

LYING IN STATE

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LYING IN STATE



**WHY PRESIDENTS LIE—
AND WHY TRUMP IS WORSE**

ERIC ALTERMAN

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*To Laura Hercher,
with love, gratitude,
and most of all,
amazement.*



That's the thing about lies, right? Individually, they don't amount to much. But you never know how many others you'll need to tell to protect that first one. And damned if they don't add up. Over time they all get tangled up, until one day you realize it isn't even the lies themselves that matter, it's that somehow lying has become your default mode and the person you lie to most is yourself.

—RICHARD RUSSO, *Chances Are* (2019)



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A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

One reason journalists often offer for eschewing the word “lie” when writing or talking about presidential lies is their inability to discern the speaker’s intent. In this book, however, I am less interested in intent than responsibility. If it was the president’s professional responsibility to know the truth about something and he did not bother to learn it, or he and his subordinates purposely avoided sharing information in order to establish “plausible deniability,” I still call it a lie. My understanding of the meaning of the word “lie” begins with the Augustinian argument that “a lie consists in speaking a falsehood with the intention of deceiving.”¹ But because a president is more than just an individual, our definition must be considerably more expansive. A presidential lie takes place when the president or someone with the authority to speak for the president seeks to purposely mislead the country about a matter of political significance. The president can remain silent while his subordinates lie for him. He can censor the truth or impede the means to discover it. The only measure of intent that interests me is whether the deception itself, however operationally undertaken, is purposeful. If it

A Note on Definitions

was accidental or based on ignorance or a misunderstanding, it can be corrected and therefore should be.

In the pages that follow, I reject the excuses often offered for the kinds of deceptions I've just described, such as that the president was "disengaged," "confused," or "distracted"; that "God told him"; or that "he's just an unbelievable narcissist." I also consider censorship, when it is purposely deployed to misinform, to count as a lie. This is not to condemn censorship per se. Societies cannot protect themselves without it. The Constitution, as various Supreme Court justices have observed (albeit for competing arguments), is "not a suicide pact."² But the power to prevent speech is awfully easy to abuse for personal and political gain, and when this happens, it functions as a lie. Secrecy is also an a priori necessity of governance, especially in wartime. But it, too, can easily bleed into dishonesty when abused, and abuse tends to its natural path when presidents are given the power to determine what citizens should and should not know. Under certain circumstances, therefore, as we shall see, it is possible for a president or his representative to lie by silencing others, and by saying nothing at all.

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HOW COULD TRUMP HAPPEN?

I hardly need to make the argument that Donald Trump is a liar. Neither is it news that previous presidents have also lied quite a bit. At the same time, the depth and breadth of Trump's dishonesty is something decidedly new. As the MSNBC host Chris Hayes wrote in a *New York Times* book review just eighteen months after Trump's inauguration: "The president is a liar. He lies about matters of the utmost consequence (nuclear diplomacy) and about the most trivial (his golf game). He lies about things you can see with your own eyes. He lies about things he said just moments ago. He lies the way a woodpecker attacks a tree: compulsively, insistently, instinctively. He lies until your temples throb. He lies until you want to submerge your head in a bucket of ice and pray for release."¹

President Trump's ability to lie without concern for credibility is both shocking and gruesomely impressive. In one three-day period in

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April 2019, Trump managed to make 171 “false or misleading claims,” according to the *Washington Post* fact-checking team. During a telephone interview with the Fox News talk-show host Sean Hannity, he uttered 45 falsehoods in 45 minutes.² It is fair to call someone who lies that frequently and shamelessly “pathological.” So yes, America has a pathological liar for its president, and literally nothing he says can be taken at face value. How did such a thing become possible? How could the world’s most powerful nation, and its oldest democratic republic, allow itself to be led by such a person? And what are the implications of allowing this liar not only to set the policies of the United States, but also to dominate its political culture to a degree that is no less unprecedented than his dishonesty?

