

The Contemporary Presidency: Presidential Lies

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In a republic based on the consent of the governed, citizens need accurate information to make informed decisions about elections and public policy. The purpose of this article is to present some examples of lies in the modern presidency and argue that there is a range of lies, from those that are justifiable to those that are unacceptable. The presidential lies under consideration will be broken into three broad categories: justifiable lies, lies to prevent embarrassment (including some serious breaches of the public trust), and lies of policy deception. The article concludes that we, as citizens, have the responsibility to examine the context of each lie before judging how it should be weighed in the overall assessment of a president.

When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.

—Mark Twain

The impeachment and trial of President Clinton raised in the nation's consciousness (and conscience) the issue of lies told by presidents. Tom Delay, Republican House majority whip, argued that the impeachment proceedings were "a debate about relativism versus absolute truth" (Katz and Taylor 1998, 3322). The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of presidential lies and to distinguish among different types of lies.¹

Often presidents do not tell the "absolute truth," but not all presidential lies are equivalent. The argument that there are different types of lies is not an attempt to

1. For purposes of this analysis, I intend to define lies in the restrictive sense of an untruth communicated with the intent to deceive (see Bok 1978, 14; Ekman 1985, 28). For purposes here, I do not take up possible presidential lies through concealment, misdirection, or implication (e.g., telling the truth with the intent to deceive). Nor do I analyze unfulfilled presidential campaign promises in this article. I do include several lies by a president-elect or vice president in this article.

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exonerate President Clinton nor is it meant to enforce the cynical view that “they all do it.” The purpose, rather, is to present some examples of presidential lies and argue that there is a range of lies, from those that are justifiable to those that are unacceptable. The presidential lies under consideration will be broken into three broad categories: justifiable lies, lies to prevent embarrassment (including some serious breaches of the public trust), and lies of policy deception.

In a democracy or a republic based on the consent of the governed, citizens need accurate information to make informed decisions about elections and public policy. Thus, it is wrong for public officials to lie about public issues. The only exceptions are situations in which reasonable citizens would agree that presidents of either party could justifiably lie to them. Lies might be justified by the need to protect lives or the effectiveness of national security operations that are being undertaken in support of a legitimate policy of the government (e.g., a hostage rescue attempt or espionage). This would include covert actions taken in support of legitimate (constitutionally acceptable) policies, but it would exclude covert policies (e.g., when the government says it is pursuing policy X, but it is in fact pursuing policy Y).

Lies of policy deception are the worst sort of public policy lie because they deprive citizens of the information necessary to make informed choices. This article will begin by considering justifiable lies, proceed to take up lies to avoid embarrassment, and conclude with several examples of lies of policy deception.

Justifiable Lies

Some philosophers, such as Saint Augustine and Immanuel Kant, take the position that all lying is morally wrong (Bok 1978). But this absolutist position is difficult to sustain, since lies can sometimes be used to protect innocent people from those intending to harm them. Nevertheless, the presumption is that there is a strong burden to justify lies in general and, in particular, lies about public policy. The most convincing justification for lying about public policy is to protect national security secrets or the lives of soldiers or spies.

Lying to foreign governments is often considered a necessary element of diplomacy, but presidential lying to citizens in a democracy should entail exceptional justification. If one accepts the legitimacy of a military establishment and the need to protect one’s country in a hostile world, one must accept the occasional need for presidents to lie. Of course, the compelling nature of this justification often tempts presidents to use the justification to lie about things not necessarily essential to national security.

This section will present several examples in which lies by presidents (or vice presidents) would be justified by national security concerns. It will also include a situation in which domestic politics justified a public lie.

Nixon and Cuba, 1960

During the 1960 campaign for the presidency, U.S. policy toward Cuba was an important issue. Fidel Castro had led a revolution to overthrow the corrupt Batista regime in 1959 and had allied Cuba with the Soviet Union and other Communist powers. The Eisenhower administration had been supporting and training anti-Castro exiles for a possible future invasion of the island to overthrow Castro. Shortly before the final series of debates between Kennedy and Nixon, Kennedy came out publicly in favor of active U.S. support of the Cuban anti-Castro forces saying, “Thus far, these fighters for freedom have had virtually no support from our government” (Nixon 1962, 353).

