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COVER: Policeman lashes out at protesters during a demonstration against the Gaza Massacre outside the Israeli embassy in London in January. In February, press photographers protested outside London’s Metropolitan Police headquarters at New Scotland Yard over fears that new anti-terror legislation would make covering demonstrations such as these almost impossible. Photo: Jess Hurd, ReportDigital.co.uk
Truth and lies

It’s not a political ideology or position. Truth is the truth. It’s honesty and accuracy, says Michael I. Niman

The motto at my local National Public Radio news station, is “Someplace between the left and the right lies the truth – that’s where you’ll find us.” I’ve always been annoyed by this trite bit of self-aggrandizement. It’s not just because it’s silly. It’s because the truth is the truth. And the truth doesn’t reside between the left and the right. The truth is not a political or economic ideology or position. It’s the truth. It’s honesty and accuracy. Period.

This motto isn’t just some innocent stupidity repeated ad nauseam. It’s dangerous. It subtly sends out a loaded political attack message supporting one position, centrisim, while surreptitiously dismissing other positions as lies, and their adherents as liars. The fact that this motto endlessly soldiers on over the years means it is largely unquestioned, save for the complaints of a nitpicking journalism professor. It’s accepted. People don’t think about it and they don’t question it. In his now classic book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, sociologist James Loewen examines high school American history textbooks and how they whitewash American history – for example, skipping unsavory bits like the cannibalism at Jamestown and the robbing of Indian graves at Plymouth, while rationalizing wars of expansion and sugar-coating anti-native genocide. But the worse crime the high school texts commit, according to Loewen, is to simplify the dynamic field of history into a serious of simple “facts.” There “were 10 million Native Americans at the time of the Columbian invasion” – not 100 million as many anthropologists argue, or two million as historians once claimed, but 10 million. That’s the answer: Memorize it and spit it back on the test.

Under this pedagogy, history ceases to be a discussion or an evolving set of arguments, but a set of simple facts to be memorized – a truth chosen by a textbook editor from a selection of many convincing arguments. The issue here isn’t whether there were a dozen or a billion people living in the Americas at time of conquest – that argument will continue to evolve. The issue is that students are completely unaware that there is an argument. The random truths, like the outright lies that social studies teachers wittingly and unwittingly spread, are deadly because they short circuit inquiry and critical thinking. History becomes a set of facts. The wrong answers become lies because they go against the conventional wisdom.

Let’s look back on some very recent history – the giddy hoopla leading up to the inauguration of Barack Obama. Corporate news outlets broadcast a daily countdown of George W. Bush’s last days in office. Everyone was on board. When inauguration day came, the media trained their cameras on Bush’s helicopter as it evacuated Washing-
The historic massive 1999 “Battle in Seattle” protests against corporate globalization were covered as a sporting event, devoid of any context – cops swinging clubs against the heads of union members and students who appeared in Seattle for no apparent reason other than to be savagely beaten.

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