

What is a Lie?

Several times in the last couple of years, we have witnessed instances in which our politicians or media personnel have made statements that are untrue or for which the overwhelming evidence suggests they are untrue. How many times, however, have you heard those making the statement say that they lied? I can't recall a single time. In these days of political correctness run amok, it seems that it is nearly impossible for us to call a spade a spade. This made me do a little research.

The dictionary tells us that a lie is an untrue statement made with the intent to deceive or to create a false or misleading impression. Wikipedia adds that a lie is an "intentionally false statement" made by a person who "knows it is not wholly the truth." Given these definitions, let's put some of the recent newsworthy statements to the test. There are really a lot to choose from, but I will focus on three major controversies.

1. "If you like your health insurance plan, you can keep it." or "If you like your doctor, you can keep your doctor." or "The Affordable Care Act will save every American family \$2500 per year." (I am not sure of the exact wording of the last statement, but I think I captured the essence of what was stated.) President Obama led the charge in making these statements repeatedly, but others in the Administration also made the statements. Are these lies? Certainly, the evidence is that they are untrue. But, the standard for a lie is higher than that. The statements must also have been intentionally false and made with the intent to deceive. There are many reports coming out now that say that the Administration knew (or at least, the analyses, studies and data strongly suggested) that none of the above statements is true. Were they made with the intent to deceive? I think yes. The only way the ACA was going to be passed was if the people and the legislators believed the above statement. If we can believe Jonathan Gruber, they were indeed made with the intent to deceive. Thus, my conclusion – all were lies. Remember during Obama's State of the Union speech a couple of years ago when one of the Republican Congressmen shouted out that Obama was lying when he was talking about the ACA? That Congressman was subjected to a lot of criticism for calling a lie, a lie. While it is certainly outside the decorum of a State of the Union speech to call out the President, it seems to be a case of calling a lie, a lie.

2. The recent Brian Williams case seems to be another example of a lie. Originally, the uproar was over statements he made about his helicopter taking on enemy fire while he was reporting on activities during the Iraqi fighting. On further investigation, it seems he also reported untruths during his coverage of the Katrina hurricane situation in New Orleans. He has admitted his statements about being in a helicopter that took on enemy fire were untrue. Let's stick to that one. OK, the statements were untrue. Were they made with the intent to deceive? I think it is obvious that the answer is that he made these statements in an attempt to inflate his own role, and bravery, and to generate further excitement in his reporting of the fighting. Maybe, we were just jealous of the bravery of the military personnel who really were putting their lives on the line every day, and he wanted to be seen as like them. Whatever his reason, that reporting along with his reporting of Katrina was largely responsible for Brian Williams being named the NBC anchor for their nightly news program to replace Tom Brokaw. He benefitted mightily from his lies. Isn't it interesting how many ways people caught in lies can make

admissions without saying that "I lied." How about, "I misremembered the facts." or "I misrepresented the facts." or "I was foggy about what happened." Is "misremembered" even a word. It does sound a lot nicer than "I lied."

3. Although this third controversy is much older than the first two, I add it because I think it challenges the definition of a lie. I refer to the situation back during the Bush administration before the decision was made to attack Iraq. President Bush and VP Cheney stated to the American people that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (in the form of biological/chemical weapons or perhaps even nuclear weapons). That statement was vitally important to justifying our invasion of Iraq. Was this statement a lie? Let's examine it. It was apparently untrue – at least no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq after we defeated the Iraqi forces. The statement was certainly made with the intent to justify the U.S. invasion. But did Bush and Cheney know that the statement was untrue when they made it? And, did they do it with the intent to deceive? These have been questions that Americans have debated since the Iraqi war. I am not sure what the answers are. Americans seem to be split along party lines. Here is what I do know. (a) Prior to the U.S. invasion, Saddam Hussein used weapons of mass destruction (bio/chem weapons) in fighting Iran and the Kurds, and they were responsible for thousands of deaths. (b) Before Bush, the Clinton administration warned that Saddam had WMDs. (c) Many key legislators (both Republicans and Democrats) made statements that Iraq possessed WMDs. These included Hillary Clinton and Ted Kennedy. (d) The intelligence agencies (CIA, DIA) believed that Iraq had WMDs and advised President Bush as such. So, did Bush and Cheney lie? My conclusion is no. What they said was apparently untrue, but they thought it to be true and they did not make their statement with the intent to deceive the American people. In fact, I think it should be difficult to believe that Saddam Hussein did not have WMDs given that he had already used them in the past. It stretches belief to think that a tyrant like Saddam Hussein would destroy his arsenal of WMDs given the unrest in his area of the world. But, either he did indeed do that, or his stockpiles of WMDs have yet to be discovered. So I give Bush and Cheney a pass on this one.

It seems that the overwhelming desire to be politically correct, we are just unable to call a lie a lie. I am embarrassed that the people we choose to represent us, to lead us, to do what is best for our country seem to view lying as acceptable, especially if they think the ends justify the means. They seem to have become experts at obfuscating their message. They seem to make everything they say unclear or overcomplicated, probably in an attempt to make it impossible for the listener to be able to say they lied -- the listener just misunderstood what they said. Just listen to the statements made by administration officials like the Press Secretary or his deputy, or the spokesperson for the State Department, or advisors like Susan Rice, or officials like Katherine Sebelius when she defended the Department of Health and Human Services during the ACA website rollout debacle, or John Koskinen in defending the IRS. They have mastered the arts of obfuscation, concealing and misrepresenting the truth.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a politician like the character that James Stewart played in the 1939 movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." If you haven't seen this movie, you should check it out. It shows how a corrupt Washington can grind down most idealistic people. Do you think we will ever get to the point that our leaders and media are completely truthful to us? Regrettably, I think not.