Conservative critics and others have argued for years that theories popular in universities such as critical legal theory undermine the idea of truth in favor of storytelling. Ironically, it has turned out that the problem is far greater on the Right than the Left. This is not only destructive to democracy. It also encourages conspiracy theories and hate speech, like a recent spate of antisemitic attacks on officials at FEMA.

The problem on the Right has long been obvious. Remember Kellyanne Conway's "alternative facts"? It has never been clearer than in a recent statement by J.D. Vance. On learning that there was no factual basis for his story about Haitian refugees eating pet dogs, he responded: "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do."

This indifference to truth crosses a crucial line. That line marks the difference between advocacy and demagoguery. It also marks the difference between protected free speech and unprotected defamation. But Vance was unusual only in his candor.

There's another view of the world, expressed centuries ago by John Adams. "Facts," he said, "are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." Our views about facts may turn out to be wrong, but we don't improve things by just deciding to repeat whatever stories suit us. And we don't make smart decisions based on ungrounded stories.

Climate denial is a prime case in point. We have long since passed the point where there's any credible doubt about the reality of climate change and its relationship to carbon emissions from human activities. But this is, as Al Gore once said, an inconvenient truth – inconvenient because it threatens huge economic interests and inconvenient because it calls for changes that some people prefer not to consider. Easier to simply deny reality.

When we won't examine facts, we have to make up other stories to account for the world. Hurricanes Helene and Milton were extraordinarily violent storms and carry a clear message that the world isn't behaving the way we used to think it would. The simplest explanation is that climate change is warming the ocean and that warmer waters create more intense hurricanes. Once we rule that out, however, we're left to invent conspiracy theories to explain the frightening failure of the world to

behave “normally.” And that’s just what we see happening, as I discussed in my post yesterday.

When lying is seen as legitimate political discourse, we’re in deep trouble. It’s a short step from blaming people for imaginary crimes to rounding them up or using force to stop them. That’s why climate scientists get death threats. And yet, whatever threats are made or carried out, reality will remain what it is. You can denounce climate change as a Chinese hoax or as one of the “great scams”, as Trump did a few weeks ago. Or you can blame the Jews for hurricanes, a growing online trend. None of that will stop the warming waters of the Gulf from sending incredible storms your way.