

## Facts no longer mean what they once did

BY LEONARD PITTS

I got an email the other day that depressed me.

It concerned a piece I recently did that mentioned Henry Johnson, who was awarded the French Croix de Guerre in World War I for singlehandedly fighting off a company of Germans (some accounts say there were 14, some say almost 30, the ones I find most authoritative say there were about two dozen) who threatened to overrun his post. Johnson managed this despite the fact that he was only 5'4" and 130 pounds, despite the fact that his gun had jammed, despite the fact that he was wounded 21 times.

My mention of Johnson's heroics drew a rebuke from a fellow named Ken Thompson, which I quote verbatim and in its entirety: "Hate to tell you that blacks were not allowed into combat intell 1947, that fact. World War II ended in 1945. So all that feel good, one black man killing two dozen Nazi, is just that, PC bull."

In response, my assistant, Judi Smith, sent Mr. Thompson proof of Johnson's heroics: a link to his page on the website of Arlington National Cemetery. She thought this settled the matter.

Thompson's reply? "There is no race on headstones and they didn't come up with the story in tell 2002."

Judi: "I guess you can choose to believe Arlington National Cemetery or not."

Thompson: "It is what it is, you don't believe either..."

At this point, Judi forwarded me their correspondence, along with a despairing note. She is probably somewhere drinking right now. You see, like me, she can remember a time when facts settled arguments. This is back before everything became a partisan shouting match, back before it was permissible to ignore or deride as "biased" anything that didn't support your worldview.

If you and I had an argument and I produced facts from an authoritative source to back me up, you couldn't just blow that off. You might try to undermine my facts, might counter with facts of your own, but you couldn't just pretend my facts had no weight or meaning.

But that's the intellectual state of the union these days, as evidenced by all the people who still don't believe the president was born in Hawaii or that the planet is warming. And by Mr. Thompson, who doesn't believe Henry Johnson did what he did.

I could send him more proof, I suppose. Johnson is lauded in history books (*Before The Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett, Jr., *The Dictionary of American Negro Biography* by Rayford Logan and Michael Winston) and in contemporaneous accounts (The Saturday Evening Post, the New York Times). I could also point out that blacks have fought in every war in American history, though before Harry Truman desegregated the military in 1948, they did so in Jim Crow units. Also, there were no Nazis in World War I.

But those are *facts*, and the whole point here is that facts no longer mean what they once did. I suppose I could also ignore him. But you see, Ken Thompson is not just some isolated eccentric. No, he is the Zeitgeist personified.

To listen to talk radio, to watch TV pundits, to read a newspaper's online message board, is to realize that increasingly, we are a people estranged from critical thinking, divorced from logic, alienated from even objective truth. We admit no ideas that do not confirm us, hear no voices that do not echo us, sift out all information that does not validate what we wish to believe.

I submit that any people thus handicapped sow the seeds of their own decline; they respond to the world as they wish it were rather to the world as it is.

That's the story of the Iraq War.

But objective reality does not change because you refuse to accept it. The fact that you refuse to acknowledge a wall does not change the fact that it's a wall.

And you shouldn't have to hit it to find that out.