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THE POLITICS OF LYING

Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power

By David Wise

Random House. 415 pages. \$8.95

By PETER JENKINS

AMERICANS HAVE a strange aversion to lying in politics. It is curious in a society otherwise so lax in its public standards. The concern with governmental veracity contrasts, for example, with the public's apparent unconcern with commercial mendacity: in advertising lying seems to be considered fair game. The original myth about George Washington made truthfulness a national public virtue and sometimes it seems that the content of the truth has become less important than its telling. Supposing, even in these days of ecological awareness, that the cherry trees around the Tidal Basin were cut down for profit (or for cash for the Committee to Reelect the President): Which would cause the greater public concern, the act of vandalism itself or Ronald Ziegler's announcement that it had been done for reasons of national security?

The Tonkin Gulf incident of August 1964 which gave rise to the war powers resolution of the same name was, in the words of David Wise, whose *Politics of Lying* could not be a more timely book, "the most crucial and disgraceful episode in the modern history of government lying." The stage-management of that elaborate deception was indeed disgraceful, but was it so crucial? By that time Americans interested enough to read the newspapers were well informed of the nature, extent and purpose of United States involvement in Vietnam; the policy under both Kennedy and Johnson had received widespread editorial and public sup-

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port. (Henry Fairlie has exploded the myth that the people were uninformed or misinformed about United States involvement in Vietnam in his article "How We Knew What We Were Doing When We Went Into Vietnam" in the May issue of *The Washington Monthly*.) Suppose that President Johnson instead of lying about the naval attacks had told the people on prime time what he held to be the truth, that Godless international communism was about to bowl over the dominoes of freedom throughout Southeast Asia and that it was the manifest destiny and duty of the United States to prevent this fate worse than war, would not the outcome have been similar?

There is no way of answering this question for sure, but it is a matter for serious speculation because upon the Vietnam experience rests so much of the weight of the "we were lied to" thesis which is rapidly becoming the modern version of the conspiracy theory of history. A great many official lies were told in the course of the Vietnam war and David Wise documents some of them admirably; but there were many different kinds of lie and he is less helpful as a taxonomist than as a collector. My own judgment is that what really did in the credibility of the policy makers was not their downright deceptions but the simplicity of their problem-solving faith which produced a steady stream of self-defeating prophecies. The Pentagon Papers are most interesting as a study of self-delusion and deceit among the policy makers themselves.

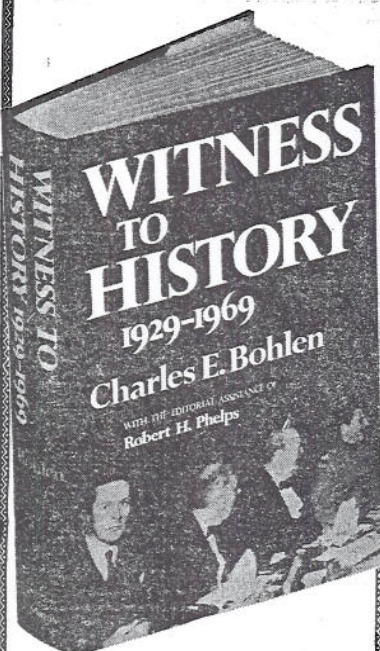
This brings us to the central problem of Wise's study. But first let it be said that it is engrossing reading, rich in anecdote from the ludicrous to the sinister, full of fascinating insights into the decision-making process, the workings of the press and television and the personalities of public figures, rich in footnotes for students of subjects other than his central subject of governmental deception and se-

crecy, and illuminated by the good-humored, practical judgments of a working political reporter. The coincidence of its publication with Ronald Ziegler's declaration that his previous statements on the subject of the Watergate are "inoperative" adds to its topical appeal, and the chapter on the inner workings of the White House misinformation machine is essential background reading for all students of the Watergate. But having said all that, I remain unconvinced by Wise's thesis, indeed not even quite certain as to what it is.

A British reporter should here declare an interest, or at least a conflict of perception. For he is bound to be amazed by the extent of press freedoms, the openness of government and the sheer volume of public information in the United States. Wise is correct to castigate the British Official Secrets Act, which has nothing to teach the United States, although he exaggerates the importance of the official framework of secrecy and underestimates the force of working but unwritten conventions which for the most part permit the exercise of basic press freedoms in Britain. These conventions together with the habitude of the British reporter to exclusion—healthy in my judgment—from the governmental process and a social status not unlike that of the actor in Shakespearean times, make him leery of accepting the kind of constitutional role within the system which is implied by the assertion of the "right to know" (as opposed to the right to find out and the right to publish) or a claim to special immunities under the law. The British reporter also, perhaps because in the way of the blind or the deaf he has been obliged to develop other faculties such as analysis and exposition, is less ready to equate the discovery of facts with the dissemination of information or to believe that information itself is the sufficient basis for an informed public opinion. (Continued on page 2)

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The Blodgett Did It

FOREVER PANTING. By Peter De Vries. Little, Brown. 274 pp. \$7.95

By PAUL THEROUX

IT WAS ONLY a matter of time before Peter De Vries became thesis-fodder, the subject of scholarly works picking out the design on his stylish linoleum, if not the figure in his carpet, and celebrated in heel-clicking footnotes in that urgent tone we are all familiar with, the special pleading of the scholar-discoverer who thinks he's hit on something. And, in the January issue of *Encounter* magazine, William Walsh of the University of Leeds, author of *Coteridge*, has written a lengthy appreciation of De Vries's work, titled "The Combination in the Safe." The reference is to Stan's remark in *Let Me Count the Ways*: "The universe is like a safe to which there is a combination. But the combination is locked up in the safe." It's worthy of Wittgenstein, and obviously Professor Walsh thinks so, too, for his essay is full of praise for our best humorist, whose intellectual attitude regarding wisecracking he sees as "like a Hegelian dialectic running backward through a projector. Synthesis unravels into antithesis, antithesis turns into thesis, and thesis is reduced to a deflated footnote."

