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Lying Is No Big Deal Anymore

In May 1960, the Soviets downed a U.S. spy plane over Central Russia. Thinking the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, was dead, President Dwight D. Eisenhower authorized NASA to say that one of its civilian planes was missing. Only after the Soviets later announced that Powers was a captive and had confessed to piloting a spy plane did Ike 'fess up. Yes, the U-2 was a spy plane, he confessed. The government had lied.

The incident is worth recalling because the revelation that the government had lied was as much a shock as the news of the spy flights themselves. It was "the first time many [Americans] learned their leaders did not always tell the truth," wrote Michael R. Beschloss in his history of the incident. Up to then, a lie uttered by a public official was considered a grave matter.

No more. Now some public officials seem to think that lying is just part of their job. An example is Robert C. McFarlane, the president's former national security adviser. Through persons who speak for him, he admits that he helped concoct a false chronology of the Iran arms sale to make it seem President Reagan was unaware of the first shipment. Later, having raised his right hand to take an oath before a congressional committee, he told the truth: the president had indeed authorized the first shipment.

Around the time the Iran story was breaking, McFarlane denied at least twice on television that he had taken with him on a trip to Iran a Bible inscribed by the president and a cake baked in the shape of a key. As I recall, he looked his interviewers in the eye and said, "You know me better than that." Well, we do now. We are reliably informed that both reports are essentially true. There was a Bible; there was a cake, although they may have been brought by Lt. Col. Oliver North, who accom-

panied McFarlane to Tehran on the same plane.

As for the president, he too has played cute with the truth. Asked repeatedly at a press conference whether a third country—Israel—was involved in shipping arms to Iran, he always said no. Since we now know the president himself authorized the shipments, we can rule out the possibility that he was ignorant of the facts. With his Bible in Iran, the president presumably felt free to say whatever was convenient.

More and more, government officials seem to have adopted the lawyer's cutesy distinction between lying and perjury. The former is permitted, indeed sometimes required, while the latter, of course, runs the risk of prison. Thus, it is all right to lie to the people through the press, but not under oath to Congress.

Of course, there are times when a government official has to lie. Former national security adviser John Poinnying, on the eve of the Grenada invasion, that such an operation was under way. It's hard to know what else he could have done. And as for Eisenhower, his deception was aimed at the Russians, who were about to meet with him in Geneva. He was trying to protect that summit meeting.

But there is a casualness to some recent lying that takes your breath away. Where once a lie was an extraordinary event and excused only for the highest reasons of state, lies are now sometimes uttered for sheer convenience's sake, often to avoid embarrassment. McFarlane's statements and actions fall into that category. Often they are excused under the rubric of "protecting the presidency," a verbose, highfalutin phrase that usually comes down to protecting a particular president from the wrath of his own people. By his own admission, McFarlane was engaged in a cover-up.

In present-day Washington it seems almost quaint to lament how frequently lies are told. But honesty is a virtue for its own sake, and lying is a symptom that something is awfully wrong. Very often, the lies stem from one big lie such as the president's insistence that he would not bargain for hostages. In these cases, the subsequent lies are really efforts to maintain or implement policies that lack public approval and not, as is often claimed, to ensure national security. It is not just the lies that are insupportable; it is the policy itself.

That is the nub of the Iran affair. The president was doing something he said he would not—doing it secretly because he knew Americans were opposed. From that epic deception stemmed all the others. They differ in purpose and consequence from the lie Ike told about the U-2 affair. He was cheating on the Russians. Reagan administrations officials are cheating on us.