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## Groupthink vs. actual thinking

By ANN ROSEN SPECTOR

*"I think, therefore I am."*

- *Philosopher R. Descartes (1637)*

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*"Groupthink syndrome includes the development of group rationalizations for defective policies, reliance on stereotypes of opponents rather than accurate and nuanced conceptions, and the suppression of doubts about decisions.*

- *Psychologist I. Janis (1972)*

*"See, in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in . . . to kind of catapult the propaganda."*

- *President G.W. Bush (2004)*

*"I'm also not very analytical. You know I don't spend a lot of time thinking about myself, about why I do things."*

- *President Bush,*

*aboard Air Force One (2003)*

Abig part of our American ethos is the value we place on independence, which is often at odds with our need to belong. We want to march to our own drummers, but at the same time listen to the beat of the people with whom we most identify. Our judgments are influenced by what others think or what we believe they think.

In earlier times, we lived in actual communities, be they neighborhoods or small towns, where the population was often fairly homogeneous. Today, many of us live in areas of

greater diversity, so we often seek out virtual communities. We get those by our loyalty to schools or teams (Go, Phillies! Go, Nittany Lions!), our adherence to brand-name clothing (Nike swoop, Burberry plaid) and by identifying with other subgroups.

The explosion of media, including the Web, cable, and satellite radio lets us cherry-pick the groups who give us an identity or reinforce the identity we have chosen for ourselves.

We support and adhere to the statements of the leaders or spokesmen and avoid thinking for ourselves. We can accept any statement, although it may be 180 degrees from what was said even a short interval ago. Or have little or no basis in fact (think of the public figures who have been outspoken about morality and yet have been less than pure themselves).

Without putting our brains in gear, we can listen to repetitions of the drivel (often known as talking points) that is reiterated endlessly in the 24/7 news cycle and believe it to be true. We can not only let the pundits tell us what events mean (what exactly are the qualifications for punditry?), we can let reporters color the events as well as report them.

When *Daily News* writer Flavia Colgan wrote a while back that Hillary Clinton should "exit with dignity and not seemingly claw and cling to [her] quest like it was an ego trip," was she criticizing Clinton for persevering? If Clinton had left the race earlier, would she have been derided as a woman who didn't have the backbone to stay in the race - like a man?

When *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd said, "Obama glided through Afghanistan," did she mean he went? When she said he "girdled his messianic loins for the kvetching he would face in Israel," did she mean he went to listen to their honest concerns?

When Rush Limbaugh said that Barack Obama's recent international tour was "Little Barry Obama's Summer Trip," did he mean that President Bush's recent international trip was a "L'il Bushie Summer Romp?"

When *Inquirer* columnist and former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum said that both Hillary Clinton and Obama wanted to "leave the Iraqi people vulnerable to chaos," did he mean that most Americans want to protect our troops from chaos and have the Iraqis govern themselves?

I don't know the answers to those questions, but I think about the use of certain adjectives and adverbs and ask myself how I would've described it if I'd been writing about it. I have my biases, and so does everyone else. But I think we need to think about where they interfere with understanding what actually occurred.

The first time I taught a course in Abnormal Psychology, a good percentage of my students did poorly on the first test. I asked them what they thought went wrong. Some said there were too many questions for the time allotted, others thought there was too much material covered. Then one student said (and I swear this is true), "I took good notes. I did all the reading. But you asked questions that required us to think."

As citizens and voters, shouldn't we, too, be required to think? Our nation and the world have some difficult problems to solve: hunger, war, disease, energy consumption, conservation of resources, an economy in the toilet.

*"I'm going to be honest: I know a lot less about economics than I do about military and foreign-policy issues. I still need to be educated."*

- Sen. J. McCain (2008)

"Actually, the most important thing you need to do is to have big chunks of time during the day when all you're doing is thinking."

- Sen. B. Obama (2008)

I'M ENCOURAGED that the two presumptive presidential candidates think that thinking and being educated are essential to their roles.


No one can be an expert on every aspect of life, but you can always learn from those who are more knowledgeable and make a decision based on the available facts.

Shouldn't we try to think, and think long and hard, rather than use slogans and bumper stickers or allow people no brighter than we are to tell us what to think? Or should we just abandon our independence and follow like sheep? \*

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