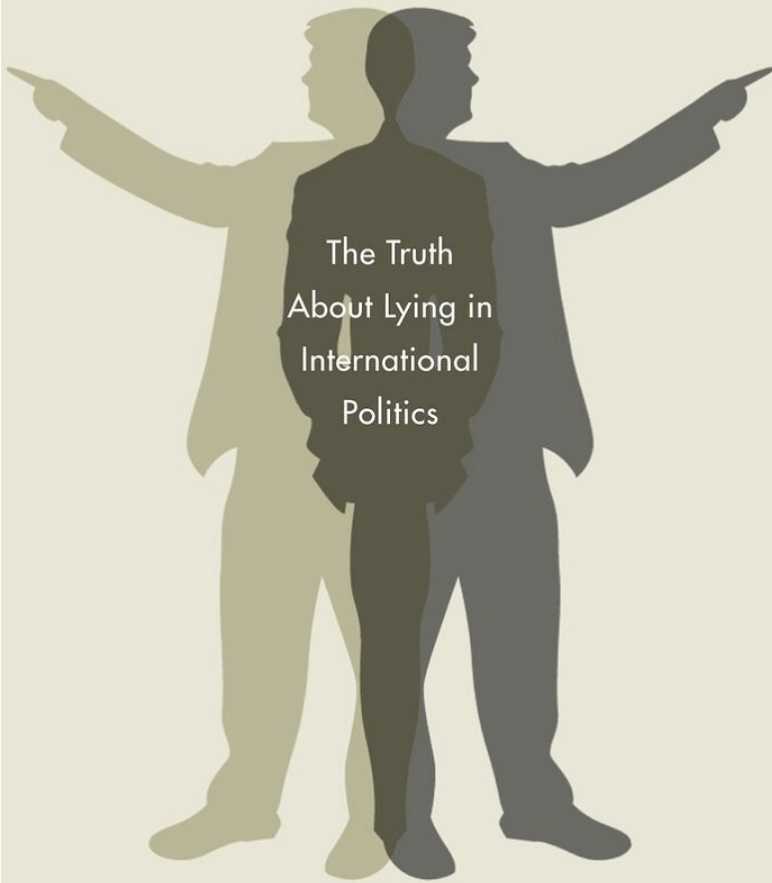


WHY LEADERS LIE



JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

WHY LEADERS LIE
The Truth about Lying in International Politics

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

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Preface

In the spring of 2003, Serge Schmemmann of the *New York Times* called me out of the blue and said that he was working on a piece about lying in international politics for the Sunday paper's "Week in Review" section. He said that for some reason my name popped into his head, so he decided to call me. We had not met or talked before. I told him that I had never thought about the subject and I did not think there was much, if any, scholarly literature on international lying. I told him that he should tell me what he was thinking and I would react. We did just that and had what I thought was an interesting and fruitful discussion that lasted about an hour. Afterward, I wrote up some brief notes on the conversation and filed them away.

A few months later, in September 2003,¹ I was invited to give a talk at MIT on a topic of my choosing. I thought it would be interesting to talk about lying in international politics, so I pulled up my notes from my conversation with Schmemmann and crafted a talk for the occasion. Over the next six years, I wrote a paper, gave eight more talks, and had numerous conversations with friends and colleagues about this subject.

Throughout this process, I have been struck by the way people respond to the topic of international lying. Every audience and almost every person I have spoken to quickly

becomes engaged and excited by the subject, and many want to talk at length about it. A number have sent me follow-up emails on their own initiative, including people who I have never met, but who were in the audience at one of my talks.

I can think of several reasons why this subject generates so much interest. For starters, most people consider lying to be a reprobate form of behavior, at least when you first broach the subject. Nearly everyone would recoil at being called a liar, even if they occasionally tell a lie themselves. Indeed, it is such a serious charge that people sometimes hesitate to call someone a liar even when they think the charge applies; instead they employ softer language. Senator John Kerry (D-MA), for example, was loath to call President Bush a liar during the 2004 presidential campaign and instead said that he "failed to tell the truth" about Iraq and "misled the American people." However, the fact that lying is widely perceived to be wicked behavior is one reason that people like to talk about the subject. It gets the juices flowing.

What seems to make the subject even more interesting to many is that I argue that there are sometimes good strategic reasons for leaders to lie to other countries as well as to their own people. International lying, in other words, is not necessarily misconduct; in fact, it is often thought to be clever, necessary, and maybe even virtuous in some circumstances.

