

We Still Won't Admit Why So Many People Believe the Big Lie

CLUELESS



opinion

Photo Illustration by The Daily Beast/Photo by Scott Olson/Getty

Six months after the insurrection it triggered, it's clear that the stolen-election nonsense is just a drop in a tidal wave of bullshit.

[David Rothkopf](#)

Updated Jul. 06, 2021 1:50PM ET / Published Jul. 06, 2021 5:13AM ET

How could so many Americans believe in “[the Big Lie](#)?” We see the numbers and we shake our heads. Poll after poll shows that one third of all of us believe the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump. Even though the matter has been adjudicated in scores of courts. Even though not a single scintilla of evidence exists that the election was anything but fair.

Six months after [the attack on the Capitol triggered by that lie](#), commentators, political scientists, and families around the dinner table still struggle to come to grips with perverse reality. It is natural to want to understand how we got here. The fate of our democracy turns on not just what our electorate believes but why they believe it. Why are a third of us such gullible rubes?

It's a question serious enough that it deserves a straight answer, even if that answer makes us

uncomfortable. And I warn you, dear reader, the answer will make you uncomfortable. So, if you are tender-minded or sensitive to self-criticism, or a credulous stooge yourself, this might be a good time to stop reading.

Because even the most modest amount of analysis and introspection will reveal that buying into the nonsense peddled by the former president and his clown college of cronies is not an aberration, not due to some momentary lapse on the part of the American electorate. We were raised on lies—including many lies that are much, much bigger than the big one that troubles us today.

That's the problem. We are as a society—and by “we” I mean virtually all of us on the planet —brought up to believe howling absurdities, ridiculous impossibilities, and insupportable malarkey from our very first moments on Earth. We have massive lie-delivery systems that are the core institutions of our society. And we have created cultural barriers to even questioning those fabrications which are most deserving of skeptical scrutiny. For example, we regularly label as sacred those ideas that are least able to stand up to scrutiny. (Heck, we have folks in our society who can't even handle the idea that the history we teach our kids might actually be based on what happened, you know, back in the past.)

Our parents lie to us. Our churches, synagogues, and mosques lie to us. Our schools lie to us. Hollywood lies to us. Madison Avenue lies to us. The media lies to us. Our leaders lie to us. Our friends lie to us. (They do. Going to the gym couldn't hurt.)

What is more the lies they offer are not always big lies (e.g. Buying a particular brand of beer will not make you more attractive) while some are just gross oversimplifications (e.g. The Founding Fathers did a lot of good... but they were not the figures carved out of marble we were sold for years). Some have a seed of truth within them but are gross distortions (e.g. Columbus did not discover America). And some of the time we invite the lies because they open the door to enjoyment (e.g. Keto? All the bacon I can eat? I'm in).

But one of the key reasons we buy into so many small lies is that we have been force fed so many big ones. I mean really big ones. I mean ones that make the current Big Lie look like one of those low-calorie snacks that is actually a high-calorie treat shrunk to a smaller size and repackaged.

The original big lies are so big that if you are like most people some of them are ingrained in your identity, they are who you are. They come from religions and heritage. They are cooked into the primal soup of our minds. Many of them have been around for longer than many of the “facts” we have and as such are so covered in the dust of history and tradition that they appear to be as substantial as what is true. Indeed, some have a timeworn patina that makes them seem almost more important than that which is verifiable or even knowable.

Social science research gives a variety of reasons for why we are inclined to believe “[alternative facts](#).” (Studies show a person is “quick to share a political article on social media if it supports their beliefs, but is more likely to fact check a story if it doesn't.” We tend to vote for what we want to be true or what our friends

more likely to believe a story if it doesn't fit the things we see for what we want to be true or what our friends believe. According to Peter Ditto, a social psychologist at the University of California, "our wishes, hopes, fears and motivations often tip the scales to make us more likely to accept something as true if it supports what we want to believe." That said, another reason is often cited for our willingness to buy into the bullshit we are being fed. According to a [2019 University of Regina study](#), "People who believe false headlines tended to be the people (who) didn't think carefully, regardless of whether those headlines aligned with their ideology." So, one way or another, we fall for fake news because it's easier for us, socially or intellectually.

Many of these lies were created out of necessity. Life is finite. (OK, I'm sorry. It is. Take a deep breath if you need to and then continue reading.) If we don't come up with a good story about what happens after it ends or why we are here we will all go mad. So we make up preposterous stories about magic people in the sky and then immediately say that we cannot question those stories, that "faith" in them is more important than knowledge of what is real. Why? Because they will not stand up to scrutiny.

When challenged, the defenders of these original big lies say the truth is unknowable. Good try. Hard to argue with that. We don't know there is not an omniscient rule-maker beyond the clouds or a heaven filled with virgins to give pleasure to the faithful so how can you question it? But of course, selling what is unknowable as a truth is one of the most important categories of lies we encounter in life. Indeed, it is the foundation of much of (speculation-based and often hooey-ridden) human philosophy. And it works.

According to a 2011 poll from the Associated Press, nearly eight out of 10 Americans believe in the existence of angels and a 2015 poll showed 72 percent of Americans believe in Heaven and 58 percent believe in the existence of Hell. A 2019 YouGov poll showed that almost half of all Americans believe in demons and ghosts... and 13 percent believe in vampires. (Note: Over half of Republicans believe in demons, whereas only 37 percent of Democrats do. How far is it from there to a similar percentage of Trump voters, according to an *Economist*/YouGov poll, believing that the Hillary Clinton campaign was a hotbed of "pedophilia, human trafficking and satanic ritual abuse?")

There are other big lies, of course. Some are related to the religious lies—like the divine right of kings or the lie that the clergy somehow are more in touch with truth than, say, scientists who actually devote their lives to studying the truth. Some come from political leaders. For example, the lie that to die in war is glorious is one that has done irreparable damage for eons. It has been disproven for thousands of years and yet remains so essential to getting young men and women to give up their lives to serve the ambitions of the