We base our political beliefs and behaviors not upon reality, but upon pictures in our heads.

Yup. And some people, especially right wingers, are less likely to change the faulty pictures in their heads when ugly old reality intrudes. The results can be catastrophic.
What awful pictures did this guy have in his head?

Pictures in our heads shape our beliefs and actions.

And can anything change these pictures?

WE HEAR BLAME ON “BOTH SIDES” FOR SPREADING DANGEROUS PROPAGANDA AND FOMENTING VIOLENCE. BUT A STUDY FOUND THAT NEARLY ALL IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE 2007 WAS COMMITTED BY RIGHT WING EXTREMISTS.

THE CONSERVATIVE DAILY CALLER CONCLUDED “THAT 92 PERCENT OF IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED HOMICIDE INCIDENTS WERE COMMITTED WITH A RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST OR WHITE SUPREMACIST MOTIVE.”

EXTREMIST RHETORIC HAS PERMEATED THE DOMINANT RIGHT WING PARTY IN THE U.S., THE GOP, AND MAINSTREAM RIGHT WING MEDIA. GOP LEADERS AND THEIR MEDIA ENABLERS HAVE SPREAD DEADLY DELUSIONS WITH PREDICTABLE RESULTS.
In 2012, Centrists Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein wrote: "The G.O.P. has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition."

But, you might be asking, what is the right wing?

The right wing movement began in post-revolutionary France as an anti-progressive force. It was called "right wing" because their parliamentarians sat on the right side of the chamber. The primary function of the right wing has been to advance the interests of the dominant classes, such as aristocrats, church authorities, and corporate owners over those of ordinary people.

Traditionally, right-wing parties included a moderate wing, interested in the well-being of the middle class. But the current Republican Party and its demagogues in the media have purged the moderate wing from its ranks.
RIGHT WING PROPAGANDISTS FILL THEIR FOLLOWERS’ HEADS WITH GRIEVANCES—CONTRIVED GRIEVANCES—AND THAT’S WHAT MAKES THEM DANGEROUS. JUST LIKE DYLAN ROOFF, MOST RIGHT WINGERS DON’T LET GO OF THEIR GRIEVANCES EVEN WHEN CONFRONTED WITH OVERWHELMING EVIDENCE THAT THEY ARE WRONG. THEIR WORLDVIEW CONSISTS OF ENDLESS CONSPIRACIES AGAINST THEM.

People on government aid are just lazy and want a handout, and most of them commit fraud!

The government funds abortions! Planned Parenthood sells baby parts for profit!

Thousands of Muslims in New Jersey cheered on 9/11 and then hid all the videos!

Jews control our money and the Federal Reserve and Hollywood and Disney!

Obama prevented oil drilling so he could drive up oil prices!

The Democrats want to take away all your guns, bazookas, and nukes!

Immigrants are taking your jobs, plotting terrorist attacks, and making your food too spicy!

Hillary ordered the troops to stand down at Benghazi and then laughed maniacally!

Black people are getting themselves killed by police to make the police look bad!

Gay people want to convert our children, destroy our marriages, and sing Barry Manilow songs badly!

College professors are turning our kids into atheists, communists, and artists!

Anti-war protestors hate the troops, the flag, and your mom!

Climate change is a hoax aimed at creating a one world government!

There’s a war on Christmas, Easter, and Cyber Monday!

Millions of illegal aliens are voting, marrying your daughter and picking all the fruit!

Millions of illegal aliens are voting, marrying your daughter and picking all the fruit!

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Millions of illegal aliens are voting, marrying your daughter and picking all the fruit!
They have incorrigibility, which means they hold to their beliefs despite massive evidence that they are wrong.

Our pictures of the world pre-persuade us. New information must pass through the existing pictures in our heads and we filter it accordingly. Some pictures become “fixed” in our heads and that’s why it’s so hard to change people’s minds. And it’s even harder to change the minds of right wingers because they hold their pictures of the world more tightly than left wingers do.
We don’t start life with pictures in our heads, but rather with an uninterrupted stream of sense impressions. The process of transforming this stream of visual, aural, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory information into the shapes of discrete entities—people, places, things, actions—requires immersion in a culture.
Our pictures of the world don't just magically appear. We get them, in part, from other people, though these received pictures may seem like nothing more to us than "the world itself."

Are you real or just pictures in my head? Wait . . . Am I a picture too?
These leaders can make people who are not threats—Jews, immigrants, blacks, gays, Muslims—appear to us as threats.

By shaping the pictures in our heads, leaders can shape our actions.

