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Lying in Politics and the Rise of Post-Truth: Philosophical Perspectives and Current U.S. Challenges

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**Lying in Politics and the Rise of Post-Truth:
Philosophical Perspectives and Current U.S. Challenges**

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Philosophy Honors Thesis
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Introduction

All through history, political figures have often lied, misled, distorted, and otherwise deceived—during times when it was deemed necessary or advantageous. In the United States, public concern about such behavior has tended to come and go: it came notably during the early 1970s with revelations that both Democratic and Republican administrations lied repeatedly about U.S. military plans and assessments in Vietnam. Today, a number of social and political trends have brought renewed concerns—summed up in *Time* magazine’s April 2017 cover story, “Is Truth Dead?”¹

It is tempting to say that most of this concern is due to the rise of President Donald Trump. Some news organizations keep a running tally of what they describe either as provably false claims by the president or outright lies. By the end of his first year in office, a *Washington Post* database had counted 2,140 “false or misleading claims” by Trump; one of many examples with policy implications is Trump’s often-repeated and demonstrably false claim that the United States is the highest-taxed nation in the world.² The *New York Times* list is plainly titled, “Trump’s Lies,” and it includes such statements as “Between 3 million and 5 million illegal votes caused me to lose the popular vote” (there’s no evidence of widespread illegal voting) and “Obama tapped my phones during the very sacred election process” (no evidence of that, either). Many analysts point out that both the manner and extent of Trump’s lies are “somewhat unique among politicians,” as Glenn Kessler and Meg Kelly of the *Washington Post* wrote in an

¹ D.W. Pine, 2017, “Is Truth Dead? Behind the TIME Cover”

² Glenn Kessler and Meg Kelly, 2018, “President Trump made 2,140 false or misleading claims in his first year”

introduction to the newspaper's updated list on January 20, 2018.³ "Many will drop a false claim after it has been deemed false. But Trump just repeats the same claim over and over, perhaps believing that repetition will make it ring truer."⁴

There's a case to be made that Trump has brought lying to a new level in American politics, but the trends behind this revived debate would seem to go far beyond him and predate his presidency. Indeed, many have spoken of the emergence of a post-truth society. The *Oxford Dictionary* named "post-truth" its 2016 Word of the Year, defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."⁵ These circumstances have been arising for a while. In a book-length study released in early 2018 titled "Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life," the Rand Corporation (a global non-profit think tank) adds further elements to the standard definition of post-truth. It does so by pointing to several interrelated trends behind this erosion of truth, which include growing disagreement over objective facts; the increasingly blurred lines between personal opinion and fact; and a "declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information."⁶ An important driver behind this trend is a sharpening of polarization along political and ideological lines, according to Rand, which used several measurements of polarization, including the growing numbers of people whose views align closely with either conservative or liberal ideology. The polarization has led to increasing partisan attacks on those formerly trusted sources of

³ David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, 2017, "Trump's Lies"

⁴ Glenn Kessler and Meg Kelly, 2018, "President Trump made 2,140 false or misleading claims in his first year"

⁵ Oxford Dictionary, 2016

⁶ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, x

information, namely the major news organizations. Social media has been an enabler of these trends.

Many people speak of lying in politics and post-truth as though they were the same thing. They do overlap and interact, but there are important distinctions between the two, as well as substantial amounts of gray area. Lying involves a false claim or representation made with knowledge of the truth, or with an intention otherwise to deceive. In a post-truth situation, truth is usually beside the point; at the very least, it is much less influential than one's own feelings, opinions, and political, economic, or ideological interests. Taken literally, the term "post-truth" suggests that previous eras of American politics were grounded in factual truth, unlike today. Taken less literally, the term calls attention to how the relative influence of opinions and emotions, in contrast to objective reality, has increased in our political discourse.

Someone could assert, for example, that this or that foreign country is running a trade deficit with the United States, as part of a desire to argue that free trade is harmful. The claim might be true or false, for all that the person making the statement knows, or cares. In a post-truth environment, the actual facts of the matter are largely irrelevant; what drives the assertion is one's feelings and preferences or interests on the matter of trade relations. (This is not a completely hypothetical example; it is inspired by a real exchange between Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which will be related in Part III of this paper.)

Sometimes, a claim could be both a straight-out lie on the part of some people and something else on the part of others. Take, for instance, the patently false allegation made by Trump years before he ran for office—that President Obama was born in Africa and therefore not eligible to be president. At least some activists making this claim (arguably including Trump)

must have known better, which would seem to make them liars. Many other people, however, were all too willing to believe the false reports and allegations, because of their political biases and their feelings toward the first African-American president. They grew into a mass movement called “the birthers,” aligned against a president who allegedly had no birth certificate legitimating his presidency, even though he did.⁷ They would spread this information on their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, either believing it to be true, or without regard for the truth, or with some other motive. Such are the gray areas between outright lying in politics and post-truth.

Do most of the “lies” in politics that we see today fit within the traditional understandings of intentional lying and deception in politics? Are we entering a post-truth phase of American democracy, which includes but stretches beyond the traditional category of political lies and signals a change in the way people make representations about factual matters? Is post-truth more dangerous to our democracy than the lying done by politicians in the past? Perhaps are we even beginning to resemble some aspects of totalitarian regimes that systematically attempted to create alternative realities to expand their control over all aspects of society? There are many important ways of addressing these questions through historical, political, sociological, and other methods of analysis. In this paper, I will investigate how philosophy and other philosophically oriented literature can help us tease out the distinctions between the various categories, and bring into clearer focus the trends underway in U.S. political culture as well as the challenges ahead.

This thesis is about both lying and post-truth, because the two tendencies are closely intertwined with each other. Several basic arguments and positions will develop in this paper, and a couple have to do specifically with the practice of deliberate lies and deception. I will argue

⁷ German Lopez, 2017, “Trump is still racist ‘birther’ conspiracy theory about Obama”

that many of the false and misleading statements increasingly made by political leaders today can be firmly classified as lies and that these intentional deceptions have no apparent moral or philosophical justification. This may seem obvious enough from a political or partisan standpoint, but it is also a conclusion that can be reached based on a wide diversity of philosophical sources; these include even Niccolò Machiavelli's ends-justifies-the-means approach, which goes so far as to encourage lying by leaders, within some limits. At the same time, many of the untruthful statements in politics fit into another category in which the speakers or hearers (or both) are not so much lying as they are uninterested in the facts of a matter. This is part of the post-truth situation that I have described. Another position taken in this writing will be that post-truth can pose a greater danger to our democracy than intentional lying and deceit, if critical masses of people no longer feel that the statements they make or hear need to account for objective facts. And, complicating individual accountability as well as the search for solutions is that there are larger social forces behind this apparent breakdown of truth, as indicated by the Rand study.

What follows is my map of the thesis.

In Part I, I present a selection of philosophical works relevant to the questions raised here. I look at Sissela Bok's philosophy of lying, primarily because it offers offers a workable definition of lying; helpful guidance on the question of justified lying, in restricted circumstances; and a philosophical argument as to the overall impact of lying on individuals and society. Then, after questioning how far Bok takes us toward grappling with a post-truth situation, I turn to Plato's *Gorgias*. This Socratic dialogue represents a critique of purely rhetorical discourse, the goal of which is what Socrates variously calls "persuasion" and

“conviction” rather than truth and understanding. *Gorgias* is concerned primarily not with lying per se, but with the perceived relevance or irrelevance of truth. I use the text here to illustrate a post-truth situation that goes beyond the question of whether someone is telling a deliberate lie, a situation in which truth matters little. After examining these two texts, I turn specifically to political philosophy, looking at how leaders can or should carry out their duties in the challenging context of power politics, using Machiavelli and contemporary philosopher Michael Walzer as my guides to the political realities. Part I will provide material for assessing questions such as whether the kinds of lies analyzed later in the thesis can be justified in philosophical terms.

In Part II, I offer two case studies from the 20th century: lies and deceptions that took root in American politics during the Vietnam War and in the former Soviet Union. I study in particular the debate surrounding the Pentagon Papers (focusing on analyses by Bok and Hannah Arendt), as well as dystopian literature that arose from totalitarian societies in the Soviet orbit. The differences between the American context (characterized by specific lies that had to be covered up) and the Communist world (of full-blown alternative reality) will help identify some of the breaking points between lying and post-truth. The two examples will also pave the way for an analysis of whether we are today moving beyond the ways politicians lied in the fairly recent past, and taking on aspects of post-truth that might lend toward comparisons with totalitarianism.

Part III brings us to current political trends and realities. I analyze a number of specific lies that fit neatly enough within traditional definitions of lying (although the extent and manner of lying, including the use of repetition, may have reached new heights). I also look at other falsehoods that seem to take us in different directions, including what many consider a new era

of post-truth or truth-decaying politics. In examining the examples, I find contemporary philosophical tools of analysis in Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt's book with the off-color title, *On Bullshit*, which predates the current conversation about post-truth, and which defines bullshit as a lack of concern for the difference between truth and falsity. In addition, I draw further guidance from the "Truth Decay" study, which identifies the underlying trends (such as those cited above) that are not adequately explained by the category of deliberate lying. By the end of this section, it should become clear that the topic of lying in politics today is about much more than lies. It is about those larger social and political forces such as extreme polarization and the rise of uncurated media, particularly social media.

In a conclusion, I look for possible justifications for the political lies, and don't find any that would fit the criteria of philosophers surveyed in this thesis, even those who take the more permissive approaches to lying. Then, I summarize how post-truth represents a genuine threat to American democracy, qualitatively different and more dangerous than political lies of the past. Finally, I evaluate some proposed solutions to the crisis of post-truth, including media literacy training and the option of fighting back.

I.

Philosophical Resources

In Part I, the first two treatments—of Sissela Bok’s *Lying* and Plato’s *Gorgias*—illustrate the two main aspects of my topic. Bok’s work would fit into what I am referring to as the traditional category of lying, which involves a deliberate moral choice to deceive. *Gorgias* offers a philosophical source for thinking about a related category in which fact and truth are almost beside the point, or far less influential than emotion and personal belief. (This is more or less the *Oxford Dictionary* definition of post-truth cited in the Introduction.) Both categories are critical to a discussion of current debates about lying in politics. The remaining two treatments in Part II bring political philosophy into the picture, with reflections by Machiavelli and Michael Walzer on the moral compromises a leader might need to make, along the way to acquiring and maintaining the power necessary to carry out political goals.

Sissela Bok’s Philosophy of Lying

In her 1978 book, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, Bok defines a lie as “an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a *statement*.”⁸ This means that someone must take action—make a moral choice and give it an expression—in order to lie. For Bok, a “statement” could include spoken words or gestures and, I would add, tweets and other messages. As we will see, Bok makes some room for exceptions to the rule of truth-telling and even offers a philosophical methodology for justifying lies, but in general she argues that lies are

⁸ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 15

dangerous, and Bok goes as far as to compare lying to violence, saying both are “deliberate assaults on human beings;” both can create a situation where people must act contrary to their own will.⁹ “Most harm that can befall victims through violence can come to them also through deceit. But deceit controls more subtly, for it works on belief as well as action.”¹⁰

Deceit, similar to violence, makes people extremely vulnerable. For this, Bok sets up a thought experiment: imagine a society in which all obligations to the truth have been abandoned. There’s no guarantee that anyone is telling the truth, whether they’re politicians, friends, teachers, etc. When it’s impossible to tell if you’re hearing a lie or the truth, no individual has the tools for informed action and speech. Such a society would not be able to function properly, because “there must be a minimal degree of trust in communication for language and action to be more than stabs in the dark.”¹¹ Even before a society unravels, however, the individual's life is imperiled from lies. How would you know if an alert for an incoming missile threat was real? Or if the owner of the apartment lease you just signed would uphold his or her end of the obligation? Or if your boss would give you the Christmas bonus s/he promised?

Lies are also dangerous because they alter the dynamic of the relationship between the liar and the lied-to. Discussing this imbalance, Bok says “to the extent that knowledge gives power, to that extent do lies affect the distribution of power; they add to that of the liar, and diminish that of the deceived, altering his choices at different levels.”¹² Lies also diminish the ability to make decisions, by overshadowing relevant alternatives—“lies foster the belief that there are more alternatives than is really the case; at other times, a lie may lead to the

⁹ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 18

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*, 19

unnecessary loss of confidence in the best alternative.”¹³ Case in point: someone lies randomly to a tourist and claims an important bridge is closed, so the traveler is faced unnecessarily with limited choice in the means of travel. Later, if that same tourist finds out he or she had been lied to, and the bridge was in fact open, she would feel wronged. The person who is deceived and manipulated will then become resentful or disappointed because she was unable to make an informed decision. The perspective of deceived puts that person in the position of a victim whose power has been usurped by the liar. Humans in general resist this loss of power, because we are familiar with the consequences of being lied to.