Yet no argument I make is more controversial and generates more discussion than my claim that statesmen and diplomats do not lie to each other very often. Hardly anyone seems to believe this is true—at least when they first hear it. Most people are surprisingly cynical on this issue. They seem to believe that there are countless examples where leaders around the world lied to each other and that therefore it should be easy to come up with a long list of those kinds of lies. In essence, they believe that inter-state lying is business as usual in international politics. I tell my interlocutors that as a card-carrying realist I was inclined at first to agree with them, but after studying the matter I have come to believe they are wrong. There is just not that much inter-state lying. Of course, this is not to say there is none.

The subject also resonates because of the Iraq war. Many well-informed people now believe that the Bush administration lied to the American people in the run-up to that conflict, which has turned into a strategic disaster for the United States. When a war goes badly and the public believes that deception helped make the war possible in the first place, people invariably get very interested in talking about why leaders would lie to their own citizens and what the likely consequences are. Plus the fact that there is hardly any literature on lying in international

politics allows—or even compels—people to think creatively about these matters.

Given the dearth of literature on international lying and what seems to be a significant interest in the subject, I decided to turn my unpublished paper on lying into a book. My main aim was to provide some analytical frameworks that might help organize how we think about lying in international politics, as well as some theoretical claims about key aspects of that subject. I hope this book will be a conversation starter on an important topic that hitherto has received scant attention. If I am successful, others will follow in my footsteps and refine and challenge my arguments.

My thinking about lying has been markedly influenced by feedback from the audiences at the various places where I have spoken: the Council on Foreign Relations in New York; the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University; the 2004 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association; a faculty-student seminar at the University of Montana; the Browne Center for International Politics at the University of Pennsylvania; the MIT Political Science Department; the University of Chicago's Program on International Security Policy; the Lone Star National Security Forum; and the "North-South" workshop jointly run by the

international relations faculties of Northwestern University and the University of Chicago.

When I was in the early stages of organizing my thoughts on the subject, I benefited greatly from an informal seminar with five of my colleagues at the University of Chicago: Dong Sun Lee, Taka Nishi, Robert Pape, Sebastian Rosato, and John Schuessler. I am especially thankful for the extensive and especially useful comments provided by Alexander Downes, Sean Lynn-Jones, Marc Trachtenberg, and Stephen Walt, whose fingerprints are all over this manuscript.

Two other individuals deserve a special word of thanks. David McBride, my editor at Oxford University Press, made a number of very important suggestions that helped make the book better. I also deeply appreciate his enthusiasm for this project, which made it much easier to bring it across the finish line. But no person was more excited about it than my agent, Bill Clegg, who not only helped motivate me to complete the book, but also provided wise and indispensable counsel along the way.

I gratefully acknowledge the editorial expertise of Jessica Ryan and Ben Sadock at Oxford University Press, who helped so much to polish the final version. In addition, I received excellent comments and suggestions from two anonymous reviewers for the press and a long list of other individuals, some

of whom I have never met. They include Eric Alterman, Stephen Ansolabehere, Robert Art, Richard Betts, David Blagden, Risa Brooks, Michael E. Brown, Jonathan Caverley, Joseph Cirincione, Michael Desch, Louis DeScioli, Daniel Drezner, David Edelstein, Francis Gavin, Hein Goemans, Charles Glaser, Emily Goldman, Jennifer Hochschild, Ian Hurd, Robert Jervis, Chaim Kaufmann, Christopher Layne, Keir Lieber, Eric Lorber, Carlo Masala, Nuno Monteiro, Michael O'Connor, Joseph Parent, Susan Peterson, Arnd Plagge, Eric Posner, Richard Posner, Cynthia Roberts, Lawrence Samuels, David Schwartz, Jack Snyder, Ivan Arreguin-Toft, Monica Toft, Peter Toft, Matthew Tubin, Stephen Van Evera, Abraham Wagner, Alexander Wendt, and Joel Westra. My apologies to anyone I forgot.

I deeply appreciate everyone's help, as I could not have written this book without it. A special word of thanks is in order for Serge Schmemmann, who introduced me to the subject of international lying and helped pique my interest in it. Of course, I bear full responsibility for all of the mistakes and foolish arguments, but owe a considerable debt to others for whatever insights this book contains.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my wife, Pamela, for actually encouraging me to spend the endless hours that go into producing a book. I loved doing the research and

writing anyway, but it is much easier when the people most affected by your work schedule fully support what you are trying to accomplish. Speaking of family, I would like to dedicate this book to my five wonderful children—Ann, Max, Nicholas, Julia, and David—who have been a source of great pride and pleasure for more than three decades.