This put Nixon in a difficult situation. He knew that the government was actively involved in support of the Cuban exiles, but the operation was covert and could not be publicly acknowledged for fear of disclosing its existence and putting Castro on guard. Nixon (1962) concluded that the only responsible action was for him to attack Kennedy’s proposal as being reckless and irresponsible:

I think that Senator Kennedy’s policies and recommendations for the handling of the Castro regime are probably the most dangerously irresponsible recommendations that he’s made during the course of this campaign. . . . If we were to follow that recommendation . . . we would lose all of our friends in Latin American, we would probably be condemned in the United Nations, and we would not accomplish our objective. . . . It would be an open invitation for Mr. Khrushchev . . . to come into Latin America and to engage us in what would be a civil war and possibly even worse than that. (p. 355)

Ironically, and to Nixon’s dismay, the eastern establishment press commented favorably on Nixon’s forbearance. In addition, Nixon accurately predicted the eventual outcome of the Bay of Pigs invasion: it did not achieve its objective, and it encouraged Khrushchev to place midrange nuclear missiles in Cuba a year and a half later, leading to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

In his first memoirs, *Six Crises*, Nixon (1962) recalled his moral position, “I was in the ironic position of appearing to be ‘softer’ on Castro than Kennedy—which was exactly the opposite of the truth, if only the whole record could be disclosed” (p. 355). Thus, Nixon in this situation was telling a blatant lie, saying exactly the opposite of what he believed. But from his perspective, it has to be seen as a legitimate, justified, and even necessary lie. The United States was undertaking a covert operation against what was seen as a Communist enemy, and disclosure of the operation could have led to its failure. Setting aside what we now know about the cold war and the future consequences of U.S. actions toward Cuba, we have to admit that Nixon’s actions were ethical and even courageous.

Ford and the Nixon Resignation, 1974

In the summer of 1974, the House of Representatives was considering impeachment charges against President Nixon, and Vice President Gerald Ford was in a delicate position, needing to be ready to assume the presidency yet not seem too anxious

to do so. On August 1, 1974, Alexander Haig went to talk with Ford carrying a list of six scenarios for Nixon's actions in his tenuous political situation. One of them included the possibility that Nixon would resign and that Ford would grant Nixon a pardon. Ford did not consider this an offer of a deal and later that day called Haig to emphasize that there was no agreement or deal (Woodward 1999, 5-10). On August 3, Ford was asked at a press conference what the meeting was about. Instead of evading or refusing to answer the question, Ford lied about it. He said that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss "what could be done, if anything, to convince the members of the House that the president was innocent as both of us feel" (Woodward 1999, 12).

Given the delicacy of the situation, it could be argued that the lie was justified. If Ford admitted that he had talked with Haig about a possible Nixon resignation, the public reaction would likely be that the Nixon presidency was over. Or, Nixon might have reacted by changing his mind and going through the impeachment process. Since the political ramifications of Ford publicly admitting what the meeting was really about were so volatile, Ford justified lying about it. Ford did, however, have the option of avoiding the question and refusing to reveal what the meeting was about, which would have been preferable to the lie. Later, on October 17, when President Ford was testifying before Congress about his pardon of Nixon, he told the truth about the meeting on August 1 between him and Haig (Woodward 1999, 27).

Carter

The argument that it might be justifiable for presidents to lie leads one to question Jimmy Carter's statement as presidential candidate that "I will never lie to you" (Witcover 1977, 320; Woodward 1999, 41). If Carter was being literally honest, he meant that he would have intended to answer a question about a hostage rescue attempt truthfully, thus endangering the lives of both the hostages and rescuers. If he was not being honest in his promise not to lie, was he being naive? That is, was he incapable of imagining a situation in which he would be obliged to lie? Perhaps he was disingenuously setting up an expectation of his truthfulness that would help him tell a lie more effectively in the case that he had to lie. Or perhaps he was merely being opportunistic in making a campaign statement to contrast himself to the Nixon administration and appeal to Americans' hopes for honesty in government.²

Lies to Prevent Embarrassment

We must admit that politicians in a democracy are in particularly difficult positions with respect to complete truth telling. To knit together coalitions of support, they must often present their policy preferences to suit the goals of different groups.

