

“The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy”

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Abstract

The most important lies of Donald Trump differ significantly from previous presidential lies. Other presidents have lied for a variety of reasons, from legitimate lies concerning national security to trivial misstatements, to shading the truth, to avoiding embarrassment, to serious lies of policy deception. The paper distinguishes four types of Trump’s lies: 1) trivial lies, 2) exaggerations and self aggrandizing lies; 3) lies to deceive the public; and 4) egregious lies. It then analyzes the consequences of lies with respect to misinformation encoding and the relationship of lies to loyalty and power. The most serious lies of Donald Trump were egregious false statements that were demonstrably contrary to well known facts. The paper concludes that his lies were detrimental to the democratic process, and that his continued adherence to demonstrably false statements undermined enlightenment epistemology and corroded the premises of liberal democracy.

All presidents lie. In fact, virtually all humans lie. This observation may lead some to a cynical conclusion of moral equivalence: all politicians lie, so they are all corrupt and deserving of contempt. But it is an abdication of moral and civic responsibility to refuse to distinguish justified, trivial, serious, and egregious lies.¹

The most important lies of Donald Trump differ significantly from previous presidential lies. Other presidents have lied for a variety of reasons, from legitimate lies concerning national security, to trivial misstatements, to shading the truth, to avoiding embarrassment, to serious lies of policy deception (Pfiffner 1999, 2004a, 2004b). This chapter will document some of President Trump’s “conventional” lies, similar to those that politicians often tell in order to look good or escape blame; the number of these types of lies by Trump vastly exceeds those of previous presidents. But the most significant Trump lies are egregious false statements that are demonstrably contrary to well-known facts. If there are no agreed-upon facts, then it becomes impossible for people to make judgments about their government. Political power rather than rational discourse then becomes the arbiter. Agreement on facts, of course, does not imply agreement on policies or politics.

This chapter will begin with some data on lies told by Donald Trump as candidate and as president and then distinguishes four types of his lies: 1) trivial lies, 2) exaggerations and self-aggrandizing lies, 3) lies intended to deceive the Public, and 4) egregious lies. It will then analyze the consequences of lies with respect to misinformation encoding and the relationship of

¹ Only a few philosophers condemn *all* lying—for example, St. Augustine and Immanuel Kant.

lies to loyalty and power. It will conclude that Trump's consistent lying has undermined enlightenment epistemology and has corroded the premises of liberal democracy.²

Presidential Lies

To be sure, other presidents have lied, sometimes about important policy issues. John Kennedy lied about US military intervention in Cuba. Lyndon Johnson lied about the US military buildup in Vietnam. Richard Nixon lied about Watergate matters. Ronald Reagan lied about Iran-Contra. Bill Clinton lied about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky (and was impeached for it). George W. Bush systematically misled the country about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Pfiffner 2004b). President Obama said that the Affordable Care Act would not force anyone to change their insurance coverage, which was not true.

President Eisenhower was perhaps the last president to take lying seriously. When it was publicly discovered that he lied about the U-2 incident (he had denied that the United States had sent U-2 planes to spy on Russia), Eisenhower felt personally mortified. He told his secretary, Anne Whitman, "I would like to resign" (Beschloss 1986, 233) and considered it his "greatest regret" as president (Alterman 2004, 19). Eisenhower's feeling of mortification over his lie seems quaint in the context of twenty-first-century politics. This chapter will argue that the cumulative effect of Donald Trump's lies has damaged the US political system more than the admittedly serious lies of other presidents.

Several organizations have counted Donald Trump's lies, concluding that his lies far outnumber those of other presidents. Glenn Kessler of the *Washington Post* compiled a list of 5,000 false or misleading statements Trump made during his first 600 days in office (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2018c). Using a stricter set of criteria, David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* counted "103 separate untruths" that Trump told in his first ten months in office, contrasted with 18 for Obama (Leonhardt 2017). The longer lists often include flip-flops, self-contradictions, undeserved credit taking, and exaggeration.³ But these falsehoods, as bad as they are, were not as insidious as Trump's lies that contradicted readily available facts. This chapter takes a more conservative approach in defining lies; it addresses Trump's statements that were clearly contrary to established facts. It is important to get beyond the sheer volume of untruths to examine the damage he has done to the American polity. The harm was not merely misleading his followers, but undermining the foundations of accountable government.

