FACTS: In everyday life, we generally assume that our understanding of reality flows directly from that reality itself. It is common sense that certain things are facts while the opposite assertions are not, and that if we can ascertain the facts, certain conclusions will follow. The purpose of information gathering, for both the scientist and the decision-maker, is to determine the facts, from which knowledge of reality can be drawn.

Perceptual theorists do not accept this simple conception of knowledge. To them, knowledge has a subjective as well as an objective component: the facts do not speak for themselves, but are given meaning by each interpreter from his own analytical point of view. The conclusion that follows from facts depends on the interpretation that is given to the facts.

Furthermore, facts do not spring from reality but are, rather, particular pieces of information from reality that are selected by an observer as having importance while other pieces of information are rejected as lacking importance. “Reality” consists of an infinite amount of potential information, from which only a tiny part is taken as a set of facts. For example, in writing the history of a particular war, the historian must select a small portion of available data to report. Millions of individuals are involved in billions and trillions of acts; billions of decisions are made by participants; the patterns of interaction are beyond imagination. The historian must select from all this a few pieces of information that seem to describe the interactions and succinctly explain their causes. Students of history and historiography know only too well the facts do not speak for themselves.

Social science summarizes this view of facts in a terse definition: a facts is but a peculiar ordering of reality according to a theoretic interest. That is, the facts themselves are imposed on “reality” by the observer, rather than the other way around; and the very nature of the “facts” themselves depends on the questions the observer chooses to ask. Since each perceptual system asks its own questions, observers of divergent viewpoints naturally arrive at different answers or “facts.” “facts” are thus subjectively defined and are themselves a phenomenon of perceptions. Perceptions cannot be corrected when confronted with facts if the facts themselves are perceptions.

Perceptual theorists distinguish among three components of perception: values, beliefs and cognitions. A value is a preference for one state of reality over another: health is better than illness, green is prettier than blue. Values do not specify what is but rather what ought to be. Values assign a relative worth to objects and conditions. A belief is a conviction that a description of reality is true, proven or known. Often it is based on prior reception of information from the environment (“I have learned that......”) but it is not the same as the data themselves. It is an analytical proposition that relates individual pieces of data into a “proven” pattern: democratic governments are less warlike than totalitarian governments; imperialism is the mature phase of monopoly capitalism. A belief is not the same as a value. One might believe that communism brings a higher rate of economic growth, and that capitalism has a better record of protecting individual freedoms. Given these beliefs, one must decide whether capitalism or communism is better according to one’s own values. Which is worth more, economic growth or personal liberties? A cognition is data or information received from the environment, for example, Russia is giving war planes to Syria. Cognitions are key elements in establishing perceptual systems and in changing those systems. The concept of changing national perceptions refers to introducing cognitions that will revise beliefs and values. If we held a conference between the major Cold War actors to iron out their differences and “misperceptions,” our purpose would be to influence perceptions by introducing new information. We would try to change stubborn beliefs and values that cause conflict by confronting each side with new cognitive data.
Unfortunately, it has been found in a variety of studies that at all levels of human behavior, deeply held values and beliefs are highly resistant to change through new cognition. Social psychological research support a theory of “cognitive dissonance.” Briefly stated, this theory holds that when a deeply held value or belief is contradicted by a new message from the environment (a “dissonant” cognition) the message (fact, cognition) will be rejected and the value or belief retained. This may not take the form of outright rejection of the discrepant message; it may take the alternate form of reinterpretation of the datum to make it consistent with existing belief. But the effect is the same: the individual’s value and belief system protects itself from external alternation.

We might relate this phenomenon to the idea of an “economy of thought.” It is very “expensive” to carry about in one’s head all the information supporting one view and its opposite. Mental economy requires that we have a filtering system to fit a single reality to our preconceptions so that we are not constantly revising our basic perceptual systems, with all the readaptation and adjustment that that would require. Political organizations choose as their leaders individuals with known points of view that concur reliably with those of the membership. If national leaders were relatively free to revise their perceptual frameworks, they would not be reliable. Hence, the rigidity and predictability of the leadership’s perceptual system is an asset to the group. The leader should not be quicker to change than are his constituents.

The constituents, on the other side, must not be overly vulnerable to perceptual change from external influences. If foreign leaders could appeal over the head of a national leader to his own constituents, they might manipulate these persons to their own advantage. For this and other reasons, it is functional for each nation to have its own system of “authorities,” public officials who determine the overall national interests with regard to other nations. These same public officials play a major role in channeling the cognitions that teach their “publics.” Many studies have shown that individuals will accept or reject the same information depending on whether it comes from a positive or negative prestige source. Thus, constituents choose their leaders partly for the relative inflexibility of their perceptual systems, and the leaders process incoming information in such a way as to maintain the existing perceptual system of the constituents. The national belief system is thus stable and resistant to change.

For all of these reasons, we can safely assume that national perceptual frameworks will usually survive challenges from other nations and new experiences. They may make superficial or cosmetic improvements to adjust to new realities at times, but fundamental change is a longterm process. The vehicle of national policy is steered by looking in the rearview mirror; nations are influenced more by where they have been than by where they are going. Hardened perceptions, because of the conviction with which they are held and the information shaping from which they are used, are major obstacles to political progress.

Questions:

--what mechanisms for potential self-correction might reduce the tendencies toward self-deception and rigid ideological distortions?

--what assumptions do Americans make which contribute to self-deception and delusion?