



The Truth-O-Meter Says:



Says President Obama was wrong "about Muslims' historical contributions to mankind, such as algebra (actually that was the ancient Babylonians), the compass (that was the Chinese), pens (the Chinese again) and medical discoveries."

[Ann Coulter](#) on Wednesday, June 10th, 2009 in a column.

Ann Coulter criticizes Obama on Muslim history

Conservatives had lots of reasons to criticize President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo. Some thought Obama went too far in praising his Muslim audience, some thought he was too harsh on Israel, and some thought he shouldn't have been there in the first place.



Bookmark this story:

[Buzz up!](#) [ShareThis](#)

Ann Coulter had her own angle. She went after Obama's accuracy.

"Obama listed, incorrectly, Muslims' historical contributions to mankind, such as algebra (actually that was the ancient Babylonians), the compass (that was the Chinese), pens (the Chinese again) and medical discoveries (huh?)," she wrote in a June 10, 2009, op-ed on the *Human Events* Web site. (The words in parentheses are Coulter's as they appeared in the column.)

She said Obama was ingratiating himself to the same community that launched the 9/11 attacks.

"All these inventions came in mighty handy on Sept. 11, 2001! Thanks, Muslims!!" she wrote.

Here's exactly what Obama said in the Cairo speech:

"As a student of history, I also know civilization's debt to Islam," said Obama in his June 4, 2009, speech. "It was Islam — at places like Al-Azhar — that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. ... It was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed."

Obama's larger point is that elements of Islamic culture are found throughout Western society. "I consider it part of my responsibility as president of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear," he said.

So, what of these inventions that Obama praised and Coulter critiqued? Was he wrong?

Our friends at FactCheck.org already [did some digging](#) and found he was generally correct, but we wanted to address Coulter's criticism more directly.

Let's start with Obama's assertion about algebra. (Don't worry. We're dealing with history here, but no linear equations.)

Indeed, algebra does have roots in Islam. Baghdad-born Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi is "the father of algebra" according to the United Kingdom-based Foundation for Science Technology and Civilization, an organization devoted to explaining Muslim contributions to science. His seminal work, *Hisab al-jabr w'al-muqabala* — or *The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing* — was written in 820 A.D. and is widely considered the first book on algebra. In fact, the word *al-jabr* from the title is the root of the word "algebra."

Nevertheless, others have contributed to algebra, including Diophantus, a Greek who some historians say should share the prestige of being the father of algebra with al-Khwarizmi. Diophantus lived some time between 200 and 298 A.D., some 500 years before al-Khwarizmi. His book, *Arithmetica*, is significant because it prompted the rebirth of number theory, or the study of positive numbers, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Regardless, al-Khwarizmi's role in developing algebra is largely without dispute. And though the Babylonians did live in what we consider modern-day Baghdad, Coulter incorrectly identifies the origins of algebra.

Moving on to navigation and the creation of the compass, Coulter is correct that Obama is on shakier ground. While many cultures used primitive navigation devices, the Chinese are usually credited with popularizing the magnetic compass, which, in its earliest form, involved a magnetized spoon-shaped stone that aligned with Earth's magnetic field. There is strong evidence, however, that Muslims made navigation tools easier to use; an astronomer named Azarchel, for example, created an all-in-one astrolabe, a device used to determine direction using the constellations.

Writing instruments come from ancient Egypt, where people used pens made from river reeds to inscribe papyrus. However, Al-Mu'izz, a Muslim who ruled Egypt from 953 to 975, is credited with inventing the fountain pen. So, Obama's claim that the "mastery" of pens originated in the Muslim world is in the ballpark.

Printing, however, is decidedly of Asian origins; the Chinese and Koreans developed woodblock and movable type printing. And around 1440 A.D. a German named Johannes



Critics Circle
A roundup of the notable in Tampa Bay's arts scene

About this statement:

Published: Friday, June 19th, 2009 at 5:17 p.m.