WHY LEADERS LIE

Introduction

The key individuals in the Bush administration who pushed hard for the United States to invade Iraq before March 19, 2003 maintained that they were certain that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Their claims, they said, were based on hard evidence. Proponents of the war who were not in the administration frequently repeated those claims, creating a chorus of hawkish voices that helped convince many Americans that it was essential to disarm Iraq and depose Saddam. In this view, Iraq was a necessary war, not a war of choice. Anyone who doubted that claim was almost certain to be labeled an appeaser or a fool, or even accused of being unpatriotic. When no WMD were found in Iraq, those in the war party had to explain why they were so profoundly mistaken. How was it possible that so many who were so sure about Saddam's capabilities were so wrong?

One explanation offered for this blunder placed the blame squarely on Saddam, arguing that he effectively lied to us about whether Iraq had WMD. Specifically, he is said to have been deeply worried that Iran—or maybe even the United States—might attack Iraq, which had been badly weakened by its drubbing in the 1991 Gulf War as well as the sanctions and

inspections regime that was imposed on Baghdad after that devastating defeat. To deter an attack on his country, so the story goes, Saddam put out false information that was designed to make Tehran and Washington think that he had WMD which he would use in the event of war. His job was made easier by the fact that the United Nations (UN) was not able to establish with a high degree of certainty that he no longer had any WMD, although it had no hard evidence that he possessed those weapons.

This line of argument is laid out in the "Duelfer Report," which was released in September 2004 by the Iraq Survey Group, an international team comprised of more than one thousand members that was tasked with finding Iraq's WMD stockpiles as well as the infrastructure used to build them. Former UN weapons inspector Charles A. Duelfer led it. After describing the various threats facing Iraq, the report tells us, "in order to counter these threats, Saddam continued with his public posture of retaining the WMD capability."- The report goes on to say: "While it appears that Iraq, by the mid-1990s, was essentially free of militarily significant WMD stocks, Saddam's perceived requirement to bluff about WMD capabilities made it too dangerous to clearly reveal this to the international community, especially Iran." George Tenet makes the same argument in his memoirs. He writes in *At the Center*

of the Storm: "We had no previous experience with a country that did not possess such weapons but pretended that it did.... Before the war, we didn't understand that *he* was bluffing.

These claims notwithstanding, there is no evidence in the public record that Saddam tried to convince the world that Iraq possessed WMD. The Duelfer report, for example, furnishes no proof to support its claim about the Iraqi leader's bluffing. That claim is merely an assertion, and the authors of the report do not provide facts to back it up. Indeed, the report itself provides evidence that casts doubts on that contention. It notes "Saddam never discussed using deception as a policy," and that one of his most trusted deputies stated that he "did not reveal he was deceiving the world about the presence of WMD."³ This is hardly surprising, since there is no evidence that he was deceiving the world. In fact, he said on a number of occasions that he had no WMD and he was telling the truth.⁴

The Bush administration, on the other hand, told four major lies in the run-up to the Iraq War. They are all discussed in detail below, but let me briefly summarize them here. Key figures in the administration falsely claimed that they knew with complete certainty that Iraq had WMD. They also lied when they said that they had foolproof evidence that Saddam was closely allied with Osama bin Laden, and they made various statements that falsely implied that Saddam bore some

responsibility for the September 11 attacks on the United States. Finally, various individuals in the administration, including President Bush himself, claimed that they were still open to peaceful resolution of their dispute with Saddam, when in fact the decision to go to war had already been made.

In short, Saddam told the truth about his WMD capabilities before the 2003 Iraq war, while senior figures in the Bush administration lied about what they knew regarding those weapons. They also lied about some other important matters. This behavior by the two sides might seem surprising, maybe even shocking, to some readers. One might think that at the very least it is a highly unusual case. But that conclusion would be wrong. Both sides acted in ways that are consistent with two of the main findings in this book. Specifically, I find that leaders do not lie very often to other countries, but instead seem more inclined to lie to their own people. Let me explain.

Although lying is widely viewed as reprehensible behavior in ordinary life, it is acceptable conduct in international politics because there are sometimes good strategic reasons for leaders to lie to other countries and even to their own people. Nevertheless, there is actually not much lying between states. When I began this study, I expected to find abundant evidence of statesmen and diplomats lying to each other. But that initial assumption turned out to be wrong. Instead, I had to work hard

to find the cases of international lying that I discuss in this book. Leaders do lie to other countries on occasion, but much less often than one might think. Therefore, it is not surprising that Saddam Hussein did not lie about whether he had WMD before the Iraq War, which is not to say that there are no circumstances in which he would have lied.

