

Spreading Lies: How Think Tanks Ignore the Facts

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[This is part 4 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), and [part three](#).]

But do the right-wing think tanks even care about the facts? In his autobiography, *Blinded by the Right*, David Brock describes his experience being recruited for one right out of college: “Though I had no advanced degrees, I assumed the grandiose title of John M. Olin Fellow in Congressional Studies, which, if nothing else, certainly impressed my parents. ... My assignment was to write a monograph, which I hoped to publish as a book, challenging the conservative orthodoxy on the proper relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government.” This topic was chosen, Brock explains, because with “a squish like Bush in the White House ... the political reality [was] that the conservative agenda could be best advanced by renegade conservatives on Capitol Hill.” (79f)

Needless to say, paying fresh-faced former college students lots of money to write articles that serve political needs is not the best way to get accurate information. But is accurate information the goal? Look at John Lott, a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute — the same right-wing think tank that promoted *The Bell Curve*. Lott’s book *More Guns, Less Crime* claimed that his scientific studies had found that passing laws to allow people to carry concealed weapons actually lowered crime rates. As usual, the evidence melted away upon investigation, but Lott’s errors were more serious than most.

Not content to simply distort the data, Lott fabricated an entire study which he claimed showed that in 97% of cases, simply brandishing a gun would cause an attacker to flee. When Internet critics begun to point out his inconsistencies on this claim, Lott posted responses under the name “Mary Rosh” to defend himself. “I have to say that he was the best professor I ever had,” Lott gushed about himself one Internet posting. “There were a group of us students who would try to take any class that he taught. Lott finally had to tell us that it was best for us to try and take classes from other professors.”

Confronted about his alternate identity, Lott told the *Washington Post* “I probably shouldn’t have done it — I know I shouldn’t have done it”. And yet, the very next day he again attacked his critics, this time under the new pseudonym “Washingtonian”. (It later got so bad that one of Lott’s pseudonyms would start talking about posts from another Lott pseudonym.)[†]

Lott, of course, is not the only scholar to make things up to bolster his case. For comparison, look at Michael Bellesiles, author of the anti-gun book *Arming America*, which argued guns were uncommon in early America. Other scholars investigated and found that Bellesiles had probably fabricated evidence. Emory University, where Bellesiles was a professor of history, begun an investigation into the accuracy of his work, eventually forcing him to resign. His publisher, Knopf, pulled the book out of print. Libraries pulled the book off their shelves. Columbia University revoked the Bancroft Prize the book had been awarded. The scandal was widely covered in academic circles. Bellesiles was firmly disgraced and has not shown his face in public since.

And what happened to Lott? Nothing. Lott remains a “resident scholar” at the American Enterprise Institute, his book continues to sell well, his op-ed pieces are still published in major papers, and he gives talks around the country.† For the right-wing scholar, even outright fraud is no serious obstacle.

Next: [Part 5: Saving Business](#)