

## POLICY Series

### America and the World - 2017 and Beyond

#### “Why Does Donald Trump Have So Much Trouble with the Truth?”

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Published on **28 February 2017** | [issforum.org](http://issforum.org)

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

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Shortlink: [tiny.cc/PR-1-5R](http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5R)

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5R-Truth>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5R.pdf>

A number of the essays in this series have grappled with the question of how big a departure Donald Trump’s presidency is from the theory and practice of American foreign policy and international relations more broadly. Having published a book on presidential deception not too long ago, I have been reflecting on this theme with particular reference to Trump’s strained (perhaps broken) relationship with the truth.<sup>1</sup> Trump’s carelessness with the truth is by now well known. The fact-checking site PolitiFact awarded Trump’s statements “Lie of the Year” in 2015. As of 3 February 2017, it had rated fully 69% of his statements either “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire.”<sup>2</sup> By comparison, Hillary Clinton, Trump’s Democratic rival in the 2016 presidential election campaign, was charged with making “mostly false,” “false,” or “pants on fire” claims 26% of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Why, then, does Donald Trump have so much trouble with the truth? It would be tempting to argue that the analytical framework developed in my book, *Deceit on the Road to War*, provides some purchase on the subject, but ultimately I conclude that its relevance is limited, ironically for reasons flagged at the end of the book. With Trump, it is difficult to distinguish deception from self-deception. As important, deception in the Trump case appears to be as much a bottom-up phenomenon as a top-down one, insofar as his supporters credit Trump with a populist authenticity *exactly because* he runs so afoul of the marketplace of ideas and its

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War: Presidents, Politics, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). The book is the subject of an H-Diplo/ISSF forthcoming roundtable.

<sup>2</sup> PolitiFact, a service of the *Tampa Bay Times*, “Donald Trump’s file,” <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/donald-trump/>. Accessed on 3 February 2017.

<sup>3</sup> PolitiFact, “Hillary Clinton’s file,” <http://www.politifact.com/personalities/hillary-clinton/>. Accessed on 3 February 2017.

elite gatekeepers. In the remainder of this essay, I elaborate on these points after summarizing the argument in *Deceit on the Road to War*.

*Deceit on the Road to War*

*Deceit on the Road to War* makes the case that deception is a natural outgrowth of the democratic process.<sup>4</sup> Elected leaders have powerful incentives to maximize domestic support for war and retain considerable ability to manipulate domestic audiences without being fully exposed. Most importantly, they can exploit information and propaganda advantages to frame issues in misleading ways, cherry-pick supporting evidence, suppress damaging revelations, and otherwise skew the public debate in advantageous directions. These tactics are particularly effective in prewar periods when the information gap between leaders and the public is greatest and the latter's perception of reality is most elastic.

In practice, leaders resort to varying degrees and types of deception to sell wars. As a general rule, however, the more contentious the domestic politics surrounding a war, the more leaders engage in blameshifting. In cases where expected costs are high or success is uncertain, leaders can encounter serious resistance to going to war. They will not be inclined to welcome domestic debate under these conditions. Rather, they will do their best to conceal the fact that they are actively considering war while seeking out provocations that shift blame for hostilities onto the adversary. If the public becomes convinced that the other side has forced the issue, they will be more tolerant of the high costs and initial setbacks that can attend war against a capable opponent.

The more permissive the domestic political environment, in turn, the more deception takes the form of overselling. In the event that expected costs are low or an easy victory seems assured, public discontent will be latent and will center on the fact that war seems unnecessary. In this case, leaders will oversell the threat, so as to convince the public that the stakes are high enough to justify war. Any threat inflation will go uncontested, as expectations of a one-sided victory will dilute whatever incentives the political opposition might have to force a contentious debate.

When resorting to deception, leaders take a calculated risk that the outcome of war will be favorable, with the public adopting a forgiving attitude after victory is secured. In the event that the outcome is unfavorable, leaders will suffer a political cost, less for misleading the public than for launching a failed war.

