

Why does Donald Trump tell so many lies?

-Prof. Geoff Beattie

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Politicians who lie have an enormous advantage over truth-tellers. If you can successfully embellish the truth or construct a new reality, that can always be more interesting and engaging than the truth. The truth may be a bit dull and uninspiring; the lie can be whatever you want it to be. You know what your audience wants to hear. And besides what is there to lose? Politicians know that lying is part of our everyday lives. We all do it! [Research in psychology](#) using lie diaries tells us that people lie on average twice a day. Many are harmless 'white' lies told for the benefit of others ('you don't look a day over thirty, honestly'), but some are not so harmless and told for the benefit of the liar themselves.

Some people get significant pleasure from telling such self-centred lies. [Psychologists call this](#) 'duping delight'. It confuses the recipient of the lie. They expect to detect signs of guilt or anxiety, instead all they see is a faint smile of satisfaction. The liar gets away with it. That smile could mean anything. [Certain types of personality](#) are drawn to these sorts of lies, including narcissists and those with little empathy like psychopaths. They don't care about the consequences for the recipient, it's all about them.

We start lying early in life – between two and three years of age. Charles Darwin in 1877 [caught his son William Erasmus](#) lying at that age. He had eaten some forbidden pickle juice and lied about it. Darwin was surprised by his son's evident pleasure in lying. The brightest children lie the most and most effectively; the ability to lie improves as our cognitive abilities develop. Like any skill, we get better at it with practice. But most of us still feel guilt even when we are well practiced.

Some politicians are so good, however, you wonder if they might actually believe the lies. You search in vain for tell-tale micro-expressions of guilt, shame or sadness, but you find none. You start to wonder about their underlying personality.

Politics was once thought of as a noble art, it was Machiavelli in 1532 [who wrote](#) 'those princes who have done great things...have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft.' A major part of that craft is the lie. Politicians lie by omission and by exaggeration, but sometimes they tell outright 'big lies'. This term was [introduced](#) by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. A big lie 'is a gross distortion or misrepresentation of the truth used as a propaganda technique.' The big lie works, according to Hitler, because the ordinary person knows how bad it feels to tell a small lie so they cannot imagine someone having the 'impudence' to distort the truth so gravely. To work, big lies, again according to Hitler, must be able 'to awaken the imagination of the public through an appeal to their feelings.' They are not aimed at our rational selves, but our unconscious and emotional selves. Trump telling us all that immigrants are eating the dogs and cats in Springfield

Ohio is not appealing to our rational system (Where's the evidence? How do they cook them? Are all immigrants at it?); it's providing us with a vivid image, it's an appeal to our feelings, it's trying to [impact on our emotional and unconscious system](#). But we ask ourselves, how could someone have the impudence to tell such a lie? That was Hitler's point.

These are some of the advantages that political liars have – no constraints on the story or the self-construction, a direct appeal to the emotions without the constraint of truth, an engaging emotional draw. What could be better? And some are very good at it – they suffer little from detection apprehension and feel confident in their ability to succeed. As the sociobiologist Robert Trivers has pointed out, lying can give you a clear evolutionary advantage – status, wealth and achievements are important in that great evolutionary battle in the survival of the genes – that's why people lie about them. But [he says self-deceit can also be evolutionary advantageous](#) because if you can convince yourself of something then it makes you more convincing to others, and therefore more effective.

Perhaps Trump managed to convince himself that they really were eating the dogs and cats in Springfield. Maybe he is that self-deluded as in so many areas (for example about climate change being a Chinese hoax). However, maybe he just thought to himself – plant the image, that is all you need to do for the faithful. MAGA.

Of course, politicians can always justify a lie to themselves. It was Plato who [introduced the concept](#) of the 'noble lie' - a necessary lie to preserve the state. Perhaps politicians reason that we cannot bear the truth all the time. What will Putin do next? Can we bear to know? They are lying for our benefit, like a 'kind' parent. Or it could be part of their own self-deceit and contribute to the fact that they then lie so often and so blatantly with little consideration of the long-term consequences for either our faith in democracy or our faith in ourselves.

Attractive fictions might well engage us and sweep us along, but fortunately or unfortunately the truth will out, as Shakespeare noted. And then it's not so pleasant for anybody but especially for the recipient of the lie. For us.