

On lying in campaigns and in office

Scheduled for presentation by Tom Tiller at the SPHEX Club meeting March 14, 2013

With examples of notable lies by officials and candidates for office throughout U.S. history, the speaker called attention to such lying as a pervasive and long-standing practice with important consequences – a situation that we must strive to improve upon.

The primary resource for the talk was the book Lying: Moral Choice in Public Life, by the moral philosopher/ applied ethicist Dr. Sissela Bok. In addressing lying as a moral issue with corrosive consequences professor Bok drew upon resources such as Augustine, Aquinas and others from earlier times. An epigraph from that book's introduction, one also used as the title of this talk – a quote from St. Augustine – indicates Ms Bok's general disposition about lying: *"When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful."*

The speaker described the strong arguments against lying in public life even though it is not always possible to know the whole truth, and even though there may be times when lies may be temporarily justified. However, to be justified in a democracy, the rare necessary lies permitted must be with advance categorical permission and/or with open disclosure, explanation and debate very soon afterward. As framed by another ethicist, Dr. Elizabeth Kiss, national security matters present special difficulties concerning this standard. Suggestions and criteria for how that difficult standard can be met and for addressing the overall problem were presented.

The presenter strongly endorsed Sissela Bok's position concerning the rightness of challenges to claims of justified lies:

*"The argument that those who raise moral concerns [about lies] are ignorant of political realities, finally ought to lead not to dismissal of such inquiries, but to more articulate description of what those realities are, so that more careful and informed debate could begin."*

The speaker concluded with a quote of the closing statement from Dr. Bok's book, *"Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity."*

For SPHEX, March 14, 2013, by Thomas C. Tiller

*“When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.” St. Augustine, “On Lying”*

In today’s world it seems we are reluctant to call a lie a lie. Even an article purporting to examine lying is full of euphemisms: untruth, prevarication, distorting, stretching the truth, mendacity, dissembling, fabrication, spreading fiction and evasiveness. (Cannon)

In this paper I will address lying by candidates and by those in office, where it is so pervasive that actual awards are made to those who tell the truth about difficult situations. An example of this is the Ridenhour Truth-Telling Prize, named in memory of Ronald Lee Ridenhour, who brought attention to the March, 1968, My Lai or “Pinkville” massacre by U.S. units in Vietnam and later became a Pulitzer award winning investigative reporter. The Ninth Annual Awards presentation held in 2012 included one for Lt. Col. Daniel Davis, who was recognized for speaking out concerning commanders sending false impressions about the degree of success in the Afghan war. In accepting his award Col. Davis said, “Something has gone wrong in society when it is ok for the truth to be negotiable.” He also said, “When a reporter asked how I rationalized speaking out against the military requirement for unity of effort. I told him, ‘There’s nothing to reconcile; I have an obligation to stand up for truth and do the right thing, irrespective of the consequences.’ ” (The Nation Institute)

Lying in public life may be more obvious and seem more pervasive in our time than earlier, but it certainly is not new. In fact we have a long history of it. No doubt you can think of your own examples, but at several points in this talk I will cite a few well known ones; you decide in each case whether the lie could be justified as necessary. Even in the first congressional election under the U. S. constitution of 1787, a claim of lying played a role in one high profile contest. After James Madison was out maneuvered for a place in the first U.S. Senate, he was next disadvantaged by the gerrymandering (before that was a term in use) of his congressional district. That made it necessary for him to do what he thought unseemly – actually campaign. When during the campaign Madison announced that he had reversed his position and if elected would work for amendments to guarantee rights to individuals – a bill on rights - he was accused of lying by making a promise he did not intend to keep. As we all know he was not lying - he did keep his promise.

Many scholars agree that Thomas Jefferson lost to John Adams in the close election to succeed George Washington because of distortions and lies spread about him. Then Jefferson apparently hired a character assassin to assist in his successful effort to replace Adams after one term.