It sounds a little like baloney, but admiration is intended. And it was bound to happen, because as the De Vries narrative races along there is an aside every few pages for the theologian, the philosopher or the English professor. It's what makes the De Vries novel so attractive; his characters rephrase the subtle philosophical point, and presented in the colloquial idiom, in the familiar situation, it becomes clear as well as wildly funny. In his new book, *Forever Panting*, De Vries has made the Delmore Schwartz poem "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me" into a serious comedy about marriage, role-playing, women's liberation and the id. Stew Smackenfelt, the actor-hero, is a suburbanite with a secret sharer: "I even have a name for my own id, whom I see as a rather hairy party

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inhabiting me as a lodger a house, a primitive of rudimentary appetites for the satisfaction of which he clamors day and night. I call him Blodgett."

Blodgett is a tireless marauder of Smackenfelt's affections, and it is Blodgett who steers the hapless hero in the direction of his mother-in-law, Ginger. The sympathy which becomes lust and then love for his mother-in-law is a refutation of every stereotype associated with that supposed villain. Ginger is full of charm and good health (she is, as it happens, a food- and health-nut), with an absolutely staggering fund of malapropisms and mixed metaphors. Her speech wins Smackenfelt (and Blodgett) over: she believes that sodomite is a lunar mineral, that if Stew loses a lot of weight he'll get too big for his britches. She refers to him sitting on his buff and being a movie diff and talks about virgins being defoliated. Straightaway, Smackenfelt is charmed into a serious of adulterous ironies, as his wife Dolly slips into the arms of a TV producer, Zap Spontini.

Things happen quickly in this novel. Witticisms and travesties (that word in its old sense of changing clothes) take the place of any tediously plotted superstructure, and people begin pairing off until they end up back at square one with their original partners. The fact that Smackenfelt is an actor both in the literal and metaphorical sense gives De Vries ample scope for comment on the paradoxes of our times and provides Stew an opportunity to play Father Plight, Boris Karloff, Dr. Watson, Zero Mostel and in the last part of the book Sir Walter Raleigh, as he bucks for a part in his wife's play. But "the play stank" and Smackenfelt is reunited with Dolly, who says, "It must be tough being Stew Smackenfelt." His reply is, "Yes . . . and I sometimes wonder whether I'm right for the part."

Apart from an isolated instance, no one in the book finds Smackenfelt very funny. The pleasure is for the readers in watching him struggle with a marriage he thinks of as a nail puzzle, funk he refers to as Gnashville and the twin lunacies of television and a theater. De Vries never misses, his comedy is unfailingly exact because he is so accurate an observer of the human animal. His wit is Elizabethan, a combination of understanding, intelligence and humor. It is easy to say he is our funniest writer, but he is also one of our most civilized minds.

Politics of Lying

(Continued from page 1)

David Wise does not make a panacea out of open government. Nevertheless, having written a long and interesting book on the subject, he is almost obliged to conclude: "Government deception, supported by a pervasive system of official secrecy and an enormous public relations machine, has reaped a harvest of massive public distrust." Without in any degree condoning deception or excessive secrecy this seems to me a far too simple conclusion and an insufficient explanation of the "credibility gap." The root cause of the credibility gap I believe to be not the politics of lying but the failure of government to achieve results which has afflicted not only the United States among industrialized democracies. It is not the lies but the gap between expectation and achievement, between promise and performance, which has so strained the credibility which is essential to government by consent. An unbuilt sewer is far more damaging of confidence in government than an untold truth about a war in a far distant land.

Moreover, there is no shortage of information but far too much of it. The size of the country and the vast supply of raw information on ever more com-

plicated subjects make it quite impossible to conceive of an informed public opinion on the 18th-century model—untrue even then—the face-to-face society. The media suppresses far more information from the public, for want of time, space or good judgment, than the government suppresses by its extravagant bureaucratic classifications. The information problem in the mass society is not starvation but distribution, nutrition and digestion.

Nor is the government the only liar. The American free market for information (free if you can afford it) permits the dissemination of vast quantities of private propaganda—by corporations, the proprietors of radio and television stations, preachers and all manner of special interest groups. David Wise barely touches upon their contribution to the aggregate of mendacity. For me the symbol of the merging of salesmanship and communication is Miss Barbara Walters holding up the Alpo dog food between interviews with public figures. The brain-adding effects of network television in commercial competition for mass audiences strike me as more powerfully subversive of an informed democracy than the ineffectual brain-washing endeavors of the government propaganda machine. For in the end it is impossible to deceive an audience that will not pay attention and the ultimate Orwellian horror will be not a politics of manipulation but a politics of unreality and unreason in which everything is believable and nothing is true.