

The Assault on Truth  
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Human beings sometimes lie. How much they deliberately tell an untruth varies according to the nature of their society. Oppressive countries are so punitive that people need to lie to survive. However, if a society is to function at all, there needs to be a set body of facts that are recognized as real. We are living at a time that such agreement on facts is being challenged from all sides, not just from our unusual president, who has recently told veterans at a rally "don't believe what you see or what you read!" George Orwell's 1984 warns of what kind of dystopia comes out of such a command.

Thomas Jefferson, our third President, said that if he had to choose between the country or the free press, he would save the press. In reality, the country and the free press are mutually interdependent. We must trust our eyes and ears.

If I say "good morning" to my neighbor and he responds "good evening," I know something is wrong. There is no rational dispute that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. To say otherwise is delusional. Every society is governed by agreed upon facts, norms of behavior and truths that change only with new and valid knowledge. Belief that truth is good and lying is bad is a universal practice, especially in Western Civilization where truth is a core value.

Folklore and moral tales. The story about the boy who cried "wolf" to get attention illustrates that by lying, he would not be believed if there really were a wolf endangering his village. The story of the Emperor's New Clothes, tells of a vain emperor, fooled by his lying tailor into believing that his invisible costume was beautiful. The intimidated public did not dare contradict this delusion, but a truthful child did so, revealing the stupidity of the king. Americans have been reared with the story of George Washington telling an unwelcome truth to his father: that he had used his new hatchet to cut down a favorite cherry tree. His father praises his truthfulness and does not punish him: a model to all parents.

Religion. Jews and Christians take oaths, and swear on their holy book, that they speak truth. In Western civilization, lying under oath is a criminal act. Habitual lying earns the scorn of family and friends. Truth and trust are inseparable. Lies are corrosive.

The Shiite sect of Islam permits a lie if telling the truth about one's belief could result in punishment or death. When the once Persian Zoroastrians were converted to Islam (and they adopted a dissident sect called Shi'a), they unlearned the basic tenet of their Zoroastrian past, that telling a lie was the biggest sin. The prophet Zoroaster preached that human beings were created with free will by the God of the Universe: free to choose good or evil (and take an afterlife punishment for evil deeds). The Devil (Satan) was identified as The Great Liar.

Politics. American presidents have sometimes lied deliberately, such as President Roosevelt during wartime; deception during war can be a survival issue. Very few American presidents, except for Nixon and Clinton, have lied to hide crimes or embarrassments, which earned them both impeachments. But in numerous responsible accounts, including Michiko Kakutani's book, The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump, the first 466 days that Trump was in office inflicted more than 3,000 falsehoods on the public. PolitiFact also keeps a daily scorecard of lies that are either "mostly false," "false," or "pants on fire." Listing the daily falsehoods is now a growth industry.

Is this never-ending flood of falsehoods the fruit of a pathological liar or a cynical manipulator? Totalitarian states, not democracies, depend upon lies, elaborate hoaxes, or conspiracy theories, to dupe the credulous or to intimidate the indignant. Democracies depend on trustworthy leadership. If our country becomes numbed by this flood of falsehoods, our democracy is doomed. But we do have remedies: the courts, the ballot box, and, yes, the press.

676 words

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