

The Lie

by Hilmar von Campe

During the Republican presidential candidates' debate on January 26, journalist Bernard Shaw asked each of the five whether it is a felony for the president to lie to the American people. Each answered that lying under oath is a felony. But when it comes to just lying to the people, the line between legality and illegality "is not bright or clear," according to Bruce Buchanan, a University of Texas scholar of the presidency quoted by Jennifer Harper in the Washington Times. "The nature of politics and the presidency itself is the strategic maneuvering and shading information. But if lying to the public was a felony, they all would have gone to jail."

Buchanan's view of the line is wrong. It is bright and clear; only liars try to make it complicated. Politics, however, is associated with lying, and everybody considers lying to be normal.

When I was confronted with Nazi atrocities after World War II, I had to come to grips with the question of my own moral responsibility for what had happened. Now, how could I, a young man of 20 who was 7 years old when Hitler and his gang took over, be in any way responsible for their crimes? Our family detested the Nazis; my father, a government-appointed official, was fired when they took over in 1933. In 1945, he perished in a Soviet concentration camp that was no less inhuman than the Nazi camps.

I realized that the Nazis were professional liars. They had lied to us about everything and fed us biased information in order to be able to manipulate us. The Nazi society and state were built on lies, the most prominent being that there was no God and that therefore religion should be kept out of education and society. Translated into American, that same Nazi principle is referred to as the separation of church and state. An additional lie is that the Constitution mandates that separation. I cannot find that provision in the Constitution or the amendments, after reading and rereading them. Maybe the concept actually comes from Adolf Hitler's Mein Kampf, where it fits in very well. In any case, when those who push it refer to separating "church and state," they lie. What they actually want is the separation

of God, and His moral law, from society. They promote it because of their own immorality and not because of any concern for the Constitution.

What linked me to the Nazis was the lie. I lied to my parents, to my teachers, to my friends. I lied to obtain small personal gains, to cover up, to appear good, or to pass an exam. The Nazis lied to manipulate the German people and obtain political power. With the help of all the small liars, they established a system of lies which was like a net thrown over society -- a net difficult to escape once it was in place. Who then was responsible for that system and the consequent atrocities? Only the big liar, or the small liar, too?

When I realized that the thought comes before the act and that ultimately the sum of all lies leads to a totalitarian system where the lie rules, I had to make a decision. I decided never to lie again and to stand up for truth whatever it might cost. I made restitution to everybody affected by my lies where I could, until my past was 100 percent cleaned. I am not vulnerable to blackmail; no FBI files delivered to the wrong people could affect me. If Bill Clinton, after the Lewinsky affair, had sworn -- and sworn truly -- to the American people that he would neither lie nor cheat on his wife ever again, he might have set out on the road to become a different person who could be trusted. Since he didn't, it is obvious that he has neither repented nor changed and that he has continued doing what he likes.

Can a lie be a merely personal affair? Of course not. The Nazi lies, supported by billions of small lies, led to destruction on an unheard-of scale, including the destruction of at least 50 million lives. But even worse was the destruction of faith and virtue. NATO leaders lied before and during the Kosovo war in order to get their war and fool the public. The developers of SAT, the Educational Testing Service, and the nonprofit Ad Council concluded last September that student cheating was reaching epidemic proportions. Long before that, U.S. News & World Report had headlined an edition with the question, "A Nation of Liars?" and gone on to describe the alarming breakdown of basic honesty in America. That was on February 23, 1988. Now we are twelve more years down the road of lies.

In August of 1996 a study at the University of Virginia concluded that everyone lies at least once a day. And Harvard philosopher Sissela Bok has pointed out that almost all lies are damaging. I am convinced the lie is at the root of all our problems. We live in a fog of lies, which with our help gets thicker every day and makes us unable to see reality. Imagine a U.S. Congress and parliaments around

the world where lies were never heard! The lie is the enemy of freedom. The liar is a danger to his nation.

Can the lie, even in a society with such a pervasive climate of lying, be changed to truth? As impossible as it appears I know it can be achieved; it is not complicated. There is no other way for humanity to achieve it than for each person to start with himself. Stop lying, put right what wrong has been done, and make the fight for truth in society your number-one priority.

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