In addition, lies can have lasting repercussions for many people other than the ones directly deceived. For example, if the president of Connecticut College is deceptively told by an advisor that tuition needs to be raised (perhaps because of a hidden agenda of some sort), not only is Katherine Bergeron in a position of diminished power because of the lie, but the school community as a whole suffers. Lies will almost always have a ripple effect on the people close to the person being lied to.¹⁴

What about the perspective of the liars? For one thing, they normally share the desire not to be lied to, but they would like to keep for themselves the option of lying, while expecting others be honest with them.¹⁵ Many liars, particularly those who lie selectively, will weigh the advantages and disadvantages of lying in particular situations, but the confidence they have in their ability to carry out the deception will often lead them to overlook the danger to themselves. Liars often wind up diminishing their own personal power as well as the power of those they are lying to; they put themselves in a vulnerable position to be discovered and criticized. They may

¹³ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 21

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 23

face the prospects of losing the trust and respectability of family, friends, and colleagues—a fact that will often weigh heavily on them, perhaps even leading them to a dimmer sense of their own integrity.¹⁶

To effectively maintain the secrecy of a lie, the liar may have to tell even more lies, because “so few lies are solitary ones. It is easy... to tell a lie, but hard to tell only one. The first lie, ‘must be thatched with another or it will rain through.’ More and more lies may come to be needed: the liar always has more mending to do.”¹⁷ Greater lies told will increase the likelihood that the liar is caught, requiring further efforts to remember and manage all of the lies.¹⁸

Throughout my exposition of Bok, I am focusing primarily on aspects of her analysis that relate to serious lies as well as to the subject of lying in politics. I am not emphasizing, for example, her discussion of so-called “white lies” that are not meant to injure anyone (for example, saying you don’t have time to do something when you really don’t want to do it), or her critique of lying in medical settings ostensibly for the benefit of the patient (not revealing that the patient has six months to live).¹⁹ Bok acknowledges that people can tell such lies with fairly good intentions, but she sees serious pitfalls in these lies too. The indiscriminate use of white lies may give way to other forms of deception, she argues, suggesting a sort of slippery slope. As a practical matter, the doctor in question would have to make sure all members of a patient’s medical team are on board with the lies, and such a concerted lie can also undermine the patient’s participation in his or her own medical choices.

¹⁶ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 24

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 25

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 26

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 58

When it comes to most lies, Bok believes that people should follow Aristotle's premise that the truth is "preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations."²⁰ In that vein, she articulates the "principle of veracity," which gives an important "initial negative weight" to lies.²¹ This does not mean that the morality of lying should be ruled out in every instance, and it does not suggest which kinds of lies should be prohibited. Rather, it means only that "in any situation where a lie is a possible choice, one must first seek truthful alternatives."²² Lying should only be considered as a last resort. "Mild as this stipulation sounds, it would, if taken seriously, eliminate a great many lies told out of carelessness or habit or unexamined good intentions," she points out.²³

Bok concedes that it would be easier (in theory) to simply place an absolute moral prohibition on lying, as some philosophers have done. In her reading, Immanuel Kant represents one absolutist position, in which all lies are prohibited, "even those told for the best of purposes or to avoid the most horrible of fates."²⁴ Bok believes that such a position leaves no room for reasonable exceptions. For example, if a murderer knocks on your door, asking if your wife is home, shouldn't you be able to lie to the murderer to save the life of your wife? Bok believes Kant would say no—you must tell the truth to the murderer—which seems a little overly sweeping and nonsensical. One could appreciate her point about absolutism, but still quibble with her interpretation of Kant.²⁵ For example, under Kant's categorical imperative, it might be possible to lie to the murderer, as long as you would universalize the ethical response and want

²⁰ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 30

²¹ *Ibid*

²² *Ibid*, 31

²³ *Ibid*, 31

²⁴ *Ibid*, 38

²⁵ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Kant's Moral Philosophy"

everyone in the world to do the same thing, *in that circumstance*. Bok does not take up this or other possible Kantian interpretations different from her own.

Offering a contrast with absolutism, Bok then turns her attention to the philosophical school of utilitarianism, which does leave room for lying in terms of the consequences the lie brings. An act is morally justifiable solely based on the consequences brought about by the action. Utilitarians are “much closer to our actual moral deliberation in many cases where we are perplexed. In choosing whether or not to lie, we *do* weigh the benefits against harm and happiness against unhappiness.”²⁶ But issues arise with utilitarianism. The costs and benefits of an action are difficult to determine when cases become more complex involving multiple parties, according to Bok, although she does not elaborate much on this assertion. She also makes the point that by focusing purely on a calculation of consequences, utilitarianism may seem to suggest that lies are neutral in themselves and that “a lie and a truthful statement which achieve the same utility *are equivalent*.”²⁷ Her conclusion on this matter seems to be that simple utilitarianism can collapse on its own terms with regard to lying, because most lies do have negative consequences for all the reasons she discusses in the book, and experience tells us that liars will always be biased in their calculations of the consequences of their lies.²⁸ (Bok seems to be more utilitarian than this critique would suggest. Her general case against lying rests almost entirely on consequences of lying, like being found out, and she doesn’t seem to make a case that lying is inherently harmful or wrong; perhaps to do so would lead her closer to the absolutism that she opposes. This may be in keeping with her general philosophical approach, which tends toward practical ethics and ethical dilemmas faced by professionals and other individuals.)

²⁶ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 49

²⁷ *Ibid*, 50

²⁸ *Ibid*, 50

If lies are dangerous but also justifiable at times, then how does one go about making this tricky moral decision? This is where Bok proposes a methodology for justifying lies. She introduces “the test of publicity,” which seeks to find out “which lies, if any, would survive the appeal for justification to reasonable persons.”²⁹ Bok sees this in part as an exercise in the Golden Rule, which calls for sharing the perspective of those who would be affected by your lie, and asking how you would react if the lie was being told to you. Bok would also like people to imagine what a reasonable public would think of the lie, but she quickly notes that such an appeal to one’s conscience might not be sufficient, given the risk of bias in assessing your own intentions. For that reason, Bok says it is important to test the idea with peers and, if possible, larger groups of people. This part of the treatment has particular relevance to public and political life.

Bok makes it clear that in a democracy, the task would be to test the lie with the largest possible groups of people representing society. It sounds counterintuitive: how do you test whether someone or a group of people will accept the validity of a lie told to them? Wouldn’t they find out that it’s a lie and negate the intended effect of the deception? Not necessarily. Bok points to public debates over issues such as national security, which could involve discussion of “the purposes and limits of deception [and] could set standards for allowable deception in times of emergency,” drawing on actual examples of past public deception.³⁰ There is, however, an important caveat in Bok’s presentation: the test of publicity “does not work well when there is a question about just how ‘reasonable’ the available public actually is.”³¹ In other words, the public has to be able and willing to assess the validity of a lie.

²⁹ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 93

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ *Ibid*, 101

Later on in the book, Bok addresses a particular rationale for lies told by leaders supposedly for the public good. In doing so, she invokes the concept of a “noble lie,” which, in her treatment, occurs during a “crisis where overwhelming harm can be averted only through deceit,” and where the stakes are high because many people could be affected.³² Bok believes that this category of lying, which might seem morally acceptable, could actually be the most dangerous of all, because it opens the way to broad rationalizations of justified lying.

She states that throughout history, rulers have often perpetuated the myth that they are superior to those they govern because of their birth or training: “Some have gone as far as to claim that those who govern have a *right* to lie.”³³ Often, they believe it is necessary to lie to the public because the people do not have a sophisticated understanding of the politics at stake. In addition, rulers may “regard particular circumstances as too uncomfortable, too painful, for most people to be able to cope with rationally.”³⁴ Politicians might also try to justify political lying by claiming that “vital objectives in the national interest require a measure of deception to succeed in the face of powerful obstacles.”³⁵ Perhaps revealing the truth to the public would jeopardize an important military operation.

Nonetheless, Bok argues that there should rarely be a situation in which a politician is permitted to lie. For one, it’s not uncommon for politicians to strive for individual gain while masquerading as defending the interests of the public as a whole. Additionally, even when politicians are convinced that their interests are pure, error and self-deception can “mingle with . . . altruistic purposes and blur them.”³⁶ Here, Bok seems to assume that lying partly for reasons

³² Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 166

³³ *Ibid*, 168

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ *Ibid*, 169

³⁶ *Ibid*, 167

of personal and political advantage are completely out of bounds, but as we will see, thinkers such as Michael Walzer make a fair case that in the world of power politics, even virtuous politicians have to keep an eye out for their own political self-perpetuation, if they want to get a chance to do good things for the public. Generally speaking, however, Bok is on solid ground when she points out there are many ways that things can go wrong when deception is employed by leaders and governments, and when they “arrogate to themselves the right to lie, they take power from the public that would not have been given up voluntarily.”³⁷ Thus, it is better to follow a general policy of avoiding lies and deception.

Lying provides a number of philosophical tools for analyzing lying in politics, including a definition that will help identify statements and messages in politics today that fit into what I have described as the traditional category of deliberate lies, which involves a moral choice and an action. Bok also offers an example of a philosopher who applies strict scrutiny to claims of justified lying in politics and a methodology to assess such claims, but who is not an absolutist. In both *Lying* and her follow-up book *Secrets* (which will come up in Part II), she gives much attention to lies by those who enjoy positions of power, not just individuals (who traditionally have been the primary focus of philosophical reflections on lying).

At the same time, her analysis of intentional deception that is stated does not provide all the tools necessary for grappling with post-truth challenges, which involve a wide mix of acts and attitudes as well as social forces. In such settings, there may at times be a blurring of lines between outright deception and a lack of interest in fact-based discourse. There may be situations in which some are lying, as Bok strictly defines, and others are all too willing to believe the lies

³⁷ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 175

and spread them further. What happens when facts and truthful assertions are of little consequence in public discourse? Bok throws a bit of light on these questions, such as when she stresses the need for a reasonable public, one that could assess the validity of a lie—which includes being able and willing to tell the difference between lies and truth. While it is atypical to progress from a contemporary philosopher to an ancient one, Plato’s critique of purely rhetorical discourse will provide further insights into a post-truth situation.

Plato and the Rhetoricians

In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates discusses with Gorgias and Polus the essence of rhetoric. Gorgias proudly declares himself to be a rhetorician—a person who is concerned with persuading others to do what you want them to do, especially in law and politics.³⁸ A rhetorician has the ability to persuade anyone of anything, Gorgias claims. He describes how the use of rhetoric makes it possible for him to act (or pose) as an expert in another field. For example, “when I’ve gone with my brother or some other doctor to one of their patients who was refusing to take his medicine or to let the doctor operate on him or cauterize him, the doctor proved incapable of persuading the patient to accept his treatment, but I succeeded, even though I didn’t have any other expertise to draw on except rhetoric.”³⁹ Because of this, Gorgias asserts that rhetoricians are especially effective at their jobs.

After some discussion, Socrates speaks of the differences between knowledge and conviction, and gets Gorgias to agree that these are two different things. The two also agree that conviction could be either true or false; someone obviously could be convinced of something that

³⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*, 453a

³⁹ *Ibid*, 456b

isn't true. "But can knowledge be either true or false?" Socrates asks. Gorgias acknowledges: "Certainly not." Conviction and knowledge are not the same.⁴⁰

Then, Socrates identifies two kinds of persuasion, with two different results: one that brings conviction without understanding,⁴¹ and the other that brings knowledge.⁴² He poses the question, "Which of these two kinds of persuasion, then, in the province of right and wrong, is the effect rhetoric has on people when they've assembled in law courts and so on? Is it the kind which leads to conviction without understanding, or the kind which leads to understanding?"⁴³ Gorgias replies in general terms: "The answer's obvious, Socrates: it's the kind that leads to conviction."⁴⁴ Summarizing where the two have arrived in the conversation, Socrates says rhetoric is "an agent of the kind of persuasion which is designed to produce a conviction, but not to educate people, about matters of right and wrong."⁴⁵ Gorgias agrees again, and he will also make the point that rhetoric is a skill or a set of tools that people can misuse (he is vague on what would count as abuse), but that is not the fault of the rhetorician.⁴⁶

It may seem that Socrates and his dialogue partner are mostly on the same page, when agreeing that the aim of rhetoric is persuasion, not understanding. However, they are taking fundamentally different positions. Gorgias is saying that this aim is proper, and Socrates is taking a stand against the idea of placing persuasion above truth. Unconcerned with educating people about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, the rhetorician is only trying to persuade them about one thing or another, according to Socrates. Appealing to people's emotions, rather than facts, is

⁴⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 454d

⁴¹ πεπιστευκέυαι

⁴² μεμαθηκέυαι

⁴³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 455a

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 454e

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 455a

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 454a

one tactic of persuasion and another key element of rhetoric. This is done in part through what Socrates labels as “flattery,” which he seems to define generally as telling people what they want to hear, and he says it has no reliable relationship with the truth.⁴⁷

Plato and Bok converge in a few notable ways, one being the idea that the liar, not just the person lied to, bears the negative consequences of lying. Both say the power of the liar, or anyone unconcerned about truth, can be diminished because of the lies and untruths (with Bok emphasizing that the perceived loss of integrity and trustworthiness weighs inevitably on the one who lies). In fact, Socrates tells Polus that he believes rhetoricians “are the *least* powerful members of a community.”⁴⁸ Polus is shocked by Socrates’ claims and says that on the contrary, leaders practiced in the art of rhetoric are the most powerful because they can act like dictators and “can execute anyone they want, and confiscate a person’s property and then banish that person from their community...”⁴⁹ Socrates is unimpressed by this notion of power. He sees Polus’s leader, on the contrary, as lacking in power and control over his own life because this leader becomes a slave to his own appetites and desires, including the thirst for power. The tyrant is not free, in that sense. Socrates has different assumptions about the nature of freedom and power, connecting these to justice and the good—which lead him to hold that the rhetorician who acts unjustly and apart from the truth is lacking in true power and freedom.⁵⁰ So there’s a price to be paid for tyranny and untruth, in both Bok’s and the Platonic account.