² This chapter does not address philosophical issues concerning the nature of perception and reality, such as idealism, empiricism, deconstruction, or postmodernism. This chapter adopts the enlightenment argument that reality is accessible and dependent on empirical investigation, evidence, and logic.

³ Flip-flops may be hypocritical or opportunistic but not necessarily lies. Before the 2016 election Trump said that the Electoral College was "a disaster for democracy." But after he won the election due to the provisions of the Electoral College, Trump said "the Electoral College is actually genius" (Kessler 2016). He also claimed that US unemployment statistics were fake during the Obama administration, but when he was president he used Bureau of Labor Statistics data to claim that unemployment decreased because of his policies as president.

Part of the problem with Trump's lying was that when his statements were challenged in the media, rather than refuting the allegations, he attacked the motives of the critics and accused them of political bias. All presidents have complained about their press coverage; they feel (with some justification) that reporters are often critical of them and that they focus on unearthing evidence that often contradicts the White House's narrative of events. Presidents occasionally try to squelch stories through jawboning and even going to court. President Nixon did this in his unsuccessful attempt to stop the publication of the Pentagon Papers, and President George W. Bush did this with respect to surveillance of Americans by the National Security Agency. But Donald Trump took this inevitable conflict with the press to another level when he attacked the media for exposing his falsehoods: "I have a running war with the media. They are among the most dishonest human beings on earth" (Kessler 2017).

In 2017 Trump declared that the "fake news media" are "the enemy of the American people" (Grynbaum 2017). On February 24, 2017, at the Conservative Political Action Conference, he repeated his denunciation, "A few days ago I called the fake news the enemy of the people and they are. They are the enemy of the people" (Jackson 2017). In complaining about the press, Trump threatened to "open up" libel laws so he could punish media outlets that did not cover him favorably (Gold 2016). In a speech about trade tariffs in Kansas City MO, Trump said "Don't believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news. . . . what you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening" (Wise 2018). In a moment of candor Trump answered reporter Leslie Stahl's question about why he continued to attack the US press: "You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all, so when you write negative stories about me no one will believe you" (Mangan 2018).

Trivial and Self-Aggrandizing Lies

Often presidents exaggerate their accomplishments or take credit for developments for which they were not responsible. For example, no president substantially controls the economy, but when the economy is doing well, the sitting president benefits and takes credit. When the economy is doing poorly, fairly or not, the electorate often blames the incumbent president.

Leaving aside spurious credit taking, which many politicians do (and are often included in media counts of Trump lies), presidents sometimes tell lies that are relatively trivial. Lyndon Johnson claimed that his great-grandfather was killed at the Alamo. John Kennedy exaggerated his speed reading. Ronald Reagan told untrue stories. Bill Clinton exaggerated his golfing prowess (Pfiffner 2004a, 26–32). Trump claimed that Trump Tower in New York City had sixty-eight stories, when in fact it had only fifty-eight (Yee 2016). In his first speech at CIA headquarters, Trump bragged that his photograph had been on the cover of *Time* magazine more than anyone else's had. "I have been on there [*sic*] cover, like, 14, 15 times. I think we have the all-time record in the history of *Time Magazine*" (White House 2017). Time Inc., however, noted that Richard Nixon had been on its cover fifty-five times (Reilly 2018).

In addition to such trivial lies, Trump often made exaggerated claims to make himself look better. After his unexpected victory in the election in 2016, Trump bragged that he won "the biggest electoral college win since Ronald Reagan" (Alexander and Dann 2017). In fact, Trump won 304 electoral votes; Obama won 332 in 2012 and 365 in 2008, Clinton won 379 in 1996 and

370 in 1992, and George H. W. Bush won 426 in 1988. Trump's win ranked forty-sixth of the fifty-eight presidential election outcomes (Kessler 2017).

In his speech at CIA headquarters Trump challenged press accounts of the attendance at his inaugural address. "I made a speech. I looked out, the field was— it looked like a million, million and a half people. They showed a field where there were [*sic*] practically nobody standing there" (White House 2017). On January 25 he said, "we had the biggest audience in the history of inaugural speeches" (Kessler 2017). Photographs of his inauguration, substantiated by records of Metro trips, demonstrated that the crowd was much smaller. By the estimates of professional crowd scientists, Trump's crowd was about 160,000, much smaller than President Obama's inauguration crowd of more than 1.8 million in 2008 and smaller than the approximately 470,000 at the Women's March the following day (Gillin 2017; Wallace and Parlapiano 2017).

