

# LVI – Lying in State

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By Butler Shaffer

If a politician or government official were to tell me the time, I would check my watch for confirmation. And the basis for my wariness gets reconfirmed each day, as members of the political establishment announce new falsehoods. A friend of mine once told me that as a radio newscaster he was tempted to start his newscast with the comment: "Here are the lies your government would like you to believe today!"

President Bush and his administration have told so many lies about the purposes and status of the war in Iraq that only the most credulous of his supporters can take his statements at face value. Such gullible souls have failed to learn the important lesson offered to Kurt Vonnegut by a friend while the two were returning from Europe at the end of World War II. Vonnegut asked his friend what was the most important thing he had learned from his wartime experiences, and received this reply: "Not to believe my government."

Most people misunderstand why governments continually lie to their own citizens. It is too often explained, erroneously I think, that dishonesty in high office is brought about by disreputable, ambitious men and women attracted to positions of power; that if honest and principled persons could be persuaded to seek high office such problems would be resolved. It is this faith that has long fired political reform movements: the belief that there is nothing wrong with the system — and, even if there are systemic problems, that they can be tinkered with and overcome — but only with the character or competency of those in power. This belief put Arnold Schwarzenegger in the governor's chair in California.

This attitude completely misconceives the symbiotic nature of political systems and untruthfulness. Lying is more than just an easy or habitual course of conduct to the state. It is so intrinsic to and ingrained into the system that truth operates as a kind of virus to its well-being. The very existence of the state is postulated on an intricate network of falsehoods; each one depending upon and, at the same time, supporting, the others. Should any one proposition fail, it might — like a house of cards — bring about the collapse of the entire structure.

Among the more prominent lies are those defining the state as the product of a "social contract" — implying a voluntary social arrangement binding only upon those who chose to be bound. Such a lie clouds the truth that all political systems have arisen by violent conquest. Written "constitutions" are held up for our consumption, telling us that state power has been limited therein, while our individual liberties have been protected. But because the state is the body that interprets this document, its powers have consistently been given an expansive definition, and our liberties a restricted one.

The lie goes on to assert that the state is necessary for the "protection of the lives, liberty, and property" of people, and yet the first thing every government does is confiscate property (through taxation), and force people to do what they choose not to do — or prevent them from doing what they do want to do. Through its war-making capacities — which, as Randolph Bourne reminds us, bestows health upon political systems — the state destroys the lives of millions of human beings. We are further told that government officials are our "agents" who owe us obedience, and yet the Realpolitik of the system demonstrates that it is we who are expected to obey, and political authorities who are the masters.

These lies have been strung together by politicians, academicians, special interest groups, and members of the media who have a shared interest in maintaining state power over the lives and property of others in order to advance their own ambitions. They have created a network of lies that resembles a spider's web. A particle of truth about the system poses the kind of threat that a small rock would when thrown into a spider's web: it causes a disconnection within the network of lies that is difficult to reconstruct.

This is why "whistleblowers" are such a threat to political systems, and why the state has always insisted upon keeping secret, from its citizens, the nature of its conduct. "Top secret" and "national security" are convenient devices for hiding as many lies as possible from public view. The state is adding new safeguards to keep its actions from public scrutiny: secret courts and secret trials of persons accused of crimes against the government.

While members of the Bush administration continue to recite the party line about how well the war in Iraq is going, the Pentagon is doing its best to assure that the American public will not bear witness to the human costs. Unlike Vietnam, television cameras are not allowed to photograph the caskets of dead soldiers being brought home from Iraq. The lie offered for this change is, as one might expect, to protect the privacy of family members! The government will not even acknowledge the caskets, preferring to call them by the most dehumanized, Orwellian term "transfer tubes." Perhaps the soldiers, themselves, will soon be identified as "disposable biological combat units." A president who can give a media performance in southern California to (in his words) "hug and empathize" the victims of recent fires, is apparently unwilling to show up for the funerals of young victims of his own firestorm!

The state has always had a low tolerance for those who speak embarrassing truths, not out of a fear that enemy nations will gain an informational advantage in wartime — they doubtless already have such knowledge — but that its own people will discover the state's duplicity. What ulterior purposes lie hidden behind official lies? Whose interests — and to what ends and costs — are being fostered by the Bush administration's war against the world?