Plato’s *Gorgias* does not directly address the question of lying in personal or public life, which is a necessary part of understanding the “truth is dead” debate today. But the dialogue

⁴⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 463b

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 466b

⁴⁹ *Ibid*

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

does describe a situation in which truth becomes unimportant to the rhetorician who aims to be successful. This brings us toward a post-truth situation that accounts for circumstances beyond whether a citizen or leader is intentionally spreading a specific lie. Knowledge and truth take a back seat to persuasion and conviction, as rhetoricians appeal to emotion and preconceived notions. Flattery is an important theme in this regard; it would be fair enough to interpret it broadly to include those who would play on prejudices and emotions, as a way of gaining political advantage.

How are the values of truth, honesty, and integrity incorporated, or not incorporated, into the world of power politics? Some answers can be drawn from the two works of political philosophy described in the next two sections.

Power Politics: Machiavelli

In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli argues for two ways that a prince could successfully gain and maintain power: violence and deceit. There are, further, two kinds of combat: “one with laws, the other with force. The first one is proper to man, the second is proper to beasts. But because many times the first is not enough, one must have recourse to the second ... it is necessary to know well how to use both the beast and the man.”⁵¹ Violence must be carried out well, to be successful. This means that a threat to the prince should be completely wiped out by means of violence, “for in truth there is no secure way to possess them other than their destruction.”⁵²

⁵¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 94

⁵² *Ibid*, 52

But violence alone will not guarantee power for a prince. Deceit also is necessary. A successful prince will employ deceit to achieve his own ends, but will give the impression that he is being truthful to the citizens. Ideally, a prince is highly educated and is basically a good person, but he learns how to be bad and knows when he must utilize deceit. He would tell the truth when possible or convenient, resorting to lying when necessary to maintain or extend his power.⁵³ “One sees from experience in our own times that those princes have done great things who have held faith of small account, and who have known how, with their cleverness, to trick men’s brains, and at the end they have surpassed those who founded themselves on sincerity.”⁵⁴ Essentially, Machiavelli wants princes to keep little promises that will not diminish their access to power, but use trickery to funnel more power toward themselves. If one engages in such deceit, he will be far more powerful and effective than someone who always keeps faith.

Machiavelli lists the situations in which it is acceptable to break faith for a prince: for example, when the promise or commitment turns against him and when reasons that made him promise are eliminated.⁵⁵ Machiavelli knows that breaking faith in this way is evil, but he argues that princes must do it for the best of their kingdom. Princes also must hide their deceptive intentions and seem to be benevolent and truthful to others. The five qualities that a prince should seem to have are compassion, faith, humanity, honesty, and religion.⁵⁶ In reality, he will need to go against each of these attributes, but will be safeguarded because the public believes he is good. These qualities will help a prince avoid “contempt and hatred” from citizens or other

⁵³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 87

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 93

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 94

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 95

rulers.⁵⁷ He will keep the trust and respect of his people, while at the same time striving (with deceit and violence) for political advantage.

Machiavelli presents a portrait of a ruler who is “good” by nature but employs deceit to achieve glory and power. He gives no indication that the politician is affected by his constant lying, something Plato and Bok would take issue with; Plato would look upon such actions as damaging to one’s soul and inner freedom, and Bok would question whether this ruler will even be seen as truthful once the deception is detected, as it usually is. To put it mildly, Machiavelli is not too worried about the harms caused by lies and deception, and yet, he does place some limits on deceitful practices—for instance, when he says a prince should practice deceit when *necessary* to achieve his aims, or that the prince should at least appear to be a truth teller. Machiavelli also cites specific instances when breaking faith is acceptable (basically, when the promise becomes a burden), which seems to imply that these are exceptions rather than the routine. And, although he is not always clear on the point, he says the prince does such things for the good of the kingdom.

The contemporary philosopher Michael Walzer is sympathetic to the Machiavellian context of power politics, but he goes further than Machiavelli to argue that a politician should feel remorse and internal torment for the lies he tells. Must a leader who wants to act effectively in the world of politics go so far as Machiavelli’s prince? Does the world of power politics require such a cynical attitude and stance toward lying and deceit? Walzer’s treatment throws light on these questions as well, while taking a more balanced view of the compromises a political leader must take.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 96

Power Politics: Walzer

Walzer grapples with these issues in an essay titled “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” included in the 1974 collection, *War and Moral Responsibility*. He believes that politicians are forced to engage in lying (and other unjust and unethical behaviors), but they should feel tormented by their decision to do so and make their torment noticeable to the public. First, Walzer begins by posing a popular opinion—politicians are less moral than the rest of us—as he introduces the question of dirty hands, which he believes is central to politics. Why are politicians expected to be a great deal worse morally? Are they just like some unethical business people, or con artists and hustlers who are of lesser moral character?⁵⁸

Walzer says no. This is because they are supposed to be looking after the interests of the citizens; “he hustles, lies, and intrigues *for us*—or so he claims.”⁵⁹ But this becomes suspect when we consider other possibilities for people to engage in politics—for example, personal glory and power. Walzer argues that the politician must act for himself at least in part because “he cannot serve us without serving himself, for success brings him power and glory, the greatest rewards that men can win from their fellows.”⁶⁰ In addition, even if a politician wanted to act justly all the time, he’d be unable to do so because of the competitive atmosphere of dirty politics. “Other men are all too ready to hustle and lie for power and glory, and it is the others who set the terms of the competition. Hustling and lying are necessary because power and glory are so desirable ... And so the men who act for us and in our name are necessarily hustlers and liars.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Marshal Cohen, *War and Moral Responsibility*, 64

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 65

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ *Ibid*

When good people enter politics, they will be required to learn how to not be good, a lesson learned from Machiavelli. With more emphasis and conviction than Machiavelli, Walzer argues that a politician should be a person who is just, but the leader must also know when to be unjust in order to achieve his or her ends. The similarities between Machiavelli and Walzer end, I suspect, when Machiavelli makes the sweeping claim that the ends justify the means, even if those ends are mostly personal and narrowly political. Walzer would oppose the idea of a politician dirtying their hands just for their own good, saying the good of the people must be placed higher.

On the other hand, politicians who place themselves above any unethical dealing and are unwilling to ever have dirty hands will be unsuccessful in politics. This is partly due to the fact that other politicians they're in competition with will be dirtying their own hands, which will inevitably allow them to get ahead of the one who has moral objections to such activity. "But, they [politicians] will not succeed unless they learn [how not to be good], for they have joined the terrible competition for power and glory; they have chosen to work and struggle as Machiavelli says, among 'so many who are not good.'"⁶² Thus, Walzer argues that it is impossible to succeed in politics without getting one's hands dirty. The question is, do we, as citizens, want our politicians to get their hands dirty, assuming they have our best interests in mind?

Walzer presents a thought experiment involving a politician who is both good and struggles for power. He wants to win the election with perfectly clean hands—an impossible task. "The candidate is a moral man. He has principles and a history of adherence to those

⁶² Marshal Cohen, *War and Moral Responsibility*, 66

principles. That is why we are supporting him. Perhaps when he refuses to dirty his hands, he is simply insisting on being the sort of man he is. And isn't that the sort of man we want?"⁶³ To win the election, the candidate has to make a deal with a corrupt ward boss involving contracts for school construction. Walzer asks: Should he make the deal, if he knows it would win him the election? Since the politician is a good person, he is hesitant to consider the deal. Walzer lists two significant reasons why this politician would be reluctant. First, "some of his supporters support him precisely because they believe he is a good man," and making such a deal could convince those voters otherwise.⁶⁴ Second, he may question his own motives for wanting to make the deal: is he striving for just personal glory through elected office, or the good of the community as a whole?

The important thing to remember is that "because he has scruples of this sort, we know him to be a good man. But ... we hope that he will overcome his scruples and make the deal."⁶⁵ The very fact that he does hesitate and puzzle over the dilemma makes him the kind of politician we want to elect. And after making the deal, he will feel guilty about doing so—"this is what it means to have dirty hands."⁶⁶ This guilt is extremely important and it should be apparent to the public that the politician is experiencing it (to the extent that the public would be aware of the political dealing). We want our politicians to feel tormented by their decisions to act unjustly because we hope they will not do so too quickly or too often. By enforcing a rigorous standard for lying in politics, ideally we encourage our politicians to be truthful as much as possible.

⁶³ Marshall Cohen, *War and Moral Responsibility*, 66

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 68

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 69

Walzer's analysis draws on Machiavelli's insights about realistic politics but manages to avoid some of the excesses of the Machiavellian approach. For example, he accepts—more than Sissela Bok would—the notion that a politician has to be willing to get his or her hands dirty in seeking to achieve a political or policy goal. Unlike Bok, Walzer isn't trying to avoid at all costs the possibility that a politician would lie in part to advance his own interests, or that his motives would be mixed. He believes this is understandable and acceptable, because (as quoted earlier) someone who struggles for power in that arena “cannot serve us without serving himself.”⁶⁷ At the same time, Walzer would place limits on lies and deception, at least in theory—for example, by arguing that the ethical compromises have to be done for the sake of the public, and that it should not be a decision made lightly. One could almost hear Bok arguing with him that the temptations would be too great and the politicians will often be biased in their assessments of their own political needs and personal virtues—biased, for instance, about whether the compromise is necessary or better than a more truthful, alternative course of action.

Are politicians all too quick to believe that they're telling “noble lies” supposedly on behalf of a noble cause, as Bok warns? And what happens when the lines are blurred between deception and self-deception, or when policy makers begin to inhabit what Hannah Arendt calls a “defactualized world”? Neither Machiavelli nor Walzer would seem to have clear responses to these questions and objections (which will be illustrated further in the discussion of the Pentagon Papers debate, in the next chapter).

...

⁶⁷ Marshall Cohen, *War and Moral Responsibility*, 64

As we have seen, the question of lying in politics—when the lies are justified, how bad they are for the public, and how much they should be avoided—lends to a variety of viewpoints and a number of nuances. Bok would advance a restrictive view of this political practice or temptation, though not as restrictive as the position taken by absolutists including perhaps Kant. Uppermost in her mind are the corrosive effects of lying on democratic decision making as well as on the political liars themselves, who may lose credibility along the way. Both Machiavelli and Walzer want to address how and to what extent a politician needs to get his or her hands dirty to carry out objectives that are deemed in the public interest as well as in their own interests. This leads Machiavelli to a permissive view of lying and deception, although he has his limits, and Walzer to an understanding that moral compromise is both regrettable and unavoidable, if politicians are to have any real achievements in an imperfect world.

These are important questions about intentional deception and deliberate lies told by individuals, but there are other questions as well. What happens when we're not even or barely trying to hide our lies and deception, because we're operating with the understanding that truth and facts are beside the point of political discourse? Plato's *Gorgias* has brought us closer to understanding this reality, with its critique of rhetoricians who use any and all tactics to persuade people, without regard to the truth of a matter. And what happens when both the lies and the disregard for truthful discourse begin to form a culture of untruth, a political world in which accurate depictions of reality are desirable only if they happen to coincide with one's agenda or biases?

Various sides of these questions are now explored further, in the context of two very different political systems and circumstances.

II.