2. Betty Glad (1980) argues that in his previous political career and campaigns, Carter had made a number of statements about his past that were arguably not entirely accurate. Later, when Carter was president, Bob Woodward (1999, 50, 87) cites several instances in which Carter was not entirely truthful.

This shading of one's position can easily slide into misrepresentation or lying. Politicians are also at a disadvantage because any fact about them will be used by their opponents to their greatest disadvantage. Behavior that would be unremarkable in a private citizen might be used to attack a person running for office. So, U.S. politicians might be tempted to deny, for instance, if one were gay, if one had had an abortion, if one had been treated by a psychiatrist, or if one had used drugs in the past for recreational purposes. Even though these would be lies, we can understand how a politician running for office might be tempted to feel that a lie would be justified in these circumstances. This section will first examine lies that are wrong, though understandable. It will then take up those lies that are serious breaches of the public trust.

Less Serious Lies

The understandable (although not necessarily justifiable) lies in this category include John Kennedy's lies about his health and George Bush's statements about his nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court and his assertion that he was "not in the loop" during the Iran-Contra affair. The Eisenhower administration's lies about the U-2 flights in 1960 are included in this "less serious" category.

Kennedy Denies that He Has Addison's Disease, 1961

Presidential health is always a sensitive subject, and administrations will go to great lengths to minimize any doubts of the president's full capacity to do the job. Rumors that John Kennedy had Addison's disease, a disease of the adrenal gland that was often fatal, swirled around the 1960 campaign. On January 19, 1961, when Kennedy was asked by a reporter if he had had Addison's disease, he said, "I never had Addison's disease . . . and my health is excellent" (Reeves 1993, 24). But the fact was that Kennedy did have Addison's disease and had medical problems all of his life (Gilbert 1993, 154-79).

President Bush and the Clarence Thomas Nomination, 1991

In 1991, after George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, he said that Thomas was "the best qualified" person for the position. In addition, Bush said, "the fact that he is black and a minority had nothing to do with this" (Mayer and Abramson 1994, 11-22). Critics argue that both of these statements by President Bush were lies.

While Thomas began life in a poor household and had very impressively worked his way up the educational and professional ladders, his credentials were not impressive as Supreme Court nominations usually go. It was apparent that the fact that Thomas was a very conservative black was key to his nomination. He was to replace the revered Thurgood Marshall on the Court, and his race would inhibit liberals from mounting an effective attack on his candidacy.

The reason for Bush's statement was to maintain the political viability of the nomination and to reduce embarrassment to Clarence Thomas. Bush's critics claimed

that the nomination was cynically protected by the race of the nominee. The lies to defend the nomination, however, were incidental to it and meant to avoid embarrassment. They also were transparent to informed political observers.

George Bush Lies about His Knowledge about Iran-Contra, 1988

During the campaign for the presidency in 1988, George Bush was the sitting vice president and heir apparent for the Republican nomination. One of the issues that was raised in the campaign was the level of his engagement in and knowledge of the Iran-Contra scandal. If he knew about it and did not object, he was vulnerable to criticism for having participated in a questionably legal and probably unwise policy.³

With this potential vulnerability in the 1988 race for the presidency, George Bush made several statements about his being “out of the loop” during decision making about the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran. In his campaign autobiography, *Looking Forward*, he said that he had been “deliberately excluded from key meetings involving details of the Iran contra operations” (Bush and Gold 1987, 240). On November 9, 1986, Bush said on *This Week with David Brinkley*, that it was inconceivable even to consider selling arms to Iran for hostages (Shultz 1993, 808). In an interview with David Broder of the *Washington Post*, Bush said,

If I had sat there and heard George Shultz and Cap express it [opposition to the Iran arms sales] strongly, maybe I would have had a stronger view. But when you don't know something, it's hard to react. . . . We were not in the loop. (Shultz 1993, 809)