The three cases featured in the book – Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and World War II, Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War, and George W. Bush and the Iraq War - were chosen to test these claims in an intensive fashion. Each is marked by a different level of domestic opposition to war, with more opposition associated with blameshifting (World War II, Vietnam) and less opposition with overselling (Iraq). Key conclusions include that democracies are not as constrained in their ability to go to war as we might like; that the marketplace of ideas rarely lives up to its full potential as a deterrent to deception; and that deception cannot be ruled out in all cases as contrary to the national interest.

*Trump's Brand of Deception*

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<sup>4</sup> In the book, I define deception as deliberate attempts on the part of leaders to mislead the public about the thrust of official thinking (8).

I conclude *Deceit on the Road to War* with three questions that the book raises but does not answer.<sup>5</sup> First, when does deception blur into self-deception? Second, what strategies do leaders use to coopt other elites and keep them from blowing the whistle?<sup>6</sup> Third, to what extent is deception a bottom-up phenomenon, as opposed to a top-down one? The first and third, I would argue, are particularly relevant to Trump and complicate any attempt to compare him to leaders like Roosevelt, Johnson, and Bush who strategically deployed deception to overcome pockets of domestic resistance to wars they considered to be in the national interest.

In the absence of ‘smoking gun’ evidence, it is difficult to pin down exactly what the balance is between deception and self-deception in any individual instance. To successfully deceive others, leaders first need to deceive themselves, at least to some degree. In the case of Trump, however, it is not clear that he has a firm enough grasp of the facts to even know that he is doing violence to them. In other words, this may be a case of self-deception all the way down. Suggestive on this score are the triggers that have elicited the most blatant falsehoods on the part of Trump and his surrogates in the first weeks of his presidency: the crowd at Trump’s inauguration *must* have been the biggest in history and widespread fraud *must* have handed the popular vote to Hillary Clinton, because otherwise Trump is not the dominant “winner” that he conceives himself to be.<sup>7</sup> A narcissist can still be a rational actor up to a point, but Trump’s self-regard seems consuming enough that inconvenient facts get screened out when they clash with his ego. With Trump the relevant question might not be “Why does he lie so much?” but “Can he handle the truth?”<sup>8</sup>

That said, it would be going too far to suggest that there is no method to Trump’s madness. It is just a different method than the one I would associate with Roosevelt, Johnson, and Bush. All three used deception to forestall debate, to minimize controversy. The goal was broad support for their policies. Trump and his surrogates, in contrast, welcome conflict with the marketplace of ideas and its elite gatekeepers. White House strategist Stephen K. Bannon, for example, has described the media as “the opposition party,” so out of touch with the American people that it “should be embarrassed and humiliated.”<sup>9</sup> The media, according to this populist narrative, is just another element of the elite establishment that is biased against Trump, with fact-checking as its weapon of choice against him.

For Trump’s supporters, most of whom are conservative Republicans, his rough treatment in the marketplace of ideas can thus be taken as further evidence that he is on *their* side, and not that of an elite establishment

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<sup>5</sup> Schuessler, *Deceit on the Road to War*, 124-125.

<sup>6</sup> On the elite politics surrounding the use of force, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, “War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force,” *Security Studies* 24:3 (2015): 466-501. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070618>.

<sup>7</sup> Trump has long relied on “truthful hyperbole” to associate his name with the “biggest” and the “best,” belying a messier reality. See David Barstow, “[‘Up is Down’: Trump’s Unreality Show Echoes his Business Past](#),” *The New York Times*, 28 January 2017.

<sup>8</sup> The Editorial Board, “[Can Donald Trump Handle the Truth?](#)” *The New York Times*, 28 January 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Michael M. Grynbaum, “[Trump Strategist Stephen Bannon Says Media Should ‘Keep Its Mouth Shur’](#),” *The New York Times*, 26 January 2017.

and that is too liberal and too Democratic for their taste.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one could argue that partisan polarization has led directly to the “post-truth” era we find ourselves in. It is “partisan tribalism,” as Amanda Taub argues, that “makes people more inclined to seek out and believe stories that justify their pre-existing partisan biases, whether or not they are true.”<sup>11</sup> This is related to how Trump can be credited with authenticity even as he takes such liberties with the truth: it is not the accuracy of his claims that matters but the way they speak to the partisan identity of his supporters. Partisan polarization, in other words, has paved the way for the “alternative facts” and other forms of misinformation that Trump thrives on.<sup>12</sup>

