

Lying and Liars: The Powerful and Obnoxious Odor of Mendacity

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

"Mendacity is a system we live in." – Paul Newman, playing Brick in Tennessee Williams', Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

A profusion of philosophical, psychological, and political ink has been spent on the subject of lying and liars. The toll in loves lost and relationships destroyed from lying is incalculable. All the war dead are victims of government lies; what Marine Major General Smedley Butler called a "racket." Lies are poison, slow or quick working, and they kill both body and soul.

We are living in [a country of lies](#). A country where propaganda is disseminated around the clock and lies are the air we breathe. Is it any wonder that most people are confused as to what to believe and whom to trust? But it goes much deeper.

I have recently read a number of perceptive, truthful articles that have gotten me thinking further about this subject, although I must add that I have been preoccupied with the issue since I was very young and my father took me to see *Pinocchio* in the movie theater and subsequently told me improvised Pinocchio stories before bedtime. Whether he knew it or not – and I think he knew – he set me on a lifetime's quest to try to distinguish truth from lies and embrace the former. Then as a teenager, I appeared on a very popular television show, *To Tell the Truth*. I was recruited to lie, to play the part of an impostor, which I did quite well. I lied for the money and probably would have made a good lying politician if fate hadn't interceded. It was only later that my actions and the show's title kept reverberating through my mind, echoing down my days to the present and my interest in truth, lies, and propaganda. From my father came a love for the redeeming nature of stories.

"More and more often there is embarrassment all around," wrote Walter Benjamin in *The Storyteller*, "when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences."

It was getting dark on the street as the young man emerged from his high school on New York's Upper East Side after basketball practice. He had lost track of time as he dreamed his basketball dreams and headed to the subway for the long ride home. It was December, 1961. A man, dressed in a cashmere overcoat and carrying a silver bowl, was walking his dog on the street. The boy asked him for the time. The man told him, adding with a grin that his watch always ran fast. The boy recognized the grin from what seemed like a dream. He pet the man's dog, and the man asked him about the imposing school next to

them. He asked the boy his name and the boy said “Eddie.” While the dog did its business in the street, they chatted for a few minutes. The man wished him luck with his basketball and said his name was Paul. As the boy hustled toward the subway, Paul Newman shouted after him, “See you later, Fast Eddie.”

The next week the boy went to see Paul Newman playing Fast Eddie Felson in *The Hustler*. He always remembered Paul’s words about mendacity and his words from *The Hustler*:

[Fast Eddie](#): How should I play that one, Bert? Play it safe? That’s the way you always told me to play it: safe... play the percentage. Well, here we go: fast and loose. One ball, corner pocket. Yeah, percentage players die broke, too, don’t they, Bert?

Lies are a common way of playing it safe. Except they kill the liar.

In an article by Mike Whitney, [“Betrayal, Infuriating Betrayal,”](#) in which he writes about the Democrats’ ongoing efforts – Russia-gate, etc. – to remove Trump from the presidency, efforts based on a string of lies they know to be lies [my emphasis] and have been proven to be so, he wonders thus toward the end:

It’s surprising that this doesn’t piss-off more Democrats, after all, it’s the ultimate expression of contempt and condescension. When someone lies to your face relentlessly, repeatedly and shamelessly, they are expressing their loathing for you. Can’t they see that?

Of course, that’s a very good question.

I read Jonathan’s Cook’s piece, [“The Guardian’s deceit-riddled new statement betrays both Julian Assange and journalism.”](#) Cook rightly excoriates *The Guardian* for lying about Assange and betraying him to the British and American governments, long-standing lies [my emphasis] that continue to today as Julian sits in a British kangaroo court where injustice is being served to extradite him to the USA. Here is one point he makes;

Nauseatingly, however, the Guardian not only seeks to blame Assange for its own mistake but tells a glaring lie about the circumstances. Its statement says: ‘No concerns were expressed by Assange or WikiLeaks about security being compromised when the book was published in February 2011. WikiLeaks published the unredacted files in September 2011.’

