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Liars' Club

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Timothy Egan on American politics and life, as seen from the West.

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If common sense were currency Michele Bachmann would be broke, and holding a tin can by the roadside just now. Alas, because we live in an age where hyperbole is gold, Bachmann is rich.

She was on CNN the other day, a rare departure from the in-house fawning of Fox "News," expressing outrage that President Obama's trip to India was going to cost \$200 million a day and involve nearly three dozen warships.

Anderson Cooper did what no Fox host would ever do: he asked the preternaturally nutty congresswoman from Minnesota where she got her figures, suggesting that "this idea that it's \$200 million or whatever is simply made up."

In fact, **it was made up**. The White House said it was preposterous, and a Pentagon spokesman called the warship claim "absolutely absurd" and "comical."

What happened next was encouraging to everyone in the reality-based community. The emerging Republican leadership snubbed Bachmann in her attempt to join the major players who will guide G.O.P. policy in the House.

Now that they have to govern, Republicans are grappling with a tough initial challenge: how to detach themselves from an influential wing of their party that has never been interested in arguing facts. On a daily basis, these people bemoan, detest and feign outrage over utter fantasies. Some of the loudest voices are elected representatives; others are professional provocateurs interested in keeping their lecture fees high and their base in a lather.

Bachmann's disastrous turn outside the Fox bubble was instructive, for it showed how the liars' club works. **The \$200 million figure originated in India**, attributed to an anonymous foreign bureaucrat, and quickly went to the Drudge Report. On Fox and Rush Limbaugh's radio rant, the absurdity that the United States would spend more on a presidential trip than the daily cost to prosecute the Afghanistan war quickly became

gospel. Did these people ever call the White House or the Pentagon to check the facts before going ballistic? Perish the thought.

Glenn Beck went nuts (a redundancy). And while acknowledging that he didn't know if the figures were accurate, he felt comfortable enough to cite "a report that has made the rounds on the Internet." A commentator on Fox business "news" and the Republican fundraiser and Fox host Sean Hannity followed their scripts and Beck.

But this particular lie prompted a minor civil conflict in Rupert Murdoch's empire. The Murdoch employee Mike Huckabee challenged fellow Murdoch employees on their outrage over a made-up figure.

At the same time, The Wall Street Journal, Murdoch's crown jewel, went after another Murdoch employee, Sarah Palin, on one of her errors, which appear on a regular basis from her Twitter feed or in speeches. Palin attacked the Federal Reserve's monetary policy, which is about as far over her head as she ever wants to get, and showed profound ignorance on inflation. She said anyone who'd gone shopping lately would know that "grocery prices have risen significantly over the past year." A Journal blogger then [noted that food and beverage inflation was practically nonexistent](#) for the past year — the lowest on record — and that Palin was having some trouble with reading comprehension.

Huckabee wants to be president, and to be taken seriously. The Wall Street Journal needs credibility on basic economic facts in order to survive. And that takes us to the incoming Republican leadership, which will succeed or fail based on whether they are able to legislate with the truth in mind, or follow the crazies.

Republicans caught a break when Sharron Angle lost her bid to unseat Senator Harry Reid of Nevada. Angle's most preposterous claim was that Shariah, or Islamic law, existed in the good old U.S. of A. Why, just now, two cities — Dearborn, Mich., and Frankford, Tex. — were under the dreaded jihadist rule, she said.

"I don't know how that happened in the United States," said Angle. Nor does anyone else, because it didn't happen, and couldn't under our Constitution, which separates church (and mosque) from state. Frankford no longer exists as a town, though a reporter for CNN did find a small church and a cemetery within its confines. The mayor of Dearborn, Jack O'Reilly, said Muslims and Christians have been living peacefully with each other for decades.

Would it surprise you that Palin was Angle's most prominent supporter? And that Palin's other big political pick in the Southwest was Arizona's Gov. Jan Brewer, who famously claimed that "our law enforcement agencies have found bodies in the desert, either buried or just lying out there, that have been beheaded." Sounds like Shariah again. Except in this case the lie was used to make people afraid of Mexicans. Brewer finally

backed off when she was unable to cite a single instance of a headless body in the treeless desert.

Palin no longer has to govern, since quitting halfway through her term in Alaska. Relying on her singular, God-given inability to properly digest facts, she's free to make stuff up without consequence. She was awarded the **2009 "lie of the year"** by Politifact.com for inventing "death panels" in the health care bill. That site, along with factcheck.org, attempt to referee the whoppers in public policy debates, and are worth a visit for anyone trying to follow the news. But they hardly seem to matter to Palin.

Other Republicans, as they move legislation through Congress, will be held to higher standards. Is global warming real? Will extending tax cuts on the richest two percent dramatically increase the deficit? Is the surge in Afghanistan doing any good, or just prolonging a winless war? Big questions, big issues. Keeping Bachmann isolated in the make-believe studios of Fox would be a good start.

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