When we take action against these apparent threats . . .

We become the aggressors. But the pictures in our heads tell us we are the victims. Our pictures turn reality upside down.

How do leaders get people to do really awful things to other people?
Leaders can use the power of images to create allies, enemies, and even our identities.

In the U.S., right wing leaders shape people into masses - of “Americans,” “Patriots,” “Whites,” “Conservatives,” “Christians” - all the while telling them how “free” they are. How free are you if you’re a particle in a mass?
Modern propagandists devised methods for putting pictures in our heads. A pioneer in this field was Walter Lippmann, who created anti-German propaganda for the U.S. Government to manufacture public approval for its entry into World War I. In his book, Public Opinion, Lippmann explained how such propaganda works.

Whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself. It is harder to remember that about the beliefs upon which we are now acting, but in respect to other peoples and other ages we flatter ourselves that it is easy to see when they were in deadly earnest about ludicrous pictures of the world.

Walter Lippmann

Change the pictures in people’s heads and you change what they believe, how they act, and even who they imagine they are.
HAVING LIVED THROUGH THE 1970S, I READILY CONCUR WITH LIPPMANN’S POINT THAT PEOPLE OF "OTHER AGES WERE IN DEADLY EARNEST ABOUT LUDICROUS PICTURES OF THE WORLD."
“They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies” [Public Relations, 3].

“Lippmann begins his book with an example of the way we treat pictures in our heads as if they are the environment itself.”

“There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days.”

“In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette.”

“It was, therefore, with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony assembled at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been.”

“They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies” [Public Relations, 3].
Lippmann knew that pictures in our heads could make friends into enemies and vice versa. He had to change the picture Americans had of Germans from the one on the left to the one on the right.

Lippmann realized that we tend to reject new pictures of the world if they don’t fit our models of reality. But a picture with dramatic power could alter our models of reality. Such pictures we call propaganda.

Thus was born the “atrocities story.” Americans were told that Germans had committed gross atrocities. Most of the stories were false.

"The war, of course, furnished many examples of this pattern: the casual fact, the creative imagination, the will to believe, and out of these three elements, a counterfeit of reality to which there was a violent instinctive response." Walter Lippmann
George Lakoff refers to our models of the world as “frames.”

Every word is defined with respect to what cognitive scientists call a frame. A frame is a conceptual structure . . .

Suppose I say the word “relief.” . . . Here's the frame: In order to give someone relief, there has to be an affliction and an afflicted party . . . and a reliever . . . that reliever is a hero . . . and if someone tries to stop the person giving relief from doing so, they're a bad guy . . . so when you use only one word, "relief," all of that information is called up.

. . . When you add "tax" to "relief" to give you the term "tax relief," it says that taxation is an affliction. That's a new metaphor.

In the hands of skilled right wing propagandists, inheritance taxes aimed at preventing plutocratic dynasties become “death taxes” that require “relief.” Control the frame and you control the pictures.
So, you say, our response should be to guard against propaganda and be skeptical of our own thinking. It turns out, however, that these aims are much harder to achieve than you might imagine.

Propaganda works best when you don’t know it’s propaganda. And you can’t easily be skeptical about your own thinking because your thoughts, infused with propaganda, probably seem obvious and natural to you. You need a different discourse, a meta-cognition, to understand your thinking.
Meta-cognition is thinking about your thinking, using tools to self-correct.

Over thousands of years, humans have developed methods for determining whether some ways of thinking work better than others and whether certain pictures of the world are more accurate than others. Yet we never have a complete and clear picture of the world itself, only sense impressions, concepts, and our own thought processes.

These methods include several "razors" (use carefully!)

1. Popper’s Razor (named for Karl Popper): A better theory is more powerful, meaning it explains more data than its rival.
2. Ockham’s Razor (named for William of Ockham): A better theory is simpler and requires fewer ad hoc hypotheses or assumptions to bolster it.
3. Hume’s Razor (named for David Hume): A better theory is more probable: the fewer miracles required, the better.
4. Whewell’s Razor (named for William Whewell): A better theory is consistent with other good theories.
5. Hitchens’s Razor (named for Christopher Hitchens): “What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.”
Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization.

Jacques Ellul

When we go looking for propaganda, we rarely see it because we assume it tries to change our pictures of the world. In other words, we call something propaganda when it is agitational.

But most propaganda, according to Jacques Ellul, is integrational. In other words, it reinforces our existing pictures of the world. It comes from our peers, or from seemingly benevolent sources such as parents, preachers, teachers, celebrities, and journalists. It is not detectable as propaganda and is thus more effective.