At the president's behest, Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, told reporters that the crowd was "the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period." Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, in an interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*, explained that Spicer did not utter a falsehood but rather "gave alternative facts." Conway said to her interviewer that calling attention to such facts is "not your job. . . . That's why we feel compelled to go out and clear the air and put alternative facts out there" (Bradner 2017).

Trump lied about his interactions with the conservative billionaire Koch brothers. "I turned down a meeting with Charles and David Koch. Much better for them to meet with the puppets of politics, they will do much better!" (Elliott 2016). However, Koch spokesman Mark Holden said that he was unaware of any such invitation. Trump also lied about receiving a letter from the NFL when he tweeted that Hillary Clinton was "trying to rig the debates" so that the presidential candidate debates would occur during televised NFL football games. Trump said, "I got a letter from the NFL saying, 'This is ridiculous.'" But the NFL denied that they had sent any letter to Trump. The debate dates had been set by a bipartisan commission in 2015 (Milbank 2017).

On June 20, 2018, Trump said that the head of U.S. Steel called him and said, "We're opening up six major facilities and expanding facilities that have never been expanded" (Kessler 2018). The CEO of U.S. Steel did not confirm any phone call with the president, and the spokeswoman for the company replied that "we post all of our major operational announcements to our website and report them on earnings calls" (Kessler 2018). Opening six major facilities would certainly be announced on U.S. Steel's website if it were planning such an expansion. Trump continued to make this claim 23 times (Kessler 2018c).

Boasting about his policy accomplishments, Trump claimed 100 times that the 2017 tax cut bill made "the most significant tax cuts and reforms in American history—it's a total of \$5.5 trillion in tax cuts." The reality, however, was that the tax cuts were projected to decrease taxes by \$1.5 trillion over the next ten years, regardless of assumptions about economic growth (Shear and Tankeersley 2018; Kessler, et al. 2018c). Trump also claimed, "Our budget calls for one of the single largest increases in military spending history in this country." But the \$54 billion increase sought in Trump's budget was not the largest increase; there had been ten other defense

budget increases between 1977 and 2017 that were larger (Qiu 2017). At the end of his first year in office Trump asserted “You know, one of the things that people don’t understand—we have signed more legislation than anybody.” In fact, Trump signed fewer bills into law in his first year than any president since Truman (GovTrack 2017).

At one level these easily debunked claims were not consequential with respect to public policy. But at a deeper level, when Trump states of obvious falsehoods and refuses to retract or admit their inaccuracy when pointed out, it indicates a callous disregard for the truth. His continued prevarication undermines his credibility and that of the United States.

Lies Intended to Deceive the Public

The above-mentioned lies may be dismissed as harmless exaggerations or “truthful hyperbole,” as Trump put it in his book *The Art of the Deal*. But Trump often lied about facts in ways that distorted reality to his political advantage and that many voters, especially his political base, might not question. Even though Trump prefaced some of his false statements with qualifying phrases, such as “people have told me” or “lots of people are saying,” it was clear that he intended for his audience to believe his implications.

In November 2016 Trump tweeted “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally” (Von Drehle 2018). There was no evidence for Trump’s claim that three to five million illegal votes were cast for Clinton, and rigorous studies have concluded that voter fraud in the United States is rare and certainly not near the millions of votes claimed by Trump (Struyk 2017).⁴ In June of 2018 Trump again claimed that in “California, the same person votes many times” and asserted that his claim was “not a conspiracy theory, folks. Millions and millions of people” (Balz 2018).

Trump appointed Kansas secretary of state Kris Kobach to chair a commission to search for voter fraud. After the commission was disbanded, a Republican-appointed federal judge ruled that Kobach could produce no credible evidence that there was any widespread illegal voting (Von Drehle 2018). A member of the commission, Matthew Dunlap, sued the commission for its records, and a judge granted his FOIA request. The eight thousand pages of records did not contain any evidence of widespread voter fraud (Rosenberg 2018). Trump’s lie was not trivial, however: 28 percent of all voters and 49 percent of Trump voters believed that he won the popular vote (Shepard 2017). Trump’s lies about the popular vote and his claims that US elections were rigged undermined citizens’ confidence in the US electoral system.

