

# Selling the Fake IRS ‘Scandal’

Despite the Tea Party wallowing in its “victimhood,” the evidence now shows no “targeting” of right-wing groups. The IRS also used word searches for “progressive” and “occupy” to weed out political groups seeking tax-exempt status, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

In their long history of practicing the dark arts of misleading the public, political leaders have enjoyed much success in getting people to believe what is not true, and what even just a small amount of inquiry or research would demonstrate is untrue.

Totalitarian regimes in particular have been able to do this, relying in large part on what is known as the Big Lie, an untruth that overwhelms any skepticism through the authority and lack of equivocation with which it is repeatedly pronounced. The power of the Big Lie comes partly from its sheer audacity but also from the repetition: the serial drumming of an idea into the heads of an unwitting public.



In societies with free speech and a free press there is some deterrence against telling outright whoppers. Usually fact-checking critics, who include energetic journalists as well as some who are trying to protect opposing political interests, are ready and eager to point out falsehoods. Even that is not enough of a deterrent to some who do not consider themselves part of the reality-based community and who merrily dispense their own odd version of the truth.

For those deterred from telling outright falsehoods, the same sort of repetition that helps to make the Big Lie work can be used to considerable effect with a

more indirect technique. This is to cultivate an idea in the public mind by asking it as a question, raising it as a possibility, or just associating two otherwise unrelated things by speaking of them in the same sentences.

Do this enough times, over and over, and even a proposition that has no basis in reality takes root in the public consciousness. Once rooted, it becomes resistant to uprooting and has a good chance of becoming conventional wisdom that, as such, becomes repeatedly referred to even more. The technique that gets the false idea started is not the Big Lie; it is the Big Insinuation.

A flagrant, and consequential, example of this process was the effort by the George W. Bush administration, in its campaign to build support for the Iraq War, to associate the Iraqi regime with the terrorism of al-Qaeda and especially with the 9/11 attack. The association was accomplished not by telling specific lies but instead mostly by incessantly uttering "Iraq," "terrorism," and "9/11" in the same breath and talking about how 9/11 taught us that we cannot wait in dealing with a supposed threat such as Saddam Hussein's regime.

This part of the campaign worked. Polls indicated that although only a tiny proportion of the public suspected immediately after 9/11 that Iraq had anything to do with it, on the eve of the Iraq war, after more than a year of the associative utterances, about two-thirds of Americans had come to believe that Saddam had been involved in the September 11th terrorist attack.

Something similar is happening with the "scandal" at the Internal Revenue Service as a result of congressional Republicans and like-minded commentators loudly and repeatedly suspecting, expecting and predicting (and less loudly, hoping) that evidence would be found showing that the White House had directed the IRS to treat political groups on the Right differentially and unfavorably in reviewing applications for tax-exempt status.

Despite enormous investigative effort devoted to that end, not an iota of such evidence has been found. What has instead been found makes the scenario of White House direction all the more implausible, given that the groups whose applications had been flagged for closer scrutiny included not only the ones on the Right that had gotten all the publicity but also ones on the Left and various others that the administration would have no interest in undermining, such as organizations working to promote Obamacare.

Not only has there been no evidence of White House involvement; there is not even any evidence of misconduct within the IRS. At most there was a slightly blunt and clumsy use of search terms to try to streamline the very difficult task of enforcing an ill-written law that says tax-exempt groups can do some politicking but this can't be most of what they do.

Despite the total lack of supporting evidence, the Big Insinuation has already had a marked effect on public perceptions. A CNN/ORC poll taken two weeks ago indicates that 47 percent of Americans (up from 37 percent in May) believe that senior White House officials ordered the IRS to target conservative political groups. There are the usual divisions by party affiliation, but even a majority of self-identified independents believe there was such a White House order (51 percent, versus 45 percent who believe the IRS acted on its own).

This is the sort of already-rooted mistaken belief that even disclaimers by those who have done some of the insinuating will not correct. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, speaking last week at the American Enterprise Institute, acknowledged to the disappointment of his audience that a hoped-for smoking gun of White House involvement probably doesn't exist. But he continued the effort to associate the White House with the "scandal," accusing the President of encouraging "bureaucratic overreach" and trying to shift any burden of proof on to the White House.

McConnell's speech was similar in that respect to a speech on the Middle East that George W. Bush gave shortly before he left office. Bush issued the requisite disclaimer that Iraq wasn't actually involved in 9/11, but then he delivered more of the all-in-the-same-breath associative language, rhetorically linking Iraq to 9/11, that had created the mistaken public belief that it was.

Everyone who cares about informed discussion of public affairs ought to care about the damage done by the Big Insinuation, regardless of which side of the political spectrum one would like to see scoring or losing points. Expressing outrage cannot be left to a fact-checking Glenn Kessler, who would not necessarily have an explicit lie to work with.

The IRS "scandal" has already received far too much attention, but the damage there includes spoiling any chance for a legitimate debate on why tax-exempt status should be given to groups doing *any* politicking, regardless of whether it is of the Left, Right or Center. No one is being prevented from political activity; why should I and other taxpayers in effect foot part of the bill for that activity?

And as we saw a decade ago, sometimes the damage to the country, including in matters involving foreign policy, can be far greater.

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