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THE TRIUMPH OF THE LIE: HOW HONESTY AND MORALITY DIED IN RIGHT-WING POLITICS

By Aaron Barlow, on July 25, 2017



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This is how lies move to normalization: A small “white lie” is put forward, just to clarify a point. A larger lie follows, but it’s still only a detail in a larger argument. The whopper, down the line, performs another function: drawing attention from even more pernicious deceit. The earlier lies, accepted with a shrug, had set the stage for acceptance. Lying has become a strategy.

In February, President Donald Trump’s spokesperson Kellyanne Conway talked, in all seriousness, about a “Bowling Green massacre”¹ that never occurred. That fabrication became the scandal *du jour*, rather than Trump’s outrageous immigration order that Conway was defending. Just weeks later, Trump himself illustrated the whole process by speaking of a terrorist attack in Sweden that didn’t exist.² These lies became the issue, overriding any serious debate about terrorism, its causes and the best responses. If intentional, the strategy had succeeded.



Photo of Joe McCarthy from the Library of Congress taken on December 31st, 1953.
Photo: Wiki Commons.

The bafflement caused by this strategy, of lying to distract, dates back at least to Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy’s 1950 claim that he had a list of communists in the State Department. Waving a paper at a West Virginia audience, he said there were several hundred of them, a charge he never substantiated. We don’t know what was on that piece of paper, but it was certainly no roster of communists. Yet Democrats who opposed McCarthy played into his hands by responding to the lie while his real agenda—establishing his own power—continued unobstructed for four more years. Tellingly, McCarthy’s chief counsel at the end of those years, Roy Cohn, would become Donald Trump’s mentor.³

Political lies can be well intended, with supposedly noble ends justifying unseemly means. As great art uses fictitious details to illuminate greater truths, the lies of wartime—*ruse de guerre*—can bring about victory, as in “Operation Mincemeat,” when fake letters on a corpse washed ashore in Spain fooled the Germans out of reinforcing Sicily during World War II. In other instances, however, the upshot becomes less noble: Conway and Trump ratcheting up fear so that less attention will be paid to real problems facing the United States.

Perhaps the most durable political lie of the past generation is the “Laffer Curve,” the idea that lowering taxes can actually raise government income by fostering economic growth. Although there is no evidence it has ever worked—when Reagan tried it, the budget deficit exploded and the state of

Senator Joe McCarthy’s chief aide, Roy Cohn, later became a mentor to Donald Trump.

Kansas has now backtracked from its own experiment with it⁴—this lie has been used to excuse reduction of taxes for the rich and, ultimately, government services for everyone else for more than 30 years. No one in government believes that, though it is again being trotted forward to justify Trump’s proposed tax cuts.

While the Laffer Curve lie obfuscates, the intent of most political lies is to sow confusion, as McCarthy used deflection for political gain. Today, as psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook writes, “By continually contradicting himself and not seeming to care, Trump generates confusion in the members of the media and political opposition that has often rendered them ineffectual.”⁵ This cannot be done without an opposition that supposes at least a half-hearted commitment to truth. Today, liberals and members of the news media are often confused by the lack of respect they get for upholding the virtue of truth, and still want to believe that there are real positions being explicitly stated by the other side, and not just lies that make debate impossible.

THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE LIE

Political lies can also be used to build skepticism toward those who are its targets, as I have previously written in these pages.⁶ Today, Robert Mercer, co-CEO of Renaissance Technologies and a major backer of the Heritage Foundation (as well as of Trump), along with his daughter Rebekah (who heads the Mercer Family Foundation) and current chief White House strategist Steve Bannon, have put the lie to good use in this regard. As Matea Gold of *The Washington Post* writes, they have “quietly built a power base aimed at sowing distrust of big government and eroding the dominance of the major news media”⁷ through, among other projects, *Breitbart News*. Today, trust in news media is at an all-time low, primarily because of lies used against them.

