Tonkin Gulf resolution, based, as it only later became clear, on official misrepresentation of staggering proportions.

By the election of 1968 the crisis in confidence, the lack of belief, had become an issue in the Presidential campaign. In a nationwide radio and television address during that campaign, Nixon asked how, if elected, "would I avoid the credibility gap?" His answer was that he would "tell the American people the hard truth." And he pledged "an open administration."

At the Hotel Pierre in New York, on November 25, 1968, Ronald Ziegler, press secretary to the President-elect, announced the appointment of Herbert G. Klein as Communications Director for the Executive Branch. "Thank you very much, Ron," Klein responded. "I'm confident we will—truth will become the hallmark of the Nixon administration . . . We feel that we will be able to eliminate any possibility of a credibility gap in this administration."

But the Nixon administration was soon awash in credibility problems. By 1972 the question of belief in the word of the government had once again become the subject of debate in a Presidential campaign, and it was much more than that.

Since the issue of government lying has been with us, in more or less recognizable form, since 1960, under four Presidents—two Democratic and two Republican—plainly it is not confined to any one party or administration. Rather it has emerged as a continuing condition, with serious implications for the democratic system.

Government deception, and the resultant loss of public trust, is supported by a system of official secrecy. The publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 caused a sensation because the papers revealed in voluminous detail how much the people had *not* been told about the Vietnam war. Moreover, these papers demonstrated that the nation's policy makers, from the President on down, had often practiced conscious deception.

In January, 1972, columnist Jack Anderson published secret documents that gave the public a glimpse of how the Nixon administration and the President's national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, sought to "tilt" American policy in favor of Pakistan during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

The Pentagon Papers and the Anderson documents focused public attention on government secrets and on the system of security classification that is designed to protect them. This system is complicated, and in fact, the public knows very little about its arcane workings. Even Congress, on the whole, has only limited knowledge of its dimensions.

The disclosures of the Pentagon Papers did demonstrate, however, how easy it is for government officials to use the security classifi-

cation system to keep from public view policies, decisions, and actions that are precisely the opposite of what the public is told. In other words, through official secrecy, we now have a system of institutionalized lying.

Policy makers who consider it desirable to mask their decisions or their objectives, or who wish to mislead the public or withhold information, can do so as easily as reaching for the nearest rubber stamp. In short, lying and secrecy are two sides of the same coin.

The government can lie, withhold information, or classify it. But equally important is what the government *does* choose to communicate. And the Executive Branch has at its disposal today a large and powerful government public relations and information machine. It uses this machine to sell those policies and distribute those official truths that it wishes the public to receive. Centered in the White House, but with branches in every department and agency, the size, scope, and operations of the information establishment are largely hidden from public view. Nobody knows how big it is, how many people it employs, or the size of its annual budget. Even at the top, its outlines are somewhat shadowy. In the first Nixon administration, for example, Herb Klein had the title of Communications Director, but the power to make key PR decisions, especially politically sensitive ones, rested not with Klein or Ronald Ziegler but with Special Counsel Charles Colson. If anyone could be said to be pushing the buttons of the administration's sprawling PR and propaganda machine it was Colson, a political gut-fighter and—for a time—unchallenged king of the President's image makers.*

Government misinformation, then, is buttressed by the classification system and distributed by the government information machine. But like a tree falling unheard in the forest, the message would have little meaning if there were no medium to transmit it to the public. The press is the medium.

There are 915 television stations in the United States, 7,227 radio stations, 1,700 daily newspapers, three major news weeklies, and

*Sooner or later Colson's back-room political operations were bound to get him into trouble. It finally happened in 1972, when it developed that Everette Howard Hunt, Jr., a former CIA agent and one of seven men indicted by a federal grand jury for conspiracy to bug the Watergate headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, had been hired as a White House "consultant" by Colson some months earlier. Three weeks after Nixon's reelection, it was announced that Colson was departing the White House. The President, Ronald Ziegler said, "regrets Chuck is leaving the administration . . . "

when, with some prodding, they added the First Amendment to the Constitution.

The American press is often called "the Fourth Branch of government," a term that at once reflects its quintessential importance and a major weakness. For the press is *not* a branch of government, and to the extent that singly, or collectively, its members forget this fact, or confuse themselves with the government, the public is not served.

The press can indeed validly be criticized, not for analyzing the actions and decisions of government too much—which was the theme of Agnew's laments—but for analyzing too little. The press's failure to question government information more vigorously, the willingness to accept official "handouts" as fact, the tendency toward passive reporting—what Tom Wicker has called "the press box mentality"—has made it that much easier for government to mislead the public.