In November 2015 Trump claimed that thousands of Muslims celebrated after the World Trade Center fell. “Hey, I watched when the World Trade Center came tumbling down. And I watched in Jersey City, New Jersey, where thousands and thousands of people were cheering as that building was coming down.” The next day he reaffirmed his claim. “It did happen. I saw it...It was on television. I saw it...There were people that were cheering on the other side of New Jersey, where you have large Arab populations. They were cheering as the World Trade

⁴ The Federal Election Commission certified that Clinton received 2,868,686 million more votes than Trump’s 62,984,828 out of 136,669,276 votes cast (Clinton won 48.18 percent; Trump won 46.09 percent of the total votes cast) (Federal Election Commission 2017, 5).

Center came down” (Gore 2016). After many investigations no one was able to discover any evidence that anyone was celebrating in New Jersey during the fall of the World Trade Center. In addition, if there were celebrations, the celebrants must have known who committed the atrocity and why they did it. These facts did not become available until days after the attack. Trump also claimed that families of the terrorists “left two days” before the attacks, which was false. None of the 9/11 hijackers had families in the United States (Hayden 2018, 45).

In an address to a joint session of Congress on February 28, 2017, President Trump argued for his travel ban by asserting, “According to data provided by the Department of Justice, the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country.” But only 40 of the 580 incidents were committed in the United States, and 241 of the 580 convictions were not for terrorism but for fraud or other immigration-related offenses. In addition, the numbers did not include terrorist acts committed by domestic terrorists, US citizens, or legal residents (Valverde 2017). In a response to a FOIA request for data supporting Trump’s statement, the Justice Department responded that “no responsive records were located.” The Justice Department did not issue a report and did not have the data that supported Trump’s claim (Wittes 2018).

In his campaign and as president, Trump also distorted basic economic facts. In 2016 Trump asserted that the unemployment rate in the United States was as high as 42 percent. “Don't believe these phony numbers,” he said. “The number is probably 28, 29, as high as 35 [percent]. In fact, I even heard recently 42 percent” (Horsley 2017). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the official unemployment rate was 5.3 percent, which is based on the number of people looking for work. One could argue that this widely accepted standard understated actual unemployment because some potential workers had given up searching for work. But by any accepted measure of unemployment, the rate was nowhere near 42 percent. When this was pointed out to Trump, he did not explain how the number should be calculated, though he continued to use the 42 percent number.

In his argument for large tax cuts in 2017, President Trump often claimed that the United States is “the highest-taxed nation in the world.” He continued, “a lot of people know exactly what I’m talking about, and in many cases they think I’m right when I say the highest...a lot of people agree that the way I’m saying it is exactly correct” (Greenberg 2018). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States has one of the lowest tax rates, with only three of the thirty-five OECD countries having lower rates (OECD 2018).⁵

As in the above example and many other instances, Trump seemed to believe that as long as many people believe him, facts do not matter. When asked in an interview how he could make claims about millions of illegal voters, he responded, “Millions of people agree with me when I

⁵ If Trump had been referring to the nominal rate of taxation of corporations, he would have been close to accurate, with the United States ranking near the top, at 35 percent. But the nominal rate, because of deductions, was not the effective rate, which, according to the Government Accountability Office, was 22 percent (GAO 2016). But Trump did not bother to distinguish corporate taxes from the general level of taxation.

say that...they're saying 'We agree with Mr. Trump. We agree.' They're very smart people" (Scherer 2017). Trump often adhered to this tautological approach:

1. Trump makes a false statement.
 2. His followers believe it, and others hear it from a source credible to them.
 3. When asked how he could make a claim with no evidence, Trump says "a lot of people agree" or "many people are saying."
- Trump's logic: He makes a false claim; people believe him; Trump concludes it is true.
QED

