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The Art of the Lie? The Bigger the Better

Lying as a political tool is hardly new. But a readiness, even enthusiasm, to be deceived has become a driving force in politics around the world, most recently in the United States.

For President Trump's supporters, rallying near the Washington Monument on Wednesday, it is enough that he says he won.

By Andrew Higgins
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MOSCOW — In a cable to Washington in 1944, George F. Kennan, counselor at the United States Embassy in Stalin's Moscow, warned of the occult power held by lies, noting that Soviet rule "has proved some strange and disturbing things about human nature."

Foremost among these, he wrote, is that in the case of many people, "it is possible to make them feel and believe practically anything." No matter how untrue something might be, he wrote, "for the people who believe it, it becomes true. It attains validity and all the powers of truth."

Mr. Kennan's insight, generated by his experience of the Soviet Union, now has a haunting resonance for America, where tens of millions believe a "truth" invented by President Trump: that Joseph R. Biden Jr. lost the November election and became president-elect only through fraud.

Lying as a political tool is hardly new. Niccolo Machiavelli, writing in the 16th century, recommended that a leader try to be honest but lie when telling the truth "would place him at a disadvantage." People don't like being lied to, Machiavelli observed, but "one who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived."
A readiness, even enthusiasm, to be deceived has in recent years become a driving force in politics around the world, notably in countries like Hungary, Poland, Turkey and the Philippines, all governed by populist leaders adept at shaving the truth or inventing it outright.

Janez Jansa, a right-wing populist who in 2018 became prime minister of Slovenia — the home country of Melania Trump — was quick to embrace Mr. Trump's lie that he won. Mr. Jansa congratulated him after the November vote, saying "it's pretty clear that the American people have elected" Mr. Trump and lamenting "facts denying" by the mainstream media.

Even Britain, which regards itself as a bastion of democracy, has fallen prey to transparent but widely believed falsehoods, voting in 2016 to leave the European Union after claims by the pro-Brexit camp that exiting the bloc would mean an extra 350 million pounds, or $440 million, every week for the country's state health service.

Many of the claims of Brexit backers are demonstrably false, but as Britain officially left the European Union, on Jan. 31, some people in London celebrated.

Those who advanced this lie, including the Conservative Party politician who has since become Britain's prime minister, Boris Johnson, later admitted that it was a "mistake" — though only after they had won the vote.

Bigger and more corrosive lies, ones that don't just fiddle with figures but reshape reality, have found extraordinary traction in Hungary. There, the populist leader

Viktor Orban has cast the financier and philanthropist George Soros, a Hungarian-born Jew, as the shadowy mastermind of a sinister plot to undermine the country's sovereignty, replace native Hungarians with immigrants and destroy traditional values.

The strength of this anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, said Peter Kreko, executive director of Political Capital, a research group in Budapest long critical of Mr. Orban, lies in its appeal to a "tribal mind-set" that sees all issues as a struggle between "good and evil, black and white," rooted in the interests of a particular tribe.

"The art of tribal politics is that it shapes reality," Mr. Kreko said. "Lies become truth and explain everything in simple terms." And political struggles, he added, "become a war between good and evil that demands unconditional support for the leader of the tribe. If you talk against your own camp you betray it and get expelled from the tribe." What makes this so dangerous, Mr. Kreko said, is not just that "tribalism is incompatible with pluralism and democratic politics" but that "tribalism is a natural form of politics: Democracy is a deviation."

