

## Editorial

### *What you are thinking today*

Most Americans cling fiercely to the right to have their “own opinions.” Not only does such a conviction override the obligation to be responsible for the consequences of one’s opinions, but, in fact, it assumes that the opinions we cherish are really our own.

In fact, most of those opinions which we cherish as “our own” have been imprinted on us by clever mass-media brainwashing techniques. A minor scandal during the recent New Hampshire Republican Party primary illustrates this point. It had to do with charges by Steve Forbes that Bob Dole’s campaign had commissioned a series of “anonymous” phone calls to potential voters, slandering Forbes. Senator Dole denied this vigorously.

The truth of the matter, as it turned out, was more interesting. Dole had commissioned a “poll” on voter opinion; however, the poll was in fact an anti-Forbes propaganda effort. The construction of such a “poll” affords us a useful insight into the real nature of “scientific public-opinion polling.”

The scandal concerned the use of “push polls,” the aggressive transmission of negative information about a rival, disguised as a poll question—something along the lines of: “Do you agree or disagree with the well-known charge that candidate X still beats his wife?” The affair caused an outpouring of public piety from the poll-takers, and one grand old man of the fraternity, Robert Teeter, went so far as to call the practice “questionable,” in a Feb. 13 *Washington Post* interview. And Teeter—who was director of research for the Nixon White House’s Committee to Re-Elect the President, and later went on to help George “Willie Horton” Bush shape his propaganda—surely knows the meaning of the word “questionable.”

The fact is, that “pushing” is not an aberration, but is the original and still-primary function of poll-taking. Successful pollsters know how to shape the form and context of their inquiries, in order to manipulate the results. For instance: The question, “Should the government prohibit the states from extending public assis-

tance beyond 24 weeks?” will give one set of results. But, one can get a vastly different response from the same group of people, if the question is varied to, “Should welfare be extended beyond 24 weeks?”

A polling whiz like Teeter gets paid, not for his statistical expertise, but for his knowledge of the fears and prejudices of the American people, and how such fears and prejudices can be used to create the desired result. Possibly the most honest statement to describe opinion polls came from Albert Sindlingen, a close associate of poll pioneer George Gallup back in the 1930s and ’40s: “We’d set up the headlines and draft the story, then we would go out and do the surveys to fill in the gaps.”

However, the real problem is not whether the statistics you read in the paper are true or manipulated; but, whether you think that the truth itself is statistical. Does the fact that 85.3% of the population believe a thing to be true, make that thing, somehow, more true, than some poor little fact that is subscribed to by only 10.7% of the people? These days, it appears that this is the case. Candidates craft their platforms to fit the highest statistical profile, and legislators draft policy—even scientific policy—to please popular prejudice. We should all remember that it was “scientifically measured,” if completely uninformed, public opinion that almost killed nuclear power in this country.

The only thing that a poll can tell you, is how many people remain for you to convince of the truth. Scientific discovery is located in overturning an idea which is firmly held by 99.999% of the population, including the so-called experts. The same is the case in politics. A political figure who knows the truth and sets about to convince the citizens that what they think is wrong, and that they should change their minds, is called a “statesman.” A political figure who gives people exactly what they think they want, is called, on some street corners, a “prostitute.” We do well to keep this distinction in mind during this crucial election year.