Many of Trump's lies were intended to denigrate President Obama. In January 2017 Trump asserted, "When President Obama was there [in Chicago] two weeks ago making a speech, very nice speech. Two people were shot and killed during his speech." The Chicago Police Department, however, said that no one was shot dead during the day of Obama's speech (Gorner and Meisner 2017). In a talk to a group of sheriffs, Trump claimed, "The murder rate in our country is the highest it's been in 47 years, right?" (Jacobson 2017). But FBI crime statistics show a significant decrease in murder rates, from 6.8 (per 100,000 people) in 1997 to 5.3 in 2016, and a fall in violent crime from 611.0 in 1997 to 386.3 in 2016 (FBI 2017). People who did not check the actual data could easily have taken Trump's claims as true, despite their inaccuracy.⁶

On March 4, 2017, Trump tweeted, "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" The director of National Intelligence as well as the director of the CIA, both Trump appointees, denied his false claim (Hayden 2018, 131–135). In a court filing the Department of Justice confirmed that they had no records of any of the alleged wiretaps (Kahn 2017).

On July 3, 2018, Trump tweeted that in order to get Iran to agree to the nuclear deal, Obama "granted citizenship" to twenty-five hundred Iranians. The Trump administration provided no evidence of this, and Obama administration officials denied it. Further, DHS data on the naturalization of and Lawful Permanent Resident Status of Iranians did not increase significantly (Davis 2018b).⁷

⁶ He also tweeted in 2018 that crime in Germany was "way up" because of Angela Merkel's policies toward immigration. In fact, German crime was down by 10 percent since 2016 and the lowest since 1992 (Taylor 2018).

⁷ According to official DHS figures, Naturalization of Iranians was 11,623 in 2013, 9,620 in 2014, and 10,344 in 2015. "Table 21. Persons Naturalized by Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Years 2013 to 2015," Homeland Security, www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table21; Iranians granted lawful permanent resident status were 9,658 in 2013, 8,894 in 2014, and 9,074 in 2015. "Table 2. Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Region and Selected Country of Last Residence: Fiscal Years 2013 to 2015," www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table2]. The Joint Plan of Action was signed on November 24, 2013; the following year, 2014, the number of naturalizations and green cards granted *decreased* from the previous year.

On November 29, 2017, Trump retweeted a video titled “Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!” posted by a British anti-immigrant, nationalist group. Dutch authorities stated that the aggressive boy was “neither a migrant nor a Muslim.” In response to questions about the president seeming to endorse the nonverified video, Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, “Whether it’s a real video, the threat is real. His goal is to promote strong borders security and strong national security” (Blake 2017). Her comment implied that facts or reality do not matter as long as President Trump used falsehoods to further his political agenda.

During the campaign in July 2016 Trump stated, “I never met Putin, I don’t know who Putin is . . . never spoken to him.” Yet in May 2014 he had said, “and I spoke indirectly and directly with President Putin, who could not have been nicer” (Associated Press 2017). These statements constitute more than a flip flop, faulty memory, or a change of mind; both statements cannot be true.

When the media point out presidents’ exaggerations or lies, a common reaction is for that president to equivocate or try to explain the false statement away. For instance, Bill Clinton, when claiming that he had not had sex with Monica Lewinsky, famously said, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” George W. Bush used carefully couched language when he implied that Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear weapons by referring to a “mushroom cloud” rather than stating outright that there were nuclear weapons in Iraq (Pfiffner 2004b). Hillary Clinton equivocated about whether the emails she sent from her personal account as secretary of state were classified. Equivocating or explaining away untruths implicitly acknowledges that there is some objective truth, even if one is trying to evade or obscure it. As La Rochefoucauld’s saying goes, “Hypocrisy is a tribute that vice pays to virtue.” However, demonstrations that his statements were false did not seem to faze Trump, and he often continued to repeat them and attack those who pointed out his untruths.

Egregious Lies

The lies documented above illustrate the cynicism with which Donald Trump approaches political leadership. It is one thing to spin news or to make exaggerated claims for credit for positive trends in the country, but it is quite another to make statements that are factually wrong and to persist in making the inaccurate claims. Of course, Trump may have had the rational expectation that many people would believe his claims uncritically and reject refutations of his claims. But some of Trump’s lies are particularly egregious, such as: his “birther” claim, his assertion that Obama was the founder of ISIS, and his self-admitted lies to Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau.