Geopolitical Contexts

In this section, I present two historical, geopolitical contexts for a discussion of lying in politics, both occurring during the Cold War. First, I look at the debate surrounding the Pentagon Papers during the Vietnam War; second, I discuss dystopian literature that emerged from the Communist world. My analysis will continue to tease out the distinctions between lying and post-truth, while also being mindful of the blurred lines between those two phenomena. I will argue, with some qualifications, that the Pentagon Papers episode fits primarily into the traditional category of conscious political deception, and the dystopian literature brings us face to face with a post-truth culture and its promotion of full-blown alternative reality.

The Pentagon Papers

The Pentagon Papers chronicles a detailed history of United States involvement in the Vietnam War from 1945-1967.⁶⁸ The top-secret study was ordered by Robert McNamara, then secretary of defense, who wanted a comprehensive review of the war. The entire report was completed in 1969 and included 47 volumes of 3,000 pages of narrative and 4,000 pages of supporting documents.⁶⁹ Daniel Ellsberg, who worked on the study and came to oppose the war, secretly photocopied large sections of the report and leaked them to members of Congress in an attempt to create awareness around the dire situation of the war. Ellsberg handed over large sections of the report to the *New York Times*, which broke the front-page story in 1971.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War*

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 3

⁷⁰ Pentagon Papers

Different readers have drawn different lessons from the Pentagon Papers, some claiming “they only now understand that Vietnam was the ‘logical’ outcome of the Cold War or the anti-Communist ideology, others that this is a unique opportunity to learn about decision-making processes in government, but most readers have by now agreed that the basic issue raised by the papers is deception,” as the German-born American philosopher Hannah Arendt summarized at the time.⁷¹ The extensive secrecy and deception that occurred during the Vietnam War era is remarkable—and the depth of it was not realized until the release of the Papers.

Five men—Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford—all were president at some point during the Vietnam War.⁷² Each of the five presidents involved in the war seemed to have access to disconcerting evidence about the progress in Vietnam. Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidential election campaign in 1964 reportedly was fraught with lies. In the time leading up to the election, Johnson painted himself as the candidate of peace and his opponent Senator Goldwater as a war hawk committed to escalating involvement in Vietnam.⁷³ Behind the scenes, Johnson was planning on increasing American involvement in the war. He deceived the public out of concern that he would lose popular support for his war plans, and even lose the election as a result. A memorandum from Johnson lays out part of his electoral strategy.⁷⁴

During the next two months, because of the lack of “rebuttal time” before the election to justify particular actions which may be distorted to the U.S. public, we must act with special care—signaling to... [the South Vietnamese] that we are behaving energetically despite the restraints of our political season, and to the U.S. public that we are behaving with good purpose and restraint.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 3

⁷² Pentagon Papers

⁷³ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 171

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

⁷⁵ *Ibid*

Johnson never revealed to the American people the deception he employed to be elected, and he gave no indication of his desire to escalate the war. The strategy worked: he won by a landslide in November 1964.⁷⁶ He promptly initiated the plans for escalation; Operation Rolling Thunder, an extensive bombing campaign in North Vietnam, began in early 1965.⁷⁷

Johnson and his advisors claimed to have altruistic reasons for their lying during the campaign—and maybe they did. They believed they knew what was best for the country and that in the end their decisions would be beneficial overall. They assumed that history would vindicate their lies and that in the end the public would forgive them, or even thank them, for their deception. In the end, Johnson and his aides turned out to be very wrong on all counts. Are politicians justified in this sort of lying and secrecy, when they truly believe it will benefit their country in the end?

As we've seen, Machiavelli's answer to this question would be a wholehearted yes, because the ends will usually justify the prince's chosen means, at least in theory. Sissela Bok also grapples with this question, coming to a decidedly different view. Bok believes that politicians are very rarely justified in engaging in secrecy and lying. Aside from the inclination of humans to rationalize their actions and misread their motives, lying takes away the ability of the people to make informed decisions. With the secrecy and lying Johnson used during his presidential campaign, he "denied the electorate any chance to give or to refuse consent to the escalation of the war in Vietnam."⁷⁸ The American people may have put pressure on Johnson to change course, had they known he didn't have the peaceful intentions that he professed (voting

⁷⁶ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 171

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 171

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 172

for his Republican opponent Barry Goldwater, who openly called for escalation of the conflict, wouldn't have helped).

Bok believes that deception such as this undermines democracy, because “deceiving the people for the sake of the people is a self-contradictory notion in a democracy.”⁷⁹ Thus, the actions of President Johnson in this situation were unacceptable for a United States president and inconsistent with democratic values. If practices like Johnson's were to become routine in America, they would cripple our democracy, Bok contended. At the same time, she acknowledged that a certain amount of secrecy seems acceptable for a democracy. The question becomes, how much secrecy is warranted and how can we draw a line?⁸⁰

We hope and expect our government to keep some secrets, such as those involving confidential court documents or medical information, but we also don't want our government keeping too much from us, Bok says in her 1982 book *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. Looking back on the history of government secrecy, she cites the phrase “arcana imperii” or “mysteries of state,” which describes the principle that the state can keep secrets from the public and be withdrawn from outsiders.⁸¹ The expression comes from “arcana ecclesiae,” which denoted church secrecy, and was adapted by government leaders to argue on behalf of 17th century absolute monarchies.⁸² Traditionally, supporters of this concept have held that government secrecy “is not less justifiable than individual secrecy, but more so,”⁸³ but Bok counters that governments have often used the rationale to “ward off criticism of abuses so grave

⁷⁹ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 172

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Sissela Bok, *Secrets*, 172

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

that nothing else could be said in their favor.”⁸⁴ She falls back on her argument related in Part I that leaders in a democratic society must find ways of gaining consent from the government for their acts of secrecy and deception.⁸⁵ Apparently, policy makers during the Vietnam War either did not do this or they miscalculated badly.

Likewise, Hannah Arendt acknowledges that political history is “not exactly a story of immaculate virtue,” granting that “truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings.”⁸⁶ However, the Pentagon Papers revealed the haunting reality of just how far U.S. presidents and advisors were willing to go in concealing truth about the war in Vietnam, deception that seemed to surpass standard government secrecy.

As noted, one example of secrecy during the Vietnam era was Rolling Thunder, the operation launched in March 1965.⁸⁷ Johnson publicly declared that the war was going well, but the Pentagon Papers reveal that in private, Johnson knew very well that the United States was losing the war. The goal of Rolling Thunder is described in the Papers: “The air war against the North was launched in the hope that it would strengthen GVN confidence and cohesion, and that it would deter or restrain the DRV from continuing its support of the revolutionary war in the South,” the report said, using the acronyms for the South and North Vietnamese governments, respectively.⁸⁸ Instead of accomplishing these goals, the air strikes increased Hanoi’s resolve and made its allies less willing to cooperate with the United States in search of a compromise. The

⁸⁴ Sissela Bok, *Secrets*, 173

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 181

⁸⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 4

⁸⁷ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 171

⁸⁸ Pentagon Papers

Johnson administration, however, continued to affirm the success of Rolling Thunder and the war in general in its messages to the American public.

There are many examples—too many to discuss here—of discrepancies between the findings in the Papers and the portrayal of the war to the public. “The relation, or, rather, non relation, between facts and decision ... is perhaps the most momentous, and certainly best-guarded, secret that the Pentagon papers revealed,” Arendt noted, referring to how policy makers ignored facts in deciding how to carry out the war.⁸⁹ A question raised from the Pentagon Papers is: why did politicians and advisors feel compelled to lie so much?

Sifting through many types of lies and deceptions, Arendt identifies two kinds in particular used by the United States during the war. She believes that both of these—public relations lies and problem-solving lies—were relatively new in political history at the time of the Vietnam War.

The first type of lie, public relations, “has its origins in the consumer society” and has to do mainly with image-making and priming something for customers just as one prepares a product for delivery.⁹⁰ The United States concerned itself mainly with selling a version of the war that was appealing to “consumers”—the American people, allies, military personnel—instead of managing the truth of the situation. This is a problematic approach because it “deals in opinions and ‘good will,’” instead of facts.⁹¹

Image-making as global policy means that politicians and advisors concern themselves primarily with maintaining an image of the United States as the most powerful nation, as a nation that doesn’t break commitments to allies, and as winners. Even though all of these characteristics

⁸⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 20

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 8

⁹¹ *Ibid*

have their merits, Arendt argues that they should not steer government policies away from other objectives, like saving human lives. The objective of the Vietnam War eventually shifted to “save face” rather than the original goals of “seeing that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their future” and the containment of Communism.⁹² But, “what the Pentagon Papers report is the haunting fear of the impact of defeat, not on the welfare of the nation, but ‘on the reputation of the United States and its President.’”⁹³ The goal was now “the image itself...”⁹⁴ Nixon went as far as to imagine destroying the credibility of the press before the presidential election in 1972. The Nixon campaign director of communications, Herb Klein, was in charge of this operation, which exemplified the attitude that image-making is the goal of global policy. In those days, there was much higher respect for the press, and as a result, whatever the Nixon team tried to do was largely ineffective, not nearly as effective as attempts today to discredit what President Trump likes to call the “fake news media.”

In Arendt’s analysis, the other sort of deception that arose out of the Vietnam War was problem solving, carried out by professional problem solvers who typically rank high in government and are “drawn into government from the universities and the various think tanks, some of them equipped with game theories and systems analysis, and thus prepared, as they thought, to solve all the ‘problems’ of foreign policy.”⁹⁵ Problem solvers were often motivated by misplaced patriotism, and they became liars when they devote themselves too fully to their solutions, devaluing the truth in favor of the political schemes they were pursuing. Problem solvers may attempt to “get rid of facts” in order to support their political inclinations.⁹⁶

⁹² Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 14

⁹³ *Ibid*, 15

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 17

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 9-10

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 12

Arendt adds another dimension to her analysis when she speculates on the role of self-deception among policy makers during the Vietnam War. She argues philosophically that compared with deliberate deception, self-deception is the “danger par excellence” because the deceiver “loses all contact with ... the real world, which still will catch up to him...” She argues further that in Vietnam-era administrations, self-deception mixed with deception, or what Daniel Ellsberg called “internal self-deception.”⁹⁷ As she sees it, policy makers and political leaders began with a self-deceiving notion that their solutions to the Vietnam problem were the right ones, and as they were gradually proved wrong, they engaged in acts of deception toward the American public.

The deceivers started with self-deception. Probably because of their high station and their astounding self-assurance, they were so convinced of overwhelming success, not on the battlefield, but in the public-relations arena, and so certain of the soundness of their psychological premises about the unlimited possibilities in manipulating people, that they *anticipated* general belief and victory in the battle for people’s minds. And since they lived in a defactualized world anyway, they did not find it difficult to pay no more attention to the fact that their audience refused to be convinced than to other facts.⁹⁸

They nurtured a “defactualized” world that kept on confirming their ideological biases and political inclinations. In doing so, were they contributing to a culture of alternative facts driven by ideology and whatever served their political ends? The next section looks more closely at a geopolitical context in which lies became woven deeply into the socio-political fabric.

⁹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 35

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 36

Dystopian Literature

What can we learn about lying in democracy from dystopian literature depicting lying in totalitarian regimes? Apparently, the American people think *a lot*. Classic dystopian novels like Orwell's *1984* shot back up onto bestseller lists after the 2016 election.⁹⁹ Popular newspapers in America are running stories comparing the worlds described in dystopian fiction to the Trump administration. The situations in the dystopian novels in many ways describe a post-truth era—one much farther along than the challenges to fact and truth in our time (or so it seems). But the similarities to our time are unsettling, and therefore important to study. First, in this section, I will give an overview of dystopian fiction against the backdrop of totalitarianism. Then, I will point to aspects of totalitarianism that might conceivably be arising (and not arising) in American politics today; these include the seemingly Orwellian technique of constantly portraying the real news (relatively accurate sources of reporting) as the fake news, and vice versa.

Totalitarianism is difficult to describe because the definition has shifted with different totalitarian regimes over the past century, among them Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany. It includes a powerful dictator and a system "based not only on terror but also on mass support mobilized behind an ideology prescribing radical social change ... the specific content of the ideology is considered less significant than the regime's determination to form the minds of the population through control of all communications."¹⁰⁰ Part of what makes these regimes "total" is that they seek to control not only the public and political sphere but also the realm of private lives and the very thoughts and consciousness of citizens. The regimes do this through press

⁹⁹ Brad Tuttle, 2017, "Sales of Dystopian Novels have been Spiking on Amazon Since the Election"

¹⁰⁰ International Encyclopedia of Political Science, *Totalitarianism*, 2,634

ensorship, propaganda, limited human rights, no transparency, and persecution of those who question the regime. Lying and fabrication permeate all of these and are necessary components of totalitarian regimes.