In the 1940 presidential campaign Wendell Wilkie charged that FDR had “telephoned Hitler and Mussolini and urged them to sell Czechoslovakia down the river.” Then after the election he casually dismissed his inflammatory statements as mere “campaign oratory.” (NY Times, 12/2/2012) In the same election FDR said “Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.” (Bok, p. 179)

A July 22, 2012, Washington Post article, “We Can’t Handle the Truth,” examined persistent calls for Barack Obama’s birth certificate even since its release. The writer

found that there still are people who question the Obama certificate and partisan politicians who use deft statements to feed suspicions about the certificate's authenticity.

Other infamous campaign deceptions include: Lyndon Johnson on Goldwater in 1964 – the nuclear cloud commercial - and the Karl Rove inspired “swift boat” lies used to devalue John Kerry's Vietnam War record.

Lying for advantage in political campaigns sometimes comes even from within one's own party. For example, on behalf of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy had F. D. Roosevelt, Jr. falsely say in the crucial 1960 West Virginia Democratic primary that Hubert Humphrey was a WWII draft dodger. And false paternity claims were used against John McCain in the 2008 Republican primary in South Carolina.

In a speech in Tunisia Hillary R. Clinton, then the U.S. Secretary of State, thought it necessary to inform an audience not to pay attention to partisan remarks made by candidates during U S campaign events. They “Don't reflect the United States, don't reflect our foreign policy, don't reflect who we are as a people.”

Two researchers, one at Dartmouth and the other at Georgia State University, conducted experiments in 2006 that shed light on why the voting public is so tolerant of lies during campaigns. Time magazine reported the experiments as follows. “[The researchers] gathered conservative and liberal students to test their resistance to factual information. They asked the group to read an article that included President George W. Bush's claim that his tax cuts had increased revenue for the U.S. Treasury, which was provably false.

Then they added a factual correction: the Bush tax cuts led to a three-year decline in tax revenue, from \$2 trillion in 2000 to \$1.8 trillion in 2003. The correction worked among liberals, but among conservatives it produced a curious backfire effect: conservatives were nearly twice as likely to say the Bush tax cuts increased revenue after they had been told this was not true. Such distortions are not limited to the conservative mind. The researchers presented an article showing John Kerry's claim from 2004 that he would 'lift the ban on stem-cell research' imposed by Bush, followed by corrective information: Bush never actually banned stem-cell research; he prevented federal money from funding research on a sub-set of embryos. In this case the corrective effect worked for conservatives and moderates but had no impact on liberals. Once again personal views had intervened. The more we care about politics and the more it becomes central to our world view, the more threatening it becomes to admit that we are wrong or our side is wrong." (Time, 10/15/12)

It isn't only at the federal level that intentional deception can be of concern. Not so long ago from our time and not so far away from our place there was a state legislature seat election in which a popular, effective incumbent and the challenger were invited by a non-partisan organization to complete an issues questionnaire. Something like this is what happened next. When the responses were made public, the challenger claimed the incumbent's answer to one of the questions meant that the incumbent planned to raise taxes. The "accused" incumbent *and most importantly the group sponsoring the questionnaire* said not. Although otherwise presumably a good person, the accusing challenger continued advertizing the deceptive interpretation, even claiming that the incumbent had a secret pact (called a dirty secret) with the governor to raise taxes after

the election. Whether or not the distortion turned the election or damaged its target, in the eyes of many it damaged the reputation of the accuser, even though he won the close election.

Perhaps such matters have always been of concern as indicated in a recently translated book, "How To Win An Election: An Ancient Guide for Modern Politicians." The translator, Philip Freeman, purports that Quintus Tullius Cicero wrote it in 64 B.C. to advise his older brother, Marcus Tullius Cicero how to conduct himself in his fourth campaign for political office. In Garry Wills's review in the New York Time Book Review he writes, "The younger man tells his brother that he must creep and crawl to voters, promising impossible things, pretending friendship when there is none, and lying." Wills doubts the authenticity of the letter as advice from younger brother to older brother, and thinks it more likely simply a satire on Cicero and on the prevailing election practices in the Roman Republic.