For so common a human occurrence, lying can be quite complicated, both morally and practically. We teach our children that lying is always wrong, but we don’t really mean it. As a young child in Hebrew school, I was taught to admire Jacob for tricking his father, Isaac, into giving the birthright blessing to him rather than its rightful recipient, his older brother, Esau.³ My classmates and I were also taught to admire the Egyptian midwives’ lie to Pharaoh’s men about having murdered the Israelites’ first-born sons, as commanded, including the little fellow who grew up to be Moses.⁴

While few of us would willingly call ourselves “liars,” the person who does not lie with some frequency is rare indeed. Sociologists Deborah A. Kashy and Bella M. DePaulo observed that lies are “a fact of social life rather than an extraordinary or unusual event. People tell lies to accomplish the most basic social interaction goals, such as influencing others, managing impressions, and providing reassurance and support.”⁵

In certain contexts and cultures, lying is both appreciated and admired. According to a study by another sociologist, J. A. Barnes, “the San Blas Kuna, of northeastern Panama, are said to ‘enjoy deceiving

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each other.’” The Kalapalo, an indigenous people of central Brazil, also allegedly “welcome being tricked,” said Barnes. In contemporary culture, however, lies are most often tolerated or ignored, especially when they are not believed anyway. People expect to be told lies when dealing with certain types of businesses, such as, to name just three, real estate, car sales, and public relations. In Hollywood, it is considered foolish to assume anyone is telling the truth without a signed contract, and it is sometimes even considered an insult. The protagonist of Ward Just’s 2002 novel *The Weather in Berlin*, a Hollywood-based film director, describes this sort of dishonesty as “a sacrament...the bread and wine of industry communions.” Lies in these businesses are often not even considered dishonest. Indeed, the nineteenth-century British statesman Sir Henry Taylor maintained that a “falsehood ceases to be a falsehood when it is understood on all sides that the truth is not expected to be spoken.” The business of politics is no different. Hannah Arendt sardonically noted that “no one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues.” To the contrary, she went on, “lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s or the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade.”⁶

Clearly, politics is not a profession that rewards, much less fetishizes, honesty. Results are what matter. In failing to hold presidents accountable for their lies, the American press has reflected a larger ambivalence about doing so among the American people. Historically, the public has tended to accept presidential lies as the cost of doing business, although some lies are contested and a few are considered shocking and unacceptable. It is no easy task to discern in advance, however, which lies will inspire which reaction, or even to define what constitutes a presidential lie and what does not.

Americans have tended to be willing to indulge presidential lies so long as they get the job done. In 2017, C-Span surveyed 91 historians in order to rank presidents for their effectiveness, a measure

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that included “moral authority.” What was striking about the result was that presidents’ reputations for lying or truth-telling did not appear to matter. Compulsive liars Ronald Reagan and Lyndon Johnson both made it into the top ten. Relative truth-tellers Barack Obama and Jimmy Carter came in twelfth and twenty-sixth, respectively, the latter just barely above the presidency’s most egregious (pre-Trump) liar, Richard Nixon, who was twenty-eighth on the list. In presidential rankings based on public polling, the famous liars do even better, albeit largely as a result of ongoing political arguments and loyalties rather than careful historical consideration and comparisons. In a 2011 Gallup poll, for instance, Reagan was number one and Bill Clinton was number three, with Abraham Lincoln squeaking into second place.⁷

These results are regrettable. A purposeful presidential falsehood on a matter of consequence necessarily sets off a chain reaction that can easily ricochet out of control.⁸ Presidential lies—even when spoken by a subordinate—have the power to create their own reality, a fact that often complicates the original problem the lie was intended to address. When this happens, it can become impossible to respond effectively. Rather than admit to the lie and endure the humiliation of being caught in it, presidents usually double, triple, and quadruple down on the lie, inevitably making the problem worse. Lies must be piled atop other lies ad infinitum until the entire edifice collapses beneath the weight of the many falsehoods.

Under such circumstances, democracy cannot properly function. As Arendt observed, “if everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer....And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.”⁹ Arendt said this in the wake of Nixon’s Watergate scandal, but her warning has never felt more prophetic—and more ominous—than under the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

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And yet, we cannot simply offer a blanket condemnation of presidential lying, as it is not always wrong. We can celebrate the fact that Franklin Roosevelt possessed the vision to ready the nation for war against Hitler and Hirohito even if he had to lie repeatedly to do it—that is, publicly proclaiming a commitment to keeping America out of foreign wars, while secretly taking steps to prepare for the one he believed to be inevitable. America’s readiness to fight the Nazis and the Japanese imperialists when the time came no doubt saved millions of lives and likely prevented Europe from falling to the fascists. Yet Lyndon Johnson’s lies during the lead-up to America’s direct involvement in the Vietnam War, while almost perfectly analogous to those FDR told a generation earlier, were undertaken in the service of an unnecessary and ultimately failed war. As the senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas observed during that catastrophe, “FDR’s deviousness in a good cause made it easier for LBJ to practice the same kind of deviousness in a bad cause.”¹⁰ Presidential lying remains a conundrum we have yet to solve.