The triumph of the lie today isn’t to Trump’s credit alone, though he lies with frequency; it belongs to a broad right-wing trend toward winning at any cost, toward lowering the importance of ethics and moral values, and toward reducing the importance of idealistic political philosophy itself to the point of meaninglessness. Utah Rep. Jason Chaffetz, the former Chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, spent several years creating an aura of dishonesty around Hillary Clinton through fruitless “investigations” of her actions in relation to the Benghazi killings of American diplomats in Libya in September 2012.⁸ But he seemed to abandon his supposed concern for truth and openness once Trump became president. After it became apparent that former national security advisor Michael Flynn had lied about meeting with the Russian ambassador—lies compounded by later revelations that Flynn had neglected to indicate on an application for security clearance that he had accepted money from Russia and Turkey, something no retired general is legally able to do without permission—Chaffetz declared, “I think that situation has taken care of itself.”⁹ Chaffetz subsequently announced his decision to resign from Congress at the end of June 2017. Could it be because he became uncomfortable in his new role as a check on Trump? Likewise, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul suggested there was no point in pursuing falsehoods or fraud when the perpetrators are Republicans, saying, “we’re spending our whole time having Republicans investigate Republicans. I think it makes no sense.”¹⁰

Political expediency controls conservative concern for truth today, just as in McCarthy’s time: only the lies of the opposition (real and imaginary) are worth pursuing.

One of the checks on political lies should be one’s own allies, especially those presumably committed to the ideals of a movement, whether conservative or liberal. On the Right, conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., claimed that mantle for half a century. Yet he and conservative activist L. Brent Bozell, Jr. (whose son, the right-wing publisher L. Brent Bozell III, is a major Trump supporter), penned a 1954 defense of McCarthy which, in the words of reviewer and historian William S. White, suggested that mistakes “are not tolerable when made by non-McCarthyites. When made by McCarthyites, however, and especially by Mr. McCarthy himself, they call only for a gentle chiding.”¹¹ Though McCarthy was only a senator, that sounds much like many contemporary conservatives’ attitudes toward Trump’s “mistakes” and lies. Indeed, the afterword of the Buckley/Bozell book can chill a reader today: “Current reports indicate that American intellectuals travelling abroad divide their time, more or less equally, between sight-seeing and apologizing for McCarthy. For Europeans, it seems, have lost faith in America, where McCarthyism is rife.”¹² McCarthy was only a Senator; his spiritual successor, Trump, is president.

The tendency to forgive one’s friends while condemning one’s enemies has a long political history but it has grown, today, to unprecedented proportions. For that reason alone, Trump is able to lie with impunity, assured that his political allies, even the most reluctant ones, will not call him out even though, just last year, they shouted “Lock Her Up!” in response to allegations that Hillary Clinton had lied.

American intellectuals traveling in Europe found themselves apologizing for McCarthy, who was only a Senator.

Over his first 100 days, *The Washington Post* found, he made “469 false or misleading claims.”¹³ Falsehood has become such second nature to Trump that, as David Remnick reports in *The New Yorker*, he once told an architect to add size and stories when talking to the press about a building they wanted to erect. “Trump has never gone out of his way to conceal the essence of his relationship to the truth and how he chooses to navigate the world,” Remnick writes.¹⁴ Yet Trump’s putatively conservative, morality-based supporters show no concern, let alone outrage, about these lies—whether because, as some argue, right-wing belief is inherently authoritarian, making followers willing to accept whatever the leader says, or because Republican politicians don’t actually care about Trump as long as he provides them cover to push through their agenda of tax cuts and deregulation.

Whatever the case may be, the general acceptance of the President’s lies by his supporters illustrates the moral and ethical bankruptcy of the Right, and the culmination of a process of casting aside belief for expediency that began with McCarthy. Perhaps

the best example of the depths into which he has cast them came during a broadcast part of a cabinet meeting on June 12, 2017, when the Vice President and other members of the cabinet in turn extolled the wonders of Trump.¹⁵ Demagoguery and hyperbole have become standard fare.

