

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Joe Saltzman is Associate Mass Media Editor of *USA Today* and Associate Dean and Professor of Journalism at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication, Los Angeles. This passage is adapted from an article that first appeared in *USA Today Magazine* in July 2006.

LYING AS AMERICA'S PASTIME

Everybody lies. From the president of the U.S. to Congress to the smallest citizen in the country, we are a nation of liars. Parents still try to teach their children not to do so. They retell the story of George Washington and the cherry tree or recite Proverbs 6: 16-19 to make their point. Yet, with the same breath, they tell their kids that, if they are not good, Santa Claus will not bring them any presents. They also urge their offspring to leave their teeth under the pillow so the Tooth Fairy will reward them. Youngsters discover at an early age that skirting the truth will keep them out of trouble: "I didn't do it; she did." "It wasn't my fault." "I don't know why the toilet overflowed. It just did."

White lies are rationalized by young and old alike as a way of being kind to people. They entail false compliments ("I love that dress on you"), lazy excuses ("I'll call you back tomorrow"), and broken promises ("I won't ever do that again"). As we grow older, the rationalizations for lying become more complex. We cheat on our income tax returns because the tax laws are corrupt. "The check is in the mail" buys some extra time in paying a late bill; besides, what is the harm? Putting on a resume that you graduated from college when you did not seems fair because you were just a few units shy of getting a diploma before you had to quit school because you ran out of money.

One survey determined that 90% of Americans lie under certain circumstances. Most of us lie out of fear or embarrassment. If our resumes are not impressive, we are afraid we will not get that job. If we are caught doing something wrong, we will be reprimanded, fired, or even sent to jail. Some rationalizations just keep growing, making the liar almost appear noble and kind of heart: "I cheat on my tax return because the government is using my tax dollars to wage an unjust war that is killing innocent people." "I'm a good person, and the lie really didn't hurt anybody. In fact, it saved a lot of bruised feelings."

Plagiarism—passing off another's work as your own—and fabrication have become commonplace, especially in student papers at all levels of American education. Moreover, it has seeped into the media. Writers of nonfiction books and memoirs have been caught lying about past events. Staff writers on such august publications as *The New York Times* and *New Republic* have made up or improperly enhanced stories. In broadcast news, pieces are lifted out of print publications without attribution or apology. Few electronic or internet news media bother checking quotes or facts that they steal from other publications. Most of the students or journalists caught red-handed seem more frustrated that they were caught than apologetic for what they have done. Some do not seem to understand that using other people's work without attribution or simply fabricating quotes and facts is dishonest. Actually, this regressive brand of journalism merely appears to be a logical extension of the dishonesty in business and personal relationships overtaking the country.

Lying has become such an integral part of society that no one seems outraged by it anymore, even when that lie has extraordinary and painful consequences. So, when the president or a congressman is caught in a lie, the public seems to accept it as just business as usual. The end justifies any means, any lies, any deceptions, any dishonest behavior.

The policy of government today seems to be that, if the truth is offensive, ignore it and make up a story. Global warming? It does not really exist. Results of global warming? Blame it on something else. Annoyed that science does not support your point of view? Ridicule it and make up your own explanation. If anyone in or out of government dares to tell the truth, minimize their participation in government and send them on their way.

The news media appear utterly confused about the acceptance of lying as a way of life. Few media outlets ever point out a lie or deception until long after it has served their purpose. Using the excuse of balanced coverage and fairness, the press seems to give any point of view, any lie, any deception equal time with people who actually are telling the truth. Scientific fact is given equal time with anyone's point of view. Expert testimony is equated with gossip and opinion. When in doubt, the news media always fall back on old, reliable audience-pleasers like celebrity journalism, consumer news, the weather, and sports—topics that do not offend or confuse.

The problem is that private behavior and public policy built on deception corrupt the heart and soul of a country and its people, leaving both morally bankrupt and untrustworthy. The news media should be worried about this, reminding readers and viewers about this epidemic of deceit that goes from the highest office in the land to the average person on the street. They should be telling us on a daily basis that a lying tongue is intolerable to any conscientious citizen.

ESSAY TOPIC

Why, according to Saltzman, has lying become an acceptable way of life in America? To what extent do you agree with his views? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation and experience.