

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

Are U.S. Presidents Required to Lie?

By David A. Crockett

The war in Iraq is over, but questions about why it was fought are growing. Those who believe the Bush administration exaggerated the case for the attack have questioned some of its prewar assertions about Iraq's weapons programs, most recently zeroing in on the accuracy of the president's State of the Union statement that Iraq was trying to acquire uranium from Africa for nuclear weapons development. So far, no weapons of mass destruction have been found.

Against this backdrop, a television ad produced by the Democratic National Committee falls just shy of calling the president a liar, and a new poll suggests that the stories of alleged deception are taking a toll, with fewer than half of respondents now saying they see Bush as a leader they can trust. (at the time of this article's release)

How important is the issue of credibility to a president? It is unrealistic to expect presidents to be models of objective neutrality. Some level of secrecy is inherent to the art of diplomacy, and deception can be an effective tool in matters of national security. Intelligence data is often uncertain, and sometimes presidents say things that prove to be false without intending to lie

Equally important, modern public-opinion management seems to require political leaders to simplify complex issues for their audience. These are individuals who win office by making their best sales pitch, and when pursuing their policy goals they present their strongest case, letting others point out weaknesses.

Our political system relies on this competitive dynamic. As James Madison, a key framer of the Constitution, wrote, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." The framers were not wide-eyed idealists unfamiliar with the temptations of power, and they hoped that pitting ambitious leaders against each other would help guard the public interest.

The current issue, however, is different. President Bush is being accused of making untrue statements (knowingly or not) for reasons of state – in other words, hyping the case for war. Those who believe all values are relative should not be troubled by this charge. Machiavelli long ago advised the prudent prince to "be a great liar and hypocrite," arguing that the most successful leaders were those "who knew how to manipulate the minds of men craftily."

That advice, however, doesn't play well with the American people and has more often than not proved damaging to the republic. Without prejudging the current Bush controversy – the details remain uncertain – it is worth exploring why personal credibility makes a difference in matters of state.

The framers of the Constitution had specific goals in mind when constructing the government, and they gave the presidency a specific function in the American political system. Alexander Hamilton wrote that the functions of the executive branch were to execute the laws and employ the common strength.

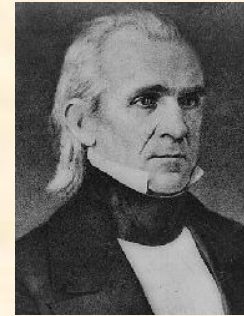
FUNCTION OF A PRESIDENT

In simple language, the presidency was designed to set and clarify goals, react to crises and pursue steady administration of the law. To fulfill these functions, the framers believed the office had to possess the quality of energy, a term that meant effective power or strength. The only way to arm the presidency with energy was to make in a unitary office, an institution centered on one person.

The other branches of government are structured differently. Congress is a plural branch designed to represent the people and enact policies in response to the popular

Prevaricating Presidents

Short- and long-term effects of U.S. presidents' departures from the truth:



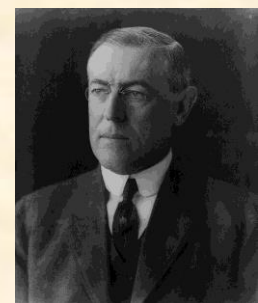
JAMES K. POLK

WHAT HE DID: False claims about a Mexican attack on U.S. soil sparked a war in the 1840s, gaining U.S. territory.
THE CONSEQUENCES: Divisiveness within the U.S. deepened, and distrust between the US. and Mexico lingers.



THEODORE ROOSEVELT

WHAT HE DID: He lied to foment unrest in Columbia to create a nation willing to let him build the Panama Canal
THE CONSEQUENCES: His manipulation added to the distrust between the United States and Latin America



WOODROW WILSON

WHAT HE DID: To justify entrance into World War I, he exaggerated the threat of German spies.
THE CONSEQUENCES: His words led to anti-immigrant hysteria and suspension of many civil liberties.



