

# Magic and Politics

Everybody loves card tricks and the sleight of hand of professional magicians. People simultaneously admire and are baffled by the trickery and the skill of the magician, the illusion and the magic. Almost always, they enjoy, even when deluded, what they have witnessed and are bewitched by the optical, visual illusions. The clever magician can create in viewers "willing suspension of disbelief" for the moment as they accept the fantasy and believe the unbelievable.

The art of magic is akin to that of politics in that people may suspend disbelief as they listen to or read the utterances of political leaders or candidates. For politicians, like magicians, the trick is to get the listener or watcher to focus the spotlight and attention on something favorable for the speaker while ignoring or paying less attention to other things. The artifice is to distract listeners and viewers into acceptance by the patter of the politician or the magician. The deception focuses on the performer so that the audience unaware of the helpers or "spinners" behind the curtain who may have arranged or helped in the trick.

Success in politics is like success at performing card tricks, with false shuffling of cards, but making sure the right one is always on top. If magicians skillfully deceive the viewer, politicians similarly engage in spin, misinformation or outright deception.

In both magic and politics there is an art of manipulation, perhaps arranged by the expert practitioners and handlers behind the curtain who help create the image of the politician and foist it on the public.

In both there is exploitation of psychology and a necessary understanding of human behavior, emotion, and perception. A recent book by David Greenberg, *Republic