

[Note: the following essay was published originally in Newsletter #33; Autumn, 1992]



# Buried Under an Avalanche of Lies

by Bill Herbst

© 1992, 2003, all rights reserved

email: [billherbst@aol.com](mailto:billherbst@aol.com)  
website: [www.billherbst.com](http://www.billherbst.com)

Do people in this country have no shame? Has the inner voice of conscience been utterly extinguished in America? Are we so jaded and greedy for wealth or power or whatever the hell we want that lying has become normal, even acceptable behavior?

I sat and watched—stunned—as the 1992 conventions of both major political parties paraded their sleazy wares across the airwaves. I watched as speaker after speaker, most of whom are well-respected, some even famous, told one bold-faced lie after another, without so much as batting an eye. Dubious half-truths formed the foundation for salacious innuendo that was compounded into character assassination, which was followed by the instant marginalization of whole classes of Americans. I heard the unanimous and hearty applause for these prevarications and waited for someone to shout, “*Enough!*” But no one did. No one seemed even to notice, much less care.

Lying to get a vote is nothing new in America. Lies have a long tradition in every arena of American life, and, presumably, in every other country as well. But never before has lying seemed so pervasive to me, so nonchalant, so completely dominant. Have we finally succumbed to the endless siege of lies that fill visual and print media? Turn on the television at any hour of day or night. Ignore

actual programming; most of that is fiction anyway. Just watch the commercials. You will quickly learn that CD collections of Elvis' hits contain songs by the King that "will last forever." Really? *Forever*? Cheesy slicer/dicer kitchen tools that cost about two bucks to manufacture are hawked with a supposed "retail value" of \$60, but can be yours for *only* \$29.95, plus \$7.00 shipping and handling.

When advertisers aren't engaging in outright lies, they're trying to pull the wool over our eyes with slick images and subliminal associations. If you can link your product to beautiful women, sex, youth, success, or fitness, then why not? And if, along the way, you can subtly make your competitor seem to be a schmuck or an asshole, so much the better.

And not only in business and politics do lies abound. No, no. Our personal lives are a veritable mine field of lying. Husbands deceive wives (and vice versa). Lovers, friends, and coworkers lie to each other. Everybody you know has lied to you. Everyone you will know is going to lie to you. And you are going to lie to them. Not only that, you're also going to lie to yourself. Endlessly. *And the beat goes on...*

When I was 19 years old, in college in Columbia, Missouri, Stephen Gaskin and his band of hippie followers rolled through town in a caravan of day-glo schoolbuses, on their way to setting up *The Farm*, one of the largest alternative communes in America. The Gaskin philosophy could be summed up in a single sentence: *Tell the truth*. Simple and to the point. *Just tell the truth*.

My entire social family embraced this radical idea with single-minded intensity and youthful naiveté. We began to "tell the truth" to each other, notably in often brutal interactions under the informal rubric of "*Getting Straight (with/about...)*." A lot of anger, resentment, and confusion were vented under this cover. Over the years, as we practiced the discipline, we discovered gradually that telling the truth was not so easy. Often the truth was impossible to tell. Sometimes we didn't really know what the truth was. We found that, all in all, the truth was a slippery character.

I've been actively studying truth and how to convey it for much of my youth and all of my adult life. Am I now able to tell the truth? Sometimes, but too often not. The truth is now more elusive than ever, especially when it comes to putting it into words. What has developed, however, are built-in sensors that let me know when I'm lying or being lied to. Red lights and buzzers go off inside my heart; sensors trip inside my intellect. At this point in my life, the lights, buzzers, and trip sensors never stop. I'm sure this is, in part, because I'm older and less naïve than I once was.

Lying is endemic to human beings, and societies are certainly no purer than individuals. If anything, cultures are more full of crap than the people who comprise them. Whatever conscience is expressed by society as a whole is invariably the product of extremely hard work and sacrifice by certain individuals willing to swim against the tide of lowest common denominators. My best guess is that there's nowhere in the world we could go to be free of manipulative falsehoods, propaganda, and fiction masquerading as fact.

I haven't lived around the world, however. I've spent my entire life in the good ol' US of A. So I can speak from direct experience only as an American kid who is now an adult American citizen.

I was taught in high school civics about the idealistic history of our country, our extraordinary efforts to promote truth and justice as "the American way." I honor and respect that heritage, and the constant vigilance required to maintain it. But—despite the pride I once felt about this grand experiment in democracy, economic equality, and human rights—the older I get, the more I fear that we're losing the battle, that the essential truths for which so many fought so hard are slipping away.

What's sadly clear to me is this: *If you want the truth, don't look to America. Increasingly, here it's buried under an avalanche of lies.*

