

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



May 24, 2015

## CAN YOU SAY "COGNITIVE DISSONANCE?"

The late social psychologist Leon Festinger (1918-1989) has never been what you'd call a household name. From where I sit, he really should be, for he was responsible for a truly important theory or concept which most literate people have heard of . . . even if incapable of defining. Furthermore, this theory (or



Leon Festinger

concept) goes a long way toward explaining a crucial aspect of the human condition. So what is it? [Cognitive dissonance](#) (c.d.)

In brief, cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon which refers to the discomfort we all feel when there is a discrepancy between what we already know or believe, and new information or interpretation. Or, stated another way, cognitive dissonance occurs when cognition and behavior come into conflict. It occurs when

there is a need to accommodate new ideas, and it may be necessary for it to develop so that we become "open" to them. Cognitive dissonance produces a feeling of discomfort, which can lead to an alteration in one's attitudes, beliefs or behaviors so as to reduce the discomfort and restore a semblance of balance. Two simple examples:

**A.** A person knows how terribly important it is for each of us to do whatever we can to protect the environment (cognition), and yet,

**B.** He/she drives a car that gets 15 miles to the gallon (behavior).

**A.** A person smokes (behavior), and yet,

**B.** He/she is well aware that smoking causes cancer (cognition).

In both examples, the feeling of psychological discomfort the person senses -- whether conscious, unconscious or subconscious -- is what Professor Festinger calls *cognitive dissonance*. (Members my tribe have long known about cognitive dissonance; it's just that we've always referred to it as *guilt* . . .)

In the world of politics, Festinger's theory goes a long way towards explaining why many cling to beliefs and positions which facts and statistics disprove.

Three examples:

- The certainty that climate change is *not* man-man and thus nothing to worry about despite what [thousands of scientists](#) have proven through research;
- The certainty that lowering taxes and cutting spending will trigger economic growth and create jobs despite a welter of [historic and factual evidence](#) to the contrary;
- The absolute certainty that "Obamacare" has been a complete failure despite overwhelming [statistical evidence](#) to the contrary.

Again, although Professor Finester did not specifically apply his concept of cognitive dissonance to the world of politics, he could easily have had it in mind when he wrote:

*A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point.*

Now before my arch-conservative friends and readers take me to task, accusing me of being blindly partisan, let me assure you that episodes of political cognitive dissonance can be discerned on both sides of the aisle.

We need look no further than President Obama . . . on the grave threat of climate change.

This past Wednesday, May 20, 2015, the president gave a commencement address at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in which he warned that climate change is a growing and "serious threat" to national security.

In his speech to the 218 newly commissioned officers he tied severe weather to the rise of the extremist group Boko Haram in Nigeria and the civil war in Syria.



*"You don't sit back; you take steps to protect your ship," the president said. "Anything less is a dereliction of duty. The same is true for climate change." The president continued, saying, "Climate change constitutes a serious threat to global security, an immediate risk to our national security . . . And make no mistake; it will impact how our military defends our country. And so we need to act – and we need to act now."*

The content of the president's graduation address -- the cognitive -- portrays a man who is keenly aware of the dire reality presented by global climate change. His speech -- along with last month's visit to the Everglades -- is meant to keep up pressure on Congressional Republicans -- many of whom are global warming skeptics -- who have stalled the president's legislative agenda. All this, is in the realm of cognition -- the fact-devouring mind.

"So where does the cognitive dissonance come in?" you may well ask. Remember: in order for there to be a demonstrable episode of *c.d.*, we need a behavior which flies in the face of cognition. And in the case of President Obama and global warming, we certainly do.

Nine days before the president's speech at the Coast Guard Academy, the Obama administration gave conditional approval to Shell Oil to start drilling for oil off the Alaskan coast this summer. Without question, the administration's approval represents a major victory for the petroleum industry, a devastating blow to environmentalists and provides a perfect example of cognitive dissonance: behavior which is at odds with cognition.

To be fair, the president does have behaviors in consonance with cognition: He has shown some willingness to go after domestic greenhouse gas emissions; he has imposed new regulations on coal-fired power plants and has also issued new rules for fuel efficiency for cars and trucks. Writing in the *New York Times*, Middlebury College environmental studies Professor Bill McKibben noted recently, *"You can't deal with climate on the demand side alone. If we keep digging up more coal, gas and oil, it will get burned, if not here, then somewhere else."* In other words, if we are to be truly alert to the dire, the lethal danger of unchecked global warming (the cognitive), a major effort on the behavior side must be changing the sources of energy by which we power and run the earth.

Unfortunately, there is an overwhelming force -- and an overwhelming weakness -- which keeps behavior at odds with cognition. And those are the fossil fuel industry and its all but untrammelled ability to do just about anything and everything it wants, and most every one of our politicians, and their zombie-like inability to say "No you won't!" Of course, this entire scenario is far from new.



Ida Tarbell (1857-1944)

111 years ago, muckraking journalist Ida Tarbell published her groundbreaking exposé [The History of the Standard Oil Company](#), which led not only to the breakup of John D. Rockefeller's financial behemoth, but inspired a generation of muckraking journalists to write about trusts and monopolies and their power to be essentially above the law. Fortunately, Tarbell -- and colleagues like Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Jacob Riis and Upton Sinclair -- had a president who was both willing and able to keep cognition in line with behavior.

That president was Theodore Roosevelt.

Unless and until our current (or future) president -- as well as members of congress from both parties -- and the American public can withstand and turn back the power of the oil, gas and coal industries, climate change will be something we just talk about and fret over (cognition) but leave to the next generation in the hopes that they will take the essential steps required to save the planet (behavior).

If only it's not too late.

So tell us Professor Festinger, is there any cure for cognitive dissonance?

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