Furthermore, leaders appear to be more likely to lie to their own people about foreign policy issues than to other countries. That certainly seems to be true for democracies that pursue ambitious foreign policies and are inclined to initiate wars of choice, i.e., when there is not a clear and imminent danger to a country's vital interests that can only be dealt with by force. Of course, that description fits the United States over the past seventy years, and, not surprisingly, American presidents have told their fellow citizens a number of important lies about foreign policy matters over those seven decades. Thus, it is hardly surprising that key figures in the Bush administration—including the president himself—lied to the American people in the run-up to the Iraq War. Bush was following in the footsteps of illustrious predecessors like Franklin D. Roosevelt, who lied about a naval incident in 1941 to help draw the United States into World War II, and Lyndon B. Johnson, who lied about events in the Gulf of Tonkin in the

summer of 1964 so that he could get congressional support to wage war against North Vietnam.

It is important to emphasize that in none of those cases were the president or his lieutenants lying for narrow personal gain. They thought that they were acting in the American national interest, which is not to say they acted wisely in every case. But the fact is that there are good strategic reasons for leaders to lie to their publics as well as to other countries. These practical logics almost always override well-known and widely accepted moral strictures against lying. Indeed, leaders sometimes think that they have a moral duty to lie to protect their country. Leaders do not always lie about foreign policy, of course, but they occasionally say things or purposely imply things that they know are not true. Their publics usually do not punish them for their deceptions, however, unless they lead to bad results. It seems clear that leaders and their publics believe that lying is an integral part of international relations.

In domestic politics, however, lying is generally considered wrong, save for some special circumstances, such as when individuals are bargaining over the price at which they would buy or sell a house, or when protecting an innocent person from wrongful harm. Most people consider "white lies" that friends tell one another— as when dinner guests praise an ill-cooked meal, or that parents tell their children to protect

them—permissible. After all, these sorts of lies involve small stakes and they are told for someone else's benefit.⁵ They are altruistic lies. But on the whole, lying is widely seen to have a corrupting effect on individuals as well as the broader society in which they live. It is not surprising, therefore, that people often tell the truth even when it is not in their material interest to do so. This is not to deny that there is a good deal of lying of the unacceptable sort in every society. Still, the less of that there is the better.² Thus, it makes good sense to stigmatize and discourage lying on the home front.

There is a simple explanation for these different attitudes toward domestic and international lying. A leader has no higher obligation than to ensure the survival of his country. Yet states operate in an anarchic system where there is no higher authority that they can turn to if they are seriously threatened by another state. In the harsh world of international politics, there is no 911 number to call if a state gets in trouble, and even if there were, there is nobody at the other end to pick up the phone. Thus, leaders and their publics understand that states operate in a self-help world where they have to do whatever is necessary to provide for their own security. If that means lying and cheating, so be it. International politics, in other words, tends to be a realm where rules are often broken with little consequence. This is not to say that leaders are enthusiastic

about telling lies or to deny that many leaders would prefer to see the international realm governed by a well-defined set of moral principles. But that is not feasible in the absence of a common sovereign to enforce them.

In contrast to the international system, the structure of a state is hierarchic, not anarchic. In a well-ordered state, there is a higher authority—the state itself—to which individuals can turn for protection. Consequently, the incentives to cheat and lie that apply when states are dealing with each other usually do not apply to individuals within a state. Indeed, a strong case can be made that widespread lying threatens the inner life of a state. It does so in good part for purely utilitarian reasons, as it is hard to make a state function efficiently when people lie to each other all the time. One can also make a moral case against lying within the confines of a state, because a well-defined community usually exists there, which is not the case in international politics. Thomas Hobbes put the point succinctly in *Leviathan*: "Before the names of Just, and Unjust can have place, there must be some coercive Power to compel men equally to the performance of their Covenants.... Where there is no Common-wealth, there nothing is Unjust."

Lying is obviously a form of deception, but not all deception is lying. There are two other kinds of deception: concealment and spinning. Unlike lying, neither involves

making a false statement or telling a story with a false bottom line. Concealment and spinning, however, are not the same as telling the truth.

These two kinds of deception are pervasive in every realm of daily life, and they cause hardly a word of protest. For example, a person interviewing for a job is allowed to spin his life story on a resume in ways that present him in the most favorable light. He is free to omit information from that resume as he sees fit. Politics is an especially fertile breeding ground for spinning and concealing. A president can tell a story about the state of the American economy that accentuates the positive trends and downplays or even ignores the negative ones, while a critic from the opposing party is free to do the opposite. But neither individual is allowed to lie to make his case. Indeed, getting caught in a lie would probably do them significant political harm.