Presidents who do not lie to the nation have been the exception, not the rule. But early in American history, presidents lied in most cases without anything like the consequences that have become possible in modern times. The United States was not a terribly powerful nation in its infancy. The federal government was not even all that powerful within the United States. And the presidency held less power within the federal government than it does today. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the decisions of a US president played precious little visible role in the daily lives of most citizens.

Despite its constant expansion across North America, until the twentieth century the United States was not terribly influential beyond its shores. One history of the period quotes a nineteenth-century secretary of state observing, “There are just two rules at the State Department: one, that no business is ever done out of business hours; and the other is, that no business is ever done *in* business hours.”¹¹ Yet

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the early presidents (and their secretaries of state) set precedents that lay the foundation for future presidential lies. And these lies would assume much greater significance once the presidency grew more powerful within the government, the government grew more powerful within the nation, and the nation grew more powerful in the world.

In 1896 the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner looked back across three centuries and pronounced the drive for expansion to be the “dominant fact” of the nation’s life thus far. But this drive for expansion differed from Europe’s, because Americans did not see themselves as colonialists. Early Americans “truly believed,” as the historian Walter Nugent observed, “that their providential mission and destiny permitted, even demanded,” their commitment to the cause of constant expansion. They felt themselves “exempted from normal rules against theft or invasion of other people’s territory,” Nugent wrote, and believed that “their own racial superiority exempted them from regarding others as equals.” They were bolstered in this belief by their all-but-universal commitment to an ideology of white supremacy, one that expressed itself in the institution of slavery and the near eradication of the Native American population. Soon afterward, these beliefs inspired the conquest of foreign lands in which nonwhite peoples lived and worked.¹²

As a consequence, presidential lying during this time was largely a matter of advancing a narrative designed to justify a series of brutal policies in the service of a strict racial hierarchy—while American citizens continued to flatter themselves that they lived in a land where “all men are created equal.”¹³ This contradiction haunted the United States as it rose to become the world’s wealthiest nation and then the most powerful one in terms of military might.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in 1945, Americans came to see their country, in President Harry Truman’s words, as “the greatest Republic the world has ever seen, the greatest country that the sun ever shone on.”¹⁴ At the same time, as the Cold War dawned, the US government adopted an almost limitless definition

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of its “national security” needs. Its official strategy was laid out in a top-secret document titled “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” better known as NSC 68, which said that “the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake.”¹⁵ The combination of the perceived existential challenge posed by the Soviets and the precarious nature of the nuclear standoff meant that Cold War US presidents shouldered greater responsibilities and were accorded greater powers than any previous leaders in history. In this context of saving “the free world” from Soviet domination or preventing the world’s destruction by nuclear weapons, the telling of a few presidential lies hardly registered as objectionable.

This awesome responsibility would prove too great for several of the presidents charged with carrying it out. Lyndon Johnson’s lies, combined with his mental and emotional instability late in his presidency, led to the catastrophe in Vietnam and could easily have spun even further out of control. Richard Nixon’s incessant dishonesty, together with his noxious combination of ambition, racism, and criminality, produced an even more volatile situation, which, thanks to bipartisan efforts in Congress, was brought swiftly to an end without a constitutional crisis. Nevertheless, the policies of these presidents caused over fifty-seven thousand senseless American battle deaths and likely at least three million more deaths among the soldiers and civilians of Vietnam and Cambodia.¹⁶ Jimmy Carter seemed unable to manage America’s empire satisfactorily, and his presidency was derailed by it. America on his watch endured humiliations by Iranian militants and Soviet generals because of his refusal to risk provoking widespread war. Ronald Reagan, in the years following Carter, revived and expanded the nation’s commitment to aggressively defending and expanding its empire, but he would find himself telling lie after lie in pursuit of illegal wars based on ideological fixations; when explaining his actions, frequently he behaved as if detached from reality. The wars he pursued undermined his own authority as president and played a significant role in the defeat of his successor, George H.W. Bush, in seeking a second term.¹⁷

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We need not minimize the often horrific consequences of past presidential lies in order to observe that they pale in comparison to the depth and breadth of the lies told by Donald Trump. The wars, coups, and assassinations that these presidents lied about resulted in the deaths of millions of innocent people and the displacement of many millions more. Trillions of dollars were wasted in the process, and the good name of the United States of America suffered around the world. These presidents surely lied—but they did not lie about everything. The office of the presidency continued to function with the understanding that although the president would have to lie on occasion for reasons of national security, the office and its occupant should remain more or less tethered to reality. Those days ended on January 20, 2017, the day of Donald Trump’s inauguration.