Then I read another fine article at Asia Times, by MK Bhadrakumar, [“Permafrost descends on US-Russia ties,”](#) about a [bipartisan Senate bill](#) aimed at demonizing Russia. The bill is led by Democratic Senator Chris Coons of Delaware. Bhadrakumar writes:

The fallout of all this is going to be profound for the Sino-Russian alliance. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [hit out](#) last week: ‘It is time to stop applying Western metrics to our actions and stop trying to be liked by the West at any cost ... the West is wittingly or unwittingly pushing us towards this analysis.

'It is likely to be done unwittingly [my emphasis]. However, it is a big mistake to think that Russia will play by Western rules in any case, just like thinking this in terms of China.'

I was struck by Lavrov's word "wittingly or unwittingly" – diplomatic speech – since he knows the Senator's bill is filled with lies but suggests otherwise – "It is likely to be done unwittingly."

Finally, I read an article by Philip Roddis, ["Julian, Guardian, and the Law of Volitionality."](#) As a lead-in to his announced topic, he tells a little tale about his step-mother that struck me. It is worth quoting in full:

Indulge me a moment, will you? At fifteen I acquired a stepmother. We never got on. Her and dad's insistence that she be called "mum" didn't help. For the two years we spent in the same house – I left home weeks before turning seventeen – I never addressed her by name or title.

She had dad round her little finger. One ploy was to badger him into making a ruling against me. Once she'd done so, she'd beg him to relent. "Oh it's alright, Frank. Let him ... " [do/have whatever it was she'd got him to forbid]. But no way was he going to u-turn at this point. A matter of pride, you see. I saw this little comedy for what it was but dad fell for it every time.

And here's the thing. Maybe she did too. She got her way, but I don't rule out her motives for that post victory appeal being hidden to – and by – her. My flawed but brilliant teacher said that everybody knows what they're doing. Indeed, it was so fundamental a tenet he gave it a name: The Law of Volitionality. Yes, he took it to absurd and at times cruel lengths but for all that he was onto something. To manage cognitive dissonance – to maintain a sense of being fundamentally good – we play games with ourselves. Stepmother was likely fooling herself almost as much as dad with her tiresome shenanigans.

It's not that she wasn't being manipulative. Just that an essential ingredient of the manipulation, vital to maintaining self-esteem, was a decision – volitionally squirrelled away, out of sight from everyday awareness – to hoodwink herself. [my emphasis]

You can find such examples every day. Articles about lies tossed about by all sides of the political spectrum are commonplace.

I think it fair to say that everyone has lied at some point, but only the most manipulative are proud of it. "The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre. This cynical consciousness that knows the truth but denies it to others is a perfect description of politicians, propagandists, intelligence services, and their media mouthpieces. They know they are lying and are proud of it, but of course they will never admit it.

Most people are not that manipulative. Sartre says there is another type of liar who suffers from bad faith. While they lie to others, they also try to lie to themselves and hide the truth from themselves. People often say that this person and that one really believe their own lies, that they are deluded, but this is not possible. For "the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as a deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one

deceived.”

I have recently been thinking that many people who are adamantly insistent on the efficacy of mask-wearing against SARS-CoV-2, the virus associated with COVID-19, and those who are always quoting the official statistics, are of this sort. They either know there is good evidence against mask-wearing and the official statistical game, but try to convince themselves this isn't so, or they avoid reading about the possibility to save face and live with themselves – both acts of bad faith. Such people are like Philip Roddis's step-mother. But in this case, the bad faith is about a Big Lie, just as the fake fight between Trump and Biden has induced many people to take bad faith sides in a scene from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*:

“Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to have a battle;
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle”
So Tweedledee and Tweedledum
Had their scrum
All about the rattle.
When it was done
Only the dumb
Gave a shit about their battle

Last year, I was at a large library book sale and came upon an odd box of typed manuscripts of stories that lacked the author's name. They were free and so I took a few. There was one very short story, entitled “Fear,” that struck me for its haunting connection to the issue of lies. “Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell,” wrote Benjamin, which seems so true with this anonymous story. Here it is:

Listen, that's what I want to say to them. Listen, this is one of those stories hard to believe. When I first heard it, I doubted it completely. Of course I was telling it and that might have been a factor. It's hard, once you hear your own voice, to believe it's you. After a while, however, I became convinced it had to be true. I couldn't make up anything so odd, so sick if you prefer. At first the voice sounded strange, but once I realized it was really mine, I understood I was revealing this pathetic tale under great duress and it was understandable that my voice sounded foreign.

