Dewey, 1933, p. 38). This concept, *disposition*, has been modulated over the years into a similar concept, "habits of mind." These habits are not "mindless…such as stopping at a red light" (Katz, 1993, p. 16), but instead are conscious, voluntary, and intentional. Ritchhart (2001) assert that dispositions concern not only what one can do, one's abilities, but also what one is disposed to do. Thus dispositions address the often-noticed gap between our abilities and our actions" (Ritchhart, 2001, p.3).

We need to help students become "self-regulated learners…[who] develop intelligent behaviors that support monitoring their education" (Altan, Lane, & Dottin, 2017, p. 8). This

means that teachers cannot only rely on prepackaged materials or strategies on developing media literacy, because they may prove ineffective in combatting the preconceptions, biases, and poorly formed judgments that are themselves, paradoxically, the product of students’ habits of mind. Teachers must instead try to help students develop the critical skills and purposeful behaviors that can serve as habits of mind, in navigating and deciphering our current political discourse. These habits of mind, in turn, can become our students’ tools for separating truth from falsity (or half-truth), and logic from illogic.

“Whataboutism”

In 2017, during an interview with Fox News, Donald Trump was questioned about his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom U.S. intelligence agencies had overwhelmingly concluded led an attempt to subvert the 2016 presidential election on Trump’s behalf. Trump expressed his “respect” for his Russian counterpart; when his questioner responded by saying, “Putin is a killer,” Trump shot back, “"There are a lot of killers. You got a lot of killers. What, you think our country is so innocent?" (Sullivan, 2017).

This tactic—in which an accused party responds to the accusation by changing the subject to a fault of the accuser—has been nicknamed “whataboutism,” and is a commonly used substitute for a Latin phrase, *“tu quoque,*” (“you also”) (Dykstra, 2020, p. 1). Historically, “whataboutism” is has been mostly associated with the late Soviet Union, in which it was practiced regularly as a response to international criticism. Edward Lucas, a longtime journalist based in the USSR, described how Soviet officials would respond to every alleged misdeed with a real or imagined one committed by the U.S.: “So you object to Soviet interventions in eastern Europe? Then what about the American assault on the Nicaraguan Sandinistas?” (Lucas, 2007). It was so pervasive, in fact, that it became a joke among Soviet citizens that even the most anodyne critique of the Soviet government by the United States would earn the same retort, “…and you are lynching Negroes” (Edwards, 2015; Havel, 1980; Zimmer, 2008). As outlandish as that example might be, it has also become a staple of American political discourse, and teaching students to recognize it is a key in helping them develop their own media literacy skills.

Ultimately, “whataboutism” is a logical fallacy, a manifestation of illogic which undermines an argument (or renders it absurd). Some of the more common fallacies that exist, particularly in classrooms, include *ad hominem* attacks (which attack the source of an argument, rather than the argument itself), “straw man” arguments (in which one participant oversimplifies

a counterargument and then attacks that hollow version), or a hasty generalization (in which a conclusion is reached based on insufficient or biased evidence). Beyond its role in developing logical thought, though, the term “whataboutism” came into much more common usage in American political rhetoric in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, in which there were multiple allegations about interference in that election by Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, to support the candidacy of Donald Trump (Dykstra, 2020). Teachers can use this example as a baseline for student comprehension. In 2017, Putin was asked in an interview with NBC News about allegations that Russia had interfered with the 2016 presidential election. Rather than respond directly, Putin called the allegations “a load of nonsense” (Fahrenhold, 2017), accused Americans of having “boring” lives if they believed such assertions, and then engaged in “whataboutism”:

> There’s a theory that Kennedy’s assassination was arranged by the United States intelligence services. So, if this theory is correct and that can’t be ruled out, then what could be easier, in this day and age, than using all the technical means at the disposal of the intelligence services, and using those means to organize some attacks – and then pointing the finger at Russia (de Moraes, 2017).