All presidents lie for the simple reason that "we wouldn't elect them if they didn't" says Western Illinois University professor George Hopkins. (*Why*, p. 60) What the public has to judge is whether [presidents] are lying for the good of the country – or for their own good. (*Why* Sean Wisents, professor of history at Princeton, p. 57) Here are some examples of presidential lies: Roosevelt about not entering WWII; Eisenhower on U-2 flights over the USSR; Stevenson for Kennedy on the Bay of Pigs; Johnson on the Gulf of Tonkin incident; Kennedy on the "missile gap," trading missile withdrawals with Khrushchev, and even his reading speed; Nixon on Watergate; Reagan on Iran-Contra approval; 1<sup>st</sup> Bush on being "out of the loop" concerning Iran/Contra; Clinton on not

having “sex with that woman;” 2<sup>nd</sup> Bush on 9-11 and Iraq-weapons of mass destruction and torture. Let’s wait until the end of his second term to select Barrack Obama’s worst offense, but tentatively one guesses it will have to do with “enhanced interrogations” and/or drones.

The handling of Eisenhower’s U-2 incident was an instructive example of how harmful lying in government can be and of how one lie can beget the need for more lies. After the reluctantly agreed to “one last” U-2 flight was taken down by the Soviets, several “explanations” were tried before most of the truth finally was acknowledged. Perhaps the incident alone, and certainly the incident plus initial lies, wrecked the soon to be held summit between Ike and Khrushchev – a summit from which both had thought mutual nuclear arms reduction might result – not a trivial outcome. “In an interview after he retired, Eisenhower said the biggest regret of his presidency was ‘the lie we told about the U-2. I didn’t realize how high a price we were going to pay for that lie.’” (Thomas, p. 386)

In The Passage of Power, the most recent volume in his series about Lyndon Johnson, Robert Caro quotes Joseph Califano concerning Lyndon Johnson. “[He] could make himself believe in an argument even if that argument did not accord with the facts, even if it was clearly in conflict with reality. He would quickly come to believe what he was saying even if it was clearly not true.” And George Reedy said “[Johnson] literally willed what was in his mind to become reality.” (Caro, p. 83).

It is worth noting that truth telling is not always rewarded by voters. Jimmy Carter’s efforts with truth telling while running for office and after election garnered more than a little ridicule and disdain. The jocularly occurred after his statements to *Playboy*

reporters near election day in November, 1976. "I'm just human and tempted. I've committed adultery in my heart many times. ... still do ... not too old for that." He explained that the Bible says, "anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery." Though ridiculed for that voters did not punish him.

But he was not given a pass following his July, 1979, very intentional truth telling experience. In an address to the American people, delivered after an unusual ten-day interlude of listening, reflection and preparation, President Carter attempted to engage the public in a thoughtful consideration of problems to be faced in our nation's way of life. He qualified what was to follow by saying that in spite of the problems he was going to enumerate the U.S. would continue to be the most powerful nation, that our rights would endure, etc. He then pointed out that two thirds of those who could vote don't, that the productivity of American workers had declined, that saving for the future by Americans had fallen below others in the western world, and that we were dependent on foreign oil for half of our supply. Carter called for a program of conservation and environmentally sensitive development of our own energy sources so as to reduce the amount of imported oil to 1977 levels and never again exceed that level. He concluded that we must face the truth about these matters to restore faith in ourselves. Initially, response to the speech was positive, but soon it was being cast as forecasting a decline of the American way of life and came to be known as "the malaise speech" – a word that was not used in the speech. But the word was used by Robert Kennedy and Ronald Reagan in campaigns against Mr. Carter. Perhaps being told that we needed to work productively, save more for our futures, and reduce dependence on foreign oil was more than we were ready to hear. Mr. Reagan presented a much sunnier "morning in America"

theme, won the next election, and, to drive home his point that there were to be no limits on America, removed the solar collectors that Carter had installed on the White House.

Maybe it is all of the above that caused Nobel laureate poet Seamus Heaney to include in his poem about a mythical country he called The Republic of Conscience, "At their inauguration, public leaders must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep to atone for their presumption to hold office." (Heaney)

The influential contemporary moral philosopher Sissela Bok has given much thought to issues concerning lying in public life and its outcomes and has written several books, essays and articles addressing such matters. Dr. Bok, who has described herself as a practical ethicist, is a person of impressive lineage; both her parents, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, were Nobel laureates. She laid out her main ideas in the 1978 publication of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, the main source for this paper. At the time the American polity was in the penumbra of the Gulf of Tonkin and the umbra of the Watergate burglaries.

