

PolitiFact contradicts its past reporting, shows no interest in reconciling the contradiction

An April 18, 2019 PolitiFact fact check contradicted its source information, a [PolitiFact \("PunditFact"\) fact check from August 27, 2015](#).

Part of the 2019 fact check examined a meme including the claim President George W. Bush left President Obama a \$1.2 trillion budget deficit. The 2015 fact check examined a meme including the claim President George W. Bush left President Obama a \$1.4 trillion deficit.

The 2015 fact check (correctly) noted the \$1.4 trillion figure includes adjustments to the FY 2009 budget made by President Obama and the Democratic Party-dominated Congress, particularly the Stimulus bill. The 2015 fact check faulted the \$1.4 trillion figure as exaggerated:

The Great Recession hit hard in 2008 and grew worse in 2009. In that period, the **unemployment rate** doubled from about 5 percent to 10 percent. With Democrats in charge of both houses of Congress and the White House, Washington passed a stimulus package that cost nearly \$190 billion, according to the [Congressional Budget Office](#). That included over \$100 billion in new spending and a somewhat smaller amount in tax cuts, about \$79 billion in fiscal year 2009.

George W. Bush was not in office when those measures passed. So a more accurate number for the deficit he passed on might be closer to \$1.2 trillion.

Did the meme makers take PolitiFact's findings into account when publishing the later meme attributing a mere \$1.2 trillion to Mr. Bush? Possibly, but to no avail. In 2019 PolitiFact found fault with the \$1.2 trillion figure it had recommended in 2015:

"(George W.) Bush 43 took it from 0 to 1.2 trillion." This is in the ballpark. Ignoring the fact that he actually started his

presidency with a surplus, Bush left office in 2009 with a federal deficit of roughly \$1.41 trillion.

Based on PolitiFact's 2015 reporting, Bush left office in 2009 with a federal deficit of about \$1.2 trillion with about \$0.2 trillion added by government actions legislated after Mr. Bush left office.

I alerted PolitiFact regarding the discrepancy on Aug. 1, 2019. After more than a month, the mistake remains, though the article has been augmented with a chart showing deficit numbers adjusted for inflation (in response to reader requests). A chart showing deficit numbers as a percentage of GDP, along with a similar chart showing growth of the debt under each president would have served readers better, but I digress.

Simply put, reporting \$1.2 trillion as baton-handoff figure in one fact check and as \$1.4 trillion in another very similar fact check must count as an error in need of correction.

This case is inconsistent with the behavior of a fact-checking organization that scrupulously follows an open and honest corrections policy.

Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,
Bryan W. White
Editor, Zebra Fact Check

P.S. I find it hard to imagine how one could argue the same standard was used to judge two very similar memes spread just a few years apart. The 2015 version was rated "Half True" while the 2019 update was rated "Mostly True." All of the justifications used in 2015 (see summary paragraphs of the 2015 fact check) to rate that meme "Half True" were just as applicable to the 2019 "Mostly True" version.

"Bush Sr. handed Clinton a \$269 billion budget deficit.

Clinton handed Bush Jr. a \$127.3 billion surplus.

Bush Jr. handed Obama a \$1.4 trillion deficit.

Obama has reduced Bush Jr.'s deficit to just \$492 billion.

But tell me again which is the party of fiscal responsibility."

Reagan took the deficit from 70 billion to 175 billion.

Bush 41 took it to 300 billion.

Clinton got it to zero.

Bush 43 took it from 0 to 1.2 trillion.

Obama halved it to 600 billion.

Trump's got it back to a trillion.

Morons: "Democrats cause deficits."