

The Way We Vote:

I've been wondering why so many Americans will vote for the Republican ticket in November. Don't get me wrong, I think I'd probably like Senator McCain personally. But that's hardly a reason to vote for somebody. The Senator, while painting himself as the maverick Republican, voted in step with the Administration about 80% of the time. That includes this stupid war, recessionary economic policy, punitive education and unaffordable health care, all of which have been sore spots for a lot of Americans.

One area where the Senator could have distinguished himself from the President is on energy policy. He has a decent public record on global warming and has been a supporter of alternative sources of power and fuel. But lately he has decided that new drilling in Alaska and the Outer Continental Shelf is the way we should go. Even the Energy Information Agency, which is run by the White House, says new drilling wouldn't produce new oil until the 2020's and that when this oil does come in it will not lower the price of gasoline. Their own scientists say it has no relation to gas prices.

Why then would the Administration and Senator McCain tell us that new drilling is the thing to do in response to \$4 a gallon gas? They tell us this because they know we will believe it. Why will we believe it? Because we want to believe in the easy answer, even when it's wrong, especially if the easy answer is presented as somehow more American. American oil will save us.

One could make the case that this next election will come down to two kinds of voting. One set of votes will be cast based on a reading of the evidence and an evaluation of how politicians respond to that evidence. The other body of votes will be based on belief. Personal belief in the candidate and a more general belief in what we wish would be true.

We wanted to believe that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction pointed at our allies. He didn't, of course. The UN inspectors told us that. But the UN is not an American answer. It's a global answer and we don't like those unless they increase our bottom line.

We wanted to believe that ethanol would lead to lower gas prices. It hasn't, of course, but it has raised food prices for the entire world. The real reason to produce ethanol (a position that Senator Obama also espouses) is so that more and more industrial corn can be grown

which in turn increases the profits of the sellers of gasoline. Who cares about food prices when we can watch our shares in giant energy companies rise? Growing more corn is an American answer. We want to believe it.

The facts of life state that the rest of the world has much more oil in the ground than we do. That's why we buy it from them. Even if we drilled everywhere in this blessed land we would be able to produce only a tiny percentage of the oil that we consume. But drilling is an easy answer that we can believe in. Being nationally addicted to oil and being in denial about it is not. So the truth can take a hike. The evidence lays on the floor in the daily newspaper under the cat's litter box, while we vote based on our pipe dream of an imaginary oil-rich America.

As the presidential campaign goes forward I suspect that the advisers to the McCain Campaign will rely more and more heavily on an appeal to comfortable beliefs and reliable fables. I invite you to watch with me and keep score. I suspect that more than a few references will be made to flag pins and Muslim middle names. Not because they have anything at all to do with the price of food or your home or your health insurance but because they touch on a couple of core beliefs. One is that patriots wave the flag and only flag wavers can be patriots. The other is that our worst problems come from "bad guys" everywhere else in the world and not from the "good guys" in our corporate board rooms and in the current Administration.

Both of these notions, patriotism and fear, are critical to the McCain Campaign. Both will be played, theme and variations, to an audience of press and public eager to eat them up. Both will be played night after night in the hope that we will be redirected from the nuts and bolts of life by these useful abstractions.

Obviously, it is everyone's right to vote how they choose. If noble ideas (like democracy in Iraq) are more important than reality (so many thousands dead for nothing but oil), it is our right to vote accordingly. If the feel-good fable that American oil will make a difference is more comforting to us than the fact that we need to wean ourselves off oil, then so be it. It is our constitutional right to be hoodwinked.

Let's just be sure that we know why we vote the way we vote.