

# MARTIN JAY



## THE VIRTUES OF MENDACITY

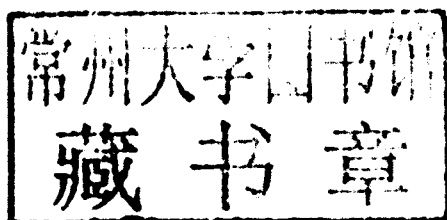
ON LYING IN POLITICS

THE VIRTUES OF  
**MENDACITY**

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**ON LYING IN POLITICS**

Martin Jay



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THE VIRTUES OF MENDACITY

## **RICHARD LECTURES FOR 2008**

For Ruby and Fidel—Let sleeping dogs lie.

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## PREFACE

It might easily be assumed that this book was conceived during the ill-starred presidency of George W. Bush when indignation against political mendacity reached new heights in the American public sphere. Matched only in popularity by the widespread charge of “incompetence,” which gained special traction after the grievous mishandling of Hurricane Katrina, “duplicity” became the favorite target of the administration’s burgeoning legion of critics. Although there were many examples to bolster this image, it was the slew of lies intended to dupe the American people into supporting an immoral and unnecessary war on Iraq that did the most damage. When the war turned sour, even the popular media jumped on the bandwagon, as demonstrated by the cover of the July 21, 2003, issue of *Time*, whose headline read “Untruth and Consequences: How Flawed Was the Case for Going to War against Saddam?”<sup>1</sup> If there had been a quick and easy victory—the confident assurance of which itself turned out to be at best an error and at worst a self-deception—the alleged deceptions about the pretexts for invasion might well have been forgiven. But as the journalist Nicholas von Hoffman cynically noted, “If you are going to tell a Big Lie badly, you have to pull off the crime, you have to make it a success. George Bush didn’t.”<sup>2</sup>

Although it certainly is the case that the brouhaha over political mendacity during the Bush administration focused my attention, it was in fact first attracted well before it began. In 1999 the *London*

*Review of Books* invited me to respond to two books on the presidency of Bill Clinton: George Stephanopolous's *All Too Human* and Christopher Hitchens's *No One Left to Lie To*.<sup>3</sup> Hitchens's provocative title was taken from the accusation launched by David Schippers, the majority counsel of the House Judiciary Committee, himself a Democrat: "The President, then, has lied under oath in a civil deposition, lied under oath in a criminal grand jury. He lied to the people, he lied to his Cabinet, he lied to his top aides, and now he's lied under oath to the Congress of the United States. *There's no one left to lie to.*"<sup>4</sup> Taking my cue from this diatribe, which expressed Hitchens's own outrage at the way Clinton's handling of the Monica Lewinsky affair typified his entire tenure in office, I began thinking seriously about the more general role of mendacity in politics.

The review appeared under the title "Mendacious Flowers" in the July 29, 1999, issue of the *LRB*, and tentatively advanced some of the arguments I will be making in this book. The response was vigorous and mostly positive, although there was one critical exception that I will always cherish. Referring to the fact that I had just assumed the chairmanship of my department, the correspondent thundered: "If you believe what you seem to believe, you have no business being the chair of the best history department in the country!" I immediately pondered the implications of this charge, realizing with perverse excitement that any project that might relieve me of the duty of chairing was one worth pursuing. But as luck would have it, I was already deeply involved with another challenging project, which was published in 2004 as *Songs of Experience* after I had completed my term as departmental chair.<sup>5</sup> The evident passion that my initial attempt to think about lying in politics had engendered was not, however, forgotten, and once the opportunity to start a new major project emerged, I returned to the theme.

The result is the book that, as it were, lies before you (or rather tries to tell some truths about lying). It is motivated by one cluster of fundamental questions: Why is there such a frequent and ubiquitous linkage between politics and mendacity? Why is virtually the first accusation hurled at a political opponent when things get ugly the charge of misrepresentation or duplicity? Why is lying in politics both impossible to eradicate and yet never easily condoned? Is there



something special about the realm of human behavior we call politics that allows mendacity to prosper, despite all the high-minded attempts to condemn and punish it? Does it perhaps even serve positive functions, despite its all too obvious negative ones? Would different interpretations of the essence of “the political,” as it has come to be called, have different implications for answering these questions?

As I began to mull over these perplexing issues and begin my research into the vast literature that has accumulated around the question of lying in general and lying in politics in particular, it was especially instructive to see the transformation of the very same Christopher Hitchens who had so excoriated Bill Clinton as a serial liar into a staunch defender of George Bush’s war in Iraq. Turning intellectual somersaults to justify the invasion and applying his considerable rhetorical skills to skewer anyone on the other side, Hitchens lost his righteous indignation about mendacity and focused his attention on the larger strategic and ideological questions served by ridding the world of Saddam Hussein. Was he being hypocritical, applying a double standard, or merely shrewdly selective in directing his wrath? Did he perhaps come to the sober conclusion that there are worse sins in politics than failing to observe the highest standards of veracity? If the latter was the case, he was not the first to come to this conclusion. To explain why it may be more than just a sign of moral weakness, self-serving expediency, or world-weary cynicism is the goal of this exercise.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Truth be told, there is no more perilous enterprise than trying to acknowledge the innumerable acts of kindness—or at times painfully pointed criticisms—that abet the composition and publication of a book. From the initial invitation by the *London Review of Books* in 1998 to review two volumes on the presidency of Bill Clinton, which first aroused my interest in the theme of political mendacity, to the efforts of the University of Virginia Press and its talented staff to turn the manuscript into a book, I have benefited from countless individuals and institutions who have contributed in one way or another to the project. The difficulty, of course, comes in doing justice to all of them, given the vagaries of memory and my failure to record every piece of advice I got along the way. So let me acknowledge at the outset the radical incompleteness of these acknowledgments, and beg the pardon of those who are negligently, but not malevolently, omitted.

