

# 'Denialism' explores causes of 'irrational thinking' in the U.S.

Global warming is just a theory championed by those who are trying to force their anti-business, "green" agenda on the rest of us. Homeopathic remedies are at least as good, and probably better, than more traditional therapeutic approaches for curing many of the diseases that affect us. The Deep-water Horizon was sabotaged by the government in an effort to gain support for cap-and-trade legislation.

Most of us have heard these rather dubious claims espoused by otherwise intelligent individuals – even though there is no credible evidence that any of them are even partially true. So why do we continue to give credence to these kinds of specious allegations?

That is the question Michael Specter attempts to answer repeatedly in his new book, "Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives." As Specter observes, Americans tend to be skeptical about almost everything; we are habitually convinced that we are never being told the whole story and that things are never as they seem. At the heart of this "irrational thinking" is a deep mistrust of both science and the government.

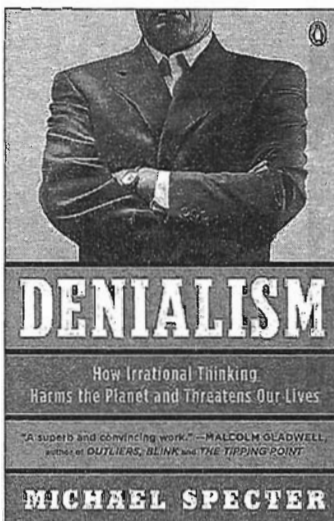
"Denialists draw direct relationships where none exist," Specter explains. "Denialist arguments are often bolstered by accurate information taken wildly out of context, wielded selectively and supported by fake experts."

Michael Specter is a staff writer for the New Yorker. He has won numerous awards, including the Science Journalism Award from the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Excellence in Media Award from the Global Health Council.

While denialism is accessible to both the novice as well as those who are more familiar with the subject matter, it is obvious that Specter is writing for a general audience. And even though the various research studies and reports he cites seem credible – which is good for a volume on this particular topic – the majority of the book is based on surprisingly few primary sources. In some instances, he seems to place greater emphasis on references that tend to be more favorable to his primary thesis.

Specter feels that a lack of reliance on the scientific method as the primary mechanism for understanding the world and solving our problems will only make things worse in the future. Without the rational and systematic analysis that science demands, human beings tend to see cause-and-effect relationships where none actually exists. He supports this assertion with a variety of examples that are all too familiar to many readers. The idea that vaccines somehow cause autism falls into this category.

"The incidence of autism has risen dramatically during the past three decades," Specter explains. "Parents, understandably desperate to find a cause and often wholly unfamiliar with many diseases that vaccines prevent, began to



*"Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives,"*  
by Michael Specter. New York:  
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wonder – publicly and vocally – why their children even needed them."

The truth of the matter, Specter asserts, is that vaccinations have saved millions of lives over the past six decades. Their benefit to society has been demonstrated extensively and conclusively. Moreover, there is no credible scientific evidence that vaccines cause autism. Yet the denialists continue to favor their own biased beliefs.

Specter believes that science has come under increased scrutiny for a variety of reasons – some legitimate and some more spurious. He also notes that this trend has been growing since the 1960s.

"For nearly 50 years Americans have challenged the very idea of progress, as blind faith in scientific achievement gave way to suspicion and doubt. The benefits of new technologies have often been oversold," Specter writes. "And denialism thrives in the space between promises and reality. We no longer trust authorities, in part because we used to trust them too much."

Another issue Specter addresses in some depth is the push for more organic farming methods. Although he acknowledges that there are benefits associated with this agricultural approach, he makes it clear that it does have serious disadvantages as a strategy for providing the food that will be required by a global population that continues to expand exponentially. He further describes how the situation is especially critical in places like Africa, where greater reliance on science and technology will be essential for successfully negotiating the immense challenges facing those who live there.

"Total reliance on organic farming would force African countries to devote twice as much land per crop as we do in the United States," Specter reports. "Total production on farms there, according to the World Resources Institute, is nearly 20 percent less than it was in 1970. Without another agricultural revolution, that trend will surely continue."

In the final analysis, Specter probably spends a little too much time describing the extent of the problems associated with denialism instead of focusing on viable solutions to those problems. Overall, however, he is confident that we will come to our senses before it is too late.

"Science and technology have repeatedly saved humanity," Specter concludes. "Denialism must be defeated. There is simply too much at stake to accept any other outcome."

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.

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