

Calling a Lie a Lie in the Age of Trump

The U.S. mainstream media bends over backward not to call the President a liar even when it's deserved, but Donald Trump's falsehoods are so glaring that the L word should apply, says ethicist Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

The *L word* is suddenly center stage as Trump's presidency begins. No surprise there, given the river of falsehoods flowing from the administration and his devious cabinet misfits. Journalists scruple about the propriety of calling a lie a lie, especially when the liar is the President of the United States. The New York Times made news by calling one of Trump's manifest falsehoods a lie. National Public Radio, perhaps wary about federal funding, shies from the word.

Underlying all this is broad public confusion as to just what a lie is. The Oxford English Dictionary oversimplifies it by saying that a lie is "a false statement made with intent to deceive." Let ethics come to the rescue. Telling the Gestapo that the Frank family had left Amsterdam (even though you were actually bringing them food on a daily basis) would not earn you the moral stigma of "a liar."

And that is the point. "Lie" and "liar" are not neutral words. Sometimes you have a moral obligation to deceive as when someone intent on murder asks if you know the location of his intended victim. Truth-telling in that case would be lethal; intentional deception is mandatory.

*Lying is when you speak falsely intending to deceive someone **who has a right to the truth**.* The specific evil that makes an intentional deception evil is in the denial of the truth to someone who has a right to it. An engaged woman is secretly pregnant from another man. If she says no when her suspecting fiancé asks her directly, then she is in this instance, a liar. He has a right to know the truth.

So face it: "lie" and "liar" have a nasty denotation. It would not be a compliment if you said of someone that he was "very pleasant, quite talented, and an outstanding liar." Like the word "murder," "lie" and "liar" denote evil. They signify an unjustifiable deception.

It is not hard to understand the skittishness of the press regarding the *L word*. When you say the President lied, you are accusing him of immoral activity. You are saying that he is speaking falsely *in the face of abundant evidence to the contrary* and is trying to deceive the public on a matter where they have a right

to the truth.

But why should the President be spared the appropriate ethical term for his actions? The sacred calling of the press, well understood by the founders of this republic, is to speak the truth especially to those in power. Why would they betray that noble mission by shrinking from calling a powerful liar on his lies?

The lies of President Trump and those of his mendacity agents like Kellyanne Conway are more insulting than has been generally noted. They are despicably cynical because they insinuate that the American public and the press have no right to the truth. Fictional "alternative facts" are all they deserve.

Lying as the Tool of Despots

Truth is the natural enemy of despotism. Crushing the press and citizen protests is the instinctive reaction of despots. We are seeing this in full play today as the press is characterized as public enemy number one and as states form plans to suppress public protests and criminalize citizen protesters.

Truth is the life blood of a democracy. The Hebrew prophets saw how labile – or liable to change – it is and worried about its loss in a society. "Truth stumbles in the market-place and honesty is kept out of court, so truth is lost to sight." (Isa. 59:14) The people are too susceptible to "smooth words and seductive visions." (Isa. 30:10) The tragedy, complained Hosea, comes when eventually "There is no truth ... in the land." (Hosea 4:1)

The antidote for despotic lies is not a polite silence or cowardly politeness and acquiescence. In the spirit of the prophets, it is thoroughly moral and right to call liars by their name. The prophets of Israel, who would make modern pundits seem timid and bland, would not shy from a word like "liar."

The kings, said Jeremiah, are "stupid brutes." (Jer 10;21). Isaiah went further saying Israel's leaders were "blind ... dumb dogs who cannot bark ... lovers of sleep ... greedy dogs that can never have enough ... who understand nothing." (Isa. 56:10-11)

And Jesus was no softer. He called the powerful religious and political leaders of his day "roaring lions ... wolves of the plain, hypocrites, blind guides, ... blind fools ... snakes, vipers ... who spill innocent blood." (Matt. 23). He said they were best compared to painted sepulchers, beautified on the outside but inside filled with the stench of death.

That is precisely the blunt, blustery spirit needed today by citizen groups, the press, and the all too pusillanimous Democratic Party. Trump, ignoring the

structures of constitutional governance, is bending democracy toward autocracy and he uses lies to grease the skids of this subversion. The lies of this liar must be cited and he must be called by the name his deeds merit.

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