Perhaps the ur-lie of Donald Trump’s presidential ambitions was the claim that Barack Obama was not born in the United States. On *Morning Joe* he said, “His grandmother in Kenya said, ‘Oh, no, he was born in Kenya and I was there and I witnessed the birth’” (Krieg 2016). On March 30, 2011, on the *Laura Ingraham Show*, Trump said, “He doesn’t have a birth certificate...Now, somebody told me...that where it says ‘religion,’ it might have Muslim.’ And if you’re a Muslim, you don’t change your religions, by the way” (Krieg 2016). Although Obama had previously released his short-form birth certificate, on April 27, 2012, he made his long-form birth certificate public, and Hawaii state officials confirmed it was authentic. Nevertheless, the next month Trump persisted and told CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, “A lot of people do not think it was

an authentic certificate” (CNN 2012). Finally, on September 16, 2016, Trump stated, “President Barack Obama was born in the United States. Period,” yet in doing so, he claimed that Hillary Clinton started the birther claim (Benen 2016). Reportedly, in 2017 he still questioned the place of Obama’s birth (Haberman and Martin 2017).

Although it was evident that many of Trump’s claims were obviously false, lies and misinformation can have effects in the real world of politics. Despite the inaccuracy of Trump’s claims about Obama’s birth, a Fox News poll indicated that 24 percent of Americans, including 37 percent of Republicans and 21 percent of independents, thought that President Obama was not born in the United States. Even some Democrats (12 percent) agreed with them (Blanton 2011).

In August 2016 conservative talk show host Hugh Hewitt asked Trump about his statement that President Obama founded ISIS and suggested that Trump meant that Obama “created the vacuum, he lost the peace.” Trump corrected Hewitt: “No, I meant he’s the founder of ISIS. I do.” Hewitt again tried to interpret Trump’s words in a reasonable way, saying that Trump must have meant that Obama and Clinton “screwed everything up.” Trump replied, “No, it’s no mistake.” Again Hewitt tried to steer Trump in a safer direction by saying that “they created the vacuum into which ISIS came,” but Trump replied, “Well, I disagree” (CNN 2011).

In a meeting with campaign donors in Missouri, President Trump admitted to intentionally lying to Canada’s Prime Minister Trudeau. Trump inaccurately claimed that the United States had a large trade deficit with Canada. When Trudeau disagreed, Trump said, “Wrong, Justin, you do.” Later in recounting his meeting with campaign donors in Missouri, Trump added, “I didn’t even know....I had no idea. I just said ‘You’re wrong. You know why? Because we’re so stupid’” (Davis 2018a; Dawsey, Paletta, and Werner 2018). Trump’s statement is egregious because it was patently false, he told it personally to a head of government and more importantly because he publicly bragged about his prevarication. He admitted that he “had no idea” about the trade balance. Nevertheless, he asserted his claim anyway, demonstrating his disdain for objective reality and telling the truth.

Misinformation Encoding, Loyalty, and Power

President Trump’s lies are important because lying about public policy issues can have significant consequences, even after the misinformation has been debunked. Lies also can be used to test the loyalty of subordinates or to demonstrate power.

Misinformation Encoding

Once “misinformation” is initially encoded in a person’s mind, it is very difficult to change. Rigorous psychological research has demonstrated that widespread myths and rumors that originate at the societal level, such as supposed links between vaccines and autism, are often reinforced at the individual level because of cognitive factors. Once such misinformation is accepted, retractions are often ineffective in changing a person’s mind and may even reinforce the initial errors (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). These effects are enhanced by partisanship and ideology (both of the left and right). For instance, in 2006 almost half of Americans still thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 Iraq War, despite the

conclusion of the Iraq Survey Group that the weapons had been destroyed in 1991 (Hanley 2006).

Experimental research has concluded that even strong retractions of originally encoded misinformation can be ineffective in reversing even weak initial encoding, and incorrect information may continue to affect perceptions, even if individuals recall corrections of misinformation (Ecker et al. 2011). For instance, in 2011 94 percent of the public had heard that Obama was not born in the United States and did not have a valid birth certificate, and 24 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the misinformation (Oliver and Wood 2014). According to polling research by the Pew Research Center, in July 2012 only 49 percent of respondents thought Obama was a Christian. Among Republicans the percentage of respondents who thought Obama was a Muslim increased from 16 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in July 2012 (Kohut et al. 2012).