In the introduction to the book, Ms Bok states her intent to examine the nature of lying, how it affects human choice, and the basic approaches to evaluating lies. She also considers justifications offered for lies some think necessary. For a serious and balanced examination of an important issue, the book has been surprisingly popular and at least two only slightly revised editions have been issued since the original publication. Her book frequently is cited in considerations of the impact of truth and lies in public life and has been used in courses in many colleges. Because Ms Bok's writings have been kept in print for so many years, her reflections in the introductions to successive printings on the

changing state of debate concerning the moral issues of lying in public life are instructive. In the introduction to the first edition of her book, Dr. Bok asserted that she was astonished that, “though no moral choices are more common or more troubling than those which have to do with deception in its many guises, they have received extraordinarily little contemporary analysis.” She also noted that the then current eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contained “not [even] one reference to lying or deception, much less an entire article devoted to such questions.” (Bok, xxxi)

Therefore, the writer said she often turned to the classical period and the Middle Ages for consideration of questions such as “What *actual choices* should we make when we are wondering whether to lie or to tell the truth? And why?”

Further, she stated that “In law and in journalism, in government and in social sciences, deception is taken for granted when it is felt to be excusable by those who tell lies and who tend also to make the rules. She also asserted that “the casual approach of professionals [to lying] is wholly out of joint with the view taken by those who have to cope with the consequences of deception. For them, to be given false information about important choices in their lives is to be rendered powerless. For them, their very autonomy may be at stake.” (Bok, xxix) “Those who learn that they have been lied to in an important matter –say the identity of their parents, the affection of their spouse, or the integrity of their government - are resentful, disappointed, and suspicious.” (Bok, p. 21)

And she invited others to take up the debate concerning the issues of those confronting urgent practical moral choices.

In the second edition of *Lying* ten years later, the author acknowledged that much more contemporary analysis concerning questions of truthfulness and deception was going on

than when the first edition was published. Evidence of this was indicated by questions of truthfulness and deception taken up in classrooms, the media and in scholarly literature, as well as addition in the AMA Principles of Medical Ethics of clauses stressing honesty. In the introduction to the 1999 edition of *Lying*, the author noted that the airways “resonate with accusations of lying and with disputes concerning every variant of prevarication, evasion, outright lying, and perjury. She opined that “the debate about the issues of lying and truthfulness came to a head in 1998 as the charges and countercharges surrounding the Clinton White House were televised the world over....” The coverage was highlighted by split screen images of “the President acknowledging in August what he had denied in January, each time addressing the public with what appeared utter sincerity.” (Bok, xv, xvi) While most of the public condemned Clinton’s lie, many partially excused it because it occurred in response to an investigation which had run far outside its assignment and spilled over into intimate private matters.

Applying Sissela Bok’s ideas about lying in public life - especially concerning political candidates and office holders – helps in evaluation of the effects of lies. Ms Bok notes what we all see - examples of something other than the whole truth used in public and private life, i.e., we see lying to some degree or another. Politicians may lie to get elected, office holders to stay in office, to deny responsibility, to protect national security or personal safety, etc. It isn’t only politicians who lie. Physicians may lie concerning placebos (aka obecalps, according to Jeff Wilson) or life and death matters in the belief that it is in a patient’s best interest. Professors may lie in recommendations to be kind to a student. Social science researchers may lie to participants to uncover deeply held

prejudices that are too socially unacceptable to be openly expressed. Police may lie under oath to produce what they believe to be a correct verdict or to meet a quota. (New York Times, 2-3-13, SR 4) Generals may forward false body counts or otherwise lie about how a war is going to bolster morale or get more materiel or soldiers. Any of us tell white lies – perhaps daily- to lubricate social interactions. But as stated earlier the focus of this paper is lies by candidates and in government.

