

* THINGS

Reality slogan

By GEORGE HESSELBERG

Of all the no-brainers in the world, this one had to end up in Madison, the city of brains.

The “surrounded by reality” slogan — Madison is an island surrounded by reality — for the past couple of decades has been in one inaccurate version or another slapped on the capital city whenever someone needs a throwaway line.

It is delivered either by someone who does not like something that may or may not actually happen here or, in a fit of errant irony, by someone who likes it here but feels it necessary to deliver a pre-emptive strike: “Look at us, we’re misunderstood in measurements involving not only geography, but metaphysics, too.”

It started with an offhand remark, a flick at the ear of the four-lake electorate during a campaign year, and was made by the glib and beloved Lee Sherman Dreyfus, who one-lined his way into the governor’s office in 1978 campaigning on the merits of being a political outsider.

Dreyfus, who then was chancellor at UW-Stevens Point, referred to Madison as “30 square miles surrounded by reality.”

But really, when it comes to Madison, what IS reality?

Even with a nod to the relativists, this didn’t, and still doesn’t, make sense from several angles.

Madison occupies about 78 square miles. It is a fact that, whenever it is cited, is different. The number falls prey to laziness, then becomes conventional wisdom, then gets misquoted in Wikipedia and pretty soon it appears on day-calendars and postcards and souvenir keychains and on the ultimate black hole of facts, talk radio.

So we find Sports Illustrated, in a 2003 story on sports towns, somehow inflating Madison to 89.4 square miles. (The four-tenths is a nice truthy touch.) The aforementioned Wikipedia says 85 square miles. Even the New Yorker, in November 2001, gets the Dreyfus part right but measures the square miles in the quote at 52.

Into this muddied stream splashes the

pesky and more interesting question of reality.

Madison, surrounded by reality? Why should what is real surrounding Madison define what is real in Madison?

It shouldn’t, and it doesn’t.

Being accused of unreality is not insulting to many here. It is a convenient excuse and a point of pride. (After all, if you are on an island, surrounded by something, where is the safest place to be? What is real in Wisconsin’s other 54,370 square miles?)

The aspersion is really to something shallower than reality, the notion that the feet of our residents and the minds of our politicians sometimes do not always reach to the ground, nudge-nudge, wink-wink. The people in Madison are (air quotes) not all there (air quotes).

“Surrounded by reality . . .” is an extension of “well, it’s Madison, what do you expect?”

Even a casual regard of the truth puts the saw to rest. Many, if not most, of the people here come from someplace else making Madison, in a way, a city of outsiders who presumably bring a little of that “surrounding” reality with them. Philosophers will say that we make our own reality. The politics of reality mean critics define their own reality.

Claudia Card, a philosopher and professor at UW-Madison — an academic here since 1966, and a native of Pardeeville, which passes for reality in the relative “surrounding” sense — says that “with respect to truth and reality, negative words wear the trousers. The negative word is the more specific one. There are lots of different ways to be real, and you don’t know which way it is intended unless you get a context.”

The context provides the definition.

Madison, an island surrounded by reality?

Get real. ■



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