
EDITORIAL

Most Americans do not observe or experience politics firsthand. Under a system of representative government they depend upon their elected representatives to convey, by words and symbolic gestures, what conditions are like in the political world: how the republic is faring, what we need reasonably fear and what we may reasonably hope. We expect that politicians will not only act but interpret reality for us, tell us what it is and what it means. Acknowledging that certain circumstances may compel a politician to lie or to be less than candid or that often he or she may lack information or have failed to think carefully, there remains a responsibility for truthfulness in the public realm that transcends the exceptions and is prior to them. Systematic lying and misrepresentation corrupt public discourse, breeding cynicism and apathy among the citizens and uncertainty among those who are responsible for making decisions of the gravest sort.

It is not coincidental that systematic lying by governments is conventionally dated from World War I and that in the decades that followed there emerged totalitarian dictatorships that developed deceit and manipulation into governmental functions and total wars in which both sides competed to construct pictures of the world favorable to their cause. The extraordinary levels of violence, directed first against combatants, then against civilians and cities, and finally against nature as well, could only be justified by reconstituting the common understanding of the world so as to conceal or euphemize the horror and irrationality now woven into the structure of things from Verdun to Auschwitz to Hiroshima to My Lai.

The response of those who sought to preserve some integrity of meaning in the public realm was to confront the lies of politicians and propagandists with the truth of facts. During the Vietnam War notable examples of this were Daniel Ellsberg's Pentagon papers and the courageous writings of Noam Chomsky. Since then the status of facts has become equivocal: experts crop up on all sides of most controversies, each with evidence in support of his or her contentions. Above all, the contemporary sensibility has been shaped to recognize that facts have to be interpreted and that interpretations appeal to criteria that are considerably less conclusive than a syllogistic proof. The problem of public discourse is no longer a matter of "setting the record straight" or of producing "facts" that will refute falsehoods. We live in an interpretative world where demonstrable lies coexist with useful fictions, where each of us depends on others for assistance in deciphering the

meaning and value of states of affairs and affairs of state in a world that is constantly fragmenting into ever more specialized areas of knowledge and activity. The first value in an interpretative world, especially in the political part of it where power and violence are everyday realities, is trust.

For nearly two decades Americans have witnessed, experienced, and been shaped by the steady corruption of the public realm and its modes of discourse. The deceptions of Vietnam and Watergate were the climactic moments in this experience but not the sole instances of a condition in which the experiment of a politics without trust is being attempted. This is the context for reflecting upon the most recent episode, the purloined briefing papers made available to the Reagan campaign organizers.

"We're handling this 100 percent different from Watergate," declared a high-ranking administration official. "The Nixon people tried to hide something, but we're sending every scrap of stuff to the Justice Department as soon as we find it." Good faith is thus demonstrated by "handling" matters by bureaucratic procedures, as though these were the natural antithesis to Nixon's evasiveness or as though it had been forgotten that one of the early casualties of Watergate was the integrity of the Justice Department, not least because the long political relationship between the then attorney general and the president created doubts about the department's zeal.

The fact that the two scandals have happened within a decade or that both have involved Republican campaigns may be no more, or less, significant than the fact of the predominance of Californians in both cases. What matters is not so much whether a "third-rate burglary" (as the Nixonites called it) was more heinous than "filched" campaign documents (in David Stockman's description), but that the comparison should force into the open the major question. It is not whether the Reagan campaign was as corrupt as Nixon's, but concerns the different ways in which the Reagan administration is corrupt and what corruption now means.

In the varied strands of evil composing it, Watergate resembled a chapter from the history of the early Roman empire. It included simple venality: high politicians were on the take and bribes passed freely. There were shabby episodes of "dirty tricks" where eager young men tried to curry favor by unfair stratagems designed to mislead the rival party. But there were also versions of what the Romans had called "proscriptions" (dangerous citizens were declared outlaws and their property confiscated) but which came to be known as "enemies lists" and "the Huston Plan" for intimidating and surveilling unfriendly persons and causes. These, too, took place in the context of an interminable war for empire that gradually revealed the cracks and weaknesses in the otherwise imposing facade of world hegemony. The Nixon men attributed their failure to impose their will on events to a disloyal bureaucracy and so they attempted to purge the disloyal and replace them by

faithful conservatives. They would then eliminate the shiftless from the welfare rolls, make it clear to blacks and other minorities that the civil rights days as well as riotous urban nights were over, and restore the work ethic. Like the Romans the Nixonites tried to mount a contradiction. They wanted to preserve and strengthen imperial power while corrupting the remains of the republican political tradition, the source of the nation's political vitality.

Lies and rumors of corruption had trailed Nixon ever since his political debut. Twice he was rejected for important office by the citizens: in the presidential election of 1960 and in the California gubernatorial contest shortly thereafter. In the end the Vietnam War and the lies of LBJ debased the public realm sufficiently to elect and then to reelect Nixon president. Jimmy Carter, who promised the nation he would never lie and largely honored that promise, failed as a president, not simply because of inexperience and a talent for selecting small-minded advisers, but because few appreciated the toll that a decade and more of lying, deceitful discourse, and governmental lawlessness had taken on the fabric of civic trust.