The problem was that Bush *had* been at meetings when the Iran issues were discussed and had heard Shultz and Weinberger object to the project (Cohen and Mitchell 1988, 264-65; Walsh 1993, 473-83). Perhaps the key meeting was on January 7, 1986, at which Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Secretary of State Shultz objected to the arms-for-hostages policy. According to George Shultz in his memoirs, “I was astonished to read in the August 6, 1987 *Washington Post*,” about Bush’s statement that he was “not in the loop.” “Cap [Weinberger] called me. He was astonished, too: ‘That’s terrible. He was on the other side. It’s on the record. Why did he say that?’” (Shultz 1993, 809). Notes of the meeting by Weinberger, Bush, and for Shultz all indicate that the vice president understood the issues (Woodward 1999, 102, 174, 198, 200, 209).

Eisenhower and the U-2 Incident, 1960

In the spring of 1960, President Eisenhower had proposed to negotiate with the Russians a test-ban treaty that would end the testing of nuclear weapons, and Khrushchev had expressed interest in a treaty. Gary Powers took off in a U-2 the morning of

3. On the probable violation of the Arms Export Control Act by the Reagan administrations, see Shultz (1993, 811) and Woodward (1999, 102, 174, 198, 200, 209).

May 1 for an espionage mission over Russia. When the plane did not return for several days, it was presumed to be destroyed and the pilot dead because of self-destruct mechanisms built into the plane and the likelihood that the pilot could not survive a crash (Greenstein 1982, 253).

The decision of the administration to lie about the U-2 affair was important to Eisenhower. He had told advisers in February 1960 that he would have “one tremendous asset” in negotiations about his hoped-for treaty with the Russians and that was his reputation for honesty. “If one of these aircraft were lost when we were engaged in apparently sincere deliberations, it could be put on display in Moscow and ruin my effectiveness.” Eisenhower once told a friend that if a president has lost his credibility, “he has lost his greatest strength” (Beschloss 1986, 233, 252).

On May 5, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union had shot down an American spy plane and denounced the United States for “aggressive provocation.” Ike knew that the Soviets were aware of the U-2 overflights, but he presumed that Powers was dead and the plane destroyed. So he approved a statement by NASA that the plane was not a spy plane but that a weather research plane had been over Turkey and might have strayed into Soviet air space. After the administration had lied about the plane, Khrushchev announced on May 7 that he had the pilot, Gary Powers, and wreckage from the plane, forcing Eisenhower to admit publicly that the United States had been spying on the Soviet Union. Eisenhower felt personally mortified and told his secretary, Anne Whitman, on the morning of May 9, “I would like to resign” (Beschloss 1986, 254). He resolved to go ahead to try to salvage the summit, although by then it was hopeless, and Khrushchev walked out of the Summit in Paris. Thus, Eisenhower’s hopes for a test-ban treaty to crown his eight years in office were dashed, and he was severely disappointed.

The irony, as pointed out by historian Stephen Ambrose (1984), was that the U-2 overflights were no secret to the Soviets, who had been trying to shoot them down with SAMs for some time. Nor were they any secret to U.S. allies in Britain, France, Norway, Turkey, or Taiwan. Those who did not know about the U-2 were members of Congress and the American people. Thus, Eisenhower undermined his most important asset, his “reputation for honesty,” and undermined the trust of the American people in their government because he thought that there was no evidence to prove his lie incorrect (Ambrose 1984, 509).

Serious Breaches of the Public Trust

More serious breaches of the public trust will be illustrated with examples from the Nixon and Clinton administrations. President Nixon’s lies to cover up the Watergate activities were intended to impede governmental investigations of serious crimes (burglaries and money laundering). President Clinton’s lies about his encounters with Monica Lewinsky were made under oath.

Nixon and Watergate, 1973-74

President Nixon lied many times concerning his knowledge of the cover-up of the Watergate break-in on June 17, 1972. For instance, on May 21, 1973, he said in a public statement that he had “no part in, nor was I aware of, subsequent efforts that may have been made to cover up Watergate” (Kutler 1990, 347). He repeated similar statements often during 1973 and 1974 as he tried to avoid public disclosure of the Watergate cover-up and other illegal activities sponsored by the White House.