Bok readily stipulates that “[t]he whole truth *is* out of reach.” But asserts that “... this fact has very little to do with our choices about whether to lie or to speak honestly, about what to say and what to hold back. These choices can be set forth, compared and evaluated. And when they are, even rudimentary distinctions give guidance.” [Bok, pp. 4-5]

A February 3, 2013, article in the Washington Post (p. B3) demonstrates how difficult finding the indisputable truth can sometimes be and how the definition of what constitutes a lie is important. Focused on Colin Powell’s U.N. speech claiming weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the article includes <sup>retrospective</sup> statements in their own words from Powell, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice, and Donald Rumsfeld. Each confirms – to a greater or lesser degree - that the justification provided by Powell turned out to be incorrect. This is what Powell said at the U.N., “These are not assertions. What I am giving you are facts and conclusions ...” Today Powell says, “I get asked ‘Were you lying? Did we know the evidence was false? The answer to these questions is no.” Rumsfeld offered this interpretation, “Powell was not duped or misled by anybody, nor did he lie about Saddam's suspected WMD stockpiles. The President did not lie. the

Vice President did not lie. Tenet did not lie. Rice did not lie. I did not lie. The Congress did not lie. The far less dramatic truth is that we [simply] were wrong.”

Before moving to my next point I should add that in my opinion even though Rumsfeld’s statement disputed Powell’s contention that he was supplied incorrect information and analysis, Colin Powell had to testify with faulty information.

In a column that captured much of the concern about deception by officeholders, veteran Whitehouse reporter Helen Thomas, following the reelections of both George W. Bush and Tony Blair after the invasion of Iraq, offered a stinging critique of the leaders and their electorates. “Funny thing about America and Great Britain. I once thought their people cared about the credibility and accountability of their leaders.... But now I note with regret that the voters in both nations have other priorities. .... The Sunday Times of London published a secret U.K. government memorandum discussing a meeting between Blair and his top security advisers. The memo said that military action against Iraq ‘was seen as inevitable’ and that Bush wanted to remove Saddam ‘through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD.’ ... the memo said that ‘the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. .... At the time of the memo, Bush officials were insisting they had no plans to attack Iraq.” Thomas continued, “I am not surprised at the duplicity. But I am astonished at the acceptance of this deception by voters in the U.S. and the U.K. I’ve seen two American presidents go down the drain – LBJ on Vietnam and Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal – because they were no longer believed. But times change, and I guess our values do, too.”

In looking to earlier times for help in thinking about what should be considered when confronted with moral choices about lying, Dr. Bok considered St. Augustine's claim that, "God forbids all lies and that liars therefore endanger their immortal souls." But she notes that the prohibition of all lies proved difficult to live by. Augustine explained apparent discrepancies by "distinguishing among lies according to the intention behind them and the harmfulness of their effects. And Augustine developed an "eightfold hierarchy, going from the most grievous lies to those most easily pardoned. Different paths were taken to allow for pardoning of some lies; to claim that some deceptive statements are not falsehoods, merely misinterpreted by the listener; and finally to claim that certain falsehoods do not count as lies." (Bok, p. 34) Augustine's hierarchy comprises: lies in the teaching of religion, lies which injure someone unjustly such as lies that harm others and help no one, lies that harm others and help someone, lies told for the pleasure of lying and deceiving - the real lie, lies to please others and smooth discourse, lies that harm no one and help some one materially, lies that harm no one and help someone spiritually, and lies that harm no one and that protect someone from bodily defilement. Augustine warns about the slippery slope – that accepting small lies will lead to more and more lies.

Bok also examined the writings of Thomas Aquinas, finding that he distinguished among three kinds of lies: the officious, or helpful, lies; the jocose lies, told in jest; and the mischievous, or malicious, lies told to harm someone. Only the latter constitute mortal sins for Aquinas.

Sissela Bok offers the following as definitions of deception and of lying as discussed in her book:

Deception: “When we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe. We can do this through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence.”