The role of the media has always been crucial to the phenomenon of presidential lying. In theory, the responsibility of the press to hold the government accountable is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution. It’s the press’s job to tell the truth about what the government is doing, what it means, and why it matters. When a president considers telling a lie—again, at least theoretically—he is forced to consider the likelihood that his mendacity may be exposed to the public by some conscientious journalistic institution working to ferret out the truth in the public interest. These hard-earned truths empower citizens to make informed judgments about their leaders despite any dishonesty or demagoguery those leaders may exhibit. In practice, however, members of the press have historically proven themselves to be decidedly ambivalent about holding presidents to a standard of basic truthfulness. In the century following the American Revolution, journalism was primarily a partisan endeavor, with news-sheets and journals tied explicitly to one of the major political parties or local bosses. News articles at the time, like life itself, were largely nasty and brutish (though not always short). When it comes to scurrilous accusations and paranoid fantasies, the

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likes of Fox News's Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, and Tucker Carlson have nothing on George Washington's scourge, Benjamin Franklin Bache, publisher of the *Philadelphia Aurora*, much less the pamphleteer James Thomson Callender, whose work would malign Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, among others.

When it comes to lying, modern political reporters have found it challenging to call presidents out. The reasons are both multifaceted and self-reinforcing. On matters of "national security"—a term that in most cases denotes the expansion or maintenance of the American empire—journalists have repeatedly proven themselves eager to give presidents and their advisers a wide berth, lest they appear unpatriotic, or somehow find themselves responsible for undermining the nation's safety. Another cause for reticence has been the expectation that journalists show respect for the office of the presidency, which they—publicly at least—have been more than happy to fulfill. A third barrier arises from the ideology of journalistic objectivity, which dictates that there are always two sides to any given issue, and that it is wrong to take one over the other, despite the fact that one (or both) might be based on a lie. Even at its most elite level, a majority of political news reporters are satisfied to rely on the typical "he said, she said" formula. Conflict, after all, is what makes a good story. Truth or lies—well, that's a matter for the fact-checkers. This is why, as the pundit Michael Kinsley noted during the second Bush administration, "if some politician declares that two plus two is five, reporters might note that this position is not without controversy. Indeed there are critics, including politicians of the opposite party, who contend that two plus two may actually be four." This tendency can be relatively innocuous so long as politicians hew close enough to the truth. The problem, as the *Washington Post's* legendary editor Ben Bradlee once explained, is that "even the very best newspapers have never learned how to handle public figures who lie with a straight face."¹⁸

Prior to Donald Trump's 2016 campaign, politicians' lies were treated in the mainstream media as an everyday occurrence that could

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be countered. And they were countered not by calling them “lies”—which was considered nonobjective, and evidence of liberal bias, since it was most often Republicans doing the lying—but by quoting “the other side.” In recent decades, this reluctance on the part of mainstream journalists to make a judgment about falsehoods came to be understood by right-wing Republican politicians as a license to lie. These lies were repeated and amplified by an enormous and growing web of conservative media outlets that arose during these same decades. These institutions operated on the radio, in print, on cable television, and eventually across almost all social media. Conservative billionaires, media entrepreneurs, and shamelessly amoral self-promoters joined together to create an entire media ecosystem in which false assertions and deliberately distorted reporting held sway. The result is that today lies have been built atop other lies, and these have come to define reality—or what the columnist and political philosopher Walter Lippmann once termed “the pictures in our heads”—for tens of millions of Americans, despite the fact that they bear virtually no relation to “the world outside,” or, in other words, actual reality.¹⁹

Given the influence that this right-wing media ecosystem came to enjoy among Republican voters, its members were able to demand the fealty of almost every Republican politician seeking national office. In order to survive in this hothouse of extremist ideology combined with casual, constant dishonesty, the historian Garry Wills observed, Republicans ended up renouncing virtually the entire Enlightenment, and with it, “reason, facts, science, open-mindedness, tolerance, secularity, [and] modernity.” It was a long time coming, but by 2011, veteran ex-Republican congressional staffer Mike Lofgren admitted that his former political home was looking “less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult.” Not long after the publication of Lofgren’s article containing this *cri de coeur*, on Sunday, April 29, 2012, the respected nonpartisan political analysts Thomas Mann of the centrist Brookings Institution and Norman Ornstein of the

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conservative American Enterprise Institute grew so frustrated with Republican recalcitrance that they joined together to author a missive in the *Washington Post* titled “Let’s Just Say It: The Republicans Are the Problem.” The piece was remarkable owing to the fact that Mann and Ornstein represented the heart of what had been the bipartisan political establishment, offering what had been treated as unbiased political analysis to journalists for over forty years. Now they were warning of “an insurgent outlier in American politics”—a political party that had grown “ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.” They told journalists that the ideology of objectivity notwithstanding, “a balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomenon distorts reality.”²⁰ The op-ed proved to be among the most widely read, cited, and retweeted of any published in the paper since the earliest days of the Internet. Many journalists congratulated its authors in private for saying what they could not say publicly.

