

# The Boy Who Cried Wolf

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In terms of the collective — American culture and society primarily, but also modern global civilization — a considerable part of my life has amounted to the retelling of a slightly altered version of the well-known Aesop's fable, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.

A fairly standard version of that fable goes like this:

There once was a shepherd boy who was bored as he sat on the hillside watching the village sheep. To amuse himself he took a great breath and sang out, *"Wolf! Wolf! The Wolf is chasing the sheep!"*

The villagers came running up the hill to help the boy drive the wolf away. But when they arrived at the top of the hill, they found no wolf. The boy laughed at the sight of their angry faces. *"Don't cry 'wolf', shepherd boy,"* said the villagers, *"when there's no wolf!"* They went grumbling back down the hill.

Later, the boy sang out again, *"Wolf! Wolf! The wolf is chasing the sheep!"* To his naughty delight, he watched the villagers run up the hill to help him drive the wolf away. When the villagers saw no wolf they sternly said, *"Save your frightened song for when there is really something wrong! Don't cry 'wolf' when there is NO wolf!"* But the boy just grinned and watched them go grumbling down the hill once more.

Later, he saw a REAL wolf prowling about his flock. Alarmed, he leaped to his feet and sang out as loudly as he could, *"Wolf! Wolf!"* But the villagers thought he was trying to fool them again, and so they didn't come.

At sunset, everyone wondered why the shepherd boy hadn't returned to the village with their sheep. They went up the hill to find the boy. They found him weeping.

*"There really was a wolf here! The flock has scattered! I cried out, 'Wolf!' Why didn't you come?"*

An old man tried to comfort the boy as they walked back to the village. *"We'll help you look for the lost sheep in the morning,"* he said, putting his arm around the youth, *"Nobody believes a liar...even when he is telling the truth!"*

Numerous versions of this story are told. In an alternate version, the wolf kills all the sheep. And in an even sterner, more gruesome telling, the wolf kills and eats not only all the sheep in the flock, but the lying shepherd boy as well. In that version, the moral — that liars will go unheeded — is enlarged to imply that liars will be punished.

As with so many fables, the moral is sometimes true and sometimes false. One very basic premise of propaganda as a tool to manipulate public opinion and manufacture mass consent is that Lying works, and the bigger the Lie, the more effective the propaganda. People will believe even the most outrageous Lies if they are repeated often enough. We have ample evidence in America that this is so.

For more than half a century — starting in the late 1960s and continuing right up through the present — I've been living my own altered version of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.

Just as in the standard version of the story, I've been a shepherd boy crying "Wolf!" to the villagers. Along with millions of other Americans, I began doing so as a youth, during the War in Vietnam. Not because I was bored, but because I was seriously alarmed about what was routinely accepted as normal. In my version of the story, there was a real danger to the sheep, and thus to the village, but the predator wasn't a wolf.

In the traditional story, the wolf is an carnivore that exists in the woods outside the village, which is an obvious reference to the long history of farmers and ranchers trying to protect their livestock from wild or feral predators. The fable is usually understood at that literal level, about protection from threats beyond the village. But in more allegorical terms, the deeper predatory threat to the village is not from an animal, but from certain villagers inside the community. Real wolves are much less dangerous than some of the people who live among us.

In both the original and my version of the story, a wolf exists and is present as a threat to the village. In my allegorical retelling, however, the predator was invisible to most of the villagers. How had he entranced them, by donning "sheep's clothing" as a disguise? No, the villagers couldn't see him because he was human. The wolf looked just like them.

So, when many of us cried "Wolf!", we were essentially pointing our fingers at certain villagers/Americans, who were usually among the most powerful and respected members of the community/country. Needless to say, this was an affront to the social hierarchy and the existing status quo pecking order. No wonder many of the villagers didn't believe us. They assumed we were disloyal to the village's core beliefs, although we felt precisely the opposite. Most of the community recoiled at our accusations, calling us liars, traitors, and America-haters. We were told often to "love it or leave it." Some of us did leave, but most stayed. We wanted the village — and America — to live up to its ideals.