Don’t watch TV! Don’t buy things! Don’t root for your home team!

Jacques Ellul
Ellul refers to the modern world as a pseudo-environment made up of myths, stereotypes, and images. For instance, we learn about the “American dream” of rags-to-riches in school and entertainment, so it seems true. But it is less true than it is in other countries.

A growing number of economic studies have found that the United States stands out as having less, not more, intergenerational mobility than do Canada and several European countries. American children are more likely than other children to end up in the same place on the income distribution as their parents.

Moreover, there is emerging evidence that mobility is particularly low for Americans born into families at the bottom of the earnings or income distribution.

In other words, for most Americans, the American dream is itself only a dream!
Edward Bernays, Freud’s nephew and a contemporary of Lippmann, was a master of propaganda. He knew that simple labels could divide our pictures of the world into good (self) and evil (other).

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

Bernays, working for the United Fruit Company and in league with the U.S. government, created a campaign to overthrow Guatemala’s democratically-elected president, Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán, by branding him a communist. It worked.
LIPPMANN, BERNAYS, AND OTHERS INVENTED A PROPAGANDA SYSTEM SO SUCCESSFUL THAT EVEN MOST SELF-DESCRIBED LIBERALS, INCLUDING MANY ACADEMICS, HAVE ADOPTED ITS PICTURES OF THE WORLD. IT IS DIFFICULT TO FIND PEOPLE WHO HAVE A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE PROPAGANDA SYSTEM WORKS AND CAN THUS REFRAME THE PICTURES THAT POPULATE THEIR HEADS.

The U.S. has overthrown more than 50 foreign governments since World War II, using propaganda methods to put pictures in our heads that justify its actions. In none of these cases was there an existential threat to the United States.

The propaganda system allows the U.S. leadership to commit crimes without limit and with no suggestion of misbehavior or criminality; in fact, major war criminals like Henry Kissinger appear regularly on TV to comment on the crimes of the derivative butchers.

Edward S. Herman
It turns out, kids, that what’s more impactful than the individual pictures or “facts” you encounter is the big picture you have of the world.

Let’s say your view of the world was shaped by John Wayne westerns. If that’s your big picture, then you have a ready-made way to understand problems such as foreign governments acting independently of U.S. interests. They are outlaws and the law must be upheld, even if we (always reluctant Americans) must break the law to uphold it.

Other “problems,” such as income inequality, air pollution, or lack of educational opportunity, don’t exist because they’re not part of the John Wayne worldview.

I know those law books mean a lot to you, but not out here. Out here a man settles his own problems.
“IN DEEP-RED AMERICA, THE WHITE CHRISTIAN GOD IS KING, FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY. RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM HAS SHAPED MOST OF THEIR BELIEF SYSTEMS. SYSTEMS BUILT ON A FUNDAMENTALIST FRAMEWORK ARE NOT CONDUCIVE TO INTROSPECTION, QUESTIONING, LEARNING, OR CHANGE.”

“WHEN YOU HAVE A BELIEF SYSTEM BUILT ON FUNDAMENTALISM, IT ISN’T OPEN TO OUTSIDE CRITICISM, ESPECIALLY BY ANYONE NOT A MEMBER OF YOUR TRIBE AND IN A POSITION OF POWER.”

-FORSETTI’S JUSTICE
ANOTHER WORLDVIEW IS CONSUMERISM

MORE INSIDIOUS THAN BOTH THE JOHN WAYNE WORLDVIEW AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IS THE CONSUMERIST ONE THAT NOW DOMINATES POLITICS AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS, INCLUDING UNIVERSITIES.

THIS WORLDVIEW ASSUMES THAT THE INDIVIDUAL PERSON IS THE BEGINNING AND END OF SOCIAL EXISTENCE AND THAT OUR POLITICS SHOULD HONOR EACH PERSON’S DESIRES AND WHIMS.

IN THIS WORLDVIEW, COLLECTIVE WELLBEING NO LONGER MAKES SENSE BECAUSE IT DOES NOT SATISFY PERSONAL DESIRES.

Sounds narrow-minded!
Even goats are worried!

I see great dangers in the impoverished worldviews of John Wayne wannabes, religious fundamentalists, and consumerists, and with their oversimplification of the world. I can't understand why such narrow worldviews seem appealing to people.