I should begin by thanking the institutions that allowed me the time and resources to do the research that underpins my argument, and provided the audiences that helped to hone it with their constructively skeptical responses. I had the great good fortune to spend my 2004–5 sabbatical at the National Humanities Center as the John P. Birkelund Fellow. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, Kent Mullikin, and the extraordinary staff of the Center provided every amenity that a scholar could desire. The forty or so other fellows in residence that year managed to steal enough time away from their own proj-

ects to respond with great generosity to my own. I was also supported throughout the years I worked on this book by the Sidney Hellman Ehrman Chair at the University of California, Berkeley, which I have been lucky to share with my distinguished colleague Jan de Vries since 1996. As has always been the case since I went on my first sabbatical in 1974, the Humanities Research Fellowship program at Berkeley has also given generously to top off my sabbatical salary.

Opportunities to air my inchoate ideas on the subject of this book were afforded by a wide range of audiences: the Humanities Institute, University of Buffalo; the Department of History, University of Maryland; the Political Science Department, CUNY; the Philosophy Department, Florida Atlantic University; the Humanities Department, Technological University of Monterrey, Mexico City; the Visiting Scholars Program, James Madison University; the conference “Ethics and Politics,” Heraklion, Crete; the Philosophy Department, University of Wroclaw, Poland; the conference “The Politics of the Past,” Jyväskylä, Finland; the European University of St. Petersburg, Russia; the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, University of Illinois; the Department of Performing Arts, Southern Illinois University; a conference on Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* in Santiago de Chile; a conference on Derrida at University of California, Davis; the Political Theory and Intellectual History Colloquium, Harvard University; the Lansdowne Visiting Scholar Lecture, University of Victoria, British Columbia; the Pierson Lecture, University of Oregon; the European University, Fiesole, Italy; and the Lionel Trilling Memorial Lecture, Columbia University. Perhaps three such occasions should be singled out for special mention: the conference at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, organized by David Hollinger, which produced the volume *The Humanities and Dynamics of Inclusion since World War II* (Baltimore, 2006), where an early version of my argument appeared; the 2007 Faculty Research Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, where I presented the mature version to my colleagues in many different fields; and the three 2007 Richard Lectures at the University of Virginia, which became the nucleus of this book.

I have also benefited in countless ways from the counsel and sug-

gestions of colleagues, students, and friends over the years. At the risk of omitting some, let me single out a few names to thank for especially valuable help: Richard Abrams, Anthony Adamthwaite, Etienne Balibar, David Bates, Seyla Benhabib, Marc Bevir, Warren Breckman, Talbot Brewer, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Pheng Cheah, Jean Cohen, John Connelly, Carolyn Dean, John Efron, Jeremy Elkins, Andrew Feenberg, Donald Friedman, Timo Gilmore, Peter Gordon, Ruth Grant, Michael Gubser, Suzanne Guerlac, Agnes Heller, Jeffrey Herf, Carla Hesse, Kinch Hoekstra, David Hollinger, Guo-Juin Hong, Dick Howard, Robert Hullot-Kentor, Andreas Huyssen, the late Norman Jacobson, George Kateb, Robert Kaufmann, Leszek Koczanowicz, Benjamin Krupicka, Dominick LaCapra, Thomas Laqueur, Benjamin Lazier, Jonathan Lear, Lloyd Kramer, Olli-Pekka Moisio, A. Dirk Moses, Samuel Moyn, Elliot Neaman, Andrew Norris, Matthias Obert, Ross Posnock, Mark Poster, Gerhard Richter, Dylan Riley, Paul Robinson, Michael Rosen, Emmanuel Rota, Eduardo Sabrofsky, Jonathan Sheehan, Corey Robin, Hanna Rose Shell, Richard Shusterman, Hans Sluga, David Sorkin, Vincent Sorrentino, Shannon Stimson, Paul Thomas, Michael Ure, Stephen Vincent, Loic Wacquant, Richard Wolin, Benjamin Wurgaft, and Lewis Wurgaft. Superb research assistance came from Knox Peden, Benjamin Wurgaft, Radhika Varadharajan, and Larry Fernández. Thanks also to Eliah Bures for tackling the always daunting task of preparing the index. Kudos as well to Dick Holway and his staff at the University of Virginia Press, as well as the two anonymous readers they selected, whose comments were invaluable. I also very much appreciate the careful copyediting of Ruth Melville.