Yet nothing changed. Editors and producers, Mann explained, were “concerned about their professional standing and vulnerability to charges of partisan bias.”²¹ So, like the man in the joke whose doctor tells him to give up drinking and instead gives up doctors, reporters simply stopped speaking to Mann and Ornstein—at least without hearing from “both sides.” It was the media’s willingness to embrace the culture of dishonesty that helped to open a door for a president openly contemptuous of the media—and of the truth itself. How this happened is central to the story of presidential lying and the threat it has come to pose to our democracy and political culture.

The Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas offered a distinction between “misinformation” and “disinformation”: the former applies to mistaken statements, while the latter denotes purposeful deception. This is a book about both. A president does not have to

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mean to lie in order to lie. He just needs to stick to the falsehood once he learns the truth. To Habermas's two categories, moreover, we must add two more. The first is the "bald-faced lie." Philosophers, including Thomas Carson, author of *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice*, define these as lies that are understood by their audience to be lies and hence do not function as lies typically do, with an intention to deceive. The problem with this category is that, in the case of a president, or almost any politician, it is almost impossible to identify such lies, since both the liar and those being lied to have every incentive to refuse to admit that they are purposely embracing a lie and ignoring what they know to true. The second category is "bullshit." According to Princeton University philosopher Harry Frankfurt, this refers to statements in which the speaker "does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose." Bullshit enables both misinformation and disinformation to thrive.²² In spouting his "bullshit," along with his misinformation, disinformation, and bald-faced lies, President Trump has been empowered by decades of increasing Republican radicalism, amplified by a conservative media establishment that not only encourages lies among its members, but demands them. These media personalities and institutions act swiftly to punish any politician who deviates from the political and ideological lines they draw, and they do so with no apparent concern for the public good and with a shocking willingness to discount reality itself. Thus, America's political history has somehow arrived at a moment in which, at the highest levels of government and media, the right kinds of lies are casually and consistently prized above truth. For that reason, in the pages that follow, the story I tell becomes as much about the damage wrought by the failure of the media to hold presidents accountable for lying as about the presidential lying itself. Together, the media and the growing trend of presidential dishonesty have laid the groundwork for the otherwise implausible presidency of Donald J. Trump.

“The Serpent’s Eye That Charms but to Destroy”

Ever since the first slave ship arrived in Jamestown in the Colony of Virginia in 1619, the racist assumptions underlying the ideology of white supremacy have remained, for the most part, just below the surface of American political life. Yet these beliefs have profoundly contradicted Americans’ understanding of themselves and their professed belief that “all men are created equal.” Rather than confront this contradiction, American presidents have felt it necessary to elide it with lies. George Washington was no exception.

Literally nothing mattered more to America’s first president than his honor. Historian Gordon Wood admitted that to modern eyes Washington’s concern for his reputation may appear “embarrassing,” even “obsessive and egotistical.” But it differed only in degree from that of his contemporaries. “All gentlemen tried scrupulously to guard their reputations, which is what they meant by their honor,” Wood explained. “To have honor across space and time was

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to have fame, and fame is what the founders were after, Washington above all.”¹

By the standards of his time, Washington’s treatment of his slaves was considered unusually humane, and it contributed to the esteem he enjoyed among his peers. His relationship with his slaves was in many respects patriarchal. He thought of them as children who were incapable of looking after themselves or understanding their own self-interest. He saw to their health and welfare and even included a provision giving them their freedom upon his death. But he was tough as well, and would punish and sometimes sell those slaves deemed guilty of “indolence” or “insubordination.”² He was capable of demonstrating a shocking callousness toward them on occasion, treating them worse than most would treat a favored pet that failed to obey them. And when it came to matters of commerce, they were property, pure and simple, no different from land or livestock. He traded them with fellow slave owners when it suited his economic interests.³

It is fitting that Washington’s only discernible lie as president arose from his role as the beneficiary of this barbaric institution. When the nation’s capital was moved from New York to Philadelphia in 1790, he faced a Pennsylvania law that freed all slaves residing in the state for six consecutive months. The president and his wife circumvented this inconvenience by shuttling their favorite slaves back and forth to their Virginia home at Mount Vernon. As Washington wrote to his plantation manager, Tobias Lear: “I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that may deceive both them and the Public.” He was worried not only about the law and his reputation, but also about the fact that “the idea of freedom might be too great a temptation for them to resist.”⁴