What are the implications for those of us who study the impact of democracy on American foreign policy and international relations more broadly? The primary one, I would argue, is that we need to be attuned to the possibility that threats to sound foreign policy can come from the bottom-up as well as the top-down. In Miroslav Nincic’s language, “disruption from below” can be as problematic as “derailment from above.”<sup>13</sup> Ironically, given the uneasy relationship historically between realism and democracy, realists of late have trained most of their fire against elite threats to sound foreign policy, and not mass ones. I have in mind here Jack Snyder’s pioneering work on great power overexpansion, in which the primary culprits are logrolled cartels spewing myths of empire.<sup>14</sup> More recently, in the debate surrounding how the Iraq War could have happened, the point of departure has been executive branch threat inflation and neoconservative influence on the Bush administration.<sup>15</sup> John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, widening the aperture, have made the case

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<sup>10</sup> As Lynn Vavreck, a professor of political science at UCLA, writes in the *New York Times*, “People often ask me ‘who these people are’ – those who elected Donald J. Trump...They’ll ask, ‘What’s the single best description of Trump supporters?’ My answer often disappoints them. It’s quite simple: They’re Republicans.” See Lynn Vavreck, “[A Measure of Identity: Are You Wedded to Your Party?](#)” *The New York Times*, 31 January 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Taub, “[The Real Story about Fake News is Partisanship](#),” *The New York Times*, 11 January 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Fandos, “[White House Pushes ‘Alternative Facts.’ Here are the Real Ones](#),” *The New York Times*, 22 January 2017. Importantly, partisan polarization should not be conflated with strong parties. Arguably, it is the combination of weak parties and strong partisanship that has been the key enabler of Trump’s rise. See Ezra Klein, “[Donald Trump’s success reveals a frightening weakness in American democracy](#),” *Vox*, 7 November 2016 and Ezra Klein, “[Obamism sought strength in unity. Trumpism finds power through division](#),” *Vox*, 20 January 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Miroslav Nincic, *Democracy and Foreign Policy: The Fallacy of Political Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Snyder’s work on democratization and nationalist conflict has a similar flavor, with elites in transitioning societies cynically deploying belligerent rhetoric to retain their hold on power. See Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000) and Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> See A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation Since 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009) and Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (London: Routledge, 2012).

that the Iraq War is but one manifestation of the distortions that the Israel Lobby has introduced into American policy toward the Middle East.<sup>16</sup>

On one level, this focus on elite politics is understandable, given what many realists consider the central strategic problem of the post-Cold War period: the tendency of a unipolar United States to succumb to the hegemon's temptation and overextend itself.<sup>17</sup> Underpinning an overactive American foreign policy has been an elite consensus that spans right and left, with a reluctant public dragged along for the ride.<sup>18</sup> When the issue is too much ambition, rather than too little, it is natural to start the analysis with elites, as they usually outpace the masses in their interventionism (as classical liberals have long emphasized).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, we may have allowed hegemonic continuity at the grand strategic level and ideological overlap at the elite level to distract us from developments at the mass level - like political polarization - that have opened the door to a heterodox figure like Trump, who pairs the retrenchment instincts of many realists with none of the discipline or savvy that is required to implement retrenchment successfully.<sup>20</sup> If Trump himself has become the central problem in American foreign policy, then it would behoove us to think hard about the political forces that enabled his rise.

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<sup>16</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> On the hegemon's temptation, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 152-153.

<sup>18</sup> For Mearsheimer, "global dominators" come in two flavors: "neoconservatives" on the right and "liberal imperialists" on the left. See John J. Mearsheimer, "Imperial by Design," *The National Interest* 111 (January/February 2011), 19.

<sup>19</sup> For a smart dissent that does not let the masses off the hook, see Jonathan D. Caverley, *Democratic Militarism: Voting, Wealth, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "[Trump Doesn't Know What He Doesn't Know About Foreign Policy](#)," *Foreign Policy*, 8 January 2017. To be fair, Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz were warning as far back as 2007 that the domestic political foundation under liberal internationalism was eroding, as evidenced by rising polarization. It was only with Trump's ascendancy to the White House that the full import of their analysis became clear, at least to this reader. See Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security* 32:2 (Fall 2007): 7-44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.32.2.7>.