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# Presidential deceptions: Nixon, 1st; JFK, 2nd

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WASHINGTON — Do U.S. presidents lie to the American public? According to one psychological study, some recent chief executives became so good at lying that their most deceptive speeches seemed more honest than their relatively truthful ones.

"I'm not just saying cynically that (presidents) are always liars, or that they are incompetent because they know how to lie," said Dr. Henry A. Alker, a political psychologist at Cornell University.

"But presidents do know how to lie, and very effectively," he said. "They know so well that they sometimes get carried away and actually give the appearance of truthfulness."

Alker discussed his study at the 84th annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

The psychologist analyzed selected press conferences of presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford. He measured the "mystification and deception" of each speech with a technique developed several years ago by The Linguistic Society of America.

The results indicate that all presidents employed some form of deception when dealing with the press. The study also showed that the men did the best job of lying during major political crises, when the deception was "deliberate and premeditated."

Alker examined the texts of each president's first major press conference after taking office.

The results showed that Nixon was the most

deceiving followed by Kennedy, Ford, Johnson and Eisenhower in that order.

The test was based on five indicators of deception and mystification:

Failure to qualify statements of fact. If a person omits proof or qualification of a statement — such as "my advisers tell me" or "in my opinion" — that indicates he may be trying to manipulate as well as inform his listener, Alker said.

Treating a noun as an adjective. Phrases such as "air superiority" tend to glorify the subject while confusing its meaning.

Reference to accusations that may have never been made by persons who never made them. "This administration has been slandered," or "Some would have us weaken our national defense," are two such examples, according to the psychologist. Such statements suggest "the truth of the statement may be taken for granted by the listener."

Implying truthfulness without proving it. The phrase "valid argument" is one example — "valid to whom?" asks Alker. Another commonly used line is "it appears that..." when the person to whom the fact is apparent is not identified.

Using the "royal we." Originally used by kings, the term "can serve to mystify an audience as to exactly who says and thinks what," Alker said. "A shared point of view is assumed or encouraged, which may be a myth. Besides, presidents are not kings."

The study's most surprising finding came when the

tests was applied to three significant press conferences that "historical hindsight has shown to... assume more than routine amounts of deception," Alker said.

Those conferences were:

Kennedy's reaction after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, where he "withheld significant facts, such as who planned the invasion," Alker said.

Johnson's statements following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, where he "gave the impression that the attack of North Vietnamese boats on our navy was totally unprovoked," said Alker.

Nixon's lengthy defense of his record on Watergate after John Dean and others had testified to the contrary before legislative investigators.

The tests identified the president's well chosen words as "extremely honest."

Though such a conclusion is "surprising," Alker said it shows instead that given the motivation and the time to prepare (a significant period had elapsed between event and its press conference), American presidents have learned to perfect the art of deceiving.

"A president must have the skill to lie, because they are similar to the skills he must use to persuade people of the truth," Alker said. "The frightening part is the lying aspect."

"But if we can increase our capability of recognizing how people lie and manipulate us," he said, "we will be more able to effectively exercise our democratic responsibilities."