The American system is based not only upon formal checks and balances among the three branches of government, it depends also, and perhaps more importantly, on a delicate balance of confidence between the people and the government. That balance of trust has been altered.

By 1972 the politics of lying had changed the politics of America. In place of trust, there was widespread mistrust; in place of confidence, there was disbelief and doubt in the system and its leaders.

The consent of the governed is basic to American democracy. If the governed are misled, if they are not told the truth, or if through official secrecy and deception they lack information on which to base intelligent decisions, the system may go on—but not as a democracy. After nearly two hundred years, this may be the price America pays for the politics of lying.

Why has it happened? Why has the government of the most powerful democracy in the world found it necessary to mislead its own people? What are the circumstances that have led to the deceit of the governed?

The Politics of Lying

David Wise

Secrecy as danger to country

A man in Macon insisted that the pictures of the moon walk shown on TV were actually taken "in a petrified forest in Arizona." A lady in Macon explained that her television set could not pick up New York City stations; how, then, could she really be getting televised pictures from the moon?

A housewife in Charlotte declared that if God wanted man to reach the moon, He would have made it easier. "He would have made steps," she said.

When the skeptics were asked why such an enormous hoax would be perpetrated, they generally replied either that the government had done it to fool the Russians and the Chinese, or that it had been done to justify the great cost of the space program. A few thought the government had a bread-and-circuses motive, to make people forget their troubles.

No doubt the overwhelming majority of citizens understand that NASA, whatever its deficiencies, really did put men on the moon. But the doubts are indicative, suggestive of a deeper ailment. As Frank Mankiewicz, national coordinator for the McGovern campaign, remarked in 1972: "There are a generation of Americans whose instinctive reaction to a public statement is that it is false."

Government deception, supported by a pervasive system of official secrecy and an enormous public relations machine, has reaped a harvest of massive public distrust. This deep distrust of government, and the word of the government, has altered traditional political relationships in America. It has shattered the bond of confidence between the government and the people. And it has diminished our confidence in ourselves and in our ability as a people to overcome the problems that confront us.

Lying is not a new phenomenon in American history or politics, but there is, after all, a question of degree and frequency, and surely nothing in our past has matched, in scale and quality, the grand deception of Vietnam. What Max Frankel has termed "the *habit* of *regular* deception in our politics and administration" is something new, and shameful. Systematic deception as an instrument of highest national policy is, God knows, hardly a cause for national pride.

What else but such a policy could result in the horror of My Lai being briefed "as one of our successful operations"? What else but such a policy could produce a General John D. Lavelle, the head of the Seventh Air Force, who commanded 400 fighter-bombers and 40,000 men, and whose pilots bombed North Vietnam at least 147 times without authorization between November of 1971 and March of 1972? Some of them filed false reports claiming they had been fired upon, for General Lavelle had made it plain to his pilots that they could not report the air strikes had taken place without enemy

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Secrecy and Clandestinism
Lying causes mistrust
of government
Permeates [illegible]

ers of the nuclear age, are frequently men of considerable intellectual abilities who have gone to the right schools. They pride themselves not only on their social graces, but on their rationality and morality. For such men, the preservation of partisan political power would not be a seemly rationale for official deception (although it might be entirely sufficient for the President whom they serve). National security provides the acceptable alternative, the end that justifies all means, the end that permits men who pondered the good, the true, and the beautiful as undergraduates at Harvard and Princeton to sit in air-conditioned rooms in Washington twenty years later and make decisions that result in blood and agony half a world away. It is the rationale that permits decent men to make indecent decisions.

The excuse for secrecy and deception most frequently given by those in power is that the American people must sometimes be misled in order to mislead the enemy. This justification is unacceptable on moral and philosophic grounds, and often it simply isn't true. Frequently the "enemy" knows what is going on, but the American public does not.

For example, for several years, until details were publicized by a subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the United States government waged a secret war in Laos. Secret, that is, from the American public, because presumably the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese were under no delusions about the American role. Apparently it was thought necessary, in this case, to mislead the American public in order to reveal the truth to the enemy.

When Lyndon Johnson issued his National Security Action Memorandum of April 6, 1965, which ordered that the commitment of American combat troops in Vietnam be kept secret, his actions were patently not designed to fool Hanoi or the Viet Cong, who would find out quickly enough who was shooting at them; it was designed to conceal the facts from the American electorate. The memorandum ordered that the troops be deployed "in ways that should minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy," a concern that was clearly tailored more to domestic audiences than to public opinion in Hanoi, where there are very few American voters. Again and again the government has taken actions designed to mislead not an enemy, but the American public—just the opposite of the stated rationale for deception.

