

1/13/96

Loose Talk About Lying

By definition, congenital means existing at birth. For someone who claims expertise in putting in a good word for the right word, William Safire canceled out whatever reliability he may have had by calling Hillary Rodham Clinton "a congenital liar."

She's been telling lies since birth? Her parents gave her the disease?

Serious charges, sloppy charges. The effect of Safire's conjectural attack was to ratchet up the already high level of political incivility. It takes more than a few paragraphs of opinionating by a columnist—one who once toadied for Richard M. Nixon and Spiro T. Agnew, both driven from office because of their dishonesty—to make an accusation of lying stick.

Safire, recycling unproven allegations, went yards over the line by personalizing his criticism of Clinton. Too many institutional lie detectors, from congressional committees to the news media, are wired to Hillary Clinton for her to get away for long with dishonesty, if that is what she is up to. Nothing indictable or perjuring has been presented, however much Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato (R-N.Y.), still toweling off the hot water of an ethical fix he was in, keeps trying. Clinton's granting interviews to ABC, NBC, NPR, CNN and others isn't exactly stonewalling.

In political Washington, a mere accusation of lying is often sufficiently damaging to the victim when the goal of a total wipeout—proving the accusation—can't be reached.

In 1992, some right-wing critics of the National Endowment for the Arts attacked Chairman John Frohnmayer as a dispenser of grants to pornographers. Two months after being fired by George Bush, who was cowed to action by Pat Buchanan and other moralists, Frohnmayer told a group of newspaper editors: "What has happened in all of this is that half-truths, and downright untruths, have been repeated so often that they have established themselves as truth.

"I give you, as just one example, the sobriquet that was put on the compromise for the NEA budget last year: 'Corn for porn.' It was repeated in, I would imagine, virtually every one of your

papers. It suggests that the National Endowment equals pornography, when nothing that the National Endowment has ever funded has been found to be obscene or pornographic in any court, in any jurisdiction, in this country."

Accusations of lying come in two categories: groundless and grounded. Safire's assault on Hillary Clinton qualifies for the first, in a mud vat with J. Edgar Hoover's assessment of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. when he won the Nobel Peace Prize: He was "the most notorious liar in the country."

No shortage exists of examples of public accusations that later proved out. In the 1980s, prosecutors began indicting Wall Street executives for systematically deceiving each other and the public. The spillover of lies was of such magnitude that in 1991, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp. told Congress that two-thirds of the firms it was working with admitted they lied to the agency.

Those who thought Oliver L. North was a liar eventually had their suspicions confirmed. The retired lieutenant colonel, ever kind to himself, told Congress: "I want you to know that lying does not come easy to me. . . . But I think we all had to weigh in the balance between lives and lies. I had to do that on a number of occasions."

To go deeper into judging accusations of deceit, two recent books are available: "Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong" by James Loewen and "Black Lies, White Lies" by Tony Brown.

The authors explore what they see as institutional deceptions. These do greater damage than any liar acting alone because in time what Nixon said, on one of his honest days, is confirmed: "When information which properly belongs to the public is systematically withheld by those in power, the people soon become ignorant of their own affairs, distrustful of those who manage them, and—eventually—incapable of determining their own destinies."

That was in 1972, in a proclamation to strengthen the Freedom of Information Act—a k a the Undoing of Liars Act.