In its simplest and most direct manifestation, the wolf was the American Empire, with its four faces of Fundamentalist Christianity, Rampant Militarization, Predatory Capitalism, and Total Commodification. That Empire, in all its hubris, racism, and obscene wealth, ruled over a "Liberal World Order" under its hegemonic command. At the peak of what came to be known as "the American Century," America had built that global structure in the wake of World War II's devastation and maintained it successfully for quite awhile. Our presumed generosity and largesse were trumpeted constantly by the Empire and its supporters. Not a day went by without the ideals of individual freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and righteous prosperity being hauled out and loudly proclaimed as justification for all our actions and proof that the Empire was indeed the Shining City on the Hill and, without question, the best village that had ever existed.

Less often mentioned was the dark side of the Empire, which included the overthrow through assassinations and coups of numerous democratic governments in the Mideast and global South, our cynical but enthusiastic support for dictators and totalitarian regimes, and the ill-gotten gains enjoyed by the Empire and its most privileged members. Too often, those gains had been achieved by raiding flocks of sheep everywhere — not only around the world, but eventually here at home as well. The people who ran the Empire called it Good, but that was a Lie. It was a predator.

I've continued to cry "*Wolf!*" through the six decades that followed the 1960s. My cries have grown louder, more urgent, and almost desperately shrill over the initial two decades of this still young 21st century, as it became apparent to me that too many Americans weren't receptive to or even interested in hearing about the dangers we saw. I've screamed until I was hoarse and turned blue in the face. All to no avail. The only people who listened were those who could see the predatory facets of our own natures. Most Americans couldn't. And there weren't enough of us who did to keep the wolf at bay or stop its killing.

Until relatively recently, the wolf had a field day. Over the past 70 years, the wolf killed millions of sheep all around the world. Their mangled bodies and bones litter the hillsides. At home, some villagers have suffered mightily — not the leaders and the privileged, but too many of the common villagers. No wool for clothing, and no mutton for food. Many of those villagers now say, "*How is it possible that our flocks are gone? Who killed our sheep?*" They are painfully aware of their losses, and they're angry about it.

To some extent, the villagers have blamed us — the formerly young shepherds, who are now old. In their minds, we were supposed to protect the flocks. But every time we cried "*Wolf!*," the villagers said, "*We don't*

*see a wolf, so you must be lying.*” Some of those villagers have come up with various gonzo theories about what’s been killing the sheep, basically scapegoats for the bloody carnage. But they still can’t see the wolf, who is now more predatory than ever.

The moral of my altered version of the fable is turned around and inverted from that of the standard story, which was that people don’t believe liars. By contrast, the moral of my altered version is that people who have already succumbed to believing a Lie will then not believe or consider the truth, even when they are told and shown. Put the truth right in front of their faces, plain as day, and they will deny and reject it. They morph into the three monkeys — See no Evil, Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil (although that third monkey has now quit and left the building, so that Evil is routinely spoken these days, aimed at whomever the lying Wolf has told the villagers to ridicule, blame, and hate).

In addition, people who already believe a Lie won’t entertain any other options, no matter who tells them. Even the most reputable, authoritative, sane, and wisest people among us are disbelieved or discounted, ignored or excoriated, and sometimes even punished once the Lie has taken root in the public mind.

Many, many concerned and thoughtful people have been trying to tell America the hard truth about its shadow for a very long time, but — by and large — Americans have refused to believe it. Too many snake oil salesman in the village are busy promoting Big Lies about America that are comforting and more attractive to the public. Not only does the truth about who we have been in this country contradict their cherished ideals and pervasive fantasies of “American Exceptionalism,” but, if the truth were seriously considered even for a second, that would mean we’d need to take a long, hard look at ourselves. Most Americans prefer not to do that. Out of sight, out of mind.

After all, aren’t we the Good Guys?