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**Book Review:**

***Why Leaders Lie—The Truth About Lying in International Politics***

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Why Leaders Lie—The Truth About Lying in International Politics

John J. Mearsheimer

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John J. Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, is one of the most prominent, productive, and imaginative scholars in the realist school of international relations. In this brief, highly instructive volume he discusses how and why leaders have used deception, dissembling, and outright lying in pursuit of foreign policy goals. He differentiates lying from two other kinds of deception, concealment and ‘spinning,’ or putting facts in the most favorable light possible.

A committed realist, he states clearly that lying, “widely viewed as reprehensible behavior in ordinary life,” nonetheless is acceptable in international politics when “good strategic reasons” so dictate. Reasons of state may persuade a leader to lie to other leaders, and even to the population at large. Interestingly, he argues that there is not much lying between states and leaders are “much more likely to lie to their own people” regarding matters of foreign policy.

Advocates of the realist perspective are usually described as emphasizing power in relations between nation states, sometimes to the exclusion of other important considerations, but that is misleading. Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, who remains the seminal figure of this school of thought and analysis, explicitly among scholars and implicitly among the wider interested public, was committed to the importance of ethics and the rule of law. Power might be unavoidable in international relations, but policies regarding use of force must be guided by a range of considerations, including morality.

Perhaps the more fundamental defining quality of the realist school is emphasis on understanding history as context, both limiting but also facilitating policy effectiveness. A great irony of American foreign policy since the Second World War is that leaders who have seen themselves as especially tough-minded and hard-nosed, willing unflinchingly to use force for purposes of state, have also overlooked history in their self-defined policy pressure cookers of decisions and crisis management.

The Vietnam War experience is today a principal exhibit for the prosecution regarding fatal dangers for foreign policy when realism is removed from historical context. The American invasion and occupation of Iraq may prove to be another, and provides the principal focus of this book.

Mearsheimer argues that top officials of the administration of President George W. Bush told “four major lies” in the prelude to the Iraq invasion. First, they lied in stating “that they knew with complete certainty” that Iraq dictator Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Second, they stated that Saddam “was closely allied” with Osama bin Laden. Third, a variety of statements from senior officials indicated Iraq had some involvement in the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11. Fourth, President Bush and others indicated that peaceful resolution of the dispute with Iraq was possible, when the decision had already been made to go to war.

On the last point, Richard Haass, at the time head of the policy planning staff in the State Department, and currently President of the Council on Foreign Relations, is quoted regarding a conversation in July 2002 with Condoleezza Rice, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. He questioned the wisdom of making Iraq the highest military priority, given the wider war against international terrorist groups. She replied in effect that this decision had already been made, and so “don’t waste your breath.”

Mearsheimer also absolves Saddam Hussein of lying about possessing weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq War, and discusses this topic in some detail. This is true based on examination of explicit statements from that leader and others in his regime. However, Saddam Hussein’s on-again, off-again course of action regarding admission of internationally authorized weapons inspectors provides implicit evidence that he was seeking to hide such a program. Ironically, apparent concealment of nonexistent weapons contributed to his downfall.

The author’s other examples of lying by national leaders include President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s description of an armed exchange between the USS *Greer*, a destroyer, and a German submarine in the late summer of 1941, several months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. FDR implied the attack was unprovoked, though the American vessel had been cooperating with a British anti-submarine effort. He also cites President Lyndon B. Johnson’s use in 1964 of an apparent attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats on another destroyer, the USS *Maddox*, to secure passage by Congress of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing expanded military efforts in Vietnam. In each case, a warship was employed in provocative fashion but leaders stated otherwise.

Mearsheimer views simplistic emotional appeals to force or “fearmongering” as a special danger facing democracies, and accuses Bush administration leaders of employing such tactics to generate public support for the Iraq invasion. He criticizes neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol who believe much of the public is too unsophisticated to be told detailed truths in dispassionate fashion.

He goes on to link the great journalist philosopher Walter Lippmann with Kristol and company in disparaging public sophistication, but that is unfair. Lippmann personified commitment to serious public education, and saw himself as an informative intermediary between leaders and the wider public. Perhaps the only news columnist of that earlier era with even more public influence was First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt; readers knew she was always completely honest.

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