

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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On July 3, I saw Glenn Beck in Driggs.

I went for the same reason I attend many events: to see people who've reached the highest levels of their respective professions. And while I'd not seen or heard Mr. Beck before, I'd heard enough about him to pique my curiosity. Hence I headed over the hill.

Three things struck me.

The first was that Mr. Beck is very good at what he does. Like him or hate him, he's quite the showman, a compelling speaker who immediately sucks in and holds an audience (especially a highly-supportive audience such as the one in Driggs).

The second was that, whatever else he may be, first and foremost Glenn Beck is an entertainer.

Some entertainers make music or perform acts of physical prowess. Glenn Beck tells stories. In particular he's a story teller-cum-moralist, essentially a lay preacher who has religion-themed points he wants to make and is very good at making them.

The third thing that struck me was that, like all good story tellers, Mr. Beck is not a stickler for facts. Soon after he started talking, I realized I was at an event similar in spirit to one of those “based on a true story” Hollywood movies, in which facts and everything else take a back seat to advancing the narrative.

Here's an example. Mr. Beck's basic theme was that America is God's chosen country, and that whenever we humble ourselves before God, He rewards us with His bounty. To illustrate his point, Mr. Beck offered an overview of American history, starting with Columbus.

In Mr. Beck's recounting, Columbus was allowed to make his 1492 expedition only after he dedicated himself to being God's servant. Once he reached the New World, however, Columbus reverted to his egotistical ways, and in so doing brought God's wrath upon himself. In particular, God made Columbus's return voyage difficult, ruined his life once he got back to Spain, and never allowed him to return to the New World.

While Mr. Beck's story was compelling, factually it was wrong (e.g. Columbus made four trips to the New World, and died a relatively wealthy man). And that casual-relationship-with-facts theme continued throughout the talk: While Mr. Beck never told any out-and-out whoppers, he also didn't let mere facts get in the way of the larger points he was trying to make.

Thinking about all this, I was hit by a delicious irony. The phrase which best described Mr. Beck's use of history in his story-telling was “liberal,” as in the Random House definition of the word: “not strict or rigorous; free; not literal: ‘a liberal interpretation of a rule.’”

Glenn Beck: Liberal story teller. It's a wonderful world we live in.

Why raise this? Because I think Mr. Beck's shtick presents a cautionary tale as we head into the 2010 election cycle.

At a certain level, what Mr. Beck and his ilk do doesn't really matter. This is because, at their core, Mr. Beck and most other self-styled pundits are nothing more than performers – entertainers with a particular

shtick working a particular crowd.

This would not be a problem if everyone agreed that they're just showmen and left it at that. However, when pundits and their audiences start taking entertainment-driven shtick seriously, it creates a problem. Why? Because sometimes that shtick is translated into advocacy, and that advocacy into policy. And when that happens, it means we've created policies grounded in an entertainer's view of the world, in which the narrative is far more important than reality. And just as a good home can never be built on a bad foundation, so too is it impossible to ground good policies or good governance in a bad understanding of facts. Yet that's exactly what Mr. Beck offered.

Again, that would be no big deal if Mr. Beck and storytellers had no influence outside the entertainment realm. But that's not the case. Instead, such entertainers-cum-pundits seem to be having an increasingly large influence over how we as a nation think about, present, and act on our issues. And therein lies the problem.

For example, a couple of days after Mr. Beck's talk, I read a blistering critique of how advocates of the recently-passed Arizona immigration law – one of the nation's toughest – sold their bill as the solution to a problem which simply doesn't exist.

In particular, supporters claimed the legislation was needed to address a massive increase in crime and violence along Arizona's border with Mexico. Yet in the reality-based world, the data make it clear that no such increase has occurred. Instead, Arizona's border-area crime and violence rates have remained constant for around a decade. True, a few horrific crimes have occurred recently, but horrific crimes were occurring years ago as well. As quoted in the Arizona Republic, Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik put it succinctly: "This is a media-created event. I hear politicians on TV saying the border has gotten worse. Well, the fact of the matter is that the border has never been more secure."

But this reality didn't matter to the legislation's advocates, and by the time those falsehoods penetrated Arizona's political consciousness, the legislation had become law.

That politicians are prone to demagoguery is not news – politicians have shaded the truth and played on fears as long as politics has existed. And it's not terribly useful to blame the media, for at the end of the day, their job is to report on what people say, regardless of its veracity.

Instead, what concerns me is the degree to which politicians are applying entertainers' "loose use of facts" standards to the realm of governance and public policy. When this happens, the resulting disconnected-from-reality policies usually backfire, sometimes spectacularly (think of Prohibition, segregation, and McCarthyism).

In less-stressful times, such demagoguery might not be such a big deal. But today's highly-charged political environment is particularly amenable to candidates and special interest advocates spouting off things they claim or imply as fact, but which may not be even remotely connected to reality. This is true even at a local level, for the stresses facing Jackson Hole – with our economic slowdown, high unemployment, pinched government revenues, and looming issues such as the Comp Plan – make us fertile ground for demagogues taking an entertainment-style approach to their campaigns.

To counter this, we rely on the local papers and the voices of opposing candidates. But my concern is that these tools won't be enough to counter bogus claims, especially during the short, politically-charged election season.

So what else can we do? As I see it, a highly-educated electorate is our best bulwark against such foolishness, for the more the electorate knows, the easier it is for them to resist demagoguery. To help in

that effort, over the next few months I'll be writing occasionally on issues which I feel are not well understood by most locals, and are therefore subject to distortion by ill-informed or ill-intentioned advocates. My goal here is not to go after any particular candidate or issue, and I won't. Instead, my hope is that, by pointing out some clear economic, demographic, and social realities about our community, I can provide readers with a filter through which they can judge a particular candidate or issue. I'll start this effort with my next column, which will examine the relationship between tourism and the local economy.