A body of literature grew from these totalitarian regimes and their quest for thought control. The three novels I've chosen to highlight are *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, *1984* by George Orwell, and *The Captive Mind* by Czeslaw Milosz. These novels each call attention to important elements and trends in totalitarian societies, revolving around not only specific lies but an effort to create alternative systems of reality and "truth." This is a quintessential part of the regimes. Here I will very briefly sketch the plots and important themes of the three dystopian works, focusing largely on the most iconic of these books, *1984*.

Darkness at Noon

Nicholas Rubashov, the main character, is arrested at the opening of the book. Rubashov represents the Old Bolsheviks. The leader of the Party, No. 1, represents Stalinism. Rubashov was a member of the party for 20 years, but he begins to have doubts about whether the socialist experiment was working and whether the Communist Party was faithful to the founding vision of socialism. He joins the Party as a teenager, played a major role in several missions, and received high honors; but in recent years he has come to feel that the search for a socialist utopia was becoming further and further out of grasp.

After being arrested, he's placed in a prison cell with limited food, no human contact, and little access to the outside world. Ivanov, an old friend of Rubashov from the civil war, interrogates and tries to force him to confess to false charges, claiming that he will escape

execution if he complies with the demand. Rubashov refuses to give in to the pressure. After Ivanov's unsuccessful attempts to get Rubashov to confess, Gletkin begins interrogating him, using physical abuse, sleep deprivation, and other cruel techniques. Eventually succumbing to Gletkin, Rubashov goes ahead and confesses. The book ends with his public confessions—and subsequent hanging for alleged political crimes.

Before Rubashov's arrest, he deals in much secrecy and deception directed at other people in the name of the Party. After his arrest, the tables are turned and he becomes the victim of the various techniques he himself had employed before, including the double-crossing and brutality.

The Captive Mind

The Captive Mind draws on author Czeslaw Milosz's experience as a writer in World War II and aims to describe the allure of Communism. The book opens with a chapter titled, "The Pill of Murti-Bing." This pill has the ability to transform one's "philosophy of life," and someone "who used these pills changed completely. He became serene and happy ... He no longer considered the approach of the Sino-Mongolian army as a tragedy for his own civilization."¹⁰¹ The Murti-Bing pill is an analogy for how Communism seeks to alter minds, brainwashing people through use of propaganda to embrace the Communist way of life and ordering society. Propaganda, brainwashing, and societal pressures are major themes in Milosz's book.

The book describes four Polish intellectuals who give in to the demands of the Party after World War II, and step in line with the totalitarian state. One of them is identified as Alpha, a

¹⁰¹ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, 4

moralist whose turn toward Communism has to do with not just attempted brainwashing but also with self-preservation and opportunism. He believes that the Communists are on the right side of history, and he wants to be on that side. “The country was ravaged. The new government went energetically to work reconstructing, putting mines and factories into operation, and dividing estates among the peasants... We should not wonder, then, that Alpha, like the majority of his colleagues, declared at once his desire to serve the new Poland that had risen out of the ashes of the old.”¹⁰² In the end, the propaganda, pressure, and power succeed in getting each of the men to capitulate to Communism.

1984

1984 by George Orwell was written in 1949 and influenced by the increasing power of totalitarian dictatorships around the world, specifically including the regimes of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler in Germany, and Francisco Franco in Spain. The novel is set in Oceania, a superstate ruled by “Big Brother” and an extremely powerful network of statesmen responsible for maintaining order.¹⁰³ The regime is characterized by required intense nationalism, censorship, and limited human rights. Lying is central to sustaining the regime and is interwoven into everything it does.

In Oceania, nationalism is required. Anyone who doesn’t honor the administration or participate in state-sponsored activities could be deemed suspicious and subject to punishment or death. The strongest example of nationalism in the book comes through in “Hate Week,” a required event with military parades and speeches opposing Oceania’s political enemies. The

¹⁰² Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mine*, 99

¹⁰³ George Orwell, *1984*, 1

crowds at Hate Week are overcome with frenzy, rallying against the enemy Eurasia. But, in the middle of an official party speech, the speaker announces that the enemy no longer is Eurasia; Eurasia is now an ally.

When the great orgasm was quivering to its climax and the general hatred of Eurasia had boiled up into such a delirium that if the crowd could have got their hands on the two thousand Eurasian war criminals who were to be publicly hanged ... they would unquestionably have torn them to pieces—at just this moment it had been announced that Oceania was not after all at war with Eurasia. Oceania was at war with Eastasia. Eurasia was an ally.¹⁰⁴

There is no official recognition of this change, and Hate Week continues undisrupted with a new focal point. “There was ... no admission that any change had taken place.”¹⁰⁵

The next task the state undertakes is to clear any history of Oceania being at war with Eurasia. The Ministry of Truth is responsible for these tasks involving the falsification of historical events. This ministry controls the output of “news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts,” so essentially any domain that could require communication of information. The “truth” part of the name is, of course, a misnomer, since the actual tasks involve lying and erasing the truth from history. After the enemy switch at the peak of Hate Week, the Ministry of Truth must work quickly to eliminate all records of war with Eurasia. Winston, the main character in *1984*, works at the Ministry of Truth and must assist with this falsification. The ministry has to make sure that “no reference to the war with Eurasia, or the alliance with Eastasia, should remain in existence anywhere.”¹⁰⁶ The event at Hate Week, along with many others, is subject to the falsification ordered by the Party: “It might very well be that literally every word

¹⁰⁴ George Orwell, *1984*, 160

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 159

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 161

in the history books, even the things that once accepted without question, was pure fantasy ... the past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth.”¹⁰⁷

The party uses the Ministry of Truth to help propagandize for the regime and garner support, or at least non-opposition, from the citizens. For example, they publish statistics that Winston deems to be falsifications or at least twisted truths. “The Party claimed ... that today forty percent of adult proles were literate; before the Revolution, it was said, the number had only been fifteen percent. The Party claimed incredibly that the infant mortality rate was now only a hundred and sixty per thousand, whereas before the Revolution it had been three hundred—and so it went on.”¹⁰⁸ The Ministry of Truth doesn’t just publish the false claims, it literally erases the truth in the records so that there is no way to confirm or deny facts as truthful or not. “Not a word of it could ever be proved or disproved.”¹⁰⁹

Lying is essentially the tool that the Party uses not only to gain power but also to change the consciousness of citizens and the way they assess truth and falsehood. Lying becomes a weapon of mass destruction, and it’s very effective, at least as reflected in the literature. It is literally a weapon, in that it goes hand in hand with physical violence, such as the torture used to get people to make false confessions. Sissela Bok warned about the connection between lying and violence; the two are interconnected since they both strip power away from those being lied to, and take away the ability to make moral decisions and form an accurate picture of a particular situation. In the context of dystopian literature, such deception becomes a way of not only taking power away from people but also undermining their ability to form a reality-based view of the world and distinguish fact from lies.

¹⁰⁷ George Orwell, *1984*, 66

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*

...

It would be overly simple to assign the Pentagon Papers strictly to the category of lying in politics, and to situate the dystopian literature entirely within the separate but related context of post-truth. There are aspects of both lying and post-truth in each of these historical case studies. Deliberate deception runs through the dystopian literature, and post-truth tendencies pop up in the Pentagon Papers example, especially in Arendt's account of gray areas including how deception interacted with self-deception and how policy makers nurtured a "defactualized world." That said, the two examples from the U.S. and Communist world do chart a movement from the lying and deception that has traditionally been part of politics to the larger forces of propaganda and untruth that characterize a post-truth society. We can also see, in this movement toward post-truth, some warnings about current U.S. politics.

On the one hand, the societies described in dystopian literature are a great distance beyond the lying that has taken place in Western democracies including the United States. It's one thing to use lies and secrecy to gain an advantage in political and policy debates, quite another to engage in systematic thought control that is enforced by constant terror and brutality. And yet, one could reasonably draw some connections between the totalitarian experience and legitimate concerns about developments in American politics. Consider attempts by the Trump administration and its allies to discredit and delegitimize most or nearly all traditional journalistic media, which will be illustrated in Part III. Is this comparable to the successful efforts in the Communist dystopia to abolish independent sources of information that are not consistent with the alternative reality promoted by the regimes? Consider also the parallel effort today to uphold the most suspect sources of reporting, including websites and other slippery

sources that do not even claim to practice the craft of independent journalism. Is this a way of creating, in effect, a state-sponsored media dedicated to producing a steady flow of propaganda? These are open questions, without easy answers, but one reasonable observation would be that many at the highest levels of government today are promoting Orwellian inversions of truth and falsehood. The message seems to be that the real news is fake news, and the fake news is real news, which is a disturbing echo of the slogans in *1984*—“War is Peace; Freedom is Slavery; Ignorance is Strength.”

Is it too dramatic to ask if we are seeing now the beginnings of a distinctively Western democratic version of thought control and post-truth? Are we going beyond the lying and deception practiced in the past as illustrated by the Pentagon Papers? Is there a new tendency to not just lie but also create or participate in an alternative reality based on fear, resentment, and preconceived notions? Perhaps answers to this question will need to put an emphasis on “distinctively Western” and acknowledge that there isn’t a totalitarian government putting restrictions on independent media and forcing people to change their thinking (at least not yet). In some ways, the American people are doing all this to themselves, a point that I take from the educator and media critic Neil Postman, who will return to this discussion in the part of my Conclusion that looks at possible solutions. Postman cites another dystopian novel, *Brave New World*, written by a Westerner, Aldous Huxley. “In Huxley’s vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history,” Postman wrote in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. “As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.”¹¹⁰ Postman was critiquing the medium of

¹¹⁰ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, xix

television and the way it makes people seek entertainment rather than knowledge, but something similar can be said about the effects of social media, which is today a primary source of propaganda and disinformation. In my view, Postman's analysis takes too much of the burden off government leaders who use their positions to foster lies and untruths, but the voluntary aspect of post-truth (in contrast with totalitarian governments) cannot be dismissed.

Totalitarianism aside, something new does seem to be happening in U.S. politics. In the past, officials lied, deceived, and covered up, but their inclination to hide their lies at least testified to their grudging belief that truth and fact mattered. What at times seems to be arising in the Trump era is a belief held by the rhetoricians who debated with Socrates—that truth and fact are whatever you could persuade someone to accept, based on appeals to their emotions. There's evidently a far greater willingness to make provably false statements over and over, aided by the fact that one's political constituency will readily accept lies that conform with their beliefs and predispositions, maybe knowingly, maybe because of a changing media environment that makes it easier for leaders to dismiss fact-based news. The next and final section explores these trends and how philosophical analysis can help us identify them.

III.

Contemporary Challenges: “Truth Decay” in the United States

Here in Part III, I look at the contemporary situation by placing the discussion squarely in the context of the Trump era and shifts in American political and media environments. I examine lies that seem to fit within, or come close to, the formal definition of lying supplied by Sissela Bok, which involves an intention (a moral choice) to deceive and an act that expresses this choice. I will also look at distortions and falsehoods that are no less serious but seem to call for other categories—including what Harry G. Frankfurt describes with rigor, if not decorum, as “bullshit,” and what I will ultimately argue is post-truth. One characteristic of post-truth is a clear indifference to whether what you’re communicating or hearing is true or false. Other elements include extreme polarization; a tendency to place feelings and personal experience over fact-based discourse; and a new media environment (e.g., social media) that enables the rapid spread of messages with no factual basis. These considerations will show that the question of lying in politics is about much more than lies; put another way, the false and misleading statements that many worry about are, in part, symptoms of broader social and political challenges.

Presidential Lies

In a discussion of this kind, it is impossible to avoid an examination of President Trump’s daily communications. As noted in the Introduction, many observers of differing political preferences have observed that Trump and some in his administration lie on a level that is both

quantitatively and qualitatively different from what we've seen in the past. He especially appears to lie more frequently, randomly, and meaninglessly than his predecessors, as far as anyone can recall.

