

A Year For Critical Thinking

By Sandy Westin

Facts. Beliefs. Assertions. In this year of strident political competition, we've heard a lot of each of all three, especially the latter two. Some sound very convincing, especially coming from a candidate of our own personal preference. But how do we sort them out and determine for ourselves what is a truth with consequences we should consider in choosing our elected officials, and which are really nothing but propaganda, designed to manipulate us as the electorate. Let's take a look at a few simple definitions:

- **Fact:** A statement describing an independently confirmable condition. (*"I was present to register my vote for 85% of the Senate's ballots in the past three years."*)
- **Belief:** A firmly held conviction which may or may not refer to empirical facts. (*"America is not the great nation it once was."*)
- **Assertion:** A statement which may or may not refer to underlying facts, and which the speaker may or may not even personally hold to be true. In other words, a belief dressed up to look like a fact. (*"My opponent is not qualified to be elected xxx."*)

So how are we to tell the difference, especially when politicians wax poetic or passionate in their statements, be they fact-based, personal beliefs, or politically positioned assertions? Here are a few litmus tests that might apply:

1. **Consider the source:** Who is making the statement and where do they get the information behind their statement?
2. **What does the source have to gain:** Why are they making the statement and implying it is true? What do they want us, the public, to believe or do based on their statement?
3. **Can the statement be confirmed with facts from reliable sources:** Do sources who have no ulterior motive on the issue (such as FactCheck.org) find there is corroborating information about the statement, or not?

It takes far less effort and attention to get riled up by an assertion made loudly or strongly - whether we agree with it or think it's hogwash - than it does to do our own critical thinking about it. Perhaps whether we end up aligning our beliefs and opinions with the "truths" claimed by any political candidate is, in the end, not nearly as important as how we arrive at that choice. To accept as valid whatever someone says just because they assert it loudly, repeatedly and strongly is no way to elect a leader. To do so is abandoning our rights and responsibility as the electorate of the largest free nation in the world. This is the year we must each apply our own critical thinking when we listen to the news, and especially before we go to the polls.

Sandy Westin has lived in the Hendersonville area since 1996. As the Village Wordsmith, she provides small businesses and nonprofits with business writing and consulting services.

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