It could hardly have been otherwise. America’s “original sin” could not but stain the character of every white man and woman it touched. Washington’s lie about the location of his slaves was decidedly a minor one, given that it was of little consequence outside his

“*The Serpent’s Eye That Charms but to Destroy*”

immediate household. And yet, as the only identifiable lie he told as president, it changes our understanding of Washington and of the founding of the United States more generally. He was, after all, in historian Joseph Ellis’s words, “the Foundingest Father of them all,” and yet one is hard-pressed to disagree with fellow historian Eric Foner’s 2019 judgment that “when it came to taking action to end slavery, he, like most of the revolutionary generation, must be found wanting.”⁵

The conduct of Washington’s fellow Virginia planter and slave owner Thomas Jefferson adds a far more problematic dimension to our understanding of the nation’s founding. We now know for certain that this revered author of the Declaration of Independence, who served as governor of Virginia and president of the United States and became the founder of the University of Virginia, fathered at least one child with his slave Sally Hemings—and quite possibly all six of her children—during the thirty-eight years she served him.⁶

Jefferson lied about this relationship for almost his entire life. The first person to publicly accuse him was the raffish Scottish journalist James Thomson Callender, who reported, in the *Richmond Recorder* on September 1, 1802, “It is well known that the man, *whom it delighteth the people to honor*, keeps, and for many years has kept, as his concubine, one of his own slaves. Her name is SALLY...By this wench Sally, our president has had several children.” Callender was admirably nonpartisan in his choice of targets. Before he exposed the rumors about Jefferson, a Republican, Callender was best known for tormenting Jefferson’s political nemesis, the Federalist mastermind Alexander Hamilton, who had been George Washington’s treasury secretary and closest adviser. It was Callender who, five years earlier, had revealed the tawdry tale of Hamilton’s extramarital affair and his blackmailing by his mistress’s husband—a story that, in his day, marred Hamilton’s reputation beyond repair. Callender also attacked then president John Adams, calling him a “hideous hermaphroditical character.”⁷

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The Federalists had jailed and fined Callender in retaliation, but they had also apparently converted him. It was after leaving prison in 1801 that he started after Jefferson. Although his conversion had come after Jefferson had pardoned him as a “martyr” to the Republican cause, Callender was quick to blackmail the new president with the demand that he pay him \$200—the cost of his fine—and appoint him postmaster of Richmond in order to keep quiet. Jefferson agreed to pay only \$50, which was not enough to quiet his new adversary. Rather than admit the truth of his relationship with Hemings, Jefferson blamed “the Federalists” for “open[ing] all their sluices of calumny.” Privately, he claimed that Callender knew “nothing of which I am not willing to declare to the world myself.”⁸ Alas, as we now know from DNA evidence, that was a lie. Conveniently, however, a drunken Callender soon drowned himself.

Historians long accepted Jefferson’s word for his innocence, following on the view expressed by his biographer James Parton, who wrote in 1874 that “if Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong.”⁹ This was, in fact, true, but in the sense opposite to what Parton intended. Slavery was wrong. Jefferson was wrong. And America was wrong. But in Jefferson’s Virginia, such behavior was no cause for concern. General John Hartwell Cocke, who, together with Jefferson, would found the University of Virginia, noted that in their home state “all Batchelors, or a large majority at least, [kept] a substitute for a wife” among their slaves.¹⁰ John Quincy Adams even wrote a humorous poem about the rumor. But his father, John Adams, predicted that “Callender and Sally will be remembered as long as Jefferson has Blotts in his Character,” and called the whole episode “a natural and almost unavoidable Consequence of that foul contagion (pox) in the human Character [of] Negro Slavery.”¹¹ And here Jefferson’s predecessor in the presidency spoke not for his fellow founders, or for his countrymen, but for posterity. Jefferson lied because he owned slaves and enjoyed what was understood to be the rightful advantages of his position in his own time and place. But from posterity’s viewpoint, slavery made liars of

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anyone who professed to prize their honor, and the stain it left on the character of America’s revered founders has remained indelible throughout its subsequent history.

America’s founders disagreed on a great deal, both materially and philosophically, but they shared a fundamental sense that they had embarked on a great experiment upon which the future of civilization itself depended. “We have it in our power,” declared the American Revolution’s great ideologist, Thomas Paine, “to begin the world over again.”¹² It was, simultaneously, a boast and a prayer, but it was also an endeavor they were prepared to try to protect at almost any cost.