You should take that into account. I am a very sick man. I realize that now. In the beginning, I thought I was surely dying, until, that is, I saw that I was already dead. Dying was beside the point. I was dead. Naturally this came as a great surprise to me. Now you might reasonably ask, how did this absurd situation come about, and how can a dead man write words? Let me tell you.

It began when I was born while the world was engaged in one of its periodic slaughters. No, periodic is not true. Those slaughters are constant.

So you wonder what my astrological sign is? The mushroom cloud of course. A cancer born under the sign of the mushroom.

Anyway, I have been living for decades now and you'd think I would have seen the obvious. I didn't, or that's what I told myself. Not for the life of me. I kept going on as if I were alive when I was dead. It's obvious now: the dead never know they're dead until... But I didn't know it, and you can imagine, I hope, how this caused me many problems.

Don't laugh.

That was the year I disappeared.

She asked me: "But are you content?"

- No, I wouldn't say that.
- So you're not? It's hard to tell? Tell me.
- No, not really.
- Not really what?
- Not really content.
- What would give you contentment?
- I'm not sure.
- You mean to say you have no idea?
- No, not that. I guess if I thought about it ...
- Do that, that's what I'm asking you. You must have thought about it before.
- Sure I have but...
- Why the but? You're so hesitant about everything. You don't know, you doubt, maybe, but, perhaps. Why are you so unsure?

I had no satisfactory answer. I could only stumble over my words. I was afraid they would trip me up, especially if I spoke without premeditation. I was used to hesitating so I could control things. That's not exactly true. When I realized I was dead, I also realized it was because I had always been a liar, to myself and others.

It was then I disappeared.

Since coming here, I have been resolved to change. Yes, the outside world was making me sick with all its lies and deceptions. Mendacity, mendacity, mendacity - I heard someone in a play scream that out once. I never forgot it, and I felt I was going mad because of it. But I too was a liar, so I resolved to change.

No more bullshit. That was my number one resolution. It sounded crude but was true. Next to it, I listed euphemisms for bullshit: exaggeration, manners, civility, tolerance, modesty, mental reservations, kindness, and of course lies.

Bullshit was lies and self-deception. Simple as that. I couldn't admit that I was dead; that was bullshit, and I was dead because I was a bullshit artist and just wanted to be an artist and write stories that were true. I have always lied so much because, like everyone else, I was afraid of the truth. Saying it, hearing it, or seeing it. I much preferred ideas of what should be true rather than what was true, or what I really thought was true. I was afraid if I gave up lying I would feel lonelier than I did before. Where did it get me anyway? Where does it get anyone? I have always hated myself for it. This all seemed so weird to me; how everyone nodded at truth, just as they nodded to each other, and then went on lying their ways through life. And if you asked them if they were lying, they would invariably deny it. Oh, it's so twisted. I am sick. I don't know where I'm going with this story. It seems to have a life of its own, unlike me.

I didn't really disappear. They took me here. I am so afraid.

That was it. Short and eerie. It reminded me of Kafka, who wrote in his diary: "The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps redeeming comfort that there is in writing."

"And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

That's what the CIA has inscribed on the wall of its headquarters: The George Bush Center for Intelligence.

More appropriately, as a description of not only the CIA but American society as a whole, are Ken Kesey's words from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: "You seem to forget, Miss Flinn, that this is an institution for the insane."

That's not a lie.

Yes, "Mendacity is the system we live in."

And the odor here is really loathsome.

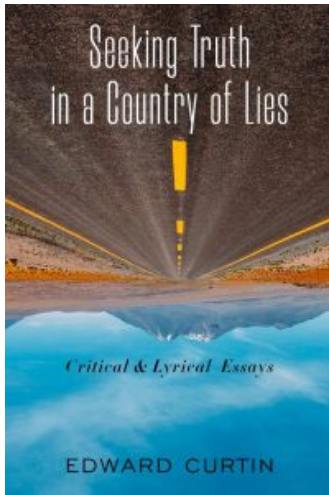
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Distinguished author and sociologist Edward Curtin is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. He is the author of the new book:
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