

Truth as an Element of Faith

It is of great importance . . . never to tell an untruth . . . he who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all of its good dispositions.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1785

THE SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER of the University of Michigan discovered in polls taken between 1958 and 1970 that Americans were steadily losing faith in their government.

In 1958, eighty percent of those polled believed their government could be trusted all or most of the time. By 1970, this figure had dropped to fifty-three percent. Corresponding to this drop in public trust in the truthfulness of government was a similar drop in faith. The question was posed: Is the government run for the benefit of *all* the people, and not just for that of special-interest groups?

	PERCENTAGE ANSWERING YES			
	1958	1964	1967	1970
TRUTH:				
The government can be trusted all or most of the time	80	77	65	53
FAITH:				
The government is run for the benefit of all, not for special-interest groups	68	64	53	41

TRUTH AS THE NECESSARY ELEMENT

By the spring of 1971, a national poll reported that sixty-nine percent of the American people did not believe that their government was telling the truth about our activities in Southeast Asia. Lincoln was right when he said that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time, and the American people were right in suspecting their leaders of lying.

At a press conference on September 26, 1969, President Nixon said, "There are no American combat forces in Laos." This was patently untrue. For on that date Americans were flying forward air-control missions from fields in Laos; Americans were in the field "advising" Lao combat units; Americans were flying more than one hundred bombing and strafing runs each day over Laos; American military personnel were operating on combat missions in Laos; and Americans were dying in combat in Laos.

Though these facts would not be officially disclosed until the heavily censored transcript of Senator Stuart Symington's subcommittee hearings was made public later in the year, the untruthfulness of the President's comments was unquestionable. While "advisers" might not, strictly speaking, be called "combat forces," no rational person could argue the exclusion of forward air controllers, bomber pilots or Special Forces teams from that category.

Later, on March 6, 1970, President Nixon made a nationally televised address to clarify, in part, what he had said at the September 26 press conference and at subsequent such conferences. In a speech entitled "The Scope of U. S. Involvement in Laos," Mr. Nixon, a lawyer, used words of exactitude: "I turn now to the *precise* nature of our aid to Laos . . ." He then said precisely, "No American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in ground combat operations." A few weeks later, however, on June 1, the Library of Congress research division reported: "At the time of Presi-

dent Nixon's statement, twenty-seven Americans stationed in Laos had been killed by Communist troops or listed as missing in Laos . . ."

A young Special Forces veteran visited my congressional office to say he had been stationed on a mountaintop in northern Laos for eleven months in 1966, and that his commanding officer had been killed while on a reconnaissance patrol. A number of other veterans of the war in Southeast Asia have described in detail their extended involvement in ground combat operations in Laos, up to and including the date of the President's description of the "precise nature" of our aid to Laos.

Either President Nixon deliberately lied to the American people or he was deliberately misinformed by the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA. All three of these agencies knew that Americans stationed in Laos had been killed in ground combat operations.

Whether it was President Nixon or his top advisers who were lying is perhaps less important than the fact that the American people were deliberately deceived. The most terrible aspect of this deception is not that it was accomplished, but that it has now become acceptable to the *other* elements in the American political system—the Congress, the press and the people themselves. How has this come about? How have we come to accept untruthfulness—plain lies—as a necessary ingredient of political rhetoric, action and style?

This is the same President Nixon, after all, who in his acceptance speech to the 1968 Republican convention at Miami Beach had said, "And let us begin by committing ourselves to the truth, to see it like it is, and tell it like it is—to find the truth, to speak the truth and to live the truth—and that's what we will do." In campaigning against the Democratic Administration then in power, Nixon had ar-

gued, "The Administration has failed in *candor* at home, and in leadership abroad. By not taking the American people into *its* confidence, the Administration has lost *their* confidence." He was right. But so also has he failed: in candor, in truth and in refusing to take the American people into his confidence.

Why? What happens to an individual who achieves power to make him forget his campaign words of bright promise? Is there something hidden in our political system, not visible to the rest of us, that prevents candor and truth on the part of our highest leaders?

Nearly a century ago, the thesis was advanced by Lord Acton that "power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." We speculate that this may well have been true in earlier times in Europe, but can it be true here and now in our own treasured American system?

I am afraid that our present political practices and customs *have* caused us to perpetuate falsehoods, to inhibit free expression and to discourage dissemination of the truth. Little wonder for the growing belief among the disenchanted young that *all* politicians are untruthful, or that their promises will not be matched by their performances.