It is not surprising that, in today's climate, neocons are quick to condemn critics of the American Leviathan for "treason," which the Constitution defines, in part, as giving "aid and comfort" to the "enemies" of the United States. Since the Iraqi government already knows the truth about whether it had weapons of mass destruction, it can hardly be benefited by information challenging the truthfulness of Bush's statements on the subject. One is drawn to the conclusion that the "enemies" to which the neocons refer are the American people themselves, a proposition offered a half century ago by the political philosopher Pogo Possum, who said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Because state power depends upon our willingness to believe in its legitimacy, the well-being of political systems demands a public mindset not given to questioning falsehoods or contradictions.

Truth-telling might become an infectious habit, producing revelations to which state officials must respond and, even worse, creating in the minds of the citizenry the thought that the government might be duplicitous in other matters than those previously exposed. Those who would expose the lies must be discredited: as "paranoids" who believe in conspiracy theories, or "disgruntled employees" who wish to bring discredit upon their erstwhile employer, or "America-haters," "anti-Semites," "racists," or victims of "senility." The state must be forever vigilant against those who reveal what it does not want known. Its attitude, in this regard, was well expressed when the Wizard of Oz admonished his trembling subjects to "pay no attention to that man behind the screen!"

I have long suspected that statistis may be overreacting in their efforts to cover their lies. Most people seem unperturbed by the dishonest nature of political behavior, and are more disposed to condemn the messengers who reveal deceit and wrongdoing. What demands have we heard for the impeachment of George Bush, whose flagrant lies about "weapons of mass destruction," al Qaeda connections to Iraq, and Hussein's imminent terrorist threats to America, manipulated an already gullible American public into an unjustified war? Impeachment proceedings were brought against President Clinton, but for the "lesser" offense of perjury.

There is a willingness of men and women to overlook grave offenses committed by institutions with which they identify their sense of being. When one identifies with a "nation-state," any wrong perpetrated by that state is a personal reflection upon oneself. To such a person, the American government cannot be a vicious wrongdoer, because to so regard it would be to castigate oneself as a wrongdoer. This is as true for Americans as it is for Germans, Chinese, French, Israelis, the British, or Iraqis. The phrase "my country, right or wrong," always comes down to "me, right or wrong."

Thus, for people to admit to the inherently dishonest nature of all political systems, is to confront their own image. To examine the monstrous nature of such systems is to explore the "dark side" of humanity that is the principal organizing force behind the state. Not wanting to face that specter, they join the flag-wavers to condemn the truth-tellers, or

simply repress the dishonest nature of what, by default, they have made of their lives. (Do you really believe that Mary Shelley was trying to horrify us with a monster of protoplasmic dimensions?)

And so, as evidence for statist lies piles up around us, most of us respond in the manner to which we have become habituated: to try to reconcile, ignore, or repress the falsehoods and contradictions. We look to the news media to distract our attentions: did Scott Peterson murder his wife? Did Kobe Bryant rape that woman? And what did Dave Letterman name his new son? Inquiring minds want to know!

Not being challenged in our thinking, the absurdities upon which the political system is grounded continue their exponential rates of growth, generating a collective insanity immune to reason. Thus, those who kill a half dozen persons are labeled "vicious" and "depraved" murderers, for whom the death penalty is insisted upon. At the same time, those who plot the systematic killing of hundreds of thousands of victims are called "statesmen," and are even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize! Corporations with close White House ties — such as Halliburton and Bechtel — are awarded government contracts worth hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars, but it is Martha Stewart — who makes a decision to sell her own property — who is prosecuted for "insider trading!"

Perhaps this is nothing more than another manifestation of "scapegoating." Not having the moral or intellectual courage to confront the wrongdoing that is so closely associated with who we are, we settle on a suitable whipping boy upon whom to inflict punishment for wrongs we dare not admit even to ourselves. If, in the case of the serial killer, the scapegoat is a wrongdoer, so much the better with which to delude ourselves as to our motives. A scapegoat need not be blameless: he or she need only be convenient.

It has been said that "The truth shall make you free," a proposition that is only partially correct. It is our insistence upon truth being identified and spoken — particularly to our own minds — that will make us free. It is such an insistence that terrifies the statists, who understand full well that the health of their system depends upon our willingness to be deceived. As more and more particles of truth are thrown into the state's spider web of lies, the disconnections with reality will become more and more apparent, so much so, perhaps, that even academicians and members of the media may begin to take notice. Perhaps comedian George Carlin best identified the symbiotic relationship of politics and untruthfulness when he observed that "If honesty were suddenly introduced into American life, the whole system would collapse!"

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