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Government By Forked Tongue: Lying As Policy

Modern administrations have all faced the question of whether to lie. Experience shows that it's better not to comment than to offer falsehoods.

By David Wise *fwj*

THERE CAME a time, as they like to say at the Iran-contra hearings, when Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North appeared before the House Intelligence Committee in August of 1986 and proceeded to tell, by his own admission, a pack of lies. When he returned to the White House from his journey to Capitol Hill, he received a now-famous message from his boss, Rear Adm. John M. Poindexter: "Well done."

The message may have symbolized the Reagan administration's conduct of foreign policy. Ollie North lied and is proud of it (and the country apparently loves him). Adm. Poindexter, no less adamant, told his inquisitors: "I don't have any regrets for anything that I did. I think the actions that I took were in the long term interests of the country. . . . And I'm not going to be apologetic about it."

For the first time in memory, the president's men are selling lying as an instrument of national policy. It is a whole new approach to the politics of lying, as bold as the revived miniskirt, and apparently to some Americans, just as attractive, if a good deal less revealing.

At least most of the time in the past, when high officials were caught telling something other than the truth, they waffled, doubletalked and just plain denied it. The last thing they would do is actually admit they had lied. (Nixon did, but only at the end, after the Supreme Court had ordered the release of his most incriminating tapes and the truth could no longer be evaded.)

One previous exception to the established rule that the government must never tell the truth about lying came during the Kennedy administration, when Arthur Sylvester, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, announced — just before the Cuban missile crisis — that the Pentagon had no information about missiles in Cuba. Later Sylvester stoutly defended the government's "right . . . to lie" to save itself "when it's going up into a nuclear war."

His statements caused a furor that no amount of later explanations could repair. Sylvester's mistake was to say out loud what a good many high officials believed, and apparently still do.

The hearings and the extraordinary statements of the two ousted former national security aides raise a philosophical question: When, if ever, is it all right to lie in the service of the U.S. government?

Before attempting to answer that question, some historical perspective may be helpful. All modern administrations have lied, in varying degree. There are reasons. The United States emerged from World War II as a superpower. With that status came a huge national security bureaucracy, including the Pentagon, the CIA and other intelligence agencies. By 1948, the CIA was running covert operations. Since those operations are supposed to be secret,

"cover stories" were prepared to protect them in case of exposure. Thus, the Eisenhower administration lied about CIA efforts to overthrow Sukarno in Indonesia, and about its one successful coup in Guatemala. Under President John Kennedy, lies were told during the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Military control over information also created a vast temptation to fib. During the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson's version of events in the Tonkin

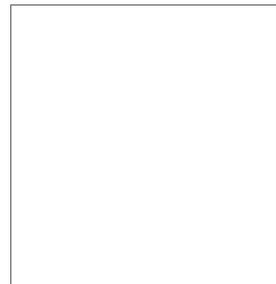
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Gulf was skewed to fit his policy. Who was the wiser? There were no AP reporters or TV correspondents on the destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf.

On the eve of the Reagan administration's invasion of Grenada, White House press spokesman Larry Speakes called a network report of the invasion "preposterous." The next day, the United States invaded Grenada.

Political leaders who mislead the public and Congress for political reasons may find it convenient to cloak their actions in the guise of "national security." Often, the line between actions taken for political self-preservation and national security is blurred, and deliberately so.

During Watergate, for example, there was one



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marvelous exchange, captured on the Nixon tapes, when the president and his aides, John Dean and Bob Haldeman, were discussing the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist:

Dean: You might put it on a national security grounds basis.

Haldeman: It absolutely was . . .

Nixon: National security. We had to get information for national security grounds . . . the whole thing was national security.

Dean: I think we could get by on that.

Why should not government lie when the price is right, that is, when the stakes are high enough? The answer is not so much moral as it is political and constitutional.

The American political system presumes tension among the branches of the government, but also a basic framework of honesty. It assumes that the executive branch will not lie to the public and to the Congress. Public trust between the people and their government is the basis of a democracy. Sissela Bok has written of the "presumption against lying" that forms the basis of trust, without which "institutions collapse."

There is an alternative to government lying. It is to tell the truth. Or, to remain silent when a matter is too sensitive to reveal immediately to the public. Contrary to the argument sometimes heard, a "no comment" by a government spokesman will not be taken by the press as confirmation of a rumor if that reply is consistently given.

The American government, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, derives its powers from "the consent of the governed." Official lying destroys that bond. The people cannot give their consent when they do not know to what they are consenting.

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