Lying: “a lie is any intentionally deceptive message which is *stated*. Such statements are most often made verbally or in writing ....” “A lie is a statement, believed by the liar to be false, made to another person with the intention that the person be deceived by the statement.” Whereas just a few years ago the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contained no reference to “lying” or “deception,” “truth” received over 100 references. “The fact that the “whole truth” can never be attained should not ... be a stumbling block in the much more limited inquiry into questions of truth-telling and falsehood.” (Bok, p. 13)

“Deception, then, is the larger category, and lying forms part of it.” [Bok, p. 14]

In order to bypass the effect of the many filters through which communications pass, Bok chose in Lying to “look primarily at clear-cut lies –lies where the intention to mislead is obvious, where the liar knows what he is communicating is not what he believes, and where he has not deluded himself into believing his own deceits.” [Bok, pp. 16,17]

Bok posits “... that society could scarcely function without some degree of truthfulness in speech and action.” “Imagine a society, no matter how ideal in other respects, where word and gesture could never be counted upon. Questions asked, answers given, information exchanged – all would be worthless. Were all statements randomly truthful or deceptive, action and choice would be undermined from the outset. There must be a minimal degree of trust in communication for language and action to be more than stabs in the dark. This is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to

human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles.” (Bok, p. 19) The author undergirds much of her discussion of truthfulness and lying with a concept she calls the *principle of veracity*, by which she means a very strong moral presumption against lying. Bok advances the case for the *principle of veracity* as a necessary foundation in society. The author writes that she derives this by accepting Aristotle’s view that lying is “mean and culpable” and that truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations. This premise, she says, “gives an initial negative weight to lies. It holds that they are not neutral from the point of view of our choices; that lying requires explanation, whereas truth ordinarily does not. .... And it places the burden of proof squarely on those who assume the liar’s perspective.” (Bok, p. 30)

In Lying, Dr. Bok wrote, “The most serious miscalculation people make when weighing lies is to evaluate the costs and benefits of a particular lie in an isolated case, and then to favor lies if the benefits seem to outweigh the costs. In so doing, they blind themselves to the effect that such lying can have on their own integrity and self-respect, and to the jeopardy in which they place others.”

Liars have different concerns. “They may trust that they can make wise use of the power that lies bring. And they may have confidence in their own ability to distinguish the times when good reasons support their decision to lie.” “Liars share with those they deceive the desire not to be deceived. As a result, their choice to lie is one they would like to reserve for themselves while insisting that others be honest. They would prefer, in other words, a “free-rider” status....” (Bok, p. 24)

While holding to the general principle that lying is bad for the liar and for society, Bok  
 ← acknowledges that certain forms of deception may be debated and authorized in  
 ← advance.

In her discussion of justified lies by government she wrote, “ The argument that  
 those who raise moral concerns are ignorant of political realities, finally, ought to lead,  
 not to dismissal of such inquiries , but to a more articulate description of what these  
 realities are, so that a more careful and informed debate could begin. .... If duplicity is  
 to be allowed in exceptional cases, the criteria for those exceptions should themselves be  
 openly debated and publicly chosen.” (Bok, p. 170) She cites unmarked police cars to  
 ← discourage dangerous speeding and unannounced auditing of  
 business and government operations as publicly regulated examples. Otherwise, she  
 believes it better that those in government should establish in advance that they will not  
 comment on certain types of time-sensitive issues (e.g., devaluation of the currency).  
 Such an advance declaration would avoid the automatic public assumption that “no  
 comment” means yes.

Bok concludes her treatment of this particular aspect of lying this way:

“some lies –notably minor white lies and emergency lies rapidly acknowledged – may be  
 more *excusable* than others, but only those deceptive practices which can be openly  
 debated and consented to in advance are *justifiable* in a democracy.” (Bok, p. 181)

Probably we all could agree that lies and other deception done in the interest of national  
 security present some of the more difficult cases to judge. For example, the November,  
 2012, testimony of ex-CIA Director David Patraeus concerning the deadly raid on the

U.S. consulate in Libya illustrated the difficulty of knowing the whole truth and deciding when, if ever, deception might be justifiable. He explained that references to terrorist groups suspected of carrying out the violence were removed from the CIA's public explanation of what caused the attack so as not to alert them that U.S. intelligence was on their trail. He made clear that there was no White House interference or political agenda. (News, Nov. 17, 2012) However debate about the incident continues.