But it's their oversimplification that makes them appealing, Goaty!
VLADISLAV SURKOV, ONCE THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF RUSSIA AND NOW TOP PERSONAL ADVISOR TO VLADIMIR PUTIN, AIMS TO MAKE COHERENCE IMPOSSIBLE BY CREATING FRAGMENTARY AND CONTRADICTORY PICTURES. THE TARGET POPULATION NO LONGER BELIEVES OR TRUSTS IN ANYTHING. THIS CONFUSED AND DEMORALIZED POPULATION Thus gives its consent to a strongman who seems capable of bringing stability out of chaos.

IN OTHER WORDS, CHAOS RULES!
The Washington Post stated that hundreds of stories circulating in the U.S. media were actually fake and were created and distributed by Russian propagandists to help Trump.

The problem with the story was that the Post got its information from PropOrNot, a shadowy group that may itself be a front for Russian propaganda.

So... what’s fake and what’s not?

The point of modern propaganda isn’t only to misinform or push an agenda. It is to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.

Garry Kasparov
This is not merely an 'information war' . . . but a 'war on information.' If the very possibility of rational argument is submerged in a fog of uncertainty, there are no grounds for debate. Sooner or later, the public will give up trying to understand what happened, or even bothering to listen.

In Russia today, thanks to Putin, spectacle, theater and lying pervade the media, confuse the discourse and have turned the viewing public into an electorate that no longer seems to care about the truth.

Gaslighting is a tactic of behavior in which a person or entity, in order to gain more power, makes a victim question their reality. It works a lot better than you may think. Anyone is susceptible to gaslighting. It is a common technique of abusers, dictators, narcissists, and cult leaders. It is done slowly, so the victim doesn't realize how much they've been brainwashed. In the movie Gaslight (1944), a man manipulates his wife to the point where she thinks she is losing her mind. 

Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas is the former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia

Peter Pomerantsev is a Soviet-born British journalist, author and TV producer

And it's a war on information!
He is really very much of a leader. I mean, you can say, 'Oh, isn't that a terrible thing' - the man has very strong control over a country.

*Actual quote*

We don’t know for sure that Putin controls Trump, but isn’t it disturbing that it’s even plausible?
When we are overwhelmed with false, or potentially false, statements, our brains pretty quickly become so overworked that we stop trying to sift through everything. It’s called cognitive load — our limited cognitive resources are overburdened. It doesn’t matter how implausible the statements are; throw out enough of them, and people will inevitably absorb some. Eventually, without quite realizing it, our brains just give up trying to figure out what is true.

But Trump goes a step further. If he has a particular untruth he wants to propagate—not just an undifferentiated barrage—he simply states it, over and over. As it turns out, sheer repetition of the same lie can eventually mark it as true in our heads. It’s an effect known as illusory truth, first discovered in the ’70s and most recently demonstrated with the rise of fake news. In its original demonstration . . . repeated statements were far more likely to be judged as true the second and third time they appeared—regardless of their actual validity. Keep repeating that there was serious voter fraud, and the idea begins to seep into people’s heads.

Maria Konnikova
Dismediation is a form of propaganda that seeks to undermine the medium by which it travels, like a computer virus that bricks the whole machine. Thus, for example,

**Information:** John Kerry is a war hero who was awarded three Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and a Silver Star;

**Misinformation:** John Kerry was never wounded in the Vietnam War;

**Disinformation:** John Kerry is a coward;

**Dismediation:** ‘Swift Boat Veterans for Truth’ are disinterested sources of information about John Kerry, equivalent in integrity to any other source that might be presented on the evening news.

This war on information is all but entirely a right wing phenomenon.
To Trump and increasingly to his Republican allies, there are only two kinds of people in the world: the ones who agree with them (who are the best people, fantastic, believe me) and the ones who don’t (who are losers and haters). There is no in-between and no such thing as neutrality.

President Trump’s playbook . . . tries to convince everyone that there’s no such thing as a neutral authority on anything. If the CBO might say your bill will have problematic effects, then the answer is not to rebut its particular critique, but to attack the institution itself as fundamentally illegitimate. If the news media report things that don’t reflect well on you, then they’re “the enemy of the American people.” If polls show you with a low approval rating, then “any negative polls are fake news.” If a court issues a ruling you don’t like, then it’s a “so-called judge” who has no right to constrain you.
Both extremes are easy; you don’t have to think, just react. You either believe anything you want or you disbelieve anything you want, without having to worry about evidence or reasoning.

The goal of propaganda is to move people away from true skepticism and towards the extremes of gullibility and cynicism (flip sides of the same coin)

Skepticism requires hard work and is often misunderstood. It does not mean being “objective” or “neutral” (which are impossible goals that disguise one’s privilege). Skepticism is not about casting doubt on the safety and effectiveness of vaccines, or on climate science, or on evolution. Those are settled questions. Those stances are properly called denials. Skeptics know when something is settled and they know when to accept it and move on.

