Author explores why world leaders lie

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During World War II, Winston Churchill declared that "truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies." Franklin D. Roosevelt agreed: He was "perfectly willing to mislead and tell untruths, if it will help win the war."

A professor of political science at the University of Chicago, John Mearsheimer believes that lying can be a useful tool in the "nasty and dangerous business" in times of peace as well as war. In this interesting and insightful little book, Mearsheimer looks at lying "from a strictly utilitarian perspective." He distinguishes lying from concealment and spinning, delineates the different kinds of lies leaders tell, discusses the strategic motivations behind them and assesses benefits and costs.

"Why Leaders Lie" contains several surprising findings. Although he acknowledges that he has not systematically examined the historical record, Mearsheimer argues that lying in international politics is rare because when vital strategic issues are at stake it is relatively easy to detect. Unfortunately, however, "leaders are more likely to lie to their own people than to rival states." "Concealing a contentious policy is especially likely in democracies," Mearsheimer points out, especially when leaders are "bent on fighting wars of choice in distant places."

Mearsheimer's cases in point are the Greer incident in 1941, the infamous Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964 and the WMD "fear-mongering" of 2003.

Leaders who lie, Mearsheimer suggests, often believe that their fellow citizens cannot be trusted to understand the complexities of foreign policy. But it is possible - "and maybe even likely" - that it is they "who are misreading the threat." A better policy might well emerge if they were forced to defend their arguments in the marketplace of ideas. And even when it "works," lying subverts democracy by eliminating trust between policymakers, making it difficult for voters to make informed choices and undermining the rule of law.

To this reader, at least, Mearsheimer, the "realist," who thinks that lying in international affairs is, at times, "acceptable," makes his most compelling case for its "downside."

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WHY LEADERS LIE

_The Truth About Lying in International Politics_

By John J. Mearsheimer

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