Perhaps the most important lie was recorded on the “smoking gun” tape from June 23, 1972, in which Nixon told Haldeman to have the CIA call the FBI to tell them to stop pursuing the trail of Watergate money because it would make public a CIA covert operation. Nixon told Haldeman to tell Richard Helms, “The president believes that it is going to open the whole Bay of Pigs thing up again. And . . . that they [the CIA] should call the FBI in and [unintelligible] don’t go any further into this case period!” (Pfiffner 1998, 208). The disclosure of this order to the CIA to lie to the House Judiciary Committee was the turning point in the impeachment proceedings against Nixon. The committee voted impeachment articles, and Nixon resigned before the full House could vote on them.

Nixon also lied to receive an income tax deduction of more than \$500,000 for the donation of his vice presidential papers to the National Archives. To qualify for the deduction, his lawyers backdated the official documents. Nixon signed the papers, thus testifying to the false date to escape paying full taxes for his income (Kutler 1990, 431-34). In retrospect, Nixon said, “I said things that were not true. Most of them were fundamentally true on the big issues” (Woodward 1999, 33).

***President Clinton’s Lies about His Affair
with Monica Lewinsky, 1998***

During the impeachment proceedings, it became clear that, despite his legalistic interpretation, President Clinton lied directly to the American public and under oath in depositions in denying that he had had sex with Monica Lewinsky. Thus, his lies were more serious than ordinary lies intended to prevent embarrassment.

One of the prominent arguments in defense of President Clinton during the Lewinsky affair was that “everyone lies about sex” and that such lies about private matters are less blameworthy than other lies. One justification for failure to tell the truth is the premise that one does not have to answer truthfully questions that people have no right to ask. Part of the premise in this argument is that privacy is essential to liberty and that individuals have a right to protect that privacy.

But the House impeachment managers made a powerful argument that the system of justice depends on the assumption of truth telling under oath and that to lie under oath is therefore an offence serious beyond any specific telling of an untruth. Clinton’s lie was wrong in several ways. Lying under oath undermines the assumptions on which the judicial system is based and sends a message that the president thinks that he is not subject to the law. In addition, Clinton cynically used others in his lie by lying to his staff and cabinet with the expectation that they would innocently repeat his lies. This violation of the confidence of his friends led to their feelings of betrayal and often to large legal fees. While we might argue that even presidents ought to have

some privacy, and we might deplore the tactics that Kenneth Starr used to obtain evidence of Clinton's sexual affair with Lewinsky, the president did in fact lie about it, and the lie was wrong. Whether the lies rose to the level of high crimes and misdemeanors for which a president ought to be impeached and removed from office is a separate question (Pfiffner 2000a).

Lies of Policy Deception

In lies of policy deception, a president says that the government is doing one thing when in fact it is doing another. The most basic premise of democratic government is that the government ought to be responsive to the wishes of the electorate and that during elections, the voters get to choose whom they want to govern them. Thus, misleading the public about the direction of government policy does not allow the electorate to make an informed choice and undermines the premise of democratic government. In the words of philosopher Sissela Bok, "Deception of this kind strikes at the very essence of democratic government. It allows those in power to override or nullify the right vested in the people to cast an informed vote in critical elections" (Bok 1978, 182).

LBJ and Vietnam, 1964-65

It is now widely understood that Lyndon Johnson misled the American public and concealed his policy of escalation in Vietnam in 1964 and 1965. In the presidential election campaign of 1964, Johnson presented himself as the "peace candidate" to contrast himself with Senator Barry Goldwater, who was a "hawk" on Vietnam and favored immediate and massive U.S. military action.

One of the most far-reaching deceptions of Johnson was his orchestration of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August of 1964. On the stormy night of August 4, the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* reported that it was under attack by North Vietnamese gunboats. The problem was that on the afternoon of August 4, the commander of the *Maddox* expressed doubts about whether an attack had actually taken place (Dallek 1998, 151). Current scholarship indicates that the second incident almost certainly did not take place (Moise 1996, 241-43; Haig 1992, 122).