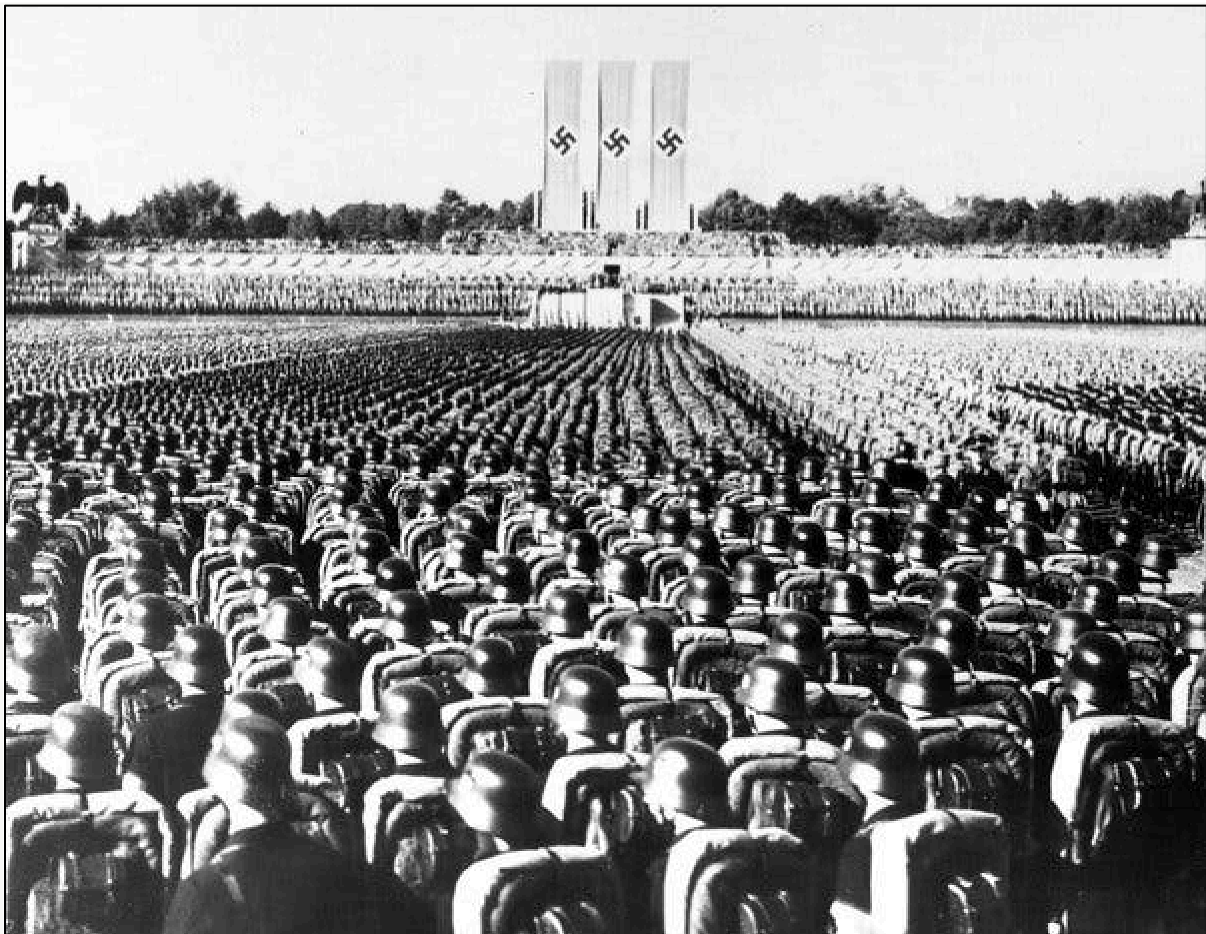
In Poland, the deeply conservative Law and Justice Party of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, in power since 2015, has promoted its own multipurpose, reality-shifting conspiracy theory. It revolves around the party's repeatedly debunked claim that the 2010 death of scores of senior Polish officials, including Mr. Kaczynski's brother — Poland's president at the time — in a plane crash in western Russia was the result of a plot orchestrated by Moscow and aided, or at least covered-up by the party's rivals in Warsaw.

Russian rescue workers inspecting the site of a plane crash that killed Poland's president, Lech Kaczynski, in 2010.

While Polish, Russian and independent experts have all blamed bad weather and pilot error for the crash, the belief that it was foul play has resonated among die-hard Law and Justice supporters. It has both fed on and reinforced their view that leaders of the previous centrist government are not just political rivals but traitors in cahoots with Poland's centuries-old foe, Russia, and Poland's own former communist elite.

The utility of lying on a grand scale was first demonstrated nearly a century ago by leaders like Stalin and Hitler, who coined the term "big lie" in 1925 and rose to power on the lie that Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in World War I. For the German and Soviet dictators, lying was not merely a habit or a convenient way of sanding down unwanted facts but an essential tool of government.

It tested and strengthened loyalty by forcing underlings to cheer statements they knew to be false and rallied the support of ordinary people who, Hitler realized, "more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie" because, while they might fib in their daily lives about small things, "it would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths."



Soldiers listening to Hitler during a Nazi Party convention in September 1936 in Berlin

By promoting a colossal untruth of his own — that he won a "sacred landslide election victory" — and sticking to it despite scores of court rulings establishing otherwise, Mr. Trump has outraged his political opponents and left even some of his longtime supporters shaking their heads at his mendacity.

