

The trouble with the truth

The Politics
Of Lying

Government by Deception,
Secrecy and Power.
By David Wise.
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By RICHARD HOLBROOKE

Multiple Choice Question for the 1970's: The Government of the United States lies: (a) never; (b) only when it has to for reasons of national security; (c) whenever it feels like it, whether or not it affects national security; (d) whenever it feels like it, to protect itself from domestic political embarrassment; (e) most of the time; (f) all of the time.

By now, many Americans would pick one of the last two choices to the question posed above. Turned off by Vietnam and Watergate and two Presidents in a row who have had low credibility ratings (for good reason), disillusioned by recent revelations of deception and even during the exciting 1,000 days of the Kennedy Administration, many educated people see deceit even where there is none, and trickery behind even routine announcements. Like the Boy Who Cried Wolf, the Government often has trouble being believed when it is telling the truth. (Try convincing people, for example, that the Peace Corps is completely clean of any C.I.A. involvement, as I firmly believe it is; even Peace Corps staff and volunteers sometimes doubt it, although three Presidents have issued orders to this effect, and no evidence has ever emerged to the contrary.)

It was not always thus. As recently as 1960, when the United States announced that it had lost a "weather research plane" near the Turkish border, most Americans accepted the official State Department explanation—until, confronted by a C.I.A. pilot alive and well in Soviet hands, President Eisenhower admitted the deception and accepted personal responsibility for the U-2 spy flights.

Did the President of the Unit-

ed States lie? And, especially, Dwight D. Eisenhower? Ike realized the cost of the lie, apparently, for in retirement he said that "the lie we told about the U-2" was his "greatest regret."

Thirteen years after the U-2 was shot down, the trust the United States Government once had has been seriously eroded. (Who would believe that cover story today?) Disbelief and cynicism are widespread. And it is not unusual to hear some of the more cynical among us argue that lying and deception are nothing to get upset about. After all, as I was told recently while debating some undergraduates who were seven years old at the time of the U-2 incident and who view their Government with appalling cynicism, "Everybody in the Government lies, so why get excited?"

Astounding, that one should even have to defend the proposition that our Government should not lie to us. Yet it has become necessary to make the case. Anthony Lake, who resigned as Henry Kissinger's assistant after the 1970 Cambodian "incursion" (and who recently learned that, while working for Kissinger, he was having his home telephone tapped for "national security reasons") has written: "The essential first step is for the Government to realize that it cannot lead the public while misleading it."

"The Politics of Lying" is thus a title and theme of great promise. Major national issues transcending partisan politics are at stake. The Government is using its power to classify material, as David Wise correctly puts it, in order "to deprive the American people of vital information." The system that has grown up, he adds, "has played a significant role in the general expansion of Presidential power" since World War II, and he concludes that "the Government's capacity to distort information in order to preserve its own political power is almost limitless."

Unfortunately, Mr. Wise's book is not equal to the ambitious task he has set out to accomplish. It never lives up to the promise of its title. Anecdote follows anecdote to shock or amuse the reader, but they of why and when the Govern-

ment chooses to lie; what it gains or loses by lying; and when and why the liars get away with it. The complex reasons that lead officials into public deception are not explored here.

The extraordinary irony of the way in which public lying creates self-deception within the executive branch (and the great costs of such self-deception) is overlooked entirely. Instead, one finds a collection of stories, some old, some new, some borrowed—all designed to convince the reader of what Wise himself says the reader already knows: the Government lies a lot. We want more than this, but it is not here.

The whys and hows of lying, as well as its real costs, are only glimpsed through the uneven anecdotalism of this book. As for solutions, we can all agree with Mr. Wise that "the only 'solution' to Government lying is to tell the truth," but his recommendations are both brief and unrealistic. (To suggest, for example, that all classified documents should become public after three years unless the President personally keeps them classified is simply not workable.)

Too much of "The Politics of Lying" is devoted to a compendium of essentially minor complaints about the treatment of the press by the White House. It is a shame, because Mr. Wise is addressing one of the major problems of our times, one that is far deeper than the "credibility gap." There seems little likelihood of it diminishing, either, despite the hopeful statement with which the President's Communications Director, Herb Klein, ushered in the Age of Nixon in November, 1968: "Truth will be the hallmark of the Nixon Administration. . . . We feel that we will be able to eliminate any possibility of a credibility gap in this Administration."

Credibility gap. The very phrase, which entered our vocabulary only a few years ago, both identifies a colossal problem for every administration,

and obscures the even more important question of why Presidents, other politicians and bureaucrats lie. Take Watergate, for example—a classic and staggering case of lying apparently at every level of the Government. But why? Mr. Wise's book (which was finished before the more recent spectacular events) does not provide us with many clues. But in the Watergate tragedy lying must be viewed as the public front edge of a much larger failure—a failure on the part of our leaders to believe, and live by, the democratic principles on which our nation is supposedly based.

The evidence relentlessly emerging supports this gloomy assessment; our leaders lie publicly because they were acting in an anti-democratic manner privately. In the brilliant perception of columnist Stewart Alsop, they were using the techniques of war, not politics. And when their private (and illegal) action began to emerge they had no recourse but to lie as a defense.

The credibility gap, then may be viewed in a somewhat different way. The Government has lost the confidence of many Americans because it lies; it lies because it has lost confidence in the values of a genuinely open and democratic society. Secrecy—a product of fear and a perennial sanctuary for insecure people—is the inevitable first step in such a process. Lying, under pressure and probing from outsiders (usually the press and Congress), is, equally inevitably, the next step. The circle is vicious. Or, to use an image North Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan van Dong used 11 years ago in predicting our Vietnam nightmare, it is really a descending spiral.

Much of the deception is done in the name of "national security"—a traditional and usually successful justification. Over the last 28 years, and growing out of a legitimate need in World War II and the cold war to protect sensitive information, the national security umbrella has been expanded