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On Basic Precepts Of Political Lying

By Joseph Horrell

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THE only truly effective way to close the credibility gap is to tell better lies. The lie enjoys an honorable tradition in politics and diplomacy. Its exponents range from Plato, whose "royal lie" was a basis of his *Republic*, to the recent American diplomat who entitled his memoirs "Lying in State," which he published after distinguished service to his country. The efficacy of the lie has been recognized by all investigators of human credulity — Lucian, Cervantes, Swift, Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain, to mention only a few. No serious students ever suggested that truth is an effective substitute.

A GLANCE at the basic principles of political lying, as these are embodied in one of the classical works on the subject, will quickly indicate how far our present inept practice fall below the standards set by tradition. These principles were set forth in 1712 by Dr. John Arbuthnot, Queen Anne's physician, in the *Art of Political Lying*. His crowning admonition is that the best contradiction of a lie is not the truth but another lie.

Where Arbuthnot can offer needed guidance to Government officials charged with the responsibility of public lying is in the essential matter of not overstraining the credulity of the public. A lie of any species, he says, whether additory, defamatory, or translatory, is totally ineffective if it is not believed, and no man spreads a lie with so good a grace as one who believes it. There should also be sufficient variety that the same lie need not be obstinately insisted upon. The ill success of many lies is due to the fact that the market is glutted by too much of a bad commodity being retailed at one time. Venting nothing but the truth for three months may give credit to lies for six months following. Politicians are advised not to retail their lies through news-writers, "who, except a strong bent and inclination towards the profession, seem to be wholly ignorant in the rules of pseudology, and not at all qualified for so mighty a trust."

The skillful liar, Arbuthnot goes on, is able to gauge the celerity and duration of his product. Certain lies have been known to have gone faster than a

man can ride post, especially terrifying lies, which travel at a prodigious rate above ten miles an hour. In duration some lies are good for hours, others for days, and still others, like insects, die out and revive again in a different form.

Arbuthnot could not have foreseen the potential celerity of lies, which now travel with the speed of light. In the matter of their duration, however, his comments are of as much pith and moment as the day they were written. Witness the short life of our major lie since World War II—the one about the U-2 flights. This lie was so poorly constructed that it had to be withdrawn from service almost at once. What is worse, it had to be contradicted by the truth, in violation of basic principles.

Since he had jailed one of our U-2 pilots, Khrushchev had every reason to expect from us a top-grade performance which would help him conceal from his people the state of their air defense, which the U-2's had been penetrating for years. Unfortunately the State Department was unequal to the challenge. Though promptly uttered, its official lie (to use Oscar Wilde's words) hardly rose "above the level of misrepresentation," a half-hearted bureaucratic performance convincing nobody. Its weak and fitful existence was abruptly extinguished by President Eisenhower when he said the flights were real happenings which he had helped arrange and had known about all along. "If," as Wilde observed despairingly in the *Decay of Lying*, "a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once."

THERE IS HOPE that science may replace art in these vital matters. Owing to advances in technology, future lying promises to take forms and achieve degrees of conviction that Dr. Arbuthnot, living before the Industrial and Atomic Revolutions, could not have imagined. Lies are being increasingly buttressed by numeric, as opposed to verbal, misrepresentation. It is rumored that the Government is sponsoring the development of high-intensity lies which, when activated at ground zero, will utterly convince all survivors, however stupefied, within a radius of 50 miles. The cost effectiveness of the technique has been sufficiently demonstrated to justify its funding. Improvements in lethal range can be expected as development proceeds. Full-scale tests are tentatively scheduled for 1968.