That is not true, however, if a foreign-policy issue is at stake. Statesmen and diplomats are rarely punished for lying, especially if they were telling lies to other countries. Probably the only exception to this rule involves cases where it becomes known that a leader lied to his fellow citizens about a policy that failed in ways that obviously damage the national interest. But even here, the main reason that a leader would likely incur his public's wrath is because the policy failed, not because he lied.

Of course, this is why a leader who is discovered to have lied to his public about a particular policy is unlikely to pay much of a political price if it works as intended. When it comes to foreign policy, success excuses lying, or at least makes it tolerable.

In short, concealment and spinning are generally seen as legitimate forms of behavior in domestic as well as international politics. But lying is a different matter. It is considered unacceptable behavior in most walks of life, save for international politics, where it is generally viewed as regrettable but sometimes necessary.

THE TASK AHEAD

There is a substantial body of literature on lying, but hardly any of it deals explicitly with lying in international politics. One notable exception is Eric Alterman's *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences*, which provides an excellent narrative of presidential lying over the past seventy years.³ However, Alterman is not a social scientist and he does not attempt to theorize about international lying. Nor has anyone else. One might respond that there are numerous studies dealing with deception among states. While this is true, that literature tends not to distinguish between concealment, lying, and spinning, and more importantly, no

work zeroes in on lying and attempts to make general arguments about that particular behavior. The aim of this book is to fill that void by theorizing about international lying, not the broader concept of deception.

At the most general level, one can think about lying from either an absolutist or a utilitarian perspective. Absolutists like Immanuel Kant and Augustine maintain that lying is always wrong and that it has hardly any positive effects. Lying, according to Kant, is "the greatest violation of man's duty to himself." Utilitarians, on the other hand, believe that lying sometimes makes sense, because it serves a useful social purpose; but other times it does not. The key is to determine when and why lying has positive utility.

I look at international lying from a strictly utilitarian perspective, mainly because there are compelling reasons that justify it and, not surprisingly, we find a considerable amount of it in the historical record. Many people seem to believe that there are circumstances in world politics where it pays to lie. This is not to deny, however, the importance of examining the moral dimensions of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, that task involves a different set of calculations and considerations, which lie beyond the scope of this book.

Broadly speaking, leaders tell international lies for two different reasons. They can tell lies in the service of the national

interest. These are *strategic lies* that leaders tell for the purpose of helping their country survive in the rough and tumble of inter-state relations. Leaders can also tell *selfish lies*, which have little to do with *raison d'état*, but instead aim to protect their own personal interests or those of their friends. My concern is with lies that leaders tell for the good of the collectivity, not for selfish purposes. Thus, when I use the term international lying, I am talking about strategic lies, not selfish lies.

The subsequent analysis is built around four questions. First, what are the different kinds of international lies that leaders tell? Second, why do they lie? What are the strategic logics that motivate each kind of lying? Specifically, what are the potential benefits of lying that cause leaders to engage in this distasteful, if not noxious, behavior? Third, what are the circumstances that make each type of lying more or less likely? Fourth, what are the potential costs of lying for a state's domestic politics as well as its foreign policy? In other words, what is the downside of telling international lies? Thus, I consider both the benefits and the costs of the various kinds of lies that statesmen and diplomats tell each other as well as their own publics. However, I do not address the important question of when each kind of lie is likely to achieve its intended effect or not, mainly because I could not come up with a good answer.

I attempt to answer these questions by providing simple analytical frameworks that draw on the theoretical literature in international relations as well as the extensive literature on lying. I have tried to ensure that my arguments are logically sound, and I have provided historical evidence to illustrate them. However, I do not test my various claims by bringing evidence to bear in a systematic manner. That task is beyond the scope of this book, which is mainly concerned with providing a theoretical template for thinking about international lying. I hope other scholars will systematically test some of the arguments offered in the following pages.

THE MAIN ARGUMENTS AND THE ROAD MAP

I make numerous claims in the subsequent analysis, but five of them stand out above the rest. First, international lying comes in a variety of forms, but the most important distinction is between the lies that states tell each other and those that leaders tell their own publics.

Second, leaders usually tell international lies for good strategic reasons, not because they are craven or corrupt. Lest I be misunderstood, I am not saying that lying is a great virtue and that more international lying is better than less. I am merely saying that lying is sometimes a useful instrument of statecraft

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