Baaa! Nonsense!
But how dangerous is this right wing war on information? It's not like it leads to fascism, right?

That's just where it is leading, my horsey friend.
MANY OF TODAY’S RIGHT WING LEADERS SHOULD PROPERLY BE CALLED FASCISTS. ALL FASCISTS NEED FOLLOWERS OR THEY DON’T GET VERY FAR. TODAY’S RIGHT WINGERS DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH FOLLOWERS TO RULE WITHOUT ADDITIONAL HELP. THEY NEED THE COLLABORATION, OR AT LEAST THE PASSIVE ACCEPTANCE, OF THE VAST ARMIES OF THE IGNORANT, THE CONFUSED, AND THE DEMORALIZED.


THE CITIZENRY “IS DEPRIVED NOT ONLY OF ITS CAPACITY TO ACT BUT ALSO ITS CAPACITY TO THINK AND TO JUDGE.”

HANNAH ARENDT
Many of those who voted for Trump don’t know they are ignorant and don’t know they are confused because they suffer from the Dunning-Kruger effect.

The same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognize correct judgment. To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter.

Thus, many Trump supporters became ignorant dupes of fascism because they are too ignorant to know that they’re ignorant! But they are also ignorant of the fact that right wing leaders are strategizing to increase their ignorance. As a result of their increased ignorance, these dupes actually increase their confidence in their awful cognitive abilities. Amazing, right?
Right wingers are also more incorrigible, meaning they hold on to their false beliefs come what may.

Chris Mooney discusses studies that show right-wingers are far more likely than liberals to employ the psychological mechanisms that lead to delusions.

Right-wingers, he writes, “tend to have a greater need for closure than do liberals”; liberals, by contrast, tend to “have more need for cognition. They like to think, in an effortful and self-challenging way, and take pride in doing a good job of it” (69).

So what is closure? Mooney writes:

The need for cognitive closure describes the state of being uncomfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, and wanting these to be resolved into a firm belief. . . . Having a high need for closure tends to mean that one will seize on a piece of information that dispels doubt or uncertainty, and then freeze, refusing to admit or consider new information.
The picture of the world held by right wingers—their reality—is false and leads them to commit endless moral wrongs.
But because it is behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates.
The images right wingers have in their heads are bizarre and unreal.

But right wingers leave real bodies lying in the shadows cast by their images.
Conventional wisdom tells us that left and right wingers have different conceptual models and that one is not necessarily better than the other. That “even-handed” view has propelled Jonathan Haidt’s career as a social psychologist!

Yeah, but Haidt is wrong because right wingers are dangerously wrong about reality far more often!
Right wingers tell us they think their own thoughts and they deny they have been told what to think.

But in the words of the great Driftglass, we right wingers “have become reprogrammable orwellian meat-puppets.”
Right wing leaders—who are con-artists, delusional, or both—sell distorted pictures of the world to their followers, who accept these pictures as their own reality.

The pictures in their heads, sold to them every day on Fox News and Breitbart, portray the world as filled with evil liberals, perverted gay people, terrorist refugees, and subversive atheists: in other words, as monsters to be eliminated.
Right wingers see demons of their own imaginings. By acting on their distorted pictures of the world, they become like the demons they imagine.

He became what he beheld. He became what he was doing. He was himself transformed.

Quote from William Blake:
For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington. Theology asserts propositions that cannot be proven true; ideologues hold stoutly to a world view despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not always bad but they are always blind. And there is the danger: voters and politicians alike, oblivious to the facts.

One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress.

This quote is from 2005. In other words, the mainstream delusions Moyers warns us about did not begin during the 2016 election!
My goal, however, is to understand right wing thinking for the same reason that a doctor tries to understand an illness - to work on prevention and treatment and thus to minimize suffering. Right wing beliefs and actions are causing immense harm!

When right wingers find out I am a critic of their propaganda and delusion, they produce more of it! The Orange County Young Republicans labeled me “the crazy @UCF prof who has a special hatred towards conservative students.”
Ha! What if Dr. Mauer gets a detail wrong? Then it ruins his whole theory!

Sorry, little monkey! His theory is saved by the Saper-Warp hypothesis.

The Saper-Warp hypothesis means getting the details wrong (or some of the details), but strangely getting the spirit, the essence, uncannily right.

Craig Saper
Did you learn something, horsey?

I sure did! Now how about a carrot?
I'm disappointed in society & Shit