David Remnick reflected this sentiment in a commentary in the February 28, 2018 edition of the *New Yorker*:

Presidents are in the habit of lying—often with bloody consequences. The Bay of Pigs, the Gulf of Tonkin, Watergate, Iran-Contra, “mushroom clouds,” and “weapons of mass destruction”—these are just a few of the postwar greatest hits. But, in terms of frequency and of the almost joyful abandonment of integrity as a demand of the office, Donald Trump is singular. He starts lying in the morning, tweeting while watching Fox News, and he keeps at it until his head hits the pillow at night. He lies to slander and seduce, he lies to profit, and he sometimes lies, it seems, just because. His capacity for falsehood is so heroic that we struggle to keep count of the daily instances. (After one year of the Trump Presidency, the *Washington Post* put the average at 5.9 falsehoods per day, a total of 2,140.) One consequence of this aspect of Trump’s character—oftentimes, it seems to be the very core of his character—is that lying defines the culture of his Administration just as it did his family business.¹¹¹

Referring to investigations into Russian meddling in U.S. elections, Michael Gerson, a conservative *Washington Post* columnist and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, pointed to “a spectacular accumulation of lies” by the current administration. He elaborated: “Lies on disclosure forms. Lies at confirmation hearings. Lies on Twitter. Lies in the White House briefing room. Lies to the FBI. Self-protective lies by the attorney general. Blocking and

¹¹¹ Remnick, 2018, “Hope against Hope”

tackling lies by Vice President Pence. This is, with a few exceptions, a group of people for whom truth, political honor, ethics and integrity mean nothing.”¹¹²

It should be added that the individual lies of past presidents were usually met with outrage, as well as explanations by the liars in chief, once they were found out. Typically in the past, political figures have stopped the lies they were telling, once the statements were found to be false, as noted earlier. In the current political climate, the lies as told by Trump are somehow able to continue, with outrage from some quarters and loud cheers from others. In this regard, it is worth looking at the role of repetition in perpetuating false claims.

Repetition appears to be a tactic for this president’s false and misleading claims. Even though much of the content of his Twitter is contrary to accessible facts, he convinces many people that the messages are true, or at least truer than what they are hearing otherwise from curated sources of news. One might wonder: how can repetition alone make statements begin to seem true, especially when accurate accounts are readily available? Some answers can be found in psychological and behavioral research.

In its original demonstration, a group of psychologists had people rate statements as true or false on three different occasions over a two-week period. Some of the statements appeared only once, while others were repeated. The repeated statements were far more likely to be judged as true the second and third time they appeared—regardless of their actual validity. Keep repeating that there was serious voter fraud, and the idea begins to seep into people’s heads. Repeat enough times that you were against the war in Iraq, and your actual record on it somehow disappears.¹¹³

One sobering implication of this research is that counter-protesters to Trump who speak up about his lies are, in effect, making the lies stronger. Author Maria Konnikova relates that any repetition of a lie, even if the purpose is to counter it with evidence, serves to reinforce the lie.

¹¹² Michael Gerson, 2017, “The Russia investigation’s spectacular accumulation of lies”

¹¹³ Maria Konnikova, 2017, “Trump’s Lies vs. Your Brain”

Human psychology proves Trump’s methods to be highly effective, especially with those who would like to believe the statements, in a political context.¹¹⁴

Political lies stick particularly well and are hard to correct because many people will not believe true statements that go against their sense of identity (which is drawn in part from their political views).¹¹⁵ This finding is consistent with theories of “confirmation bias,” in which people tend to believe information that is consistent with their already-held views, even if the information is provably false. Likewise, in a 2010 article published in the journal *Political Behavior*, two researchers pointed to “a wide array” of studies demonstrating that “citizens are likely to resist or reject arguments and evidence contradicting their opinions....”¹¹⁶ (The article also presented ways of overcoming the biases, reflecting one stream of research that I will relate in the Conclusion, regarding possible solutions to post-truth challenges.)

The current presidential lies do seem different from those in the past, when presidents lied more selectively, strategically, and carefully, often to protect their reputations when they felt doing so was necessary. In the middle of a sex scandal, Bill Clinton said, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky” (a claim that rested on the dubious interpretation that sexual relations had to involve intercourse).¹¹⁷ Richard Nixon said, “I am not a crook,” as he untruthfully denied involvement in the Watergate scandal.¹¹⁸ Both these politicians had a dominant lie or intentional distortion that caused their reputations to be damaged, leading to the resignation of Nixon and a severely compromised presidency for Clinton. As we’ve seen, our

¹¹⁴ Maria Konnikova, 2017, “Trump’s Lies vs. Your Brain”

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, 2010, “When Corrections Fail: The persistence of political misperceptions”

¹¹⁷ *Time*, Top 10 Unfortunate Political One-Liners

¹¹⁸ Ibid

current president makes false claims more frequently and with seemingly fewer repercussions than other presidents or political leaders. Many of his lies aren't to cover-up a mistake or stem a crisis, as with the cases of Clinton and Nixon; some don't seem to have any political or policy goal (as will be seen in the next paragraph, especially in regard to the perplexing claims about how many people attended his presidential inauguration). The indiscriminate nature of the lies is demonstrated in the finding by *Politico* that 70 percent of Trump's statements during his 2016 campaign were provably false, while only 4 percent were completely true (another 11 percent were mostly true, according to the fact-checking news organization).¹¹⁹

For example, Trump claimed that he lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton because millions of illegal immigrants voted in the election.¹²⁰ First, voter fraud is extremely rare and unlikely in a presidential election. And second, it would be nearly impossible for illegal immigrants to account for the 3-million-vote difference between Trump and his opponent in 2016.¹²¹ Trump also claimed that more people attended his inauguration than 44th president Barack Obama's inauguration. Side-by-side photos of the inaugurations alone prove Trump's statements false.¹²² Trump estimated that 1-1.5 million people were present at his inauguration, when the true number was in the 300,000-600,000 range. According to the *Washington Post*, Trump's most repeated lie or falsehood of 2017 was that the Affordable Care Act was failing or on the edge of disaster. In reality, at the time Obamacare was stable, according to the *Post*. Trump also repeatedly asserted that his tax bill would be the largest tax cut ever; the Treasury Department data show that his bill would only rank 8th largest.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Maria Konnikova, 2017, "Trump's Lies vs. Your Brain"

¹²⁰ Lori Robertson and Robert Farley, 2017, "The Facts on Crowd Size"

¹²¹ Brennan Center Staff, 2017, "In Their Own Words: Officials Refuting False Claims of Voter Fraud"

¹²² [Side-by-side photos](#)

¹²³ David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, 2017, "Trump's Lies"

Whether all of these and many other statements are simply lies will depend on one's definition of lying. A tight way of defining a lie would be that it is something said with full knowledge of the truth—full awareness of the fact that one is lying. The operative definition in this thesis—the one provided by Sissela Bok—is actually wider than this strict construction, in that Bok's definition, as I read it, doesn't explicitly state that the person must have the full knowledge. The statement just has to be intended to deceive in some way. Take, for example, the false statement cited in the Introduction that the United States is the highest taxed nation in the world. Trump might not have the clearest handle on all the data involved in making such a statement, in which case, some might argue that he is not lying, under a strict notion of having full knowledge of the truth. I would argue that he is, on some level, choosing to mislead people in this instance, and the choice is taking expression in a statement or message of some kind. That would make the statement a lie, according to Bok's definition.

Undoubtedly, many of Trump's false statements would fit almost any definition of lying, such as perhaps his repeated claim (included more than once in the chronological *New York Times* list) that President Obama ordered wiretapping of his phones at Trump Tower during the 2016 presidential race.¹²⁴ On the other hand, I would be a little skeptical of categorizing some statements of these kinds as simple lies, including the claim that the Affordable Care Act was failing, which seems to be a general characterization, not just a specific factual claim. One could feel that the statement is a distortion, and still acknowledge that it is in part a matter of opinion, depending on one's view as to whether the healthcare law is generally on solid ground.

¹²⁴David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, 2017, "Trump's Lies"

But is the category of lying the only or the fullest way of understanding the problematic nature of Trump's statements? Is something more or something else going on here? Whether or not all of these "lies" can be classified as such, the president seems to habitually make representations with no care at all as to the reality of a situation, no interest in the truth of a matter, except to the extent that the truth happens to coincide with what he wants to say at a given moment. Take, for example, Trump's comments during the 2016 campaign that gave credence to an outlandish report that the father of Senator Ted Cruz, one of his rivals, had something to do with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.¹²⁵ If it wasn't a lie, it rested firmly on a belief that you don't need to have any idea that something is true before making the statement. The Princeton philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt is one of those who (not in connection with Trump) has sought to create a different classification for such statements, one that he argues is even more serious than lying.

BS

In his 2005 essay and book, *On Bullshit*, Frankfurt distinguishes lying from another branch of deception. Liars must at least think that they know the truth, but bullshitting requires no such conviction. Bullshit (BS) is a lack of concern for the difference between truth and falsity. Therefore knowledge, which is a necessity for lying, is irrelevant to bullshit. But just because some people do not care about the truth or falsity of their statements doesn't necessarily mean that they are lying. Bullshitters might not be liars, according to Frankfurt, since their statements may very well be (randomly) true. The big difference is that bullshitters are unconcerned with

¹²⁵ Dylan Matthews, 2016, "Trump just held one of his weirdest, Cruz-bashing, JFK conspiracy theorizing rallies ever"

the truth. “This points to a similar and fundamental aspect of the essential nature of bullshit: although it is produced without concern with the truth, it need not be false,” Frankfurt writes.¹²⁶ “The bullshitter is faking things. But this does not mean that he necessarily gets them wrong.”¹²⁷

This disregard for the truth leads Frankfurt to believe that the bullshitter is a more insidious threat to the world than the liar. There is a constraint upon the liar that he is forced to adhere to: he must say something directly contradictory to the truth. In a sense, liars have respect for the truth in that they wish not to be discovered as liars. They also must have a relationship with the truth, however conflicted that may be, in order to be able to tell lies. The bullshitter, however, is not constrained by the truth in this way. He can utilize imagination and creativity to persuade others of his statements; he is, as Frankfurt would say, a “bullshit artist.”¹²⁸

In the news, one example of what Frankfurt describes came recently when Trump met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, while in St. Louis for a fundraiser for Republican U.S. Senate candidate Josh Hawley. Afterward, Trump boasted to donors that he made up facts during the meeting with Trudeau—particularly his false claim that the U.S. is running a trade deficit with Canada (it is actually a trade surplus). An audio recording of that gathering was later obtained by the *Washington Post*, and here is how the *New York Times* summarized the conversation:

As Mr. Trump told the story, the Canadian leader assured him that the United States did not have a trade deficit with Canada. ““I said, ‘Wrong, Justin, you do,’” Mr. Trump said, according to a transcript published by The Post. “I didn’t even know. Josh, I had no idea. I just said, ‘You’re wrong.’ You know why? Because we’re so stupid. And I thought they

¹²⁶ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 14

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 15

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 16

were smart. I said, ‘You’re wrong, Justin.’ He said, ‘Nope, we have no trade deficit.’”¹²⁹
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The president also asserted that Japan bars American cars from its market through an odd test. “They take a bowling ball from 20 feet up in the air and they drop it on the hood of the car,” he said, untruthfully.¹³¹ “And if the hood dents, then the car doesn’t qualify.”¹³²

Here is a situation where the word “lying” does not fully get across the worrisome nature of the deception. The president here is not simply trying to get away with a fact about trade deficits that he knows to be false, in the meeting with Trudeau. That would be lying, pure and simple. He is acknowledging, in the meeting afterward, that “he made the claim having no idea whether it was right or wrong,” as reported by the *Times* (which went on to relate similar false claims that Trump made that same day, at a factory in St. Louis).¹³³ The example illustrates Frankfurt’s point that the bullshit artist is not constrained by and has no relationship to the truth. Such a person lives in a world beyond truth.

Frankfurt raises the possibility that BS might be more prevalent today than in the past. He cites, for instance, the growing emphasis of marketing, advertising, and public relations. The implication is that when someone is mainly concerned with selling a product, he will not speak truthfully about the product because the overriding aim is to persuade someone to buy it. What Frankfurt says about the BS artist in general would apply here: “His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his

¹²⁹ Peter Baker, 2018, “Trump and the Truth: A President Tests his own Credibility”

¹³⁰ Josh Dawsey, Damian Paletta, and Erica Werner, 2018, “In fundraising speech, Trump says he made up trade claim in meeting with Justin Trudeau”

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, 2018, “Trump Repeats False Claim About Canada After Admitting Uncertainty over Figure”

interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.”¹³⁴

This may be too harsh: it’s unlikely that all salespeople are uninterested in telling the truth about the products or services they represent. But Frankfurt has a point that bears closely on politics, as did Hannah Arendt (in her analysis, related in Part II, of how Vietnam war planners were guided by a public relations mentality that valued image-making above everything else). Frankfurt suggests that the PR and marketing mindsets have extended beyond commerce into other fields, including politics. He does not expand on this point, but in a related context, he describes the demand for all politicians, and even average citizens, to have strong opinions on every matter. Since it is practically impossible for most people to have deep knowledge in every area, they inevitably (to one degree or another) become bullshitters, according to Frankfurt. In other words, they look to sell their potentially false knowledge as the truth.