How Ronald Reagan has discharged his responsibility toward the public realm and its legacy of meanings was summed up in a wholly truthful, if unconscious, remark he made not long ago. After charging that an enormous campaign existed to misrepresent his administration's environmental policies, he then asked rhetorically, "Now how about five minutes of the truth?" Which is about what the citizenry has gotten. Several months ago the *New York Times* reported that White House aides were relieved because the media were giving less publicity to the President's numerous and now legendary misstatements of fact and misleading accounts. Reagan's men attributed this to "a decline in interest by the general public." They went on to say, with a logic befitting the age of interpretation, that the public recognized the accuracy of the president's "larger points" even if some "nits and nats" were "open to debate." It is an actual fact that the president has systematically misrepresented such nits and nats as: the administration's level of aid to education, previous levels of defense spending, the vulnerability of American defenses, the extent of cuts in social spending and environmental matters by his administration, and the condition of the social security system and his own plans to reform it.

Like the deceptions of the Nixon regime, the untrustworthiness of the president and his men is linked to the tightening of state power, threats to civil liberties, and the encouragement of higher levels of violence. The Reaganites have systematically sought to weed out ideologically disloyal bureaucrats and replace them by what the president calls "a whole new cadre of young conservatives in government." While rejecting the cruder methods of the Nixon years, the Reaganites have not foresworn the old hostilities toward desegregationists, dissenters, environmentalists, and militant ethnics. The tone was conveyed in the lecture that the president recently read to a group of high school students, several of whom favored a nuclear freeze. Rights, he told them, are a "privilege" and "with that privilege goes a

responsibility to be right." Where the Nixon administration struck at its enemies mainly out of malice, the Reaganites have sublimated enmity into ideological principles, mainly libertarian, and used the legal powers of the government to roll back desegregation, reduce constitutional safeguards for public employees, and eat away at the Freedom of Information Act.

Nowhere is lying more conspicuous than in the administration's efforts to revitalize imperial power and, in the course of it, to increase the potential and actuality of violence in the world. The president's attempts to deny covert American assistance to the "contras" fighting in Nicaragua and to conceal the amount of American aid flowing into Honduras and El Salvador may not have attained the level of Nixonian grandeur but the same contempt for truth is evident: Somocistas are "freedom fighters"; the recent pastoral letter on world peace by the Catholic bishops has "the same purpose" as the administration; the nuclear freeze movement is "counter-productive" because "we are all talking of a freeze."

Perhaps the most remarkable evidence of the president's cynicism is the attitude that he displays toward conservatism. Although in actual fact he has implemented many of the pledges he made to conservative groups, he persists in denying that he has cut back on environmental protection, social welfare, and education or that he has significantly increased defense spending. It is as though lying has become so congenial that one is forced to mislead supporters and opponents alike.

It was fitting that an administration that places such store upon the manipulation of images, the expert use of television, and the skills of the Great Communicator should have stolen a briefing book for a televised debate. That it should not be laundered-clean money or dirty tricks but a document that has been prepared for the culminating moment of a long public debate is indicative of a more general indifference—except for rhetorical purposes—towards the things that the people as a whole have a stake in, not the least being the conditions that make for public discussion. In a society where political involvement has become dangerously attenuated for many citizens and where that involvement so frequently is vicarious, the open corruption of politics endangers what is already a fragile connection. For it is a corruption of politics, not just old-fashioned give-and-take, when the president suggests that Communists are behind the nuclear freeze movement or that teachers are engaged in deliberately brainwashing students about the nature of nuclear war.

The ideological element that joins the president's indifference toward truth with the convictions and goals of his influential supporters among corporate leadership is a deep conviction that if a wide range of government functions were given over to private enterprise and made to conform to the discipline of the market and to corporate-style authority, then most domestic problems, at least, would become more manageable. In all lying there is an element of contempt. Here it happens to be contempt for political life on any terms other than those embodied in corporate values. There was a small bit of poetic justice recently when the administration had

to fire an assistant secretary in HUD because he had improperly used government personnel to complete a book on "Privatizing the Public Sector."

Before long another presidential campaign will be underway. Unless the president disavows all of the signals he has given thus far and chooses not to run, as citizens we can look forward to an experience from which it is difficult to emerge feeling other than unclean and demeaned. The tragedy is that while President Reagan has taken public discourse to a desperately low point, the issues facing the country are profound and to some extent even unprecedented in our history. What makes the discussion of them troubling is that possibly for the first time in American history there is a widespread sense of emptiness at the center of our collective existence. For more than two decades it has become steadily clearer that we do not know what we are about in this world, except as mainly passive instruments of whatever combination of corporate, military, and bureaucratic purposes happen to have jelled at particular moments. And we are largely unable to talk about our common concerns because it is no longer clear how, after decades of the corruption of speech, we should begin political talk: Reagan exploits while he travesties traditional values, while technicians and academic experts can be induced to provide the scientific lyrics to any melody.

There are at least two vital questions that citizens must find ways of forcing into the coming campaigns. They are not the usual stuff of quick policy solutions but they are quite basic to the political revitalization of the society. One concerns the terrible damage done to the character of political life by the pursuit of empire. Empire is, at its essence, domination over other peoples. It exploits their wealth, uses their bodies, and is prepared to sacrifice whole societies to the dictates of military and economic strategies. Empire means being hated by others because exercising tyranny is synonymous with being hated. But empire is also at war with democracy at home. They stand for diametrically opposed notions of power and of social worth. The enemies of democracy have repeatedly stated their case; this election needs to be one where the friends of democracy insist on confronting the issue of imperial power.

The other concerns the restructuring of society. All of the current talk about reindustrialization, reinvestment, free trade, and the like is about big plans in the making for the thorough modernization of America, from education to defense, from industrial plant to social security. Here, too, those who care about democratic values of participation, the uses to which one's body, skills, and resources are put, and rendering power shareable and controllable by popular constituencies must struggle actively and transform democracy from a campaign flourish to a fundamental issue.

— Sheldon S. Wolin
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