4. The question arises as to whether President Johnson deliberately lied to the American people and members of Congress in characterizing the August 4 incident as a military attack against U.S. naval vessels. Johnson's actions can be read in two different ways. He can be seen as taking the best judgment of Secretary McNamara and Admiral Sharp that U.S. forces had, in fact, been attacked. But when subsequent reports came in that there was serious doubt about whether there had been any attack, Johnson did not acknowledge the reevaluation. He pushed ahead with his initial intention to order retaliatory raids, to address the American people, and to get Congress to pass a resolution of support for his reaction to the doubtful attack.

5. For an analysis sympathetic to Johnson, see Dallek (1998, 147-56); for a critical account, see Karnow (1983, 367-75); Goulden (1960; and Sheehan (1988). See also Berman (1982, 31-34) and MacMaster (1997, 107-08, 121-23).

But Johnson and McNamara continued to act as if the attack had, in fact, taken place and ordered U.S. air attacks against the North Vietnamese and pursued the approval of Congress for further action. In response to Johnson's request for support, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was used by Johnson as a blank check for the remainder of his term to do what he thought best in Vietnam and to avoid asking Congress for a declaration of war.⁴ Several days later, Johnson himself admitted to George Ball, "Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish!"⁵ (Ball 1982, 379). In early 1964, Johnson said, "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there" (Goulden 1969, 160).

In the fall of 1964, Johnson returned to downplaying any hint of an expanding U.S. involvement in Vietnam. On October 21, in Akron, Ohio, he declared, "But we are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves" (Wise 1973, 65). In December, Johnson authorized planning for air strikes against the North, in part to convince the South Vietnamese that the United States would stick with them if they increased their own military efforts. In December of 1964, General Harold K. Johnson predicted that it would take five hundred thousand men and five years to achieve victory in Vietnam. In late January 1965, a JCS study estimated that seven hundred thousand troops would be necessary (MacMaster 1997, 247, 261).

On January 21, 1965, Johnson's first full day as an elected president, he and McNamara met with a bipartisan group of members of Congress from both Houses. He misled them by presenting the bombing of Laos and covert operations against North Vietnam as being successful and misrepresented his military advisers' judgement about the status of South Vietnamese military readiness. He presented a much more optimistic picture than was warranted by the judgement of military leaders. Johnson told the congressional leaders that he had "decided that more U.S. forces are not needed in South Vietnam short of a decision to go to full-scale war . . . war must be fought by the South Vietnamese. We cannot control everything that they do and we have to count on their fighting their war" (MacMaster 1997, 211). He did not tell them of the plans to begin bombing North Vietnam. On March 8, 1965, the first combat troops, thirty-five hundred Marines, arrived at Danang in South Vietnam.

These troops, although engaged in combat, were supposed to be assisting the South Vietnamese in defensive operations. But in April, an increase of eighteen to twenty thousand in the Marine forces was authorized, and their mission was changed by National Security Action Memorandum [NSAM] 328, which authorized the offensive use of U.S. ground troops against the Viet Cong. NSAM 328 stated explicitly that the change in mission was to be kept secret:

premature publicity [should] be avoided by all possible precautions. The actions themselves should be taken as rapidly as practicable, but in ways that should minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy . . . changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy. (Berman 1982, 57)

McNamara and Johnson also understated the needed additional financial support by \$10 billion and argued that military mobilization was not necessary. Johnson refused to ask Congress for the money that he knew would be necessary to support the war effort for fear that a request would undercut the possible passage of his full Great Society program. By the time Johnson left office in 1969, thirty thousand U.S. troops had died as well as hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. Thus, Johnson had led the United States into a major land war in Asia in 1964 and 1965 while doing his best to conceal the increasing U.S. participation.