Still, Frankfurt does not commit himself fully to saying that there is a greater incidence of BS in the world today, and of course, he wasn’t, in 2005, addressing the current political climate. He wants to make the case that BS is a strong inclination for human beings in general. “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic,” writes Frankfurt, adding that this tendency is common in public life, where, as noted, people often speak about matters on which they are to some degree ignorant.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 17

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 19

But what happens when bullshit leaps from the individual to the social and political levels? What happens, furthermore, when other corrosive features are added to BS—including hyper-polarization in politics, appeals to emotion as the dominant trait of political conversation, and changes in the media environment that enhance the trends? All of that brings us closer into a post-truth situation.

Changes in the media environment are worth illustrating briefly here, because these have combined with and have made possible the growing attacks on the more traditional and credible sources of news gathering; both of these features are critical to post-truth.

Tweeting Away a Stable Democracy

Twitter and other social media have served as a vehicle of these trends, and the use of these media for post-truth purposes obviously involves much more than the current political administration, but I will continue looking at Trump here for the purposes of illustration. Trump uses Twitter, a social media platform, to speak to the public, and he will sometimes tweet dozens of times a day. He has 45.8 million followers, and each of his 6 tweets per day (on average) are used to further his many political agendas—one of the most significant being his attempts to discredit the media.¹³⁶

One way of analyzing the president's Twitter feed is to look at specific statements and examine whether they are true. Here, instead, I want to emphasize the broader ways in which the tweets are seeking to alter fundamental perceptions about the sources of credible news and information—in other words, to discredit independent journalism and curated media. Many

¹³⁶ [Donald Trump's Twitter](#)

tweets are clearly intended to make people believe that journalistically credible sources of news are untrustworthy, and the more suspect sources that sometimes don't even claim to be journalistic (like openly partisan websites) are actually the ones to be believed. Here are samples:

While the Fake News loves to talk about my so-called low approval rating, @foxandfriends just showed that my rating on Dec. 28, 2017, was approximately the same as President Obama on Dec. 28, 2009, which was 47%... and this despite massive negative Trump coverage & Russia hoax!

The Fake News refuses to talk about how Big and how Strong our BASE is. They show Fake Polls just like they report Fake News. Despite only negative reporting, we are doing well - nobody is going to beat us. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

The Failing New York Times has a new Publisher, A.G. Sulzberger. Congratulations! Here is a last chance for the Times to fulfill the vision of its Founder, Adolph Ochs, 'to give the news impartially, without fear or FAVOR, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved.' Get ... impartial journalists of a much higher standard, lose all of your phony and non-existent 'sources,' and treat the President of the United States FAIRLY, so that the next time I (and the people) win, you won't have to write an apology to your readers for a job poorly done. GL

I use Social Media not because I like to, but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair press now often referred to as Fake News Media. Phony and non-existent 'sources' are being used more often than ever. Many stories & reports a pure fiction!¹³⁷

The multiple distortions here are not just about particular claims or issues. They relate to the structures of media and communication in American society, and the tweets aim to undermine confidence in journalistic outlets that are (for all their flaws and shortcomings) far more dependable than the outlets being promoted here. It would be extremely hard to argue that the *New York Times* is a less solid journalistic operation than *Fox & Friends*. But, according to the reality represented by these tweets, the *Times*'s polling data—assembled by social scientists

¹³⁷ [Donald Trump's Twitter](#)

who follow state-of-the-art methodologies—is just another example of “fake” news. And *Fox & Friends*, a morning talk show that both originates and echoes many of Trump’s false statements, is the impartial and reliable source, according to this inversion.¹³⁸ Reporting on Russian meddling into the U.S. elections is merely a “hoax.” In fact, nearly all of the most prominent news organizations (the press) are “the fake news media.”¹³⁹ Further, messages on social media—which do not generally follow journalistic standards—are the honest and truthful sources of information. Such assertions border on Orwellian inversions of truth and falsehood (as related at the end of Part II), and these are one way of building a post-truth culture. The tactics also appear to be working with some large constituencies: while twenty percent of self-identified Democrats think that the media lies, more than three quarters (76 percent) of Republicans think so; they’re much more likely to be listening to Trump.¹⁴⁰ Another whopping 85 percent of people who strongly supported Trump believes that the media fabricates stories.¹⁴¹

Many Americans do not trust mainstream media, and are instead looking to questionable or disreputable sources like Fox News, Trump’s Twitter, or pseudo-politicians like Tomi Lahren who report extremely one-sided or false information.¹⁴² With an alarming number of Americans shunning mainstream news media, people are eliminating their own abilities or inclinations to even access the truth. Instead, they’re being fed fairly consistent untruths and distortions from fringe media sources and Trump himself. This is a dangerous situation for any democracy.

The role of a truly independent news media cannot be dismissed or underestimated in a democratic society. Hannah Arendt described how the importance of the media was revealed

¹³⁸ Joanna Weiss, 2017, “The Strange Psychological Power of ‘Fox and Friends’”

¹³⁹ [Donald Trump's Twitter](#)

¹⁴⁰ Steven Shepard, 2017, “Poll: 46 percent think media make up stories about Trump”

¹⁴¹ Ibid

¹⁴² [Tomi Lahren's Twitter account](#)

through the publication of the Pentagon Papers, as well as the reporting on Vietnam that the press had done for years, prior to the leaking of the documents. In her view, the Pentagon Papers themselves “revealed little significant news that was not available to the average reader of dailies and weeklies.”¹⁴³ Here, she might be speaking too broadly. The average reader could have known much about the conduct of the war, which the press had been covering closely for many years, prior to the leaking of the documents. But the public and press knew much less about U.S. intelligence reports as well as the deception (and self-deception, Arendt would add) on the part of leaders who gave false assessments of military progress during the war. In any event, Arendt wants to emphasize how the constant press coverage of the Vietnam War “testifies to the integrity and to the power of the press even more forcefully than the way the *Times* broke the story.”¹⁴⁴ She makes the point that the press is like a fourth branch of government. Her suggestion for ensuring such an event never happens again is relatively simple: citizens need to be paying attention to their dailies and weeklies and speaking up if something doesn’t seem right.¹⁴⁵ After all, if citizens had put the pieces together as they were released and protested U.S. involvement in Vietnam earlier, perhaps there would have been a different outcome.

A free and credible media is one of the main components of our government that keeps it from slipping into authoritarianism, or the totalitarianism depicted in *1984*. In Orwell’s novel, as cited earlier, a slogan of the Party was “war is peace,” which was readily accepted by the public. This upside down view of reality is comparable to attempts today to blur the line between curated and fringe media, and to convince people that real news is fake news. If there is no trust in legitimate media and news sources, it becomes increasingly easy to feed false information to

¹⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 45

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*

the public. Once this is done, it becomes easier to abuse political power and carry out corrupt and unjust agendas. The mainstream media undoubtedly has flaws and often falls short of its journalistic mission and ideals, but it has usually served as a check and balance on the major powers of government, and without it democracy can be seriously undermined.

At its worst and most extreme, this could be a form of hoped-for authoritarianism or totalitarianism, but in this case, the strategy would be in reverse. As indicated in dystopian literature discussed in Part II, totalitarian regimes outlawed independent journalism and destroyed public records in order to alter the perceptions and consciousness of people. In the United States, our current leaders sometimes seem to be changing the way people think, first, which could make it easier in the future to weaken independent and legitimate sources of news and information, conceivably by changing laws and regulations. It's not as far-fetched as people might think: the president has already called for changing libel laws to make it easier for people to sue media outlets and journalists for what he describes as false and unfair coverage.¹⁴⁶

Truth Decay

A term rising in popularity to describe the combination of all the trends mentioned so far (including post-truth, lying, and bullshitting) is “truth decay.” It refers, broadly, to the phenomenon of opinions and feelings replacing facts in public life. The Rand corporation’s study, titled “Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life,” discusses trends, causes, and effects of truth decay in the U.S. politics.

¹⁴⁶ Christina Wilkie, 2018, “Trump wants to make it easier to sue the media, but that almost definitely won’t happen”

Reading the book-length study, one could get the uneasy feeling that Hannah Arendt’s warnings of a “defactualized world” have come true.

“In any areas of American society, facts and data are essential to survival or necessary for success. Complex decisions, even when they require subjective judgments and intuition, can be made with more confidence when anchored by agreed-upon facts and reliable data,” says the opening words of the report. “Yet in national political and civil discourse, disagreement over facts appears to be greater than ever. Opinions are crowding out and overwhelming facts in the media.” This is one of the key trends analyzed by Rand in the study—“increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data.”¹⁴⁷

Three other trends are discussed in the report, each one interrelated with the other. These include a blurring of the line between opinion and fact—aided in part by articles and columns in major newspapers (including the *New York Times*) that do not clearly distinguish between opinion and news, not to mention the proliferation of other news sources that routinely do the same. Another trend is the “increasing relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact.”¹⁴⁸ People are turning to Twitter for sources of political information instead of the mainstream media, and as a result they’re finding it hard to distinguish fact-based reporting from information based on personal experience and anecdotes (which the study says can lead people to think that illegal immigration is rising and that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes, neither of which is true). And lastly, there is “declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, x

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, xi

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, xvii

The study also identifies potential causes of Truth Decay. The first is “cognitive bias,” which is, as related earlier, the neuroscientific explanation that identifies how humans look for opinions that confirm their own preexisting beliefs.¹⁵⁰ Another cause is major changes in the information system, such as the rise of social media or the 24-hour news cycle, both of which increase the spread of false information.¹⁵¹ Next, the inability of the education system to keep pace with the changes in the information system, leading to a generation of students without the critical thinking and media literacy skills necessary to handle truth decay (to which I will return in the Conclusion). The last cause is polarization—primarily political but also social and economic—which leads each side to construct its own “narrative, worldview, and facts.”¹⁵²

I would edit that last explanation by Rand to say that polarization often leads people to fit the facts into their own narratives, and even worse, as we’ve seen, invent (or dismiss) facts for that purpose. It's interesting, however, that *Truth Decay* does not include fake news among the causes of this deterioration of fact-based truth. The study, rather, sees fake news as a symptom of trends such as changes in the political and media environment. “ ‘Fake news’ itself is not the driver of these deeper questions and issues, and simply stopping ‘fake news’ is unlikely to address the apparent shift away from loss and trust in data, analysis, and objective facts in the political sphere,” the study argues. “As a result, a narrow focus on ‘fake news’ distracts from a rigorous and holistic assessment of the more-extensive phenomenon—an assessment that might lead to remedies and solutions.” This argument seems to derive from Rand’s desire to stress the broader social forces behind the erosion of truth and fact.

¹⁵⁰ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, 81

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 96

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 152

In the report, the major question remaining is, what are the consequences of truth decay? According to Rand, one is the erosion of civil discourse, since it is not possible to discuss political issues without a common understanding of facts.¹⁵³ Another is political paralysis, in which legislators and others are unable to agree on the facts up for debate, often leading to an inability to take action and forge compromise.¹⁵⁴ Rand says a third effect is alienation and disengagement of individuals from political and civic institutions, because civic involvement tends to decrease as trust in government decreases (one wonders if this is still the case today, at a time when so many people seem fired up politically, including those who spread false information through their social media outlets).¹⁵⁵ A final effect defined in the study is uncertainty at the national and international levels; with a dysfunctional political and information system, allies and other countries, for example, will not trust information provided by the United States.¹⁵⁶

Truth Decay makes an important contribution to this discussion by giving a much larger picture of what others call “post-truth,” one that goes far beyond lies, or even “bullshit” as described by Frankfurt. Rand probably goes too far when it states that fake news—and by implication, lies and deliberate deception (including bullshit)—are a distraction from the real issues and causes of truth erosion. It would make more sense to say that fake news is not the entire picture of post-truth, but the lies and intentional distortions can hardly be ignored. They’re arguably the most irresponsible aspect of post-truth, because they’re (by definition) knowingly committed by individual agents, not social and political forces such as “polarization” and social

¹⁵³ Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, 192

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 199

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 207

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 216

media. They need to be constantly exposed (in the hope that facts still matter), not taken for granted. Still, the study helps us to see that the question of lying in politics is not just about bad actors and flawed human beings, or even about political movements that have a special disregard for fact-based information. The challenge goes far beyond lies.

Conclusions: Justifications, Dangers, and Possible Solutions

Are there potential justifications for the lies, or false and misleading statements, which have become more obvious in American politics? It would be hard to find any, if you're looking at the philosophical approaches surveyed in this paper. The statements by Trump analyzed in Part III would not come close to fulfilling the criteria laid out by Sissela Bok, who, as we've seen, sets a very high bar for exceptions to the rule of truth-telling. For instance, she is thinking of situations where national security is at stake, particularly in a geopolitical crisis, and even then, she argues that lying should be the last resort. Lies and misleading statements of the kind discussed earlier would clearly fall short of this standard; they're far too frequent, random, and self-serving to fit into a narrow range of exceptions.