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# INTRODUCTION

## American Democracy and the Dream of Transparent Politics

Nescit vivere qui nescit dissimulare, perire melius.

[He who doesn't know how to dissimulate, doesn't know how to live,  
and is better dying.]

—LATIN MAXIM

Qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare.

[He who doesn't know how to dissimulate, doesn't know how to rule.]

—LOUIS IX OF FRANCE

“We demand that there be a legal campaign against those who propagate deliberate political lies and disseminate them through the press.” So began the twenty-third of twenty-five points in a crisp and uncompromising program promulgated by a nascent political party in 1920 with a remarkable future before it. There is no small amount of irony in the fact that the party in question was the National Socialist Party of Germany, whose most lasting contribution to the theory and practice of political mendacity was announced in the autobiography of its leader only three years later. The so-called big lie introduced in *Mein Kampf* quickly became known as the favored technique of totalitarian states. As Adolf Hitler explained in one of the most frequently cited passages from his book,

The magnitude of a lie always contains a certain factor of credibility, since the great masses of the people in the very bottom

of their hearts tend to be corrupted rather than consciously and purposely evil, and that, therefore, in view of the primitive simplicity of their minds, they more easily fall victim to the big lie than to a little one, since they themselves lie in little things, but would be ashamed of lies that were too big. Such a falsehood will never enter their heads, and they will not be able to believe in the possibility of such monstrous effrontery and infamous misrepresentation in others. . . . Therefore, something of even the most insolent lie will always remain and stick—a fact which all the great lie-virtuosi and lying-clubs in the world know only too well and also make the most treacherous use of.<sup>1</sup>

What is often forgotten by those who identify the “big lie” with Nazi propaganda is that Hitler was referring in this passage to its alleged use by Jews and others who had claimed that Germany had lost World War I in the field and not because of a “stab in the back” at home, and was by no means explicitly advocating the technique himself.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, on certain issues, it now seems as if he and his henchmen fully believed the foul ideas they espoused and even made their murderous intentions public.<sup>3</sup> As Theodor W. Adorno bitterly noted in *Minima Moralia*, fascism “openly proclaims the principle of domination that is elsewhere concealed.”<sup>4</sup>

But it quickly became apparent to the world—although, alas, not quickly enough to many Germans—that Hitler also knew how to use the big lie to his own advantage (while all the while denouncing his enemies as themselves incapable of telling the truth). Ironically, the awareness that he could fabricate so blatantly allowed him sometimes to employ a strategic use of true statements. According to Alexandre Koyré, “It was just because he knew he would not be believed by the ‘others,’ that his declarations would not be taken seriously by the uninitiated—it was precisely by telling them the truth, that he made certain of gulling and lulling his foes. Here we have the old Machiavellian technique of the second-degree lie, most perverse of techniques whereby the truth becomes the pure and simple instrument of deception.”<sup>5</sup> Because of this sinister manipulation, the German language, some commentators went so far as to warn, was crumbling under the weight of Nazism’s deliberate abuse.<sup>6</sup> To be sure,



once the full magnitude of Hitler's monstrous deeds became known, the mere accusation of mendacity faded in comparison. As the political theorist Judith Shklar noted, "His sincerity was hardly an issue. When one really knows that someone is evil, one has no time for his possible hypocrisy."<sup>7</sup>

The point, however, is not to focus on the Nazi case, which is too extreme and ineffable to be considered typical. Railing against the "lies" of one's opponents while privately granting to oneself the right to commit one's own in the name of a higher cause than truth-telling was, after all, not an invention of the Nazis, indeed of any twentieth-century political movement. Instead, it has been in play ever since Plato's controversial notion of the "gennaion pseudos" from *The Republic* (414c), which is traditionally—although not without controversy—translated as "noble lie."<sup>8</sup> It was not by chance that Plato—rather than more recent German thinkers like Hegel or Nietzsche—was the favorite philosopher of the Third Reich.<sup>9</sup> Its leaders could also pride themselves on the burden they took on—like the guardians of Plato's Republic—to do great and benevolent deeds while hiding their responsibility from the uncomprehending masses.<sup>10</sup>

Plato, to be sure, was a believer in the authority of reason, singular, in accord with nature, and accessible to the philosopher. In the history of philosophy, he occupies a privileged place as the defender of the universality of logos, expressed in eternal forms which reason can discover and then apply to practical affairs in the life of the city (the polis from which politics was ultimately derived). He had little patience for those rival thinkers like Protagoras or Gorgias who came to be called Sophists, and who developed a reverence for the arts of rhetoric as opposed to those of dialectic. Strictly demarcating knowledge from mere opinion, preferring certainty to probability, and suspicious of arguments that were based on the moral character of those who held them, Plato and his followers favored rigorous demonstration over mere persuasion, which could be based on dubious appeals to emotion and the seductions of language.

One of the most virulent critics of Sophistry was the historian and military leader Xenophon (c. 427–355 BCE). In such works as *Hiero*, a dialogue between the Syracusan despot and the poet Simo-