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The Erosion of Truth — Remarks from Politics Aside 2016

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RAND president and CEO Michael Rich gave the following remarks at the start of Politics Aside 2016 on November 11, 2016.

Welcome, everyone. It is always good to see so many good friends of RAND.

I wanted to start tonight's program by telling you where our theme came from—"The Erosion of Truth." It's something that's been on my mind for a long time—well before the election results this week and even well before the campaign.

RAND was founded on the basis of a simple idea: that public policy should be based on the best available evidence—on facts and rigorous, objective analysis. RAND has demonstrated the power of that idea many times since it was established nearly 70 years ago. And right now, our 1,100 researchers are working on solutions to some of the most difficult challenges facing policymakers around the world—applying the same simple idea about facts and rigorous, objective analysis.

But this is a very unusual and dangerous time in history. Not only do Americans feel entitled to their own opinions—and rightly so—but a growing number of Americans, from across the political spectrum, also feel entitled to "cherry-pick" facts to support their opinions, or even commission up a new set of "facts," if necessary.

In short, just as we're facing some of the most complex challenges of our time, we also have to contend with an epidemic of what I have been calling "truth decay."

As the president of an institution that is almost unique in the public policy world because of our nonpartisan, non-ideological approach to policy analysis, I'm often asked whether "truth decay" is a threat to RAND. And my answer is "you bet"—it most certainly is. And not just to RAND. Truth decay is now a threat to our society as a whole. A quick story . . .

Almost 30 years ago, the U.S. Senate did something that in hindsight seems extraordinary. It voted to ratify an international treaty, known as the Montreal Protocol, that phased out the use of CFCs—organic chemical compounds used in aerosols and refrigerants. The extraordinary part? The vote was unanimous. It was a real triumph of bipartisanship.

But it was also a triumph of RAND-style research and analysis, of facts over opinions, evidence over ideology. For years, experts, including many at the RAND Corporation, had assembled and analyzed data that showed that CFCs were eating away at the Earth's ozone layer.

The issue was not without controversy. There were skeptics. And scientists acknowledged that they could not prove that human activity was to blame. RAND analysis, relying on the best available evidence, helped break the stalemate by framing the issue in a brand new way—based on probabilities, not on certainty.

All 83 senators present on March 14, 1988, united around a rigorous, objective analysis based on one common set of facts. Mitch McConnell voted the same way as Ted Kennedy. How many of us can imagine our elected leaders in Washington doing the same today—on any important issue?

Which brings me back to “truth decay.” When everyone has their own facts, then nobody really has any facts. And our democracy grinds to a halt.

Polarization inflamed by truth decay is the gravest threat facing America. That is because virtually no important problem can be solved, virtually no bold initiative can be completed, in the span of a single two-year Congress or even a four-year presidential administration. That’s not enough time to:

- Negotiate and ratify a major treaty, or
- Defeat an insurgency, or
- Plan and carry out a large public infrastructure project, or
- Reform one of our safety-net programs.

Policymakers have to collaborate for years to get these kinds of things done.

Now, don’t get me wrong. Spirited public debate is part and parcel of our political process and even of the relationship between executive and legislative branches. But the distinction is this: A policy debate featuring different interpretations of the same facts is healthy. It promotes compromise and consensus. But a policy debate featuring opinions about opinions? Without a common set of facts? That’s a recipe for gridlock. That is why we’ve invited you to help us think about and discuss the “erosion of truth.”

I’m so pleased that Soledad O’Brien is here with us tonight. Besides being an award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and founder and CEO of Starfish Media Group, she is host of *Matter of Fact with Soledad O’Brien*. And my favorite part of her biography: She is an active and valued member of the RAND Board of Trustees.

Soledad will introduce you to Leslie Sanchez, an author, political strategist, and political commentator, and together they will take us through conversations on two related topics:

- The first is about the effect of truth decay on the media, or the roots of the erosion of truth in the media.
- The second is whether or not there’s a relationship between truth decay and the low levels of public trust in the government and many of its leaders.

Then Soledad will welcome DJ Patil, Chief Data Scientist of the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy, to talk about his efforts to make data more open and available so that people can all make better decisions. They will discuss whether a blossoming of data available to the public might be one type of antidote to the erosion of truth.



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