

Winning Arguments in the Narrative Wars (Hint: You Can't)



By Steven Yates

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“I argue very well. Ask any of my remaining friends. I can win an argument on any topic against any opponent. People know this, and steer clear of me at parties. Often, as a sign of their great respect ... they don't even invite me.” –Dave Barry

A couple of weeks ago I watched a mentoring-type video (no longer available, as its creator only keeps these up for 72 hours, for reasons of his own) on the theme of *how to win any argument*. As a one-time logic instructor (ghost out of my past) and a narrative warrior (sort of, kind of, my glorious present), I was fascinated!

Intellect versus Basic Beliefs and Mental Prisms

The presenter focused on the difference between intellect and basic beliefs. *Intellect* is how smart you are, sometimes reflected in strings of university-gained credentials. In my experience, people who are unquestionably smart – some of them light years ahead of me in their specialties – can still believe some incredibly stupid things outside those specialties. Or so they seem!

Basic beliefs are often a product of unconscious conditioning. The process gets started in childhood, long before the child develops a capacity to rationally evaluate an idea or belief

system. A few develop this capacity as they reach adulthood, and the results overturn a lot of what they grew up believing.

This happened in my case, and in other folks I've numbered among friends and acquaintances over the accumulated years.

Most others sleepwalk into adulthood still seeing everything through the mental prism supplied by the belief system they were immersed in as children and never learned to question.

What they see, they see only in ways that reinforce their belief system. Logicians call this confirmation bias. What doesn't reinforce their basic beliefs, they often won't see at all.

That calls forth the perennial question: what happens when people with different belief systems meet, start interacting, and discover how different they are from one another? They have different narratives. Each will have all sorts of questions for the other, but few for themselves.

All too many such interactions descend into sarcasm and ridicule. Examples permeate daily newspapers, letters to the editor, comments sections, blogs, and mostly unmoderated online forums. Very productive stuff!

The unpleasant truth: where basic beliefs are concerned, persuading people to change their minds using intellectual arguments is extremely difficult, and if others aren't open to being persuaded, it isn't doable at all. Those across the aisle won't hear, because they *can't* hear. That mental prism I mentioned is screening out everything you're saying. If you double down, you're only going to drive them away. This is why *most* arguments over politics and religion (and sex) are lose-lose propositions.

This applies *directly* to the narrative wars we're in.

The Narrative Wars

I don't doubt that a lot of urbanized, left-leaning foot soldiers in corporate media, the legal system, the entertainment industry, and of course academia, are scratching their heads at Donald Trump's continued popularity despite those 91 felony charges and civil suits that so far have cost him (on paper, anyway) around half a billion dollars. Trump remains the Republican base's favorite. That same base is dismissing Nikki Haley as George W. Bush in a dress.

The present-day GOP base's firm belief is that the allegations against Trump are political, and hence invalid.

What's the basic belief system here? For many, it's that they've been thrown to the wolves by an Establishment (large corporations including former employers as well as the federal government) that couldn't care less about them and proves this with its insults about, e.g, "deplorables."

And since most are white, they see Establishment policies like Diversity-Equity-Inclusion which includes everyone except them, as disadvantaging them educationally, careerwise, religiously, culturally.

A recent group of academics – political scientists, I hear, led by a guy with the unlikely name of Brandon Rottinghaus – has ranked the presidents. They put Abraham Lincoln at the top of their list as the greatest U.S. president. Guess who they relegated to the bottom. I probably don't have to tell you.

The GOP base is going to respond to what they regard as yet another provocation that this is the best reason they've seen this week why no one should pay attention to woke academics.

I honestly believe the academics, and many of their counterparts in media and elsewhere, see themselves as trying to secure "our endangered democracy," i.e., the "democratic institutions" that constitute "our" Establishment.

If the divisions are this intractable, *how does one win any*

argument? How do you cross the conceptual gulf created by the narrative wars?

You Can't Win, So You Shouldn't Try

The unfortunate answer: you don't.

Your best bet – unless you're in the business of writing about this sort of thing, like I am – is not to begin arguing.

Remember the old rhyme: *a man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still.*

Most people are going to believe what they want to believe. They are just following their childhood imprinting.

This will tell them that most of the time they can trust the authorities, at least on “important stuff” including governance. They are going to reinterpret whatever evidence you present in terms of what that mental prism allows them to see.