The founders understood the European system of military competition between states for territory and riches to be the root cause of the continent’s deepest problems—endless war, class oppression, and mass impoverishment—and they feared that such a system could undermine their revolution. Armies and navies liked to fight wars. Wars, they knew, tended to enrich the few at the expense of the many and create a class of leaders who loved luxury more than virtue. This sequence of events had, in their eyes, led to the collapse of both Athenian democracy and the Roman republic, and they sought to avoid it all costs.

It was the founders’ most profound wish to absent themselves from the kinds of Old World quarrels and rivalries that might result in war and put them on this destructive pathway. Their natural inclination was to try to withdraw themselves entirely from the world of diplomacy. But they simultaneously understood that the success of their grand experiment rested at least in part on the ability of the nation’s citizens to participate in unfettered transatlantic trade. And engaging in trade would require a means of protecting US merchant ships from pirates and other countries’ navies, as well keeping trading routes open in the parts of North America where France, Britain,

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and Spain continued to hold sway. Hence, they acknowledged the need for an army and a navy and all the associated things that could threaten to undermine a nascent republic.

Washington's famous farewell address of 1796 should be seen in this light. In this letter to "friends and fellow citizens," the departing president proclaimed that America should protect itself and its ships but go no further. It should avoid "permanent alliances." (An earlier draft, prepared four years earlier, had included the warning that the new nation should "never unsheathe the sword except in self-defense.") John Quincy Adams reiterated this warning with even greater force and eloquence in 1821, when he said that "wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be." But the nation must not "[go] abroad, in search of monsters to destroy....[America's] glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*."¹³

At the same time, the volatile energies and ensuing population explosion that the American Revolution catalyzed needed somewhere to go. Fortunately, there happened to be an immense, sparsely populated continent just beyond the borders of the original thirteen colonies ready to absorb them. By far the most consequential lies told by early American presidents were those told in the service of this ceaseless expansion, as the continent was not nearly so sparsely populated as Americans had led themselves to believe. This vast expanse offered not only the world's greatest source of untapped natural resources but also a means of avoiding Old World decadence and corruption. America did not need to compete with European nations for access to the materials it needed to grow powerful. Nor was the growing population a problem. Americans just needed to move westward. Almost no one took note of the colonial claims of foreign nations to any of this territory, much less of the tens of millions of Native Americans who were already there. In many respects, as the historian Walter Nugent convincingly argued, American history was "a continuous narrative of territorial acquisition."

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Nugent broke down its components as follows: “Military solutions, overlain by rationales and high ideals, have consistently been considered effective and justified. Expansion has also been premised on the conviction that America and Americans are not tainted with evil or self-serving motives. Americans, the ideology says, are exceptions to the moral infirmities that plague the rest of humankind, because our ideals are pure, a ‘beacon to humankind,’ and, as Lincoln said, ‘the last best hope of earth.’”¹⁴

These beliefs are deeply held convictions at the core of American public life, and yet they are not even remotely consistent with reality. Therefore, US presidents have been forced to lie to the public in the pursuit of their expansionist goals, and history has tended to reward these same presidents for their lies, judging them exclusively on the basis of their effectiveness rather than on their honesty. Each “success” provided a path for the next president, who then built on both the new conquests and the lies his predecessor told to win them. And, as with so many of the consequential turns in the early history of the American presidency, the tradition begins with Thomas Jefferson.

The five years Jefferson spent representing the colonies in France, from 1784 to 1789, had left him haunted by the specter of mass poverty. In the landless peasants he saw there, he had observed a poverty that was passed from generation to generation. American yeoman farmers, he believed, stood in contrast to these peasants. America’s farmers, citizens who owned their own plots of land, were “the chosen people of God,” the source of “His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.” Only such farmers, and likewise tradesmen, could uphold the Enlightenment values necessary to sustain the spirit of the Revolution. Were American farmers and tradesmen ever to sink to the level of dependence he witnessed in France, he believed, the dream of liberty and virtue would sink irretrievably with them. America’s salvation thus lay westward, beyond the original confines of the new nation. The continent’s beautiful, bountiful lands would draw Americans out of the corrupt cities already

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developing in the east and allow future generations the opportunity to create a nation of virtuous, socially and politically equal yeoman farmers. “By enlarging the empire of liberty,” Jefferson wrote, “we multiply its auxiliaries, and provide new sources of renovation, should its principles at any time degenerate in those portions of our country which gave them birth.” In a letter to James Monroe shortly after the latter became president, Jefferson admitted to dreaming of a day when the infant nation would “cover the whole Northern, if not the Southern continent with a people speaking in the same language, governing in similar forms and by similar laws.”¹⁵

In pursuit of this dream, Jefferson was willing to set aside his lifelong commitment to limited government. Previously, he had been a fierce opponent of the concentration of power in the new federal government created by the Constitution, and with it, the implied powers that Hamilton and company had insisted it contained. He was no doubt driven by fears that his rival’s vision of a powerful, urbanized, commercial nation-state would result in a corrupt, moneyed aristocracy that might undermine the virtue that Jefferson so prized in its citizens.