Trump also used repetition to reinforce his misstatements. For instance, eighty-eight times Trump repeated his claim that his administration won the largest tax cut in US history, when actually it was the eighth largest (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly. 2018c). He claimed thirty-three times that the United States is one of the highest taxed nations. He also repeated many other inaccurate claims that were merely misleading rather than outright lies (Kessler et al. 2018a).

It may seem obvious that repetition can reinforce false information, but there is also empirical and experimental evidence for this effect. Repetition of false information increases the likelihood that the information is considered true, even if there are warnings of the credibility of the source of the information (Polage 2012). Even real-time corrections do not have a significant effect on those predisposed to believe the false information (Garrett and Weeks 2013). Other empirical research has shown false statements' frequency of occurrence confirms the common observation that "if people are told something often enough, they'll believe it" (Hasher and Goldstein 1977, 112).

The increasingly widespread use of the internet and social media has exacerbated the speed at which misinformation diffuses throughout society. It turns out that there is empirical evidence for the saying attributed to Mark Twain: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

Scholars from MIT compared the relative speed of the dissemination of false news on Twitter from 2006 to 2017. They investigated 126,000 rumors that were spread by about 3 million people more than 4.5 million times. They verified the truth or falsity of asserted information against six fact-check websites, the judgments of which correlated with each other 95 percent of the time. They found that true stories on Twitter were seldom retweeted by more than 1,000 people, whereas the "top one percent of false stories were shared by 1,000 to 100,000 people (Vosoghi, Roy, and Aral 2018). Untrue stories were "70 percent more likely than the truth to be" retweeted (Lohr 2018), and false claims were disseminated "significantly farther, faster, and more broadly" than the true stories (Aral 2018).

Lies as a Demonstration of Loyalty and Power

During a rally in Iowa Donald Trump famously boasted “My people are so smart...Where I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK? It’s like incredible” (Marcin 2017). Loyalty to Trump is strong among those who voted for him, with 72 percent of them having thought that allegations that Russia tried to help Trump get elected were “fake news” and 64 percent of them were opposed to an investigation of the circumstances. If an investigation proved that the Trump campaign conspired with Russians to interfere with the 2016 election, 77 percent of his supporters thought he should stay in office nonetheless (Public Policy Polling 2017).

Telling lies and expecting others to believe or at least accept false claims can also be an assertion of power. Any doubts expressed by subordinates can be viewed as disloyalty. Andrew Sullivan argues that many of Trump’s lies are “about enforcing his power” and undermine “the very possibility of a reasoned discourse” (2017).

Humpty Dumpty’s exchange with *Alice in Through the Looking Glass*, makes this point:

“I don't know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant, ‘there's a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn't mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’,” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (Carroll 1960, 268–269, emphasis in original)

Thus, accepting President Trump’s more obvious lies may be an indicator of loyalty to him, such as when his press secretary Sean Spicer went before the press corps to defend Trump’s assertion that the crowd at this inauguration was the largest ever to witness an inauguration (Marquez 2017; Parker, Rucker, and Gold 2017).

Accounts of some Republican leaders’ reactions to President Trump’s remarks about Haiti (referring to it and African countries as “shithole” countries) illustrate the effects of power on loyalists’ willingness to reinforce a false narrative. When reports of the language based on the memories of participants at the meeting were made public, the White House did not deny he had used that language. Democratic senator Dick Durban (IL) stated to the press that the president had used the term, and Republican senator Lindsey Graham (SC) admitted that the accounts of the president’s language were “basically accurate.” Immediately after the meeting Republican senator Jeff Flake (AZ) confirmed that he heard the same account, and a number of

Republicans—at least twenty-two—denounced the president’s reported words. But twenty-five Republican senators refused to comment on the incident (Kaplan, Weiland, and Shear 2018; Kaplan, Baumgaertner, and Parlapiano 2018).

After several days President Trump denied he used such language: “The language used by me at the...meeting was tough, but this was not the language used” (Vitali, Hunt, and Thorp 2018). Then two Republican senators, David Perdue (GA) and Tom Cotton (AR), who were in the room at the meeting, had previously said that they “did not recall” the president using the term but after the president’s denial changed their recollections to deny that the term had been used. The two senators’ changed recollections reflected the effect of power and loyalty on people’s willingness to testify to a false statement (Kaplan, Baumgaertner, and Parlapiano 2018b).