The elitists who make national security policy have combined "the arrogance of power," as Hannah Arendt has noted, with "the arrogance of mind." They have increasingly come to feel that they alone possess the necessary information and competence to deal with foreign policy crises and problems. Leslie H. Gelb, director of the

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Classification + Secrecy

cause serious errors

dis[illegible] people

Truth never can catch up

task force that produced the Pentagon Papers, has written that "most of our elected and appointed leaders in the national security establishment felt they had the right—and beyond that the obligation—to manipulate the American public in the national interest as they defined it."

The elite policy makers have thus found an easy justification for both deception and secrecy. They are the only ones who "read the cables" and the intelligence reports and "have the information." Ordinary citizens, they believe, cannot understand complex foreign policy problems; ergo the policy makers have the right, so they think, to mislead the public for its own good.

In its baldest terms, this philosophy has been stated as "the right to lie." Even if officials feel compelled to mislead the public—and it is unlikely that total virtue will ever find its way into the councils of government—to proclaim that right is to place an official imprimatur on a policy of deception and distrust.

"It is sophistry to pretend that in a free country a man has some sort of inalienable or constitutional right to deceive his fellow men," Walter Lippmann has noted. "There is no more right to deceive than there is a right to swindle, to cheat, or to pick pockets."

The result of more than two decades of deception has been to shred the fabric of trust between people and government. It is not only that people no longer believe what a President tells them; the mistrust has seeped outward. It has spread, and pervaded other institutions. In the courts, for example, the government has discovered it increasingly difficult to convict peace activists or others who dissent from established policy because juries tend to disbelieve the uncorroborated testimony of government witnesses.

Within the Executive Branch itself, the lying has had an insidious effect, for in time, policy makers begin to believe their own lies. The deception designed for the public in the end becomes self-deception, as the lesson of Vietnam illustrates. To read the Pentagon Papers in detail is to perceive a group of men at the highest level of the government marching in lockstep toward certain disaster. They had begun to believe their own memoranda, "options," and "scenarios"; for them, reality had become the reflection in the fun-house mirror.

One of the most damaging aspects of government lying is that even if the truth later emerges, it seldom does so in time to influence public opinion or public policy. The extent of the government's deception over Tonkin Gulf did not begin to emerge until late in 1967 and early 1968, almost four years after the event. By then, it was too late.

And the effect of lying is cumulative; it is doubtless true, and possibly comforting, that the American public is less gullible today

possibility of change, and there will be continuing danger to our political institutions.

During hearings in 1971 of the Moorhead subcommittee, Representative Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., wondered whether it might be possible for Congress to pass a law that would make it a crime for government officials to "willfully deceive" Congress—and, by implication, the public. As McCloskey noted: "People who submit deceptive income tax returns or willfully mislead the government when they submit information are subject to criminal sanctions." Why not turn this principle around, he asked, and apply it to the government? The proposal would create monumental enforcement problems, since government officials would be unlikely to prosecute and jail themselves for fibbing.

Still, McCloskey was right to raise the issue. Political leaders must come to understand that no government can arrogate to itself a higher right to deceive its people for their "own good." The doctrine of deception in the public interest must be rejected.

As Anthony Lake, a former White House official, has so aptly put it: "The essential first step is for the government to realize that it cannot lead the public while misleading it."

The classification and secrecy system, combined with the other factors discussed above, has resulted, I have suggested, in a system of institutionalized lying. Never before in our history has the American public accepted a classification system in peacetime that permits dozens of civilian agencies to stamp documents secret and to control information. The secrecy structure that has been allowed to take root and flourish since 1951 has given the Executive Branch unprecedented and dangerous power to conceal and mislead. As we have seen, whole categories of intelligence classifications have sprung up that are, of and in themselves, supersecret.

There have been suggestions that the United States abolish the classification system entirely. A strong argument can be made that the new technology, such as overhead reconnaissance by satellites, and the universal nature of scientific knowledge make the whole concept of government secrecy obsolete or obsolescent—at least insofar as it applies to science, and to weapons research and deployment.

