

The American Conservative

Bovard on *Why Leaders Lie*

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On July 14, 2011 @ 2:16 pm In

Jim Bovard has [reviewed](#)^[1] Prof. John Mearsheimer's [Why Leaders Lie](#)^[2] for the new issue of *TAC*. At *The National Interest*'s site, Ted Galen Carpenter also had some [comments](#)^[3] on the new book. As both of them explain, Prof. Mearsheimer argues that political leaders lie to their own people far more often than they lie to one another, and he also argues that strategic lies told in the national interest can sometimes be beneficial. Bovard can't find many examples of the beneficial strategic lie, and he makes a good case that even when they appear beneficial in the short-term they can lead to significant errors later on.

Bovard helps to explain why many foreign policy deceptions go unpunished. He writes:

While some people regard political lies as negligible offenses, official deceptions often prove fatal to foreigners.

At the end of the review, he concludes:

There is no reason to expect government to be more honest in the future than it has been in the past. The Obama administration's lies on Libya are eerily akin to the Bush team's lies on Iraq and the Clinton administration's lies on Kosovo. But deceiving the American people should no longer be treated as a victimless crime.

One difficulty in holding a deceitful government accountable for its foreign policy decisions is that the vast majority of the people who suffer because of them are not American citizens. There are cases, most notably in Vietnam, where misleading Congress and the public has led to escalation of foreign wars that have cost tens of thousands of American lives, but on the whole most of the costs are imposed on the people in other countries. The public isn't entirely indifferent to this, but they usually aren't going to penalize government officials for it. Of the three wars Bovard lists here, only one became the cause of major political outrage here at home. This was partly because it dragged on for many years when it was supposed to be a short war, but mostly because of the growing number of U.S. casualties. The Iraq war's costs to the U.S. in terms of killed and wounded were [quite high](#)^[4] for a so-called "small" war, but the Iraqi civilian population suffered much higher losses and enormous dislocation of population that will have adverse effects on Iraq's politics and economy for years and decades to come. When the government misleads the public, it has all of the harmful effects Bovard mentions, and it may even cost America dearly at times, but most of the costs are paid by others, and those costs are either invisible or quickly forgotten back home. There might be more public outrage over government deceit if there were a more complete accounting of the consequences of the policies that were enabled by this deceit.

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1 Comment To "Bovard on *Why Leaders Lie*"

#1 Comment By [cfountain72](#) On July 14, 2011 @ 5:26 pm

Shhhh Daniel. Don't you know, we're tired of hearing about Iraq? In fact, I don't think we should mention it

anymore...

[5]

These are two perfect examples of repeating the lie over and over again, until it becomes an accepted truth. While the video's poster's focus on Bolling's bone-headed line about the 9/11 attacks (or lack thereof?), I was even more disturbed by Dana Perino's indignant response to the mention of the Iraq War. Is she still on Bush's payroll?

(To be non-partisan, we certainly saw similar nonsense out of the ex-CIA chief/now-Sec-Def.)

Peace be with you.

Article printed from Eunomia: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison>

URLs in this post:

[1] reviewed: <http://www.amconmag.com/blog/leviathans-lies>

[2] Why Leaders Lie: <http://www.amazon.com/Why-Leaders-Lie-International-Politics/dp/0199758735>

[3] comments: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/why-us-leaders-deceive-their-own-people-5563>

[4] quite high: <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/06/afghanistan-iraq-wars-killed-132000-civilians-report-says>

[5] : <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201107140027>

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