Just last year, they shouted “Lock Her Up!” in response to allegations that Hillary Clinton had lied.

THE LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN LIE



Right-wing strategist David Horowitz speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2011 in Orlando, Florida. Photo: Meshae Studios via Flickr.

Right-wing strategist David Horowitz justifies political lies in his 2010 book, *The Art of Political War for Tea Parties*,¹⁶ as necessary parts of both “art” and “war,” wherein there are no constraints in either creative expression or fighting for dominance. That is, Horowitz argues for an extreme politics—politics as a type of war, where the art of waging it successfully justifies *anything*. Horowitz didn’t invent this. The political notion of “honest graft,” for example, goes back much further than the Tammany politician George Plunkitt, who coined this phrase to excuse dishonesty “in the public interest.” Trump bothers with no such sophistry. He wants to believe he had a smashing victory at the polls; therefore, he’s not really lying when he says he won with legitimate voters. He appears able to simultaneously lie and still believe his own “alternative facts” (to use another phrase of Conway’s¹⁷)—quite a feat of sophistry.

Clouding the issue, members of the news media often don’t always clearly separate fact from opinion. Speaking on January 25, 2017 on the National Public Radio program *Morning Edition*, senior NPR Vice President of News Michael Oreskes, after agreeing with one of his reporters that defining a “lie” is simply a matter of establishing intent (often an impossibility), said, “Our job as journalists is to report—to find facts, establish their authenticity and share them with everybody. And I think when you use words like lie it gets in the way of that.”¹⁸ But these “facts” Oreskes wants reporters to find aren’t always facts; they are often simply utterances by newsmakers. By not calling untruthful statements lies, the media can end up abetting the Right’s strategic use of lies.

From World War II until the election of Ronald Reagan, the mainstream news media tried to establish an ethos of fact-based reporting, but that was never completely successful and it failed when media owners discovered that news could be a profit center. (Even NPR, a nonprofit, pays close attention to numbers and income.) Today, journalists who cover politics often find themselves trapped—between opinion and fact, between Horowitz’s vision of art and war—and they don’t know how to get out. This results from their “ingrained habit,” as political scientist Norm Ornstein describes it, of “the reflexive ‘we report both sides of every story,’ even to the point that one side is given equal weight not supported by reality.”¹⁹ The Right has become adept at taking advantage of this.

A currently influential right-wing activist and writer, Horowitz actually started as a leftist. But when he saw which way the wind was blowing in the 1970s, he trimmed his sails and headed far to the Right. Like Trump, who has also shifted political allegiance,

Horowitz's compass always seemed to point more towards particular goals with a personal as well as political element. For both, the lie has no moral aspect, but is simply a tool.

Ramparts magazine, where Horowitz worked from 1968 into the 1970s, was an outlier even among leftist publications in the 1960s. Founded in the early 1960s with a Catholic focus, the magazine later “added generous doses of sex and humor, adopted a cutting-edge design, forged links to the Black Panther Party, exposed illegal CIA activities in America and Vietnam, published the diaries of Che Guevara and staff writer Eldridge Cleaver, and boosted its monthly circulation to almost 250,000,” as one history of the publication put it.²⁰ Horowitz's experience there, starting shortly after the magazine published William Turner's shaky article on New Orleans' District Attorney Jim Garrison's equally shaky investigation into the Kennedy assassination²¹—a theory that blamed the CIA—showed Horowitz the power of manipulating the truth. *TIME* magazine described *Ramparts* as “slick enough to lure the unwary and bedazzled reader into accepting flimflam as fact.”²² Embracing the lie as a tool allowed people like Horowitz to flourish and eventually, through the likes of Fox News, and right-wing provocateurs Andrew Breitbart and James O'Keefe III, to take over the U.S. conservative movement. They, and not more traditional conservatives like George Will and David Brooks, are now the plow that cleared the way for Trump.