Similarly, when Trump insulted Representative Mark Sanford at a meeting with the House Republican Conference in June 2018, he later tweeted that members “applauded and laughed loudly.” Several members said that was a mischaracterization, that the group actually exhibited a subdued reaction. But when questioned about the reaction to Trump’s insult, two dozen House attendees refused to characterize the members’ response, implicitly accepting Trump’s assertion. The consequence of disagreeing with the president’s tweet might have been that Trump would turn on them, as he had on Mark Sanford (Phillips 2018).

When journalist Ron Suskind spoke with a top-level Bush White House aide in 2004 (rumored to be Karl Rove) about the run-up to the Iraq War, the aide commented on the nature of power, saying that reporters like him were

“in what we call the reality-based community,” which he [the aide] defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (Suskind 2004)

President Trump’s dismissal of normal policy discourse may be likewise based on the assumption that power creates its own reality. Whether from conscious calculation, carelessness, or self-delusion, President Trump’s lies undermined the basis of a democratic republic.⁸ His continued and systematic lies were more than occasional misstatements or confusion; they were central to his political leadership and his appeal to his base.

In a broad analysis of the deterioration of political discourse in the contemporary United States, Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael Rich analyze the characteristics of what they call “truth

⁸ Some might argue that if Trump himself believed his assertions, they did not constitute lying. But self-delusion is no excuse when misinformation is exposed and the misinformation is repeated or its inaccuracy not acknowledged.

decay” (2018). These include the effects of cognitive bias in a polarized political environment, which is exacerbated by the prevalence of social media in a twenty-four-hour news cycle. The consequence of truth decay is the erosion of rational political discourse, and this can lead to the marginalization of checks on executive power by surrendering power to a leader who claims “I alone can fix it.”

Conclusion

Trump’s frequent refusal to attempt to refute charges that he was telling falsehoods or to try to excuse them by equivocating demonstrated his conviction that he did not need to explain himself to others. In asserting his power, he expected others to accept his version of reality and dismissed disagreements as partisan attacks on him or “fake news.”

All of Trump’s lies that contradicted commonly accepted facts challenged the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment, which are premised on the belief that there are objective facts that are discoverable through investigation, empirical evidence, rationality, and the scientific method. These premises imply that political discourse involves making logical arguments and adducing evidence in support of those arguments rather than asserting one’s own self-serving version of reality (Hayden 2018, 3–4). Senator Patrick Moynihan’s admonition is apropos: “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.”

Agreeing on the enlightenment epistemology that there are verifiable facts in the world does not guarantee that people will agree on the implications of those facts or even which empirical evidence counts as fact. It is entirely reasonable to disagree about the methods by which facts are to be discovered, the way data are gathered, or how heavily to weigh different facts. But it is incumbent upon leaders in a democratic system to attempt to be accurate in their claims concerning politics and public policy.

Most disagreements about public policy stem from differences in the interpretation of facts, contrasting values, and different expectations about human behavior. This is where political discourse should be grounded, not mere assertions without an acknowledgement of the differing sources of information upon which claims are based. For instance, as in the case of unemployment statistics in the United States discussed above, it is entirely legitimate to argue that one’s way of making calculations is better than other approaches and draw one’s policy prescriptions from different ways of calculating unemployment. What is not acceptable is to declare that the generally accepted calculations are phony without specifying the way one calculates the “facts” behind one’s own, different numbers (Greenberg 2018).

The premise of representative democracy—or, indeed, any type of accountable government—is that there is some fundamental reality or commonly accepted set of facts that provide the basis for deliberation and choices about governance. Inevitably people will disagree about the policy implications of facts or even what measures ought to be used to establish facts, but there must be some common agreed-upon reference to empirical reality.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt wrote, “Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as

such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of a man who can fabricate it” (1958, 350). In the same book, she argued that “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist” (Arendt 1958, 474).

Trump’s refusal to admit the truth of widely accepted facts corrodes political discourse and is consistent with the practice of many authoritarian leaders. The assertion of the power to define reality by ignoring inconvenient facts is destructive of democratic governance. Donald Trump’s false statements about politics and policy strike at the very heart of democracy. If there are no agreed-upon facts, then it becomes impossible for people to make judgments about their government or hold it accountable.

In *On Tyranny* Timothy Snyder argued, “To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so....Post truth is pre-fascism” (2017, 65, 71).

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