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The Post-Truth Campaign

By PAUL KRUGMAN

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Suppose that President Obama were to say the following: “Mitt Romney believes that corporations are people, and he believes that only corporations and the wealthy should have any rights. He wants to reduce middle-class Americans to serfs, forced to accept whatever wages corporations choose to pay, no matter how low.”



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Paul Krugman

How would this statement be received? I believe, and hope, that it would be almost universally condemned, by liberals as well as conservatives. Mr. Romney did once say that corporations are people, but he didn't mean it literally; he supports policies that would be good for corporations and the wealthy and bad for the middle class, but that's a long way from saying that he wants to introduce feudalism.

But now consider what Mr. Romney actually said on Tuesday: “President Obama believes that government should create equal outcomes. In an entitlement society, everyone receives the same or similar rewards, regardless of education, effort, and willingness to take risk. That which is earned by some is redistributed to the others.”

And in an interview the same day, Mr. Romney declared that the president “is going to put free enterprise on trial.”

This is every bit as bad as my imaginary Obama statement. Mr. Obama has never said anything suggesting that he holds such views, and, in fact, he goes out of his way to praise free enterprise and say that there's nothing wrong with getting rich. His actual policy proposals do involve a rise in taxes on high-income Americans, but only back to their levels of the 1990s. And no matter how much the former Massachusetts governor may deny it, the Affordable Care Act established a national health system essentially

identical to the one he himself established at a state level in 2006.

Over all, Mr. Obama's positions on economic policy resemble those that moderate

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Republicans used to espouse. Yet Mr. Romney portrays the president as the second coming of Fidel Castro and seems confident that he will pay no price for making stuff up.

Welcome to post-truth politics.

Why does Mr. Romney think he can get away with this kind of thing? Well, he has already gotten away with a series of equally fraudulent attacks. In fact, he has based pretty much his whole campaign around a strategy of attacking Mr. Obama for doing things that the president hasn't done and believing things he doesn't believe.

For example, in October Mr. Romney pledged that as president, "I will reverse President Obama's massive defense cuts." That line presumably plays well with Republican audiences, but what is he talking about? The defense budget has continued to grow steadily since Mr. Obama took office.

Then there's Mr. Romney's frequent suggestion that the president has gone around the world "apologizing for America." This is a popular theme on the right — but the so-called Obama apology tour is a complete fabrication, assembled by taking quotes out of context.

As Greg Sargent of The Washington Post has pointed out, there's a common theme to these whoppers and a number of other things Mr. Romney has said: the strategy is clearly to portray the president as a suspect character, someone who doesn't share American values. And since Mr. Obama has done and said nothing to justify this portrait, Mr. Romney just invents stuff to make his case.

But won't there be some blowback? Won't Mr. Romney pay a price for running a campaign based entirely on falsehoods? He obviously thinks not, and I'm afraid he may be right.

Oh, Mr. Romney will probably be called on some falsehoods. But, if past experience is any guide, most of the news media will feel as though their reporting must be "balanced," which means that every time they point out that a Republican lied they have to match it with a comparable accusation against a Democrat — even if what the Democrat said was actually true or, at worst, a minor misstatement.

This isn't an abstract speculation. Politifact, the project that is supposed to enforce truth in politics, has declared Democratic claims that Republicans voted to end Medicare its "Lie of the Year." It did so even though Republicans did indeed vote to dismantle Medicare as we know it and replace it with a voucher scheme that would still be called "Medicare," but would look nothing like the current program — and would no longer guarantee affordable care.

So here's my forecast for next year: If Mr. Romney is in fact the Republican presidential nominee, he will make wildly false claims about Mr. Obama and, occasionally, get some flack for doing so. But news organizations will compensate by treating it as a comparable offense when, say, the president misstates the income share of the top 1 percent by a percentage point or two.

The end result will be no real penalty for running an utterly fraudulent campaign. As I said, welcome to post-truth politics.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on December 23, 2011, on page A31 of the New York edition with the headline: The Post-Truth Campaign.

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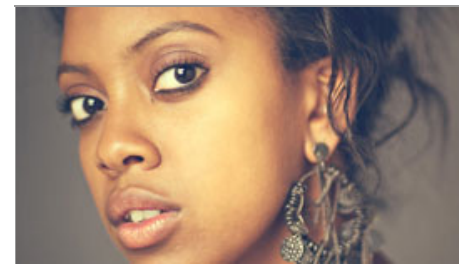
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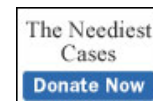


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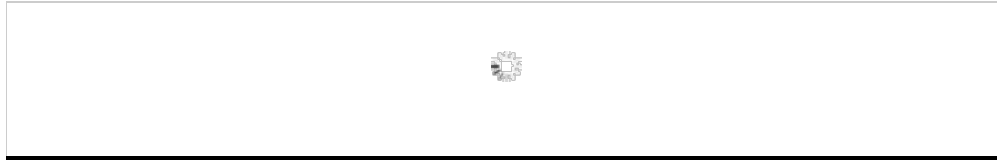
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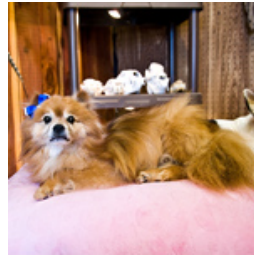
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