After the interviewer asked him again about Russian interference in the election, Putin again tried “whataboutism” as a defense: “put your finger anywhere on a map of the world, and everywhere you will hear complaints that American officials are interfering in internal election processes” (Zimmer, 2017). If we can help students understand that these are insufficient answers and an attempt to dodge responsibility for a reasoned response, they will be more effectively equipped to deal with American examples of the type—see below:

Figure 1

Examples of “whataboutism” for classroom use

Example 1
Headline: NPR, March 13, 2017: GOP Health Care Bill Could Leave 24M More Without Coverage By 2026, CBO Says” (https://n.pr/2ZvHUuS)
A new report finds that the Republican bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act would reduce the federal deficit by $337 billion over a decade but would also leave 24 million more Americans uninsured during that same period.

The uninsured estimates from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office could create even greater political hurdles for the GOP bill. That legislation has already drawn opposition from major interest groups, health policy experts, and even some GOP lawmakers. The bill's defenders are touting the lower premiums and deficits that the CBO estimated, but they are also facing questions about what to do about tens of millions of uninsured Americans.
Tweet: Donald Trump, March 13, 2007 (https://bit.ly/3qx6p75)
Example 2
Headline: “Donald Trump isn’t fazed by Vladimir Putin’s journalist murdering,” by Philip Bump, *The Washington Post,* December 18, 2015 (https://wapo.st/3ubKoN1)
Transcript from MSNBC’s Morning Joe, Friday, December 18, 2015 **TRUMP:** When people call you "brilliant" it's always good, especially when the person heads up Russia.

HOST JOE SCARBOROUGH: Well, I mean, also is a person who kills journalists, political opponents and ... invades countries, obviously that would be a concern, would it not?
TRUMP: He's running his country, and at least he's a leader, unlike what we have in this country.
SCARBOROUGH: But, again: He kills journalists that don't agree with him.
TRUMP: Well, I think that our country does plenty of killing, too, Joe. So, you know. There's a lot of stupidity going on in the world right now, Joe. A lot of killing going on. A lot of stupidity. And that's the way it is. But you didn't ask me [that] question, you asked me a different question. So that's fine."

Example 3
Presidential Press Conference, August 15, 2017, New York City *This press conference took place three days after the “Unite the Right” Rally took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. This was a white supremacist rally that resulted in violence and protest, as well as multiple injuries and the murder of a counter-protester, Heather Heyer, by a white supremacist in a car.* (https://politi.co/3k0RlvO)
REPORTER: Senator [John] McCain [of Arizona] said that the alt-right is behind these attacks, and he linked that same group to those that perpetrated the attack in Charlottesville. **TRUMP:** Well, I don't know. I can't tell you. I'm sure Senator McCain must know what he is talking about, but when you say the alt-right, define alt-right to me. You define it. Go ahead. Define it for me, come on, let's go. **REPORTER:** Senator McCain defined them as the same group. **TRUMP:** Okay, what about the alt-left that came charging at [indiscernible] – excuse me – what about the alt-left that came charging at the, as you say, the alt right? Do they have any semblance of guilt?...What about this? What about the fact that they came charging – they came charging with clubs in their hands swinging clubs? Do they have any problem? I think they do.

Teachers can also point out that “whataboutism” is not an approach used only by political conservatives; certainly, liberal politicians and commentators have made similar false claims and

logical errors. However, it is equally important to show how this tactic has become commonplace on the political right over recent years. Even after the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, Republican allies of President Trump were deflecting criticisms by alleging that the Black Lives Matter movement was the liberal equivalent of the insurrectionists (Peters, 2021). During Trump's second impeachment trial, his defense attorneys argued that Democrats have used inflammatory language in the past, and therefore the President cannot be blamed, no matter what the context was (Waldman, 2021).

