

Review - Why Leaders Lie

Written by Thomas Messer

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THOMAS MESSER, NOV 19 2012

Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics

By: John Mearsheimer.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Politicians are famous for their use and abuse of language for self-serving purposes. Adept politicians will use rhetorical flourishes and carefully worded responses to avoid answering questions, to answer questions in a manner that suits their purposes, or to rephrase questions so they may answer the questions they would prefer to have been asked.[1] This has led the populations of many countries to assume their politicians are not always honest with their constituents.[2] There is also a common assumption that if politicians and leaders regularly lie to the citizens who elect them, then surely they must lie to other nations' leaders who cannot electorally punishing their deception.

Professor Mearsheimer's book raises a number of important questions: what is lying? Is lying common in international politics? Why would national leaders lie to one another? Moreover, if national leaders do lie to each other, is it done to benefit the nation or the leader? In addition, if the leader genuinely told the lie for the nation's benefit, should we care? Given the dog-eat-dog nature of an international system that lacks a global government to regulate state behaviour, all of these questions are highly relevant to international politics. Despite these questions

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being highly valid and having considerable influence upon interstate relations, Mearsheimer found limited publications on lying between states within the political science literature. Mearsheimer wrote *Why Leaders Lie* not to provide an authoritative volume on the evolution of lying and all of its forms, but rather to provide a starting point by developing analytical structures for further political science research.

The book consists a discussion of lying and the general (non-international relations) theory about lying. Mearsheimer outlines the various kinds of deception, including making a false statement to prompt others to believe that statement (lying); concocting a story which uses facts beneficially to the teller's view and omits those which are counter to their purpose (spinning); and providing information but excluding elements which a person chooses not to disclose unless pressed (concealment). While there are frequently instances of such behaviour in everyday life, and such tactics may be used for self-interested political purposes, Mearsheimer addresses only instances where deception occurred for strategic purposes: in order to advance the interests of a state.

Mearsheimer provides a typology of seven different types of lies told in international affairs. The lies told to obtain an advantage or deny another state an advantage (inter-state lies); lies told to inflate a threat to prompt a public to understand the threat (fear mongering) and hiding information from their publics and other states which could harm a nation (strategic cover-ups). Other lies include lying about a country's past to concoct a positive story about a country (nationalist myths); and deceptively attributing actions to a devotion to liberal/humanitarian norms (liberal lies). Finally, Mearsheimer addresses lying to promote a country or social group's interests (social imperialism) and lying to hide unsuccessful policies or failures (ignoble cover-ups). Mearsheimer's analysis excludes ignoble cover-ups and social imperialism, as they are lies told to benefit small elements of society, not the entire state and are therefore not strategic lies. Interestingly, Mearsheimer does not include 'threat deflation', the opposite of fear mongering in his analysis, and justifies its exclusion because 'it rarely occurs'.^[3] In the types of lies he examines, Mearsheimer provides an analytical framework within which to understand the lie and an example, mostly drawn from recent history. After discussing these lies and providing examples, Mearsheimer addresses the negative repercussions of lying on international affairs.

Contrary to the assumptions of many, including the reviewer, Mearsheimer concludes that while lying occurs in international politics, it is not rampant. Rather, he argues that politicians are more likely to lie to their citizens than to the leaders of other countries, given the high risks that may accompany such deception. Mearsheimer suggests that rampant deception by states in international affairs can not only 'backfire' and damage the state or the leader, but can also damage the domestic body politic, as it may 'foster a culture of dishonesty'.^[4] Interestingly, Mearsheimer posits that nations will often forgive their leaders for deception if the leader's actions result in a success, while they will be punished should it lead to failure. Perhaps most concerning, Mearsheimer concludes fear mongering is likely to remain a feature in United States national discourse to garner support for additional wars of choice.^[5] This is likely to be replicated in other nations where troops, materiel or funding is to be deployed against a non-existential threat.

Why Leaders Lie contains some assertions that merit review. Firstly, given the number of female heads of state and diplomats, it would be prudent for Mearsheimer to incorporate factual case studies or hypothetical scenarios that involve females in such positions, rather than only males. Secondly, it is difficult to support Mearsheimer's assertion that economic and environmental issues are 'low politics' due to the relative scarcity of trust and 'low stakes' when states address such issues.^[6] International politics is largely about the interplay of states and often centres upon military power, but in recent years, economic and environmental issues have risen to far greater prominence, particularly in states where reliable supply of food, water and funds are more important than developing military capabilities.

As Mearsheimer notes, this book does not hold all of the answers about lying in international politics. Nor does it address all forms of lies in international politics, instead focusing upon those lies told for strategic purposes to benefit the nation and excluding lies for other purposes. As such, perhaps the book could more accurately be titled *Lying for the Nation*, which would more accurately reflect its contents. Rather, the book seeks to start the discussion within political science and international relations faculties and to prompt research that builds upon the foundations he provides – a goal that Mearsheimer has certainly achieved with this book. The political science field would benefit

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from further research building upon Mearsheimer's typologies, particularly incorporating quantitative data, if possible, to provide greater understanding of lying in international affairs.

Mearsheimer has written a highly entertaining and thoroughly researched book that is delivered with succinct prose.[7] Mearsheimer has written a book that simultaneously addresses an underdeveloped area in international relations literature by creating theoretical structures and case studies, while also providing entertaining reading for the non-specialist reader. This book should be recommended reading for international relations students and scholars and citizens may benefit if national leaders' political advisors heed Mearsheimer's warnings.

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[1]For a contemporary introduction to political rhetoric, see Katherine McCabe, 'Climate-change rhetoric: A study of the persuasive techniques of President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard', *Australian Journal of Communication* 39(2) (2012):35-58.

[2]Andrew Leigh, a former Economics Professor and current Australian politician, provides a comparative study of trust in political leaders in Australia and the United States of America drawing upon considerable public surveys. Leigh's paper is available at: <http://andrewleigh.org/pdf/PrincesNewClothesCh2.pdf>. See also Susan J Pharr, Robert D. Putnam and Russell J Dalton's 2000 paper, 'A Quarter-Century of Declining Confidence' in the *Journal of Democracy* 11(2), 2000:5-25. The authors found citizens in many leading nations that trust of their politicians has declined.

[3] Mearsheimer, p.151

[4] Ibid., pp.139-140.

[5] Ibid., pp.142-143

[6] Ibid., p.45

[7] For a similarly entertaining book that utilises international relations theory but makes it accessible to the public, see Dan Drezner's *Theory of International Politics and Zombies*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

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