In the State of the Union address, delivered in January, Bush asserted that Iraq was trying to acquire uranium from Africa to develop nuclear weapons.

will. The Supreme Court is a small collegial body of learned experts who enjoy job security so that they may protect our liberties and rights.

The principal difference between the presidency and the other branches of government is its unity. Because decision, speed and firmness are essential in certain circumstances, and those qualities are more likely to be manifested in one hand rather than many, the presidency is one individual. That is why the character of the president is more important than the character of any single individual in another branch of government. If a member of Congress lies, he is merely one person in a larger institution. If a president chooses to lie or abuse power, that affects the entire executive branch.

Hamilton wrote that “a feeble executive implies a feeble execution of the government.” If a character flaw like lying adversely affects the presidency, it will have a negative effect on the functions the presidency is designed to fulfill. A weak presidency leads to weak governance. It leads to a hampered ability to set goals, react to crises and pursue steady administration of the law. History provides plenty of examples.

LYING FOR REASONS OF STATE

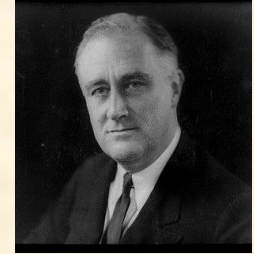
James K. Polk was perhaps the first president to lie for reasons of state. Polk lied about the circumstances leading up to the Mexican War in the 1840s, claiming Mexican forces had attacked American troops on American territory. Polk also lied about his war aims, insisting that he sought only justice when in fact what he wanted was territory. Polk’s reputation was such that his enemies took to calling him “Polk the Mendacious.”

Did Polk’s actions matter? After all, he never planned to run for re-election, and he was quite successful in adding significant territory, including California, to the United States. In the short term, however, Polk’s actions led to a feud in his own party. Free Soilers led by ex-Democratic President Martin Van Buren contributed to the defeat of Polk’s party in 1848, giving power to the Whigs.

The long-term consequences of Polk’s actions were more profound. They helped deepen the growing sectional crisis in the union, pressing slavery as an issue in national politics. In just over a decade the nation plunged into civil war. On the international scene, they led to tension and distrust between Mexico and the United States that lingers to this day.

Polk’s mode of operation has been replicated several times since. Woodrow Wilson ran for re-election in 1916 under the slogan “He kept us out of the war.” Privately, he admitted that he would not be able to do so, and he prepared accordingly. To justify entrance in to World War I, Wilson had to exaggerate the threat of German spies. When the war was over, Wilson fought for the League of Nations, but he did so by using divergent and contradictory rhetoric with Congress and the people.

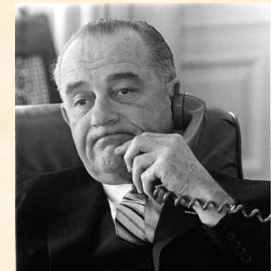
Wilson’s problems with honesty created both short-term and long-term issues. In the short



FDR

WHAT HE DID: He hid his poor health from voters, insisting on running for a fourth term in 1944.

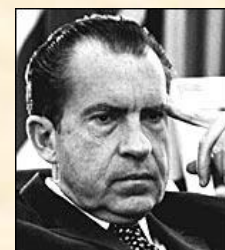
THE CONSEQUENCES: His death left in charge a president, Harry Truman, untried in foreign policy.



LYNDON JOHNSON

WHAT HE DID: Exaggerated military incident in Gulf of Tonkin to push Congress to expand his powers. Also used casualty numbers to his advantage.

THE CONSEQUENCES: His presidency’s “credibility gap” became so pronounced that he did not seek re-election.



RICHARD NIXON

WHAT HE DID: Lies about Watergate seemed part of a larger pattern of knowingly misleading the public.