Would those statements even be justified according to the more permissive standards of Machiavelli, who actually encouraged lies and deceptions on the way to amassing political power? Probably not. Machiavelli might have been cynical about the importance of truth telling, but his cynicism operated within a universe of fact and truth. His prince felt accountable to the truth, in that the prince had to be careful and judicious in his lying. The ruler had to keep within certain bounds, such as lying only when necessary to achieve the objectives of the kingdom, always trying to at least make it seem that he was acting honestly and speaking truthfully. In other words, the prince "submits to objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth," as Harry G. Frankfurt says in another context.¹⁵⁷ Those operating in a post-truth universe,

¹⁵⁷ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 51

however, are generally not burdened by such constraints, because both they and their intended audiences are far less concerned about whether a statement is true or false.

The lies have even less justification under Michael Walzer's more balanced assessment. Recall that he agreed with Machiavelli in saying that politicians might have to lie for reasons of political advantage, because if they don't get elected and succeed politically, they won't get a chance to do good work for the public. Applied to current circumstances, one could say that the president's many false statements relate to a desire to gain political advantage so that he could accomplish his political objectives. But this probably wouldn't satisfy Walzer, who puts limits on such rationalizations. He argues (departing from Machiavelli) that a good, conscientious politician would feel tormented by such deceptive behavior, and would do it not ultimately for their own good or psychological needs, but for the good of the public at large. That would be a test of deciding if the lies are justified, and it's hard to argue that these deceptions would pass the test: there's little or no evidence of guilt and regret on the part of Trump and many others lying in politics today. That is part of the post-truth picture, in which politicians often feel they can lie or tell half-truths without worry, and go on repeating the claims.

But what about the argument by supporters of the president who say that even when his statements are inaccurate, Trump is articulating a "deeper" or "larger" truth? Elaborating on this notion, the *New York Times* quoted Trump advisers who say the president "may not always be precise but is speaking a larger truth that many Americans understand. Flyspecking, tut-tutting critics in the news media, they say, fail to grasp the connection he has with a section of the country that feels profoundly misled by a self-serving establishment."¹⁵⁸ This is the article cited

¹⁵⁸ Peter Baker, 2018, "Trump and the Truth: A President Tests his own Credibility"

in Part III about Trump’s false claims that there is a trade deficit with Canada—and more to the point, about how the president boasted privately that he had no idea if there really was such a deficit. The *Times* added that from the standpoint of Trump supporters, "the particular facts do not matter as much as this deeper truth."¹⁵⁹

Presumably, the deeper truth in this example would be that the U.S. has failed to negotiate trade deals that are in the best interests of the nation, which is a matter of opinion (or an argument to be demonstrated), not an objective fact. And that is one problem with this way of thinking: it erases the difference between facts and opinions. The facts don’t matter nearly as much as the claim you want to make, which brings us back to Socrates and his argument with the rhetoricians, who believed that the goal of discourse was not to seek truth but to persuade people through appeals to emotions and similar techniques. Furthermore, the idea of a so-called “deeper” truth is problematic in any society that depends on democratic decision making. The concept seems to dismiss the importance of having agreed-upon facts in a healthy political debate, which are necessary to forming opinions and policies. More generally, appeals to the deeper truth could serve as an excuse for lies, deceptions, and other statements made without regard for facts. In this way, the concept bears a close resemblance to what Bok describes as “lies for the sake of the truth” or of a “higher” truth.¹⁶⁰

The dangers are implicit in these points. For example, harking back to the earlier section on the Pentagon Papers, it is sobering to think of what the public reaction would be in 2018, if the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were to reveal such widespread deception in foreign policy at the highest levels of government. To begin with, probably large portions of the public

¹⁵⁹ Peter Baker, 2018, “Trump and the Truth: A President Tests his own Credibility”

¹⁶⁰ Sissela Bok, *Lying*, 7

would dismiss the revelations in part because they came from the so-called “fake news media.” Even apart from declining trust in major media, many would resist or tune out the reporting because of related trends including the prevalence of opinion over fact (which would drown out the factual reporting or otherwise make people less interested in the facts of the matter). This is one illustration of how post-truth represents a more serious challenge to democracy than lies of the kind practiced by politicians in the past. Lies are often found out and corrected. Liars are exposed and need to explain their deception, when they operate in a context that is constrained, however unhappily, by the demands of truth. In this context, they normally feel a need to stop telling a lie once it is discovered, even if they go on to tell other lies. That is what happened after news organizations revealed the Pentagon Papers, but those dynamics are altered in the turn toward post-truth.

In a post-truth setting, it is much harder to sort out the lies from the truth, harder to distinguish fact-based statements from claims made on the basis of opinions and personal anecdotes. News organizations that pride themselves on reporting as accurately as possible are not believed by large segments of the public. Meanwhile, news sources that more or less invent stories—like the immigrant “caravans” on the Mexican border that did not really exist—are listened to more closely by these groups.¹⁶¹ In this Orwellian inversion, the real becomes fake, and the fake becomes real. What’s changing is nothing less than the structures of truthful communication, maybe even the epistemology of the people—how we come to believe what is so and what isn’t so.

¹⁶¹ Jeremy W. Peters, 2018, “‘You Hate America!’: How the ‘Caravan’ Story Exploded on the Right”

Are there solutions to these challenges?

According to some, what's urgently needed today are basic skills of critical thinking and media literacy, a challenge that falls heavily on educators at all levels. What is a fact, as distinct from an opinion? What is a strong assessment of the reality of a situation, as opposed to a personal anecdote or a mere claim? In reading an article or viewing a post, how do you identify both the reliable messages and the falsehoods? The idea is that questions like these would make people more discerning about the information and messages that come from various forms of media, especially social media.

A guiding figure in media literacy is Neil Postman and his critique of the "image culture." The images that Postman had in mind were those on television and videos—he wrote his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1985, and died in 2003. "We're a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are now given form by TV, not by the printed word," he wrote in that book subtitled *Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman argued that this shift from the print world to the image culture was monumental, because unlike print, images do not encourage critical, rigorous, logical reasoning; image-based communication is good for provoking emotional responses and not much else.¹⁶² Again, he was talking about TV and videos, but he could have been critiquing digital media in the same way. He stressed the need for education that counters the image culture, which includes teaching students how to distinguish serious communication from triviality and what he termed "bullshit" in a speech he once gave to educators. In that speech, he said: "Sensitivity to the phony uses of language

¹⁶² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 28

requires, to some extent, knowledge of how to ask questions, how to validate answers, and certainly, how to assess meanings.”¹⁶³

Some educators have devised lessons and courses inspired in part by Postman and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. For example, one such lesson advises teachers to assign a text-based reading and direct students to “analyze an author’s unstated ideas and meanings.... Draw conclusions about the author’s purpose. Evaluate if and how the author uses authoritative sources to establish credibility. Evaluate an author’s argument,” and engage in other critical analysis.¹⁶⁴

Efforts at media literacy should help students to be more thoughtful and questioning about the media messages that come at them every day. However, I do find it hard to picture media literacy happening on a gigantic scale, taught by public schools all across the country, and I find it easy to picture left-versus-right arguments about how to teach these skills to children and which media outlets are most responsible for untruths. I’m also not sure of what Postman would think of such programs, in isolation. His critique suggests that the only real way to counteract the false and trivial information taken from the image culture is for people to once again become immersed in texts and reasoning associated with print-based culture. It sounds like, for him, the solution is for print to once again become the primary medium that shapes the way we think and understand the world. Not many people are going to hold their breath waiting for that to happen.

Some are advocating a more direct and confrontational approach to solving the problems of post-truth. In a new book simply titled *Post-Truth* (released in March 2018), Lee McIntyre refers to those who feel that the important thing now is for people to learn how to live in such a

¹⁶³ Neil Postman, *Bullshit and the Art of Crap Detection*, 7

¹⁶⁴ Jordan Gutlerner and Mark Halpern, 2010, “Media and Culture”

society—for example, to “choose wisely” what they believe. McIntyre responds: "I, for one, do not want to [simply adapt to post-truth]. The issue for me is not to learn how to adjust to living in a world in which facts do not matter, but instead to stand up for the notion of truth and learn how to fight back."¹⁶⁵ He continues:

The point of challenging a lie is not to convince the liar, who is likely too far gone in his or her dark purpose to be rehabilitated. But because every lie has an audience, there may still be time to do some good for others. If we do not confront a liar, will those who have not yet moved from ignorance to “willful ignorance” just slip further down the rabbit hole toward full-blown denialism, where they may not even listen to facts or reason anymore? Without a “counternarrative” from us, will they have any reason to doubt what the liar is saying? At the very least it is important to witness a lie and call it out for what it is. In an era of post-truth, we must challenge each and every attempt to obfuscate a factual matter and challenge falsehoods before they are allowed to fester.¹⁶⁶

This may not sound like a promising strategy, given some of the points related in this thesis. Take, for example, the research findings on confirmation bias, which is the tendency to believe statements, however inaccurate, that confirm one’s biases and ideological prejudgments. The findings suggest that when people are confronted with information that goes against their biases, it often makes them more determined to believe what they believe. In addition, I’ve related research on the repetition of lies—which can have a persuasive effect of their own. But McIntyre points out that repetition can work both ways—the repetition of true facts can have an effect as well. He points to some research indicating that an avalanche of reasonable, truthful statements can bring about "a tipping point" where people are finally convinced, and confirmation bias begins to break down. He cites several studies including one which concludes that while "misinformed beliefs can be quite stubborn, it is possible to change partisans’ minds when one ‘hits them between the eyes’ over and over with factually correct information.”

¹⁶⁵ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 154

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 155

McIntyre adds: "It may not be easy to convince people with inconvenient facts, but it is apparently possible."¹⁶⁷

McIntyre's approach does not take fully into account the broader forces behind the post-truth phenomenon. As related, the Rand Corporation cited structural causes of truth decay such as extreme political polarization and changes in the media environment, including the declining influence of formerly trusted sources of information. For these reasons, the authors of Rand's *Truth Decay* study conclude that complaining about (or fighting) "fake news" is not the answer; one has to address the underlying causes—for example, by finding ways to reduce political polarization. But perhaps this analysis and McIntyre's are not necessarily opposed to each other; perhaps the repetition of truthful statements can get more people to agree on basic facts, which would make our political discourse less sharply polarized.

There are obstacles to McIntyre's project of fighting back, some of which can be drawn from commentaries on the so-called "gaslight effect."¹⁶⁸ The term comes from an Alfred Hitchcock movie in which a character would gradually dim a gaslight and then deny the room was getting darker, making the victim think she was going crazy—the idea being that liars can get people to question their sense of reality.¹⁶⁹ One element of gaslighting is projection: turning the tables on people you are lying to, by calling them the liars (such as when journalistic media are accused of spreading fake news). Another trait of gaslighters is to find people who will support you regardless of how much you are lying (which happens when a lying politician is able to stir up a political base). Still another tendency is to tell people that everyone lies, which might

¹⁶⁷ Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, 159

¹⁶⁸ Ariel Leve, 2017, "How to survive gaslighting: when manipulation erases your reality"

¹⁶⁹ Frida Ghitis, 2017, "Donald Trump is 'gaslighting' all of us"

get them to lower their standards of truth telling¹⁷⁰ (in fact, supporters of the president often explain away the lies by saying every president has lied). These and other elements could make it hard to fight back against political gaslighting, but McIntyre shows a possible way forward with his model of reasoned resistance and steady commitment to fact-based discourse.

Rational, honest, and rigorous argumentation—in the public and political spaces—does appear to be the best hope. What’s the alternative? We could turn inward and just make sure that we, as individual citizens, aren’t deluding ourselves and believing lies. In doing so, we’d just be learning to survive in a post-truth environment, not learning how to change that environment. Or we could take the Machiavellian option, which would be to use all effective means to defeat the political movements most responsible for post-truth—using whatever power we have and even engaging in our own forms of obfuscation. That would be both paradoxical and self-defeating in the long run, possibly replacing one ideologically motivated form of deception with another. In a similar way, we could take the rhetorician’s option, which would be to rely purely on techniques of persuasion rather than reasonable discourse that aims to arrive at truth. Maybe those concerned about climate change, for example, would focus entirely on producing scary images of islands going underwater, or personal anecdotes about terrible weather events that may or may not have to do with climate change. This too would be at least a partial victory for appeals based on emotion rather than the kind of serious thought and logical reasoning modeled by Socrates in the *Gorgias*.

An authentic response from those who favor the values held by an intellectual community would be different—it would constantly promote fact-based reasoning and critical reflection,

¹⁷⁰ Stephanie Sarkis, 2017, “Gaslighting: Know It, Identify It, Protect Yourself”

hopefully in a spirit of dialogue and mutual understanding. In the end, fighting back in those ways might be all we can do.

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