Nixon and the Secret Bombing of Cambodia, 1969

In 1969 and 1970, the Nixon administration undertook the bombing of North Vietnam targets in Cambodia; over a period of fourteen months, more than thirty-six hundred raids by B-52s were flown (Shawcross 1987, 228). The secret bombing involved elaborate deception and falsification of reports (Hersh 1993, 60-65).⁶ The pilots of the B-52s were briefed on missions to be flown in South Vietnam, but a subset of the pilots were told that they would get special orders while they were in flight. They would then be instructed to leave the other planes and deliver their bombs to specific coordinates in Cambodia. After dropping the bombs, they returned to their bases and reported as if they had been bombing in South Vietnam. These reports were the official reports that were recorded in the Air Force and Defense Department records. The secret reports of the actual bombings went through back channels to the White House. Not even Secretary of the Air Force Robert Seamans knew of the secret bombings.

The question arises as to the purpose of the secrecy. Originally, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird thought the bombings could be justified to the public, but he was overruled by Nixon and Kissinger (Shawcross 1987, 21). After all, the North Vietnamese knew they were being bombed, the Cambodians knew bombs were dropping on their country, and the Communist allies of the North Vietnamese were informed of the bombing. The only implicated parties who did not know were the U.S. Congress and the American people. In his memoirs, Richard Nixon argued that Prince Sihanouk wanted the U.S. to bomb but that if the bombing were publicly acknowledged by the U.S., the Cambodian government might have felt compelled to protest. Nixon does not explain why this would have been particularly harmful to U.S. interests. But Nixon also admitted the more important reason for the deception: "Another Reason for secrecy was the problem of domestic antiwar protest. My administration was only two months old, and I wanted to provoke as little public outcry as possible at the outset" (Nixon 1978, 382).

6. A dual-reporting system was developed. Nixon ordered that a cable be sent to our ambassador to South Vietnam, Elsworth Bunker, saying that all discussion of possible bombing of North Vietnamese targets in Cambodia was suspended. At the same time, he had a separate, back-channel message sent to the commander of American forces in Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams. Abrams was instructed to disregard the cable to Bunker and to plan for the Cambodian bombing campaign. See Hersh (1993, 60-65).

Nixon's deception about the secret bombing of Cambodia was wrong because it was a significant expansion (legally and militarily) of the war into a neutral country (even though the North Vietnamese were not respecting its neutrality). His lies and deception thus deprived the American people of the information necessary to make informed political decisions. The war at that point was controversial, and its expansion would have increased political opposition to it (as did the public invasion of Cambodia on May 1, 1970). Thus, the lies embodied in the dual-reporting system were intended to pursue a significant foreign policy change without the knowledge of Congress or the American people.

President Reagan and Iran-Contra, 1986-87

During the Iran-Contra affair in 1986 and 1987, President Reagan told several lies or made misstatements about sending arms to Iran and U.S. aid to the contras in Nicaragua.

First, on November 13, 1986, after the arms deals had been revealed by a Mid-east newspaper, President Reagan addressed the nation and said,

The charge has been made that the United States has shipped weapons to Iran—as ransom payment for the release of American Hostages in Lebanon. . . . Those charges are utterly false. . . . Our government has a firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. That “no-concessions” policy remains in force in spite of the wildly speculative and false stories about arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments. We did not—repeat—we did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages. (*Washington Post* 1987, A15)

But as more information about the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran came out in congressional hearings and testimony, President Reagan had to admit what the evidence showed. In a March 4, 1987, address to the nation, he said,

I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true. But the facts and the evidence tell me it is not. . . . What began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated in its implementation into trading arms for hostages. (*Washington Post* 1987, A15)

Second, on January 26, 1987, President Reagan told the Tower Commission that he had authorized the shipment of TOW missiles from Israel to Iran in August 1985 and of the replacement of those missiles by the United States to Israel. But in another meeting with the Review Board on February 11, 1987, he reversed himself. He said that he had gone over the issue with his Chief of Staff Donald Regan and that he had not approved of the transfer before it was undertaken. Later, on February 20, 1987, in a letter he wrote to the Commission President Reagan, he stated, “The only honest answer is to state that try as I might, I cannot recall anything whatsoever about whether I approved an Israeli sale in advance. . . . The simple truth is, ‘I don't remember—period’ ” (Walsh 1990, 468; Mayer and McManus 1988, 374-78).