Horowitz argued, in a 2010 edition of *The Art of Political War for Tea Parties*, that “politics isn't just about reality. If it were, good principles and good policies would win every time. It's about images and symbols, and the emotions they evoke. This is the battle that conservatives generally lose.”²³ Though Horowitz's argument is strained—the Right, in fact, has become particularly adept at winning on emotional appeals and not so often on sound, proven policy—one implication is clear: the old rules don't apply. In right-wing politics today, one can lie without concern for the truth behind such things as “images and symbols.” The constant repetition of the lie that Obama was born in Kenya left many Americans with the impression that he was at least a Muslim, if not a Kenyan. The power of the accusation lay not in its veracity—it had none—but rather in its symbolic ability to create the impression of Obama as “un-American.”

Horowitz continues to trot out staples of right-wing argument that he certainly knows are untrue, like “Everything that is wrong with the inner cities of America that policy can affect Democrats and progressives are responsible for.”²⁴ Further justifying his lies of this sort, Horowitz presents what he calls “the principles of political war.” Namely:

1. Politics is war conducted by other means
2. Politics is a war of position
3. In political wars the aggressor usually prevails
4. Position is defined by fear and hope
5. The weapons of politics are symbols evoking fear and hope
6. Victory lies on the side of the people.²⁵

By accepting these principles, Horowitz validates the use of political lies. But by equating politics with war he also approves of leaving morality and honesty aside in pursuit of winning—a dangerous proposition, as we are now seeing in the age of Trump.

NEW JOURNALISM AND THE RISE OF ITS EVIL TWIN

As *Ramparts* was reaching its heights in the 1960s, the phenomenon of New Journalism was also taking hold in U.S. magazines. It played with the truth in another way, as its most famous practitioner, Tom Wolfe, recalls in describing his first encounter with it:

My instinctive, defensive reaction was that the man had piped it, as the saying went . . . winged it, made up the dialogue . . . Christ, maybe he made up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geek . . . The funny thing was, that was precisely the reaction that countless journalists and literary intellectuals would have over the next nine years as the New Journalism picked up momentum. The bastards are making it up!²⁶

Some of them *were* making it up. Or embellishing. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is no paragon of factuality.²⁷ Hunter Thompson's nascent “gonzo journalism” in *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* didn't let truth get in the way of a good story.²⁸ However, much of their work could be justified on the same grounds one uses for fiction: small inaccuracies served a greater point. In right-wing politics, however, this strategy has been twisted into an excuse for saying anything and never having to apologize for being wrong.



Horowitz argues in his 2010 edition of *The Art of Political War* that “politics isn't just about reality.”

In the 1970s, the philosopher Sissela Bok made the obvious connection between lies, politics and journalism, outlining the practical genesis of the lie in each field:

the cub reporter who will lose his job if he is not aggressive in getting stories, or the young politician whose career depends on winning an election, may in principle be more sorely tempted to bend the truth than those whose work is secure; but this difference may be more than outweighed by the increased callousness of the latter to what they have come to regard as routine deception. ²⁹

U.S. culture worships success. Winning means everything; the path there, very little. And some moral constraints on that objective have loosened over the years or have even been modified to allow for deception. Together, they have moved American culture to the cynicism of Pontius Pilate, who (according to John 18:38) asked Jesus “What is truth?” just before allowing him to be crucified.

Pilate’s question, today, has renewed importance, as even the president struggles with the concepts of “real” and “fake” news. In May 2017, Trump was shown two doctored *TIME* magazine covers about climate change that quickly got him “lathered up about the media’s hypocrisy”³⁰ (unsurprising, given the fake cover of *TIME* hanging in some of his golf courses³¹). And his administration has tried to find ways to justify his lies (something he personally never would have bothered with before being elected). From St. Augustine on, “truth” has been central to understanding relationships between individuals, and has colored perceptions of the lie and the liar. This may have changed for today’s political activists on the Right, but the president is finding himself in an awkward position where Pilate’s question can no longer be ignored. Today, for Trump, it has aspects of life and death that he’s never faced before. His lies, no longer meaningless, move through the entire world.