Occam's Razor

The second "habit of mind" that teachers can use to help students navigate a perplexing media environment is one that has been in use for centuries. Today, it is commonly found in fields as disparate as mathematics, computer science, physics, medicine, and cognitive psychology, even though it began as a philosophical tool. It is named after (or at least, attributed to) William of Ockam, or Occam, an English logician and a Franciscan friar. In Latin, Occam's rule was *Numquam ponenda est pluralitas sine necessitate,* which means "plurality must never be posited without necessity." It is sometimes also elucidated as the *law of economy* or the *law of parsimony*, and though the rule itself was not particularly new—Aristotle had posited something similar, as had Ptolemy—historically, William of Occam receives the credit. This is most likely because of the writings of Sir William Hamilton, who in 1852 coined the phrase "Occam's razor" (referring to its utility in cutting down arguments) (Borowski, 2012).

Essentially, Occam's razor posits that, of two competing theories, the simpler explanation is to be preferred. There have been modern clarifications—for instance, clarifying the theorem to read, "do not multiply *fundamental* entities without necessity" (Baron & Tallant, 2018, p. 596)—and critics, who argue that while the theorem can eliminate unnecessary irrelevancies, it can also "constrain the development of imaginative theories" (Pecker, 2004, p.185). However, it has endured as a useful tool across disciplines, because of its elegance. For modern audiences, a clearer elucidation would be *among competing hypotheses, the one with the fewest assumptions should be selected* ("How to use Occam's Razor Without Getting Cut," 2021). Colloquially, the rule is typically represented as the following: "usually the simplest explanation is the right one."

How might this be applied in a classroom? Teachers can present students with an argument made by a political figure, and ask them to apply Occam's razor to its premise and assumptions. Take, for example, the statements and actions of Donald Trump in the wake of his

electoral defeat in 2020. At one point, Trump complained about the electoral process in Wisconsin, alleging electoral fraud: "In Wisconsin, as an example, where we were way up on election night, they ultimately had us miraculously losing by 20,000 votes. And I can show you right here that Wisconsin, we're leading by a lot, and then at 3:42 in the morning, there was this. It was a massive dump of votes. Mostly Biden" (Yen, Swenson, & Seitz, 2020). He also claimed similar crimes in other states, like Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Arizona—see below:

Figure 2

Donald Trump's tweet of November 4, 2020 (https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/election-results-and-news-11-04-20/h_d9cf20dc4b5a3a9bad6b7e569f46842f)

These claims were repeated in dozens of lawsuits, filed by the Trump campaign, across the country after the election (Helderman, Swaine, & Lee, 2020). Though none found any success, the lies were repeated and amplified by Trump and his followers to such a degree that, by January 2021, an astonishing 72% of Republicans still believed that the election was rigged against Trump (Zhou, 2021).

As discussed earlier, it is unlikely that simply asserting a contrary claim and presenting facts to support it will convince many of these people. An application of Occam's razor as seen below, however, can help students begin to perceive the logical cracks in these arguments. Teachers can take an assertion and present it to students, and then ask them the question at the heart of Occam's question: "how many assumptions would have to be true for this statement to be accurate?"

- **Statement:** The 2020 presidential election was rigged against Donald Trump and the Republican Party.
- **Assumptions:** what would have to be true for this statement to be accurate?

Students would need to see this process modeled by the teacher, since most of them would instinctively gravitate towards either affirming the statement (“yes, I believe this”) or denying it (“that can’t be true”). Instead of granting the premise of the statement, students will have to examine its foundation; if this *were* true, how many factors undergirding it would *also* have to be true?

With regard to the presidential election—to begin with, the president’s political adversaries would have to decide to carry out a criminal enterprise of breathtaking, unprecedented scope. Then, they would have to control a number of state governments and the various agencies and elected officials that administer and oversee a federal election. These nefarious actors would then have to organize the logistics of voter fraud—inventing fraudulent identifications, manufacturing fake voters out of the deceased and undocumented, creating ballots that were practically identical to the real thing. And of course, they would have to do this across several different states, without direct or open coordination; and of these states, more than a few (Georgia and Arizona, for example) were controlled by Republicans (Helderman et al., 2020).