Reagan might have been expected to recall such an important foreign policy decision, especially because Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz objected to the United States trading arms to obtain the freedom of hostages held in Lebanon. They agreed with President Reagan's statement on June 18, 1985: "America will never make concessions to terrorists—to do so would only invite more terrorism. . . . Once we head down that path, there would be no end to it" (Walsh 1997, 4). It may have been wise or unwise to reverse administration policy about dealing with terrorists, but as Weinberger argued on December 7, 1985, it would violate the Arms Export Control Act (Woodward 1999, 137, 155).

Third, on January 26, 1987, President Reagan told the Tower Review Board that he did not know that during the time the Boland Amendment was in effect the NSC staff had been engaged in helping the contras in ways additional to the diversion of funds (*Washington Post* 1987, A15). After the congressional hearings began, Reagan changed his story and said that he was "kept briefed" on private support to the contras. "I was very definitely involved in the decisions about support to the freedom fighters. It was my idea to begin with" (*Washington Post* 1987, A14-A15).

Thus, President Reagan changed his story at least three times during the investigation: (1) about whether the arms were intended to get the hostages freed, (2) about his approval of arms to Iran, and (3) about whether he knew about U.S. aid (other than the diversion of funds) to the contras during the period the Boland Amendment was in effect.

Characterizing the contradictions in President Reagan's statements about these important events as lies is not unambiguous. Since lying involves intentionality, one might argue that Reagan did not know what his White House staff was doing. While this argument is plausible with respect to the diversion of funds from Iran to the contras, it is a doubtful defense of his knowledge of the arms-for-hostages shipments or their purpose. Reagan might also have indulged in a certain amount of self-deception regarding his policies. He may have convinced himself that he was not trading arms for hostages, but he persisted in his denial even after George Shultz told him that it was an implausible claim (Shultz 1993, 1133; Mayer and McManus 1988, 315).

There is also the possibility that Reagan's Alzheimer's disease began to affect him while he was still president and could explain his confusion in answering questions about his decisions on Iran-Contra. For legal purposes, it would have been difficult to convict Reagan of lying. Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh decided not to indict Reagan during his investigation of Iran-Contra because

it was virtually impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt what the President remembered in January and February of 1987. Although it seems obvious that President Reagan made hopelessly conflicting statements to the Commission, it would be impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that any misstatement was intentional or willful. (Walsh 1990, 469)⁷

7. According to the final report on Iran-Contra, making false statements to the Tower Commission could be punished under the criminal code (18 USC Par. 1001) (Walsh 1993, 468).

If one wants to defend Reagan from the charge of lying by arguing that he did not pay attention to details, that he deceived himself, or by incipient Alzheimer's disease, one must be careful so that sympathy with Reagan's occasional confusion does not slip into condescension. If we give Reagan full credit for his policy victories, we must also admit that he was not always entirely truthful.

Conclusion

The issue of presidential lying is a problem because it undercuts the democratic link between citizens and their government. It also undermines trust in the government and all public officials. Obvious lying also sets a bad example and may lead others to justify their own lying. But it is the argument of this article that not all lies are equal; that is, some are worse than others are. The assertion that "they all do it" assumes that all lies are equally wrong (or inevitable) and implies that citizens have no responsibility to examine presidential lies and make political judgments about them. Such an attitude is insidious and undermines moral responsibility.

The taxonomy of lies was developed to help think about the substance and circumstances that might help us distinguish more from less justifiable lies. The point is not whether the cases cited fall into the correct categories or even if the categories are the right ones. The point is, rather, that presidents occasionally tell lies and that we, as citizens, have the responsibility to examine the context of each lie before judging how it should be weighed in the overall assessment of a president.

We must also keep presidential lying in perspective. Lies are not the most important aspect of what presidents do, either in a negative or a positive sense. Each of the presidents cited in this article was guilty of worse actions than the lies documented here. But each of these presidents also accomplished significant achievements that outweigh the lies that they told.

In public discourse about presidential character, lies are certainly relevant, but we ought to realize that presidential character is multidimensional rather than seamless (Pfiffner 2000b). Analysis of the contrasting aspects of character in each of our presidents will get us much further than simplistic campaign slogans in making judgments about presidents.

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