In 1968, an able young legislative assistant to then Congressman Donald Rumsfeld of Illinois, Bruce Ladd, traced the origins of Presidential deceit in a book appropriately titled *The Crisis in Credibility*. While there had been earlier examples of administrative news management in American history, Mr. Ladd ascribed the beginning of modern public trust of government pronouncements to the security and secrecy requirements of World War II. That was a total war, fought against an Adolf Hitler who had without remorse ordered the murder of six million Jews in concentration-camp gas chambers, fought against a Japan which had attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor en

route to overrunning much of the western rim of the Pacific. Few Americans questioned—though perhaps we should have—the fire-bombing of Dresden or the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Total war against totalitarian regimes seemed to justify those actions, at least in those days, for most Americans. Whatever secrets the government wanted to keep were kept, ranging from the Manhattan Project (the early development of the atomic bomb) to the President's whereabouts when he toured the nation's defense plants. Nobody, including the press, complained much. "Loose lips sink ships." In wartime all of us could well understand the need for governmental secrecy.

With the end of World War II, the Cold War and near-hysterical anti-Communism of the 1950s justified continued secrecy. Security restrictions relating to weapons technology, delicate diplomatic negotiations and military contingency planning obviously required absolute secrecy. We were still "at war" in the minds of most Americans. "Espionage" and "the CIA" became words of popular understanding and acceptance. The loss of atomic secrets through spies such as the Rosenbergs and Dr. Klaus Fuchs, the developing technology of hydrogen and cobalt bombs, the need for adequate intelligence about Communist plans or plots—all of these contributed to public acceptance of continued government secrecy.

The common-law rules for the recovery of damages by reason of "misrepresentation and deceit" have included for centuries the concept that, in dealings between individuals, the *concealment* of material fact is just as actionable as the deliberate *misrepresentation* of fact. If concealment of fact is justified by government, therefore, it is only a small step to justify deliberate deceit as well.

Ironically, the American who was most respected for his integrity in the postwar period, President Dwight D.

Eisenhower, laid the basis for the transition from secrecy to conscious government deceit. It began with his approval of official statements to the American people and to the world immediately following the Russian capture of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in May of 1960. President Eisenhower personally approved the government's issuance of a deliberate falsehood: that Powers' flight over Russia was a routine weather reconnaissance mission. A shocked America woke one morning to find that their beloved President had lied to them.

The range of government deception broadened and with it the decline of public trust. In the administration of John F. Kennedy, both the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 were accompanied by deliberate lies to the American people by high government spokesmen. U. S. involvement in the overthrow of South Vietnamese Premier Diem in 1963, determined, aided and encouraged by our ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, was unequivocally denied by the State Department and even by Lodge himself.

Assistant Secretary of Defense (1961-67) Arthur Sylvester enunciated the new ethic: "On occasions (such as the Cuban missile crisis) when the nation's security is at stake, the Government has the right, indeed the duty, to lie if necessary to mislead an enemy and protect the people it represents." The key words are "when the nation's security is at stake."

Probably most Americans would accept the need to deceive the enemy (and, unfortunately, one's own people) when the national survival was truly endangered, or if it were necessary to prevent a nuclear holocaust. Government bureaucracy being what it is, however, and bureaucrats being who and what they are, the phrase "when the nation's security is at stake" immediately began to receive broader

and broader interpretation. Once the principle of admitted deception of the American people was forthrightly stated by a Defense Department official and successfully practiced by several Presidents, what careful public servant at the Pentagon or in the State Department could fail to understand that deception on *his* part might well be justified?

Government agencies wholly unconnected with the national security took the cue. By 1971, inquiring Congressmen and newsmen had discovered a raft of deliberate deceptions by *domestic* agencies in the executive branch. The Department of Agriculture refused to release the findings on meat inspection, particularly with respect to hot dogs and spoiled products. The Food and Drug Administration withheld for a year the test results showing high chemical contamination of fish in certain waterways in Alabama. The Commerce Department and the Federal Power Commission were reluctant to enforce the Ambient Air Quality standards of the 1970 act and have been unwilling to disclose their reasons for the failure of such enforcement or to reveal the data discovered in their investigations. In the case of the supersonic transport, perhaps the outstanding example of deliberate governmental deception in a matter wholly unconnected with the nation's security, top White House aides, the Office of Science and Technology, and Secretary of Transportation John Volpe variously withheld information or gave misleading reports to a congressional committee and the public at large. (This incident is more fully treated in a later chapter.)

If, by 1971, *before* publication of the Pentagon Papers, sixty-nine percent of the people believed the government to be untruthful, is it not time to consider whether we have allowed secrecy and its inevitable companion, deliberate deceit, to go too far as the accustomed and acceptable agents of government?

Deceit when the national security is literally at stake is one thing; as a matter of continuing policy it is another. If, as I believe, faith in our government is a necessary part of our national strength, then we have more to fear from loss of faith than we do from any increased knowledge gained by foreign governments.

Truth, in short, must be a national goal. We must consciously seek it. We must carefully reexamine those areas where we have become accustomed to secrecy, concealment and deceit. This is vital if we are to determine, in each case, whether truth is not more valuable than secrecy. The national security requires the faith of our people as well as the strength of our weapon systems.