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...Or a Dead End

By Leon Harris

DALLAS—How to succeed in government and diplomacy without actually lying? It can't be done, the experts say.

Greek, Roman, and later pundits from Plato to Machiavelli, as well as their disciples from Barbarossa to Louis XI to Richelieu, affirm that to lie for the benefit of the state is acceptable—indeed, that one who cannot lie, cannot govern (*Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare*).

Lying as a painful but patriotic duty is perhaps best expressed in Sir Henry Wotton's dictum: "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the Commonwealth."

Part of the appeal and excitement of lying, as of mountain climbing, comes from its difficulties and dangers. Warnings abound. There is Rochefoucauld's that the surest way to fool yourself is to think yourself more clever than others, and, of course, there is always Walter Scott's caveat: "O, what a tangled web we weave, / When first we practice to deceive!"

The dubious proposition that truth is better than falsehood nevertheless persists, and in this, as in most such misfortunes, the principal culprits are in the press. In the last hundred years, a very few magazines and newspapers must bear the greatest burden of guilt for giving lying a bad name.

Some journals, as Oscar Wilde complained, have so degenerated that they

may be absolutely relied upon. Theirs is the responsibility for the decay of lying that is spreading as rapidly and as out of control as a cancer.

Wilde especially deplored how many young people fall into careless habits of accuracy and develop a morbid concern for truth-telling, warning that, "If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out."

He recognized that there is no such thing as a "born liar" and, like Plato, explained that lying and poetry are arts requiring intense study, devotion and practice, as well as imitation of the best models.

Against such an overwhelming weight of wisdom, there is little to cite on the other side of the argument except the tiresome clichés of the Koran, the Talmud and the Ninth Commandment.

Up-to-date, "relevant," with-it arguments for truth and against falsehood are rare, but a few are to be found, for example in Robert Bolt's "A Man For All Seasons," which portrays Thomas More's unreasonable refusals to lie.

At the play's end, Sir Thomas's death is assured by the courtroom perjury of Richard Rich who is rewarded for his lie with the attorney generalship of Wales.

Sir Thomas then suggests mildly, "Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world . . . But for Wales!"

Leon Harris is author of a forthcoming biography of Upton Sinclair.