

Trust and Truth in Democracy
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We take for granted how lucky we are to live in a society in which there is so much trust. It is automatic to believe that our system is predominantly based on truth and sense of duty. When we turn on our water taps, we expect the water to be safe to drink because the people responsible for assuring it are doing their job. When we find that officials have deliberately lied about water quality, we expect to see them prosecuted for criminal action.

When we go to the market, we do not assume that the posted price of items is negotiable. We do not debate the cost of each onion (as I experienced when living in Iran decades ago). When we vote, we expect (with few exceptions) that our vote is counted and is not counterfeit. We expect our elected officials to tell the truth, and when we find they lie, we expel them.

As parents, we try to instill truth telling in our children. They are not punished when they admit a bad action as much as they are punished for lying about it. The moral tale of George Washington admitting to his father that he had used his little hatchet to cut down a cherry tree sapling. His father praised the truth telling.

What we forget, as Americans, is that around the world, truth is a luxury that few can afford. In most traditional societies (religious and illiterate), lying is essential to survival. In punitive societies with dictatorships or religious theocracies, rulers make certain that there is only one source of truth, theirs.

In dictatorships, all rival sources of true information are eradicated: first, the free press, then the law courts, then parliaments, and finally those in the mass of people who have not been intimidated. They pay a terrible price for their truth.

In autocracies, the leader boasts a direct relationship with God, and anyone daring to disbelieve their fables faces the charge of heresy and a very nasty execution. The message is clear: truth is what the Great Leader says it is. In an old fable, a little child watches a naked king walk down the street, wearing the "splendid clothes" that lying tailors had conned him into believing were real. The intimidated grownups pretended to see the clothes. The child did not. Suddenly, everybody knew the truth.

A fascinating ancient religion, Persian Zoroastrianism, preached that there was one god of the universe, and in a burst of creation, this god created mankind. He gave man a great gift: the gift of knowing truth from lies, and the ability to choose. God's shadow was the devil, Shaitan (Satan), who represented the Lie. This remarkable religion differed from other early faiths in saying that man had choice. Good Zoroastrians were expected to "Ride (a horse) well, shoot (an arrow) straight, and tell the truth." With those gifts, society would be well ruled. The consequences of the Lie were chaos, mistrust, and punishment after death.

Around the world today, truth is a luxury. Liberal Democracy is under attack by the Great Lie. Plant discord, tell people that what they see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears is mistaken. There is alternate truth, theirs. Threaten and plant fear, jail and murder journalists, replace honest judges, corrupt elections, and intimidate with death threats those who fight for truth and decency.

This is happening in countries that for a brief time aspired to be liberal democracies. Poland, Hungary, Turkey, India, are all becoming illiberal democracies, abusive and without the teeth of checks and balances. In such countries, lies trump truth. Trust becomes a casualty. However, disorder also has consequence: anarchy and eventual revolt.

For the first time in our nation's history, we are encountering the Big Lie. We have had lying leaders before, but they were small time compared to our President, schooled in rousing adoring crowds with unremitting boasts, lies (over 4,000 to date), and attacks on all institutions of governance designed to check his abuses of power.

Impeachment is no "witch hunt." Abuse of power must be checked.

685 words

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