PRIME MOVERS OF THE LIE IN POLITICS TODAY

Though Trump may be the most prominent liar in contemporary politics, he’s far from alone. I’ve already mentioned two of his most effective contemporaries: James O’Keefe of Project Veritas and the late Andrew Breitbart, whose website, under the subsequent leadership of Steve Bannon, has become a major right-wing (and Alt Right) source of fake news.³² The two men have spawned an entire industry, one whose most famous recent success is the Planned Parenthood “sting” videos of David Daleiden and Sandra Merritt, edited in such a way as to make it seem as though Planned Parenthood was selling fetal tissue.

Belying its name, Project Veritas has little to do with truth of any sort. It is a project of political “warfare” in the tradition Horowitz has established. Its website claims as its mission to “Investigate and expose corruption, dishonesty, self-dealing, waste, fraud, and other misconduct in both public and private institutions in order to achieve a more ethical and transparent society.”³³ O’Keefe’s method of operation involves two types of lies: first sandbagging opponents by disguising himself and his associates in such a way that those they interview let down their guard, and then creatively editing their responses—often captured on hidden cameras—to make the points he wishes about the organizations he’s attacking. His greatest success was the destruction of the community activist group ACORN through dishonest presentation of interviews with ACORN workers, a formula also used by Daleiden and Merritt.

Both O’Keefe and Breitbart have tried to justify themselves by claiming continuity with the muckraker tradition within journalism. “Discovery,” however, is not part of their lexicon; rather self-justification and winning are. Today, O’Keefe keeps to his playbook, though he has been exposed as a fraud many times, and Breitbart acolyte Steve Bannon has propelled *Breitbart.com* into a premier political website that has now gone global and himself into a position as one of the president’s most important advisors.

DEFEATING LIES



Unknown protester holds sign at the Anti-Trump protest in New York City at Tompkins Square Park in January of 2017. Photo: Meshae Studios via Flickr.

Responsibility for the triumph of the lie in American public discourse rests not with any one group of people or movement, though the Political Right benefits from it most.

If the current defeat of truth is to be reversed and the lie once again relegated to a position of approbation, the old tactic of simply exposing lies must be abandoned. It took years for this to work in McCarthy's time and will likely take even longer now, perhaps too long. Though exposing lies is necessary, we have to develop a different strategy if we are to bring back any pride in truth. We have to reinvent moral and ethical standards, apply them to our own lives, and insist that we never reward liars, no matter how much we like them or agree with the positions they adopt.

The response to Trump's flagrant use of the lie in firing FBI director James Comey in May—claiming he was responding to the bungled investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails³⁴—may be a start toward a national realignment in favor of the truth. The real reason for the firing was obvious—the investigation into connections between Russia and the Trump campaign had to be stopped—and the public rejected the cover story with a level of outrage missing throughout the many lies of the primaries and 2016 election. The White House, used to its lies working in its favor, was taken aback.

For years, politics in the U.S. has been devolving toward the logic of professional wrestling, where truth is irrelevant and the fan favorite is the champion. Politicians have played agreed-upon roles, while the people have cheered for victors it already knew would win—or, in Trump's case, would provide the best show. The public response to the Comey firing—an angry and full-throated denunciation of political lies, which eventually led to the appointment of a special counsel to continue the investigation into ties between Trump's campaign and Russia—was the first hopeful sign in a long time: that the lie hasn't yet triumphed completely, that democracy isn't yet dead.

• We have to reinvent moral and ethical standards, apply them to our own lives, and insist that we never reward liars.

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