Jefferson’s presidency will always be associated with the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France, and properly so. The new lands were considered so vast at the time that few could say exactly where the territory began or ended, or whose sovereignty counted where. Under the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, the United States paid \$15 million for roughly 830,000 square miles. The price was significantly more than the entire federal budget at the time, but the deal, signed in May, more than doubled the size of the country. Today, the area stretches across fifteen US states and two Canadian provinces. According to Jefferson’s former, literalist interpretation of the president’s constitutional powers, he lacked the authority to commit to this purchase on his own. He did it anyway, though, because he believed that the opportunities for expansion into the new territories would likely be the salvation of the nation’s virtue for generations to come. America’s population was already growing at a remarkable

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rate, and it was only getting started.¹⁶ But whether he was right about the future—or even about the virtue of yeoman farmers—is beside the point. The point is that this would hardly be the last time a president would claim for himself powers that, before assuming office, he had insisted lay beyond any president’s rightful mandate.

Indeed, Jefferson had been plotting to find a way to capture the territory for his country well before France offered to sell it. Moreover, a few months earlier, in February 1803, he had recruited men for an expedition that he disguised as a scientific endeavor when in truth it was a commercial and military one: an exploration of the trans-Mississippi West, which at the time remained in Spain’s hands. “The idea that you are going to explore the Mississippi has generally been given out,” Jefferson confided to Meriwether Lewis (of Lewis and Clark) in a letter dated April 27. The reason, he continued, was that it “satisfies public curiosity and masks sufficiently the real destination”—which was, in fact, the Pacific.¹⁷ Here Jefferson was admitting to a lie, albeit a small one as he understood it, given what he believed to be at stake.

Jefferson’s successor, James Madison, a fellow Virginia planter—and Jefferson’s partner in almost all their political and philosophical endeavors—was a clearer thinker and a less impetuous politician. His role in drafting the Constitution and recording the debates that took place over it, together with the essays he penned in *The Federalist Papers* to argue for its ratification, speak to his extraordinary intellect and commitment to the cause of the new nation. But as a practicing politician, Madison was not in Jefferson’s league, and as president, he soon found himself overwhelmed and compelled to lie. Less practiced in the art of deception than his mercurial mentor, Madison ultimately set the nation on a path toward a nearly ruinous and unnecessary war.

Like Jefferson, Madison dedicated himself to using his office to strengthen the young nation’s commitment to liberty and virtue by means of expansion. Also like his predecessor, he did not much

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occupy himself with the intellectual compromises necessary to reconcile that goal with the ideas he had previously espoused about the limited powers of the presidency. In 1811, Madison asserted US jurisdiction over Spanish West Florida on the basis of an intellectually indefensible interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase, and pretended to Congress, without any evidence, that the British were about to invade the territory. (Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and their fellow Republicans insisted against all evidence that Napoleon had sold Florida to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase. But Florida belonged to Spain, and France never disputed this, so obviously France could not sell it to the United States.) A year later, in 1812, he sought and received congressional authorization to use force to prevent a foreign takeover of East Florida, which this time did lead to war. Ironically, Madison had previously gone to great lengths to avoid just this outcome. In public, he had taken a tough line against the British on the issue of the impressment of American sailors while privately allowing that if the crown would just tone down its rhetoric a bit, it need not change its actual policy. When the British laughed at what they considered to be ridiculous demands from a pipsqueak, nearly navy-less nation, Madison reversed himself and charged England with spilling “American blood” within US territory via “pretended blockades” and the “plundering” of US ships. The British were actually seizing fewer US ships than France was during this period, and a great many of the sailors they grabbed off of them were genuine deserters from the Royal Navy. Most important, however, the British announced before the war began that they would be suspending these activities. This news did not reach the public until after hostilities had begun and Madison had gotten his war—a war that almost cost the country its independence.¹⁸

Madison’s successor and the fourth and final member of the Virginia planters presidential club was James Monroe. To be sure, he remained committed to the program of continuous expansion established by his predecessors—but, to be fair, most of his administration’s