A Pentagon task force reviewing the government's classification policies reported in 1970 that no matter how stamped, protected, and locked up, "on vital information, one should not rely on effective secrecy for more than one year." The task force also reported: ". . . it is unlikely that classified information will remain secure for periods as long as five years, and it is more reasonable to assume that

it will become known by others in periods as short as one year through independent discovery, clandestine disclosure, or other means." The panel was headed by Dr. Frederick Seitz, a leading physicist, and its members included Dr. Edward Teller, who is usually described, unenviably, as the "father" of the hydrogen bomb.

While the task force believed that "more might be gained than lost" if the United States were to abolish—unilaterally if necessary—all secrecy, it concluded that this was "not a practical proposal at the present time." But the panel recommended "major surgery" of the classification system. It estimated that the volume of scientific and technical information that is classified could be decreased "by perhaps as much as 90 percent."

The task force also suggested that in one vital area, excessive classification was actually weakening the national security. ". . . the laboratories in which highly classified work is carried out have been encountering more and more difficulty in recruiting the most brilliant and capable minds." One member of the task force predicted that "if present trends continue for another decade, our national effort in weapons research will become little better than mediocre." Thus the mania for classification may be having an effect that is the opposite of what its designers intended.

One member of the panel, paraphrasing physicist Niels Bohr, noted that "while secrecy is an effective instrument in a closed society, it is much less effective in an open society in the long run; instead, the open society should recognize that openness is one of its strongest weapons . . ." The report also observed, accurately: "We believe that overclassification has contributed to the credibility gap that evidently exists between the government and an influential segment of the population." The report was a more than usually candid and thoughtful document, which makes it all the more unfortunate that it was given an administrative classification and kept semisecret by the Pentagon.

Although the classification system veils information from the public and permits the Executive Branch to distort the truth and shape events to fit policy, the secrecy label—and the doctrine of "executive privilege"—is also used to conceal information from Congress. Secrecy gives the President a powerful psychological advantage in his continuing power struggle with the Legislative Branch. Since national security information is highly classified, it is not only some members of the public who may assume that the President alone "has the information" and knows what is best. The same attitude is deeply rooted in Congress.

Nothing could be more dangerous in a democracy, however, than for its citizens and the legislature to abdicate foreign policy

Politics of Lying

Classification does not serve security - [illegible]

and prohibiting the publication of such material without approval of the director of CIA. A federal appeals court upheld the government in September. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, Marchetti sought to appeal his case to the U.S. Supreme Court. But on December 11 the Supreme Court declined to hear his appeal, thus allowing the lower-court decisions to stand. Marchetti left CIA in 1969 after fourteen years, during which he rose to the position of special assistant to Admiral Rufus L. Taylor, then deputy director of CIA. Robert P.B. Lohmann, a CIA agent assigned to New York City, obtained an outline of Marchetti's proposed book about the intelligence agency from an unidentified source—presumably in the publishing industry—"who has provided reliable information in the past," in the language of an affidavit filed by Lohmann on April 17, 1972, in the federal court in Alexandria.

William Franklin explained the Old Boy rule in the interview with him (*idem*). My unsuccessful efforts to locate the State Department's public reading room with the aid of the receptionists took place on December 27 and 28, 1971. Donald J. Simon was kind enough to take me there, and to show me the inner recesses of the Old Boy reading room, when I interviewed him at the State Department on December 28, 1971.

Robert J. Donovan was interviewed in Washington on December 1, 1971. Max Frankel's affidavit in the Pentagon Papers case is from *The New York Times Company v. United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Arno Press, 1971), Volume I, pp. 396–413. The account of the walking backgrounder with President Johnson on May 3, 1965, is from the typed transcript of the notes I took on that occasion.

James C. Hagerty described Eisenhower's annoyance with Top Secret stamps in testimony to the House Foreign Operations and Government Information Subcommittee, *Hearings*, Part 4, March 6, 1972, p. 1011. Melvin R. Laird's warning that the Soviet Union was deploying multiple warheads is from *The New York Times*, March 7, 1972, p. 5. The statistics on the number of persons in four major federal government departments with power to classify documents are from a study released August 3, 1972, by the Interagency Classification Review Committee and published in *Hearings*, House Foreign Operations and Government Subcommittee, Part 7, May, 1972, pp. 2826–27. William G. Florence's testimony to the subcommittee is *ibid.*, Part 1, June 24, 1971, p. 98. A useful analysis prepared by the subcommittee staff, comparing the Nixon classification order to its predecessor Executive Order, appears in Part 7 (*idem*), pp. 2851 ff. Florence's estimate of twenty million classified documents in Pentagon files is from Part 1 (*idem*), p. 97.

The Politics of Lying

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