Sources:

The National Institutes of Health, [Islamic Culture and the Medical Arts](#), accessed June 15, 2009

Ann Coulter, [remarks on President Obama's Cairo speech](#), accessed June 15, 2009

White House, President [Obama's speech in Cairo](#), accessed June 15, 2009

Ball State University, [Algebra's Father](#), accessed June 19, 2009

The Foundation for Science Technology and Civilization, [Muslim Founders of Mathematics](#), accessed June 15, 2009

Encyclopedia Britannica, [Biography of Diophantus](#), accessed June 15, 2009

The Wall Street Journal, [The Islamic Enlightenment](#), by Eric Ormsby, Feb. 14, 2009

Wired Magazine, [Fathers of Invention: What Muslims Gave the Scientific World](#), by Jennifer Hattam, May 22, 2009

National High Magnetic Field Laboratory, [Early Chinese Compass](#), accessed June 15, 2009

The Foundation for Science Technology and Civilization, [Origins of the Fountain Pen](#), accessed June 15, 2009

The New York Times, [Shelf Life: The Story of Islam's Gift of Paper to the West](#), by Holland Cotter, Dec. 29, 2009

Written by: [Catharine Richert](#)
Researched by: [Catharine Richert](#)
Edited by: [Bill Adair](#)

How to contact us

We want to hear your suggestions and comments. For tips or comments on our campaign promise database, please [e-mail the Obameter](#). If you are commenting on a specific promise, please include the promise number. For comments about our Truth-O-Meter or Flip-O-Meter items, please [e-mail the Truth-O-Meter](#). We're especially interested in seeing any chain e-mails you receive that you would like us to check out.



PolitiFact is a project of the *St. Petersburg Times* to help you find the truth in American politics. [Reporters and editors](#) from the *Times* fact-check statements by members of Congress, the White House, lobbyists and interest groups and rate them on our Truth-O-Meter. We're also tracking more than 500 of Barack Obama's campaign promises and are

Gutenberg invented the printing press, his most well known project being the Gutenberg Bible. Obama overstates the role Muslims played in printing. He would have been more accurate if he pointed out that followers of Mohammed were instrumental in disseminating the printed word, according to Jonathan M. Bloom's *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*.

Lastly, Obama contends that Muslims developed certain aspects of modern medicine, which is partly true. According to the National Institutes of Health, the Greeks influenced healing practices in the Islamic world, but then the work of many Muslims influenced the ideas and practices in late medieval Europe from which early modern medicine eventually arose.

Dr. Max Gross of Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding said it's fair to say that Muslims created or contributed significantly to all the inventions Obama outlined in his speech.

"I have no difficulties with what Obama said," said Gross.

Nevertheless, Gross pointed out that innovation can develop in different places at nearly the same time, so there is inevitably some disagreement with where certain tools or ideas originate.

He used the astrolabe to emphasize his point.

Muslims did not "create all navigation tools, they refined the astrolabe," he said. "The astrolabe is what Europeans used to navigate the oceans."

Let's review this little history lesson by revisiting Obama's words. He didn't say Muslims were the sole inventors of these disciplines, he merely said their innovation contributed to the development of disciplines. We find Coulter is incorrect about Obama's statement about algebra, that she's largely right about navigation, that she's wrong about pens and that it's fuzzy about how much Muslims contributed to modern medicine. So we find her criticism to be Barely True.

rating their progress on our new Obameter. >>
[More](#)

St. Petersburg
Times
tampabay.com

Browse the Truth-O-Meter:

- [By person](#)
- [By our rulings](#)
- [By subject](#)
- [Pants-On-Fire rulings](#)
- [Barack Obama's file](#)
- [Joe Biden's file](#)

Browse the Obameter:

- [All promises with No Action](#)
- [All promises In the Works](#)
- [All promises Stalled](#)
- [Obama's broken promises](#)
- [Obama's compromises](#)
- [Obama's kept promises](#)
- [By subject](#)

Subscribe

Keep up to date with PolitiFact:

- [Sign up for our e-mail](#) (about once a week)
- [Subscribe to our Twitter feed](#)
- Put a [free PolitiFact widget](#) on your blog or Web page
- [Subscribe to our RSS feeds](#)
- [Add us to your iGoogle page](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Order your set **Only \$14**
of cards now plus shipping & handling



PolitiFact.com

© 2009 · All Rights Reserved · St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South · St. Petersburg, FL 33701 · 727-893-8111
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the Times](#) | [RSS](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)