

## **We're all entitled to our own opinions, but not our own facts**

Written by Wauneta Breeze  
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By Mary Kay Quinlan

Nebraska News Service

The top executive of the company that wants to build the Keystone XL oil pipeline through the Ogallala Aquifer was quoted this week as saying that Nebraskans would support the project "if they get the facts, the right facts."

As opposed to the wrong facts?

Message control, from the White House to the statehouse to the school house as well as from Wall Street to Main Street, has become the order of the day.

And the campaign-style advertising and high-priced lobbying that seem to dominate the discussion of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline is yet another illustration of how public discourse has too often degenerated into fear-mongering shouting matches instead of thoughtful debate based on, well, facts.

You might recall Earl Landgrebe, the Indiana Republican congressman, a diehard Nixon supporter, who famously said during the Watergate hearings: "Don't confuse me with the facts. I've got a closed mind."

At least he was honest.

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Less so are those who believe — or who are paid to believe — that if they repeat something often enough and loudly enough it will become true, even though many such assertions often are opinions masquerading as facts.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served four terms in the U.S. Senate and was an adviser to four presidents, both Democrat and Republican, was of a generation of politicians who respected the process of constructive public discourse. “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts,” Moynihan once said.

The trouble with facts, of course, is that they can lead to contradictory opinions.

But that doesn't make the facts themselves “right” or “wrong.”

What it does mean, though, is that participants in public discourse — whether on the floor of the Legislature, the halls of Congress or the Occupy Wall Street encampments and tea party rallies — need to resist the temptation to wrap themselves in catchy slogans and outrageous assertions that shamelessly disregard the complexity of issues we face, whether it's balancing the federal budget or deciding the route of an oil pipeline or coming to grips with a local school bond issue.

Nebraskans are justifiably proud of the overall quality of their public schools, all of which strive to teach students what educators call “higher order thinking skills.”

We say we want our kids to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers, with an ability to analyze information — yes, facts — and arrive at reasonable conclusions.

If we expect that of our kids, then it's the least we can expect of ourselves as voters and of our elected policy-makers.

Their job isn't easy. But it doesn't help when advocates with deep pockets aim to control

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access to the facts we need to make informed decisions

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