THE CONSEQUENCES: The political scandal web of deceit over Watergate led to his 1974 resignation.

term, his domestic management of the war led to anti-immigrant hysteria and the suspension of many citizens' civil liberties, and the voters repudiated his party at the polls in 1920. In the long term, Wilson's failure to secure American participation in the League of Nations helped pave the way for World War II.

Lyndon Johnson represents another example of lying for reasons of state. While campaigning in 1964 on a pledge not to send American boys "away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," Johnson exaggerated an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin to push a resolution through Congress granting him a virtual blank check to take "all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Johnson's case was based on reports that North Vietnamese patrol boats had twice made unprovoked attacks on American naval destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. In fact, the first attack was defensive in nature, and the second attack never occurred at all.

'CREDIBILITY GAP'

Because of the continual disconnect between reality and White House claims of what it would take to win the Vietnam War, the term "credibility gap" was coined about the Johnson presidency. In fact, Johnson's credibility fell so low that he felt compelled to bow out of the race for his party's presidential nomination. The disastrous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago paved the way for Richard Nixon's election. In the long term, a strong case can be made that Johnson's actions led to the destruction of the New Deal consensus in American politics.

A pattern of lies also brought Nixon down. The web of deceit known as Watergate, as well as the secret bombing of Cambodia, seemed to be part of a larger pattern of knowingly misleading the public that led to his 1974 resignation.

Not all examples of lying lead to personal repudiation. Theodore Roosevelt lied and manipulated events to foment revolution in Colombia to create a nation willing to let him build a canal. Long after he left office, he admitted, "I took the Canal Zone." Although personally successful, Roosevelt's actions – like Polk's before him – led to long-term hemispheric distrust between the United States and Latin America. One has to wonder whether a more patient and honest approach would have been healthier in the long run.

Even understandable cases of lying for national security reasons can lead to negative consequences for U.S. relations abroad. When the Soviet Union shot down Francis Gary Powers' U-2 spy plane in 1960, Dwight Eisenhower was caught in a series of less-than-candid statements about the U-2 missions and Powers' fate. He remained personally popular to the end of his presidency, but his efforts to end the Cold War self-destructed, in part because of this credibility lapse.

RESPONSIBILITY OF OVAL OFFICE

Because the president is a unitary figure, he is relatively easily held accountable, and the result of credibility problems is often personal or partisan repudiation. An example of that is Bill Clinton, whose prevarication about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky led to his impeachment and hampered his ambitious domestic-policy agenda.

The impact on Clinton's policy ambitions provides a window on an important consequence of presidential lying: the problems created for the constitutional system. The responsibility to preserve credibility lies with the individual sitting in the Oval Office. That is as it should be, because the functions of the presidency depend on an energetic and strong executive. If nothing else, when lying becomes public, it distracts the president from his agenda and from his ability to lead and steadily administer the law.

During President Bush's presidency, difficulties didn't dissipate quickly. There was no discovery of an Iraqi program of weapons of mass destruction and the credibility controversy has dogged Bush's legacy putting question on the validity and reason for invading Iraq.

Obama's presidency has been dogged by partisanship affecting his ability to get his agenda done. Scandal hasn't particularly plagued his terms but his signature Affordable Health Care Act or "Obamacare" has created difficulties in achieving his goal of reducing health care costs. His statement regarding how people could keep their original health care plan if choose when the AHCA was implemented has hurt his credibility.



BILL CLINTON

WHAT HE DID: Lied about his sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky and lied under oath.

THE CONSEQUENCES:

Prevarication led to his impeachment and hampered domestic policy agenda.

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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ PERIOD: _____

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Instructions: Please read the article Truth and Consequences and then answer the following questions.

1.) According to the author, what is the principal difference between the Executive branch and the other two branches? Why?

2.) Why is character so important?

3.) Of the presidents who were mentioned in the article, which action seemed to be more justified? Why?

4.) Is there a difference between “misleading” versus “lying” to the public? How so?

5.) In your opinion, is it necessary for the president to lie/mislead for the benefit of the nation? Why or why not? Please be specific.