Further examination of justified lies was provided by Elizabeth Kiss (pronounced Quiche), then serving as the founding director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, in a 2003 conference on issues concerning deception in modern democracies. (She is now president of Agnes Scott College.) Dr. Kiss began by citing Immanuel Kant's absolute prohibition on lying: "To be truthful in all declarations is a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits to no expediency whatsoever." Though for Kant lying cannot be trumped by other duties, Kiss argued that some principles can trump the duty to be truthful: e.g., lying to save an innocent person from violent death is defensible. And, she continued, "By implication lying may also be permissible to protect or defend democratic society...." But she decries the call by some - Walter Jajco for example - for the U.S. to create a permanent, professional deceptive operations apparatus for use in peacetime and wartime because his proposal is "breathhtakingly oblivious to the moral costs and dangers of deception." She suggests four reasons such deception is morally problematic. Even though, or perhaps because, in the years since her warning, practice may have swept past it, her worries about likely bad effects deserve consideration. First, strategic deception involves not only deception of

enemies but also deception of your friends. Second, “to have a policy or settled practice of deception sets up patterns of behavior and justification that lead to corruption and abuse,” “that will creep and spread.” Third, in order to be successful, strategic deception requires compartmentalization of information and hierarchical chains of command.

These forms of organization tend to thwart critical assessment. Fourth, “It both violates and is parasitic upon an expectation of good faith.”

Elizabeth Kiss looks to Sissela Bok’s rationale for the requirement of public justification of deceptive practices to find a practical way to do it. “Look at the example of the use of unmarked police cars. You would defeat the purpose ... if there was a sign ... asking ‘Is it okay to use this as an unmarked police car?’” But you can have a public discussion about whether it is okay to use unmarked police cars. You can get the community to agree ... that the practice is justified and serves the public good.” In matters of national security we should apply wide public scrutiny and public consideration of questions like “Is it okay for government to place lies in the press for tactical purposes in wartime?” Such a requirement for justification for certain types of deception in specified kinds of situations might be less damaging to overall credibility of government and less likely to creep out into more and more lying. (Kiss)

It is ironic that two of the most candid statements during the 2012 presidential campaign confirmed the disregard with which the truth is held by many campaigners. Both were issued out of Mitt Romney’s camp, but my guess is that a candid member of the Obama

camp would have said the same. In March of 2012 an aide to Mr. Romney was asked whether Romney's primary opponents might force him too far to the right to win in the general election. The aide's comparison of erasing positions taken in primaries and replacing them with different positions in the general election to an Etch a Sketch, though amusing, cynically supported the notion that what candidates say in campaigns should not be taken seriously. The other statement was by the campaign's pollster who said, "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers." (Time, 10/15/12)

### **Can anything be done to diminish lying in public life?**

It won't be easy. The difficulty begins with determining just what statements fit one's definition of lies. "Bill Adair, who founded PolitiFact, a site that employs 35 reporters and won the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the 2008 campaign" says " 'We recognize that the truth is in shades of gray and different interpretations can be valid.' " (Time, 10/15/12)

But individuals, governments and private institutions can make changes in their own actions and in what they accept. U.S. District Court judge Gladys Kessler apparently thinks being held accountable for lies and publicizing them may help. She ordered tobacco companies to publish corrective statements that say they lied about the dangers of smoking and that disclose smoking's health effects, including the death of 1200 people a day. (News, 11/28/2012)

The public can pressure candidates to not use lies and innuendo. The voting public must demand that politicians they oppose *and the ones they support* not lie and that they use

facts and truth to reveal and not to distort. And voters must withdraw support from those who use lies and other distortions. (Time, 10/14/12) The media must focus on issues and facts rather than on elections as horse races and soap operas.

Educational institutions may have a special role, both in how they conduct their enterprise and in courses addressing issues such as moral choices concerning lying and truthfulness. Some will question whether talking about such matters will make any difference in actual choices made in real life. I think it can. I assisted college students many years as they worked to nourish and sustain an honor code – one that has now been in continuous operation for eighty years. I saw that while certain things – e.g., the breadth of behaviors covered, the territory where the code applied, the nature of sanctions used - could swing back and forth, the attention given such matters served to reinforce the importance of the basic tenants of the code: honorable behavior is expected and lying, cheating and stealing are prohibited. Also, programs based on the moral development research by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg in school classrooms and even in prison settings found that engaging people in dialogue about hypothetical moral dilemmas can raise their level of moral functioning in real life.