In embracing this big lie, however, the president has taken a path that often works — at least in countries without robustly independent legal systems and news media along with other reality checks.

After 20 years in power in Russia, President Vladimir V. Putin, for example, has shown that Mr. Kennan was right when, writing from the Russian capital in 1944, he said, “Here men determine what is true and what is false.”

Many of Mr. Putin’s falsehoods are relatively small, like the claim that journalists who exposed the role of Russia’s security service in poisoning opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny were working for the C.I.A. Others are not, like his insistence in 2014 that Russian soldiers played no role in the seizure of Crimea from Ukraine, or in fighting in eastern Ukraine. (He later acknowledged that “of course” they were involved in grabbing Crimea.)

But there are differences between the Russian leader and the defeated American one, said Nina Khrushcheva, a professor and expert on Soviet and other forms of propaganda at the New School in New York. “Putin’s lies are not like Trump’s: They are tactical and opportunistic,” she said. “They don’t try to redefine the whole universe. He continues to exist in the real world.”

Unidentified men outside a Ukrainian military base in Crimea in 2014.

Despite his open admiration for Russia’s president and the system he presides over, she said, Mr. Trump, in insisting that he won in November, is not so much mimicking Mr. Putin as borrowing more from the age of Stalin, who, after engineering a catastrophic famine that killed millions in the early 1930s, declared that “living has become better, comrades, living has become happier.”

“That is what the big lie is,” Ms. Khrushcheva said. “It covers everything and redefines reality. There are no holes in it. You so either accept the whole thing or everything collapses. And that is what happened to the Soviet Union. It collapsed.”

Whether Mr. Trump’s universe will collapse now that some allies have taken flight and Twitter has snatched his most potent bullhorn for broadcasting falsehoods is an open question. Even after the Capitol siege by pro-Trump rioters, 174 members of Congress voted to oppose the election outcome. Many millions still believe him, their faith fortified by social media bubbles that are often as hermetically sealed as Soviet-era propaganda.

“Unlimited control of people’s minds,” Mr. Kennan wrote, depends on “not only the ability to feed them your own propaganda but also to see that no other fellow feeds them any of his.”

In Russia, Hungary and Turkey, the realization that the “other fellow” must not be allowed to offer a rival version of reality has led to a steady squeeze on newspapers, television stations and other outlets out of step with the official line.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey has shut down more than 100 media outlets and, through bullying by the tax police and other state agencies, forced leading newspapers and television channels to transfer ownership to government loyalists.

This assault began in 2008 with claims by Mr. Erdogan and his allies that they had discovered a sprawling underground group of coup plotters and subversives comprising senior military officers, writers, professors, editors and many others.

Protesters outside a courthouse in Turkey in 2013 where 275 people were accused of trying to overthrow the government. Turkey’s leader later acknowledged the case was a sham.

“The group was completely invented, a total fabrication,” said Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of“The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey.”

This big lie, built around a few shards of fact, convinced not only pious Muslims hostile to the country’s secular elite but also liberals, many of whom then viewed the military as the biggest threat to democracy. Trials dragged on for years before Mr. Erdogan acknowledged that the case against the alleged underground group was a sham.

Long before Mr. Trump, Mr. Cagaptay said, the Turkish leader, who has ruled since 2003, “saw the power of nativist and populist politics” rooted in falsehoods and “brought to prominence the idea of the deep state to justify crackdowns on his political opponents.”

Mr. Trump’s ascent also helped empower a cousin of the big lie — a boom in social-media disinformation and far-right conspiracy-theory fiction.

It has most notably been embodied by the global expansion of Qanon, a once-obscure fringe phenomenon that claims the world is run by a cabal of powerful liberal politicians who are sadistic pedophiles. Mr. Trump has not disavowed Qanon disciples, many of whom participated in the Capitol mayhem last Wednesday. In August he praised them as people who “love our country.”

To some extent, each new generation is shocked to learn that leaders lie and that people believe them. “Lying never was more widespread than today. Or more shameless, systematic, and constant,” the Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Koyré wrote in his 1943 treatise, “Reflections on Lying.”

What most distressed Mr. Koyré, however, was that lies don’t even need to be plausible to work. “On the contrary,” he wrote, “the grosser, the bigger, the cruder the lie, the more readily is it believed and followed.”