That, then, leads to another assumption that would have to be true—it was not just Democrats who wanted to see Donald Trump defeated, but significant numbers of his own party. And all of this would have to be carried out in near-total secrecy, without a single member of this increasingly vast conspiracy breaking ranks or letting a detail slip, either before, during, or after the election.

At this point, the teacher can ask students how many assumptions they have had to make—for the imaginative ones, the list will be considerable—and then ask the students to consider an alternative explanation for the president’s loss. What other—and simpler—hypothesis could we form? And the answer should be, at this stage, obvious; Donald Trump lost the election not because of some byzantine and nationwide conspiracy, but because he failed to get more votes than did his opponent.

But what of the “surprise ballot dumps?” At this point, after the application of Occam’s razor, the students can seek out answers in a traditional inquiry-based manner, and they will shortly find the reason: these were not “surprise” ballots at all, but instead overwhelmingly were

mail-in ballots that were counted after in-person votes (a consequence of policies enacted in state legislatures like Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Georgia—all controlled by Republicans) (Jacobson, 2020). At this point, a rational analysis of the election of 2020 leads students to an inexplicable conclusion—it was not rigged or fraudulent (Eggers, Garro, & Grimmer, 2021).

Of course, teachers may (and probably will) experience resistance from students, who supported the president (or come from families that did). This is why a sustained commitment to teleological tools like Occam's razor is essential for classroom practice. Teachers should emphasize the application of the theorem, rather than the moral nature of the conclusions we reach by using it. Put another way, it does not matter if a student *likes* the fact that the most rational outcome is that Donald Trump was *not* the victim of a massive conspiracy—what matters is that, in recognizing how the process works, that student will have to acknowledge it, and ideally be less likely to support irrational conclusions in the future. This approach can be applied to a variety of recent conspiracy theories, including the "deep state" contrivance—essentially, that an unelected and deeply embedded group of government figures, administrators, and bureaucrats, are working in tandem to advance liberal causes and to destroy the presidency (now legacy) of Donald Trump.

Teachers can also apply the same rule to historical events. Was it possible that Franklin Roosevelt knew about the attack on Pearl Harbor before it occurred in December 1941? Was it possible that the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 was carried out by more than one person? Could the terrorist attacks on September 11th have been staged? What about the moon landing in 1969? All *could* be true, ostensibly; but the number of assumptions for any one of them to be supportable borders on the fantastic. When we apply Occam's razor, we find that the hypothesis with the least number of assumptions—when we avoid plurality without necessity—is usually the right one.

Discerning Motives

In discussing the 2020 presidential election, it is likely that a student will eventually ask a question similar to this one: "so, if there wasn't a conspiracy to defeat Donald Trump, why did he keep saying so?" After deciding on a hypothesis, it is important to consider this issue as well—if a given theory is most likely untrue, why do people keep saying it is?

As noted above, it is important to recognize that the particular characteristics of the Trump movement—a figurehead who was consistently dishonest, a fear-based messaging

network, and a highly nationalistic, "us-versus-them" disposition—is likely to feed into conspiratorial thinking (Edsall, 2021). So one possible conclusion as to why individuals continued to advance the falsehood that the election was rigged is, frighteningly, that they genuinely believed it. It could be, then, similar for Trump himself—he could have believed the notion that his reelection was being stolen from him. Given that, as president, he had access to the most up-to-date and accurate information available does not necessarily mean that he had not convinced himself of a massive fraud and cover-up. This is one blind spot of Occam's razor—the simpler explanation, in some cases, is not *always* the correct one.

The simpler explanation, of course, is that Donald Trump was lying, and knew he was lying. Students should also be asked to consider what that explanation would mean—in short, that the President of the United States used the power of his office to push, for weeks, a story that he knew was false, in order to illegally stay in power. It is neither partisan nor polarizing to reach that conclusion, or to help students reach it themselves. David French (2021), a political writer, argues that there are two types of lies in politics—what he calls *enabling lies* and *activating lies.* The former set the stage for the latter; for instance, believing that "America will end if Donald Trump loses" will enable his most fervent supporters to respond to the activating lies that Donald Trump told after the election. The enabling lie allows a person to feel compelled to act, as Skitka and Morgan (2014) argued, outside the legitimacy of institutions or the rule of law to achieve what they see as a "moral" outcome—even to the point of storming the U.S. Capitol building.

As teachers, our own motives matter, as well. Before the last several years, it would have been difficult to imagine educators asking students to consider the possibility of insurrection in our own lifetimes. While we are all conscious of the dangers of indoctrination, and we want our students to "think for themselves," we also have to be willing to reach, describe, and defend morally acceptable outcomes. Just as we would not want our students believing that slavery was permissible, or that the Civil Rights Movement was wrong, or that the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II was right, we should not allow them to cling to irrational conspiracies—or worse, to be victimized by them.

It would also be dangerous to engage in our own application of "whataboutism"—the false equivalence of asserting that, in this case, Republicans and Democrats are essentially the same. While partisan polarization has been on the rise for decades in this country on both the

right and left (Koerth & Thomson-DeVeaux, 2021), the rising danger of political violence has become, in the U.S., almost uniquely a right-wing phenomenon (Lowery, Kindy, & Tran, 2018). The Global Terror Database, which compiles terrorist attacks and their motives (where understood and available), finds that between 2010 and 2017, incidents with a right-wing motivation accounted for a full third, while left-wing attackers were responsible for about 13% (https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/). Lilliana Mason and Nathan Kalmoe (2021) conducted surveys of Americans based on their party affiliation from 2017 through 2020 and found alarming evidence of the impact of conspiracy theories on violence:

> Republican falsehoods about the election were also linked to support for post-election violence. After Biden was announced president-elect in November, we asked Republicans whether they would support various ways of rejecting Biden’s presidency. Fourteen percent of Republicans said governors should call up the National Guard to resist federal orders. Nine percent said the military should overthrow the new president. And an astounding 25 percent said citizens should prepare weapons to resist the federal government (Mason & Kalmoe, 2021).

Similarly, the polling group Bright Watch found that supporters of President Trump were markedly more likely to condone violence in the wake of the election (Bright Line Watch, 2020). It would be disingenuous, at a minimum, to pretend that Americans’ fallibility in the face of conspiracy theory is entirely a right-wing problem; but it would be dishonest to claim that both parties suffer equally from it.

Conclusion: “We Have Become Morally Ill”

In 1990, in the wake of Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Revolution” which overthrew the Communist Party’s lock on power, Vaclav Havel, a dissident and playwright, was elected to the presidency. In his inaugural speech, Havel tried to outline the cultural decay which communism had inflicted on the nation’s people, and why that, more than a political system, represented the greatest threat to the country’s renewal:

> The worst of it is that we live in a spoiled moral environment. We have become morally ill because we are used to saying one thing and thinking another. We have learned not to believe in anything, not to care about each other, to worry only about ourselves… I don't refer only to our masters; I'm speaking about all of us. For all of us have grown used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an immutable fact, and thereby actually helped

keep it going. None of us are only its victims; we are all also responsible for it. (Havel, 1990)

Havel’s admonition applies to Americans as well—we are victims of conspiracies, false dichotomies, and willful fantasies. This is because of a failure of rationality, and a lack of critical media literacy. But we are also responsible for this dilemma, in that we all partake in promulgating it and refusing to acknowledge our role in doing so. Teachers play a unique role in promoting an active engagement with our civic institutions, but this is predicated on our students’ ability to comprehend them.

The good news seems to be that, in spite of the upheaval and trauma of recent years, political activism and knowledge seems to be on the rise. The 2020 Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey, by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, indicates as much; this past year, over half of respondents could name all three branches of government (an all-time high for this survey); and 73% named freedom of speech as one of the rights protected by the First Amendment, up from 48% in 2017 (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2020). This base of knowledge—undistorted by conspiracy, falsehood, or illogic—is hardly perfect, but encouraging. It should boost all social studies teachers, and remind us that, in spite of the events of recent years, Americans share more than we might think.

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