If we are serious about changing prevailing practices about lying, perhaps the New Testament book of Ephesians, traditionally attributed to Paul as a letter to members of the church at Ephesus, offers useful, succinct advice about truth and lying: “Then throw off falsehood; speak the truth to each other, for all of us are the parts of one body.” (The New English Bible, Ephesians 4:25)

However, having relied on ideas from Sissela Bok concerning lying in public life, it is appropriate to give her the final word. In a brief essay in the January 25, 2012, New

York Times magazine, she wrote as follows. “Few members of the public have any desire to let politicians lie to them. Why, then, don’t they reject candidates shown to have lied. Sometimes they do, if the lie is important and there is clear evidence that it took place. But most of the time the truth is hard to discern amid the barrage of accusations and counter accusations about fraud, the broken promises, and the outright lies that fly fast and loose among campaigns.

If citizens do not trust what candidates say, then they cannot interpret the information they need to vote. This cuts at the very root of what we mean by democracy founded on the consent of the governed.

The worst outcome would be for everyone to give up - - for voters to conclude that all politicians lie and for all politicians to lie when they think they will get away [with it] hoping that enough people will be misled and that others won’t hold it against them.

To reverse course, voters and politicians alike should set their standards higher. This calls for doing their best to distinguish between lies and honest mistakes, between lies ... proved and lies that are only suspected; between deception through outright lies, half-truths and silence; between foolish promises or predictions and knowingly false ones; and between slipping into a lie and undertaking a policy of deceit - - choosing to be someone who deals with others through deceit.

The temptation is strong, in our partisan climate, for politicians, their supporters and all who have a stake in their victory to view their own misstatements as innocuous compared with those of their opponents. To the extent that they choose to engage in distortion and allow others to carry out smear campaigns on their behalf, they will contribute further to public distrust and to doubts about their personal character and integrity.”

And in all editions of her book Professor Bok holds firm to a concluding statement, “Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity” (Bok, p. 249)

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*“When regard for the truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things will remain doubtful.” Augustine*

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“Something has gone wrong in society when it is ok for the truth to be negotiable. ...I have an obligation to stand up for truth and do the right thing, irrespective of the consequences.” Davis

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“These are not assertions. What I am giving you are facts and conclusions.” Powell

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“... no moral choices are more common or more troubling than those which have to do with deception in its many guises....”

The fact that “the whole truth is out of reach ... has very little to do with our choices about whether to lie or to speak honestly ....”

“A lie is a statement, believed by the liar to be false, made to another person with the intention that the person be deceived by the statement.”

“[Liars] may trust that they can make wise use of the power that lies bring. And they may have confidence in their ability to distinguish the times when good reasons support their decision to lie.” But they don’t want to be lied to; they seek free-rider status, depending on existence of a general atmosphere of veracity.

*“The argument that those who raise moral concerns are ignorant of political realities, finally ought to lead not to dismissal of such inquiries, but to more articulate description of what those realities are, so that a more careful and informed debate could begin. .... If duplicity is to be allowed in exceptional cases, the criteria for those exceptions should themselves be openly debated and publicly chosen.” Bok*

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“To be truthful in all declarations is a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits to no expediency whatsoever.” Kant

“Some principles can trump the duty to be truthful: Lying to save an innocent person from violent death is defensible. By implication lying may be permissible to protect or defend democratic society.” But deception *is* morally problematic: “First, strategic deception involves not only deception of enemies but also deception of your friends. Second, “to have a policy or settled practice of deception sets up patterns of behavior and justification that lead to corruption and abuse ... that will creep and spread. Third, in order to be successful, strategic deception requires compartmentalization of information and hierarchical chains of command that tend to thwart critical assessment. Fourth, “It both violates and is parasitic upon an expectation of good faith.” Kiss

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*“Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect and veracity.” Bok*