



Courtyard Counseling Center

We're here to help



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Lying Around:

Part 4 - When our Political Leaders Lie

For even the most casual political observer, lying is viewed as part of the game. No conscious person, regardless of political affiliation, would be surprised to learn that politicians lie. In fact, most of us would find laughable a statement to the contrary. Whether or not the lie bothers the general public often depends upon which side of the lie they find themselves. Situational ethics is prevalent in politics as well as in the minds of the public. Do we support the reason for the lie? Does the lie support our personal agenda? Do we like the person who lied? Has the liar duped us? Do we see the lie as understandable and forgivable? The answers to such questions will determine our reaction to the lies and to the politicians who tell them.

All presidents must sometimes lie. Although, Abraham Lincoln contended that he didn't lie because he had such a poor memory. This anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, makes the point that in order to be a good liar one must remember the lie and all the distortions that protect the lie. When it comes to lying by high-ranking governmental officials, they often have a network of people who remember and support their lie with even more lies. This is especially true in matters of administrative embarrassment or national security. Because our survival can depend on outwitting our enemies, few would argue that we shouldn't spy. The very business of spying is all about lying and the public tolerates it. In fact, we seem to admire spying as not only necessary, but also as glamorous and clever.

Not all lies are equal. We justify some presidential lies because they support a greater good. If telling a lie can save lives, few would hesitate. The issue becomes less certain if telling a lie would save someone from hurt feelings. Very few people would openly support lying for personal gain. Although the distinction between these types of lies is not as clear as we might think. The public rarely has enough information or expertise to determine whether the president is lying. Instead, some might have suspicions, while others might naively believe everything the president says. For still others, they might focus on body language or a disingenuous facial expression to support their suspicions that the president is lying.

It doesn't take a political historian to see the diversity in some of the lies told by our recent presidents. And it's not simply that presidents lie that disturbs the public. It is what they have lied about, to whom they have lied, and their motivations for lying that bother us. Political leaders must remain stalwart in the face of criticism and accusations. This requires a tremendous ego. Jimmy Carter arguably had the fewest ego requirements of any president in recent history.

As a result, he was viewed as less charismatic than other presidents. He was not a good liar. President Reagan, a practiced professional actor, was very charismatic and had great ego requirements. Such an ego allows one to lie with less internal or moral conflict.

Richard Nixon, who had a mammoth ego, lied to cover-up a crime and to keep his job. He didn't lie for reasons of national security or to comfort a frightened public during a time of depression. It was his selfish duplicity that angered the American people. Nixon's lies provoked the House Judiciary Committee to invoke Articles of Impeachment. But before they acted, Nixon's mountain of lies in the Watergate cover-up forced his resignation. His proclamation, "I am not a crook!" became fodder for a generation of comedians.

Bill Clinton, riding the crest of a successful first administration, was caught lying about a profoundly human failing. Like Nixon, Clinton's lies were not about governmental business. This time it was strictly personal. Clinton lied to avoid the embarrassment of facing his family and the American public. What seemed to bother people most, and what also garnered him the most support, was that his lies made him seem more ordinary than presidential. His second failing was to not believe that he could be forgiven. His political opponents self-righteously seized upon this opportunity while hiding their own personal misbehavior. Several of them stepped down after it was revealed that they too had cheated on their wives. The public, regardless of their political affiliation, have increasingly become less tolerate of such lies by their leaders.

George W. Bush, accused of misrepresenting his reasons for invading Iraq, took another approach. He never addressed the accusations of lying but instead constructed an alternate reality that his supporters eagerly believed. He changed his reasons for invading Iraq from finding weapons of mass destruction, to capturing Saddam Hussein, to freeing the Iraqi people and bringing democracy to the region. Never mind that it was well known that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. Was it a convenient diversion? His strategy and struggle now seems to be to constrain his administration's misleads while creating a legacy that fits his ego. It remains to be seen how history will treat Mr. Bush. He has three and a half years remaining to serve and much can happen in that time. Unfortunately, it appears that he has either not grasped that the public can handle the truth or he has much to hide.

Typically, we see lying as a moral weakness and we don't like to think of our leaders as weak. We hold them to higher standards. Our psychological relationship to our political leaders has characteristics in common with our psychological relationship to our parents. Although we don't require perfection, we look to them for our moral compass and we protect the image we construct of them. If they fail us, we can feel betrayed and our psychological foundation can become unstable.

We need to be realistic about the leaders we elevate. We don't need a scrupulously Honest Abe for president; we need an intelligent, sincere and empathic one who creates more opportunities for telling the truth and fewer reasons for lying.

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