

The scourge of whataboutism

The simplistic diversionary tactic defies the notion that both sides can be right



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A “whatabout” is a method of deflecting debate that increasingly seems to have consumed rational discourse. Use of the term means, “You have stumbled into an area of conflict where I can’t rebut you, so I will divert to a battleground where I have more weapons.”

When my wife, for instance, said, “I cannot believe you spent \$500 on a signed, first-edition of ‘Thin Thighs in 30 Days,’” I, knowing I could not win that war, went whatabout.

“What about your spending?” I bellowed. “You dropped 20 times that much this year and I have the receipts to prove it!”

“On groceries,” she said wearily. “More specifically, on the thigh-swelling muck that you tearfully demand I buy.”

Clearly whataboutism won’t always work, nor should it, since it’s an intellectually

bankrupt strategy. But it is, in our politics, deployed shamelessly on both sides of the aisle and nastily denounced when the other side does it.

On the political left, one of the great whatabouts is on immigration. To those who support President Donald Trump’s wall on the Southern border to keep out immigrants coming illegally, liberals often come back with “What about visa overstays? You know 66 percent of new immigrants here illegally overstay visas, and a wall won’t help with that!”

That’s a weak argument. A plan is not worthless because it addresses only part of a varied and complex problem. If you have water leaking into your house through the basement and the roof, you don’t refuse to patch the roof because it won’t help with the basement. And the two groups are not equal. People who sneak into the United States without any scrutiny are not the same as ones vetted by our government for visas who then overstay.

On the political right, the top issue-oriented whatabouts are on gun control. When gun-control advocates say they want to limit, for instance, military-style semi-automatic rifles with high-capacity magazines, gun enthusiasts come back with, “What about handguns? You know the majority of people killed by guns in America are killed by handguns, right? Plus what about hunting rifles? And laws won’t stop criminals!”

But the fact that banning the rifles and magazines that make it easy to kill 30 people in 30 seconds won’t save people killed by pistols, or make all such guns and magazines disappear, is irrelevant, whether or not

you agree with such a ban. If an army were coming to attack and there was a way to steal half of its assault weapons, you wouldn’t say, “Why bother? They’ll still have guns.”

The reasonable arguments for and against a wall on the U.S. Southern border address how it will affect the flow of unvetted people and contraband across the border. Such arguments consider whether that impact justifies the costs and downsides of the wall, understanding that it will not stop all illegal immigration or its ills (and blessings).

The reasonable arguments to be made for and against specific

gun-control laws address whether they will reduce senseless killings. They consider whether such a reduction justifies the various costs and downsides of such bans and limits, understanding that it will not end all gun deaths or even all mass murders.

The whatabout is tribal, not logical. It says, “My side has a list of beliefs and your tribe has a list of opposite beliefs, and any defeat I deal you is a win for my team’s entire agenda.” As a debate strategy, it’s silly. As a way to determine which policies our nation ought to pursue, it’s catastrophic.

Lane Filler is a member of Newsday’s editorial board.



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Trash is strewn about the floor and seats of an eastbound LIRR train on the Babylon Branch after the evening rush on Jan. 9.

act of cleaning up after oneself speaks volumes about how people behave in more complex situations. God help us.

Tina Marie Soha,
New Hyde Park

Here is a simple and practically no-cost solution to reduce trash on the LIRR. Modify the departure announcement that

says “... please take all your personal belongings” to include “and any trash you have, including newspapers and food and drink containers.” I think most people would comply, if because of nothing else than guilt and the watchful eyes of caring fellow commuters.

Michael Filaseta,
Hauppauge

Nassau GOP is acting as voice of the people

The “pox on all your houses” approach in Newsday’s Jan. 9 editorial, “Stop politicizing reassessments,” again misses the point about the controversy.

The fear, concern and anger among the residents are direct results of the incompetent manner in which Assessor David Moog and the administration have rolled out their reassessment plan. The administration has made error after error, and the information provided to the public has been inadequate.

Newsday’s editorial board is critical because the legislature’s Republican majority has not been more supportive of the administration’s reassessment plan. You have it backward. The majority has simply done what the administration and Moog have failed to do. We are helping constituents get answers, hosting town hall forums, and introducing legisla-

tion to force the administration to be more transparent and to protect the rights of the residents. In short, we are being the voice of the people in county government.

Richard Nicoletto,
Mineola

Editor’s note: The writer is presiding officer of the Nassau County Legislature.

Thanks to a veteran nurse of World War II

World War II soldiers die quietly and mostly unnoticed by the world, not fully appreciated for the dedication they showed as part of “the greatest generation.” However, your Jan. 8 obituary and death notice for Mary Ann Galterio caught my eye. She was 101 when she died on Jan. 5 at a Southampton nursing home.

She served as a captain in the Army Nurse Corps during World War II, stationed on an evacuation hospital ship in

the South Pacific, taking care of wounded soldiers.

I didn’t know her or her family, but I just feel better that I stopped for a moment of reflection and wrote this note to say thank you as we lose more of these incredible WWII veterans. I want to express my gratitude to those who gave us our freedom today. They must not go unnoticed.

Hail and farewell, Capt. Mary Ann Galterio, for a job well done. You have the appreciation of a very grateful country.

Mike Jacobs,
Wantagh

CORRECTION: The New York State Paid Family Leave Act is funded by employee payroll contributions with a maximum 2019 benefit of \$746.41 per week. An opinion piece on Monday incorrectly stated how the program is financed and the specific maximum benefit for 2019.