And speaking of *evidence* (since every day I see phrases like so-and-so *claimed without evidence that...*), those locked into agendas or serving such will demand evidence, or imply lack of such, when confronted with something they *don't* want to believe. If you point to evidence, they'll move the goalposts. They'll either dismiss your claim, denying that it exists or reinterpreting it to fit their prism. They'll then tell you, “there's no evidence.”

Continuing the argument is a loser's game.

If it's something they believe, or *want* to believe, they couldn't care less about evidence.

Example: corporate media and the entire deep state behind it *want* to believe Vladimir Putin is responsible for Russian political prisoner Alexei Navalny's death last week. No one appears to have noticed that *nothing*, no direct chain of

causality, connects Putin to Navalny's death.

Meanwhile, speaking of political prisoners, no one in "legacy" media *even mentions* the ongoing effort to extradite Julian Assange to the U.S. to face trial for the "crime" of exposing deep state war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan spread across two administrations, one of an Establishment Republican, the other an Establishment Democrat.

Their mental prisms simply won't let them see it!

See how this works?

Flat-Earthism and Other Christian Mental Prisms

Among my Christian friends are a few folks who now think the Earth is flat.

They think Biblical references to a "firmament in the heavens" (Genesis) and God's "laying the foundations of the world" (Job) are literal and not figurative, and require a flat Earth.

It's clear: I'm not going to argue them out of this belief, and I've learned not to try.

One of *my* beliefs is that God created a world that ultimately makes sense, at least *some* of its truths discoverable by physical science, because He created us with intellects capable of such an endeavor. I don't see how the technological civilization we've built over the past few centuries would have been possible, were this false. But that's just me.

I'm prepared to respond to claims about the Earth being flat with something like, "That's what you think? How interesting!" And then dropping it.

Incidentally, I also don't think there's going to be a "rapture." This, it seems to me, is based on an elementary misreading of II Thess 4:16 – 5:2, combined with Matthew 24.

My reference here is typically to Gary DeMar's *Myths, Lies & Half-Truths: How Misreading Their Bibles Neutralizes Christians* (2000).

I think that when whatever happens, happens, Christians are going to be clobbered right along with everyone else – in the short term, anyway.

Guess what? I've never convinced anyone of this, either. I don't try. (Maybe DeMar, unlike myself a *real* theologian, had better results disputing dispensationalism.)

Wisdom: A Theory

Wisdom – that which a trained philosopher such as myself is supposed to “love” – surely includes the insight (among others) that humans are more emotional than rational. It has been understood at least since the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote of it in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1730s) that emotions are more powerful motives to action than reason. Most if not all worldview beliefs are held for emotional and not rational reasons. In most cases, it does not occur to the believer that his worldview could be false.

This is not to say that reasons are irrelevant, or that persuasion is utterly impossible. But most of the time, what I said above applies: there will be goalpost-moving and reasons either won't be seen or won't be seen as decisive.

You have to decide if making an effort is worth your time and energy. That is going to depend on your situation: who are you trying to persuade, and why?

Atheists are convinced that a complete world-explanation is possible without a God. Okay...

In my 60-something years of experience, the atheists I've known have usually been more obsessed with God, Christ, religion, etc., than I ever thought of being. I've come to

find this phenomenon – well – interesting.

I noticed this back in the '00s' when I was dating a woman who confided to me that she didn't believe in God. At some point I must have said I was a believer. Both of us were supporting Dr. Ron Paul for the 2008 GOP nomination. It's how we met. But somehow, despite the many practical problems involved in trying to sell reluctant Republicans on Dr. Paul's messages about the Federal Reserve, the debt bubble that even then was starting to blow up in our faces (think: 2008), the American war machine, etc., *every conversation we had somehow went back to religion*. I wasn't the one bringing it up.

The relationship ended after she accused me of "talking down" to her. I was surprised it lasted as long as it did (over a year).

Wisdom also includes knowing the difference between a person's deeply held beliefs *which have become part of their identity* versus workaday problems that come our way, about which we can agree *are* problems (the Paul campaign gave us plenty of those!).

At that point in my *own* development I'd not yet realized the harsh truth: Dr. Paul was far too intellectual for the emotion-driven American public.

Trump succeeded where Dr. Paul failed because he connected with people on an emotional level. Did he not seem to understand their problems and confidently tell them, beginning back in 2015, "I can fix this!"

Problem-Solving: The Biggest Problem We Face

We humans are, in a very general sense of the term, problem-solvers. The world presents us with an abundance of problems to solve. Some of us get very good at problem-solving in our respective niches. One way of getting rich – or so I am told – is to solve a problem and be able to sell your solution to a

lot of people, or to a corporation.

Among our biggest present-day problems are the narrative wars. My counsel, increasingly, is: instead of arguing, walk away. Become independent in as many areas of your life as you can: financial, in terms of food production, in terms of health and safety. Bring family on board to the greatest extent you can (hopefully you're not "yoked" to a spouse who doesn't "get it"). Identify like-minded others you can work with locally.

Forget about those obviously aligned with the Establishment. If you can't get local representatives on board, forget about them.

Ignore leftist pronouncements. Ignore what "LGBTQIAZYXWV+" types are doing if it's not affecting you or your family. You don't have a moral obligation to save the world.

If you direct your limited energies into activities you can control, you might soon be in a position to help others.

I don't know that this it solves the biggest problem, which gives me the most sleepless nights.

And this is?

Science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein's character Lazarus Long put it this way:

Political tags – such as royalist, communist, democrat, populist, fascist, liberal, conservative, and so forth – are never basic criteria. The human race divides politically into those who want people to be controlled and those who have no such desire.

Behind the narrative wars and specifics such as Trump versus Biden is this much deeper clash: *between that minority that feels compelled to control whole populations, versus those who want to be left alone.*

Whatever actions the latter take *have to include defense of their turf*. They can't assume that if they're nice to the wolves, the wolves will stop being wolves and be nice right back. That's not how the world works.

Worse still: today's majority doesn't much care if they're controlled, so long as they have sports, Netflix, TikTok, and beer.

Which means: those standing on their demand to be left alone constitute another minority. The "silent majority" some appeal to simply doesn't exist.

A Remnant

It might be helpful, or at least calming, to realize that both this clash and the dilemmas posed by mass indifference are as old as the human race itself. The prophet Isaiah faced them, when God commanded him to go to a corrupted and decadent Ninevah and preach what the corporatists of his day, were there any, would doubtless have called a message of doom-and-gloom.

God implied that he'd not be listened to and would be lucky if he got out with his hide intact. "Why bother?" he might have asked. The answer:

Unless the Lord of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:9).

See Albert Jay Nock's amazing essay "[Isaiah's Job.](#)"

There's a Remnant out there, a third minority within the majority. Nock wrote of the Remnant:

They are obscure, unorganized, inarticulate, each one rubbing along as best he can. They need to be encouraged and braced up because when everything has gone completely to the dogs, they are the ones who will come back and build up a new society;

and meanwhile, your preaching will reassure them and keep them hanging on. Your job is to take care of the Remnant, so be off now and set about it.

Today's Remnant has the Internet. They need not be unorganized and inarticulate. Many are probably awake (not "woke"!) and aware. That's who we are writing for, on Substack, independent sites like NewsWithViews.com, and others.

It's helpful to realize that history moves in cycles. Civilizations rise. They forget the attitudes, aptitudes, and values that made their rise possible. The majority of their people grow soft, complacent, and entitled. Those motivated by power then move. Initially they meet with little resistance. Civilizations become divided and decadent. The power-hungry encourage both, because divided and decadent populations are easier to control. But they can't control the Remnant. The Remnant are neither powerful nor power-hungry, though. They can't prevent a civilizational downturn, or decline.

We're definitely in a downturn, as consolidations of wealth and power grow and freedom shrinks. Today's Remnant is still our best hope for Renewal and Rebuilding. Its members don't think in terms of civil war. They aren't violent. I've inveighed against thinking in such terms. Civil war, if it happened on U.S. soil under today's circumstances ("blue" versus "red"; urban versus rural; ethnicity against ethnicity) would be nasty and brutal.

The powerful would be the only victors.

Wisdom thus lies in realizing that in the end, no civilization based on accumulated monies and power has ever endured. It invariably falls from within. A "new world order" based on a [Great Reset](#) (or a [Great Taking](#)) would be no exception. Let's see to it that the Remnant is ready. This means forgetting about convincing those on the other side, or any majority, with intellectual arguments, and instead reaching out to those

who are willing and able to build a future based on responsible freedom.

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