

Nation Suffers When Presidents Lie

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In the heat of this presidential race, we are bombarded with political advertising touting each candidate's qualifications. But would anyone of them be a truthful president? The prospects of such are not good. It seems as if we have caught every presidential candidate telling lies to gain votes and win delegates. Too many Americans accept lying as simply part of politics. Does it matter if presidential candidates sometimes lie to us? Yes, it does. Those who lie to gain power will also lie once they are in power, and the lies of presidents are dangerous.

Presidential Lies

When U.S. presidents lie to the nation those lies are largely inexcusable.

Admittedly, there may be times when national security requires a president to withhold important information from the public, but those circumstances are rare and are not the same as lying to the nation.

Presidential lies carry the potential for great harm. Some people believe President George W. Bush and his advisers lied about Saddam Hussein's threat to America and his possession of weapons of mass destruction. Presidential history is the root of such cynicism.

During the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson and his cabinet members repeatedly assured Americans the war was near an end. We now know from the memoirs of Johnson's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, that Johnson and his cabinet members had no such belief.

President Richard Nixon assured us he knew nothing about the break-in at the Democratic Party's Watergate offices. He told us he was not a crook. His taped conversations proved him a liar and the nation endured a constitutional crisis.

President Bill Clinton lied to America during a national TV broadcast. He pointed his finger at the camera and angrily said: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." President Clinton's lie resulted in months of public turmoil that almost paralyzed the government during his impeachment and trial. Clinton is charismatic and remains hugely popular; popularity, however, is not respect. Clinton permanently tarnished his presidential legacy.

Credibility Damaged

The office of the president is one of great prestige, but prestige is not the same as credibility. The office of president does not bestow credibility on the officeholder.

Gaining credibility requires hard work and depends on truthfulness. A president caught telling lies loses credibility with the American people. Why believe in a president's policies if you cannot believe the president's words?

A U.S. president is the most powerful leader in the world while in office, and a president's lies carry international implications. Can America's allies trust the United States in times of crisis, if the president is a known liar? What about the nation's enemies? A lying president gives credence to our enemies' claims that our nation is corrupt.

A president's lies threaten democracy because democratic government depends on openness and truth. Americans must discuss, debate and critically judge national and international policies. A public regularly lied to is a misled and ignorant public incapable of judging correctly. Democracy thrives on truth.

Eventually, presidential lies corrupt the nation's soul and its people. Lies no longer outrage us.

When a liar holds the nation's highest office, the nation faces moral bankruptcy. Why should any of us tell the truth, when we so richly reward a liar?