

StayingAlive



Beautiful lies

MATTHEW EDLUND M.D.

Contributing Columnist
health@lbknews.com

Why tell people the truth when they prefer beautiful lies? A media that vaunts visuals over evidence is convinced the public is more than willing to forget unpalatable facts, while our political class exploits the lesson.

In the first years of the Bush Administration, public relations officials often extolled their capacity to create "their own reality" — how else could the majority of Americans believe that Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's government, two groups dedicated to annihilating each other, worked as a team to produce the horrors of 9/11?

Blithe denial of reality is now a national force. Here are three examples:

Drug advertising

More than one patient has come to me saying, "All I want is a pill that makes me happy, makes me lose weight and causes no side effects." Drug and device consistently provide the message that there is a technical fix out there for almost every ill and that no personal or public responsibility need be taken to prevent. "Only" two-thirds of the nation is officially overweight, and "only" one-third of Americans are expected to become diabetic.

Why spend money for programs getting people to walk to work, use mass transit or discover their neighborhoods as they make themselves healthy, when there are fabulous profits to be made from pills? Watching TV drug ads is an experience like watching Salem cigarette



ads of the 1970s — each puff propels you into a glorious, primeval forest.

Drug side effects appear as unreadable sidebars. Minor complications like death and dementia are instead left to conversations where you should "ask your doctor," who is so harried and bent down by insurance companies and pharmacy benefit managers she will predictably prescribe the damn thing just to get you out of the office.

Melody Petersen's book "Our Daily Meds" describes how drug advertising now extends to children's cereals "and special sessions" at Rotary clubs. There is no place to hide. Expect more Vioxx and Phen-fen style disasters; European countries generally ban all consumer drug ads.

Wage wars, cut taxes and you'll balance the budget

Since southwest Florida is a national leader in foreclosures, one might expect some clarifying debate about federal spending, but debts that destroy individuals, families and national economies apparently cannot ever affect the national government.

Vice President Cheney proudly pointed out that President Reagan showed "deficits don't matter." The conflict in Iraq will only cost \$3 trillion if it stopped tomorrow, paid for with tax cuts from the party of "fiscal responsibility." The federal budget deficit, which has "surged" far more than our "success" in Iraq, does not include long-term payments for Social Security or Medicare, while the treasury reports that two-thirds of American businesses pay no federal tax whatsoever.

If you don't pay your bills, you go bankrupt. Not the feds. The trade deficit has "markedly declined" to "only" \$800 billion a year, while a falling dollar helps raise gasoline prices. Talk of cutting taxes under such brutal condi-

tions is tantamount to requesting banana republic status — didn't many defaulting Latin countries in the 1980s have debts smaller than ours? Watch the campaign ads over the next three months, and you'll wonder who's delusional.

Drill your way to energy independence

Americans use about three times the energy per person as Germans and Danes, whose "sunny lands" now provide solar power for a fifth of their electricity. But why spend money on conservation, solar or wind power, when you can drill in the Gulf?

Does it matter the energy produced will likely not be available for a decade, and only boost national production by half of 1 percent? Does it matter it threatens beach tourism — a staple of the Sunshine State economy, or that drilling hastens global warming that will put our homes under water?

The British government recently produced a major study of the "unpredictable disasters" that could lead to national crises. Terrorism, particularly attacks on London transit, stood high on the list. Yet the item considered most dangerous was a potential flu pandemic, estimated to kill anywhere from 50,000 to a half-million people, followed second by coastal erosion caused by global warming.

Beautiful lies are easy to accept. We love fantasy, and sometimes lies prove true. There may be a pill out there that will prevent all flu pandemics, or another that will make you happy and lose weight without side effects.

Unfortunately, denial of reality cannot work in the end. People die, economies crumble and soldiers disappear in countries Americans cannot find on the map. A nation, which spends twice as much money per person on health care to produce the health statistics of Lithuania

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KeyTravel



Paris: A city of cozy neighborhoods

RICK STEVES

Contributing Columnist
steves@lbknews.com

As I dodge Parisians walking their poodles and pushing baby strollers in a vibrant market street, I'm reminded that one of the reasons Paris is endlessly entertaining is because of its neighborhoods. On streets such as rue des Martyrs, real people make cozy communities in the midst of this vast, high-powered city. You find a warm and human vibrancy you miss when just hopping from big museum to museum.

Strung across the road above me, a banner announces a neighborhood "clean-your-attic-day" sale. At a bakery, a sign in the window still brags its baguettes were voted the best in Paris in 2007. And next to me, a line of motorbikes are poised to deliver sushi, pizza-style, to the next caller. (In this affluent neighborhood, many professionals don't want to cook after a long day of work, so delivery services like this are booming.)

Rue des Martyrs leads toward the center of Paris from the busy boulevard Clichy. As you wander, you feel the reality of raising a family and a sense of neighborhood in this urban setting. Still, security is a concern. Several side streets are "voie privée" — private lanes for high-rise, gated communities. The school has barriers to keep possible car bombs at a distance. (Since the terrorist attacks that rocked Paris decades ago, there's no parking in front of most schools or

near buildings that serve a Jewish clientele.)

Shopping for groceries is an integral part of everyday life here. Parisians shop almost daily for three good reasons: Refrigerators are small (tiny kitchens), produce must be fresh, and it's an important social event. Shopping is a chance to hear about the butcher's vacation plans, see photos of the florist's new grandchild, relax over "un cafe," and kiss the cheeks of friends. In a Parisian neighborhood like this, people know their merchants as if it were a village.

Goods spill onto the sidewalk. And locals happily pay more at a shop that's not part of a chain. The corner charcuterie still sells various meats. But it's morphed with the times by offering more variety, prepared dishes sold by the weight, and even a few tables so that customers can eat in as well as take out.

Across the street is one of the countless late-night groceries, which are generally run by North African immigrants who are willing to work the night shift, earning their living off wealthy locals who gladly pay the high prices for the



A cheese shop on rue des Martyrs features French specialties made by artisans.

RICK STEVES/Longboat Key News

convenience. Locals warn me that any place advertising prices by the half-kilo is trying to mask a very high markup.

The cheese shop has been serving the neighborhood ever since it used to keep goats and cows out back. This fromagerie preserves its old marble shelves, aluminum milk jugs, and World War II vintage scales, as if to show off its community roots. And rather than big name cheeses, it sells only the products of small artisan farms.

Locals know the butcher serves top

grade beef — a big concern after what they translate as the "crazy cow" problem. The ceiling hooks — where butchers once hung sides of beef — now display just a red medallion that certifies the slaughtered cow's quality.

At the patisserie you can jostle with a discerning and salivating clientele for the tasty, little, typically French works of art. They bake up special treats in sync with each season: Easter, Christmas, or whatever. I'm here at the end of the

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