

# Ignorance of the Issues May Not Be as Useful as Many Republicans Think

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Herman Cain's recent [inability](#) to demonstrate a command of even the most basic facts and debates around recent events in Libya made Rick Perry's [failure](#) to recall which three federal agencies he wanted to abolish during a recent debate seem positively statesmanlike by comparison. Cain, however, is not the first presidential candidate, or occupant of one of the country's highest offices to make the kind of mistake that would embarrass an above average high school student. Vice President Dan Quayle famously advised a young schoolboy to add the letter "e" to the end of the word "potato" during a spelling exercise. Similarly, poor command of the facts and garbled pronunciation were almost a defining characteristic of George W. Bush during his campaign for the presidency.

Cain's demonstrated lack of familiarity with this major foreign policy issue, however, is different from previous cases. Quayle seemed, at least somewhat, embarrassed by his spelling mistake never talking about it much after it happened. In general, Quayle was not pleased with his reputation for being less than brilliant, often acting defensive and upset when it was raised. Bush, for his part, sought to improve his knowledge of foreign policy during his campaign by working closely with foreign policy experts. The extent to which Bush succeeded in this endeavor are not clear, but some effort was made by the then Texas governor.

Bush and Quayle were somewhat aware that being perceived as not very smart would damage their political standing. Today being seen as not very bright is an advantage for many Republican candidates. Herman Cain's bumbling answer on Libya is just the most egregious example, but the Republican candidates for president have all displayed an appallingly poor level of knowledge of major issues. There is almost no substantive discussion of issues, foreign policy discussions have been reduced to various politicians claiming that America should be the most powerful country in the world, America should stop giving out so much foreign assistance, or both.

In the last two decades, inability to discuss issues in any depth has shifted from being a liability to a point of pride among Republican candidates. Cain's discussion of Libya was, on some level, another blow to a sinking campaign, but it also demonstrates that candidates can get relatively far down the political path to the presidency despite knowing little more than a few ideologically driven platitudes about the major issues. It is almost as if the Republican Party has spent so much time attacking every Democrat with a good education as an elitist, that they are now suspect of any sign of intellectual sophistication from their own candidates.

In fairness to the Republican Party, Herman Cain is, like Ron Paul, Newt Gingrich and most of the other candidates, not running for the presidency in the sense of having any chance of actually becoming president. Instead, most of these candidates seem to be running to get a show on Fox News, otherwise solidify their role in the media or simply to anger as many on the left as possible. Nonetheless, it is troubling that being smart and having a good understanding of the issues is no longer considered necessary for running even that kind of a campaign.

In the likely case that Romney wins the nomination, the campaign will be between two candidates who can at least speak clearly and have a decent understanding of most issues. Both candidates, particularly Romney, will seek to downplay their formal education, over-simplify the issues and accuse the other of being an elitist, but this will be deliberate for political purposes. However, if Romney slips and does not win the nomination, or if he loses in 2012 and the Republican Party continues to move in this direction, it is easily conceivable that we will have a Republican nominee who embraces this notion of ignorance as a virtue.

The political value of this ignorance on the far right is apparent, but it also is true that having a president who genuinely understands so little about the world, politics, economics or history, cannot be good for America. While brash displays of ignorance may win votes in Republican primaries, it is never helpful for the president of the U.S., in an increasingly global and multi-polar world, to cavalierly mispronounce foreign words, to remain deliberately ignorant of foreign cultures, to fail to see any shades of gray in any policy discussions or to have any ability to propose complex solutions to complex problems.

Those on the far right who fail to recognize this, or who simply deny the extent to which ignorance has permeated the Republican Party at the highest level, are putting some obscure political point about imagined elitism above what is good for the country. The failure of conservative leadership to recognize this and speak out against the triumph of ignorance in the Republican Party and the far right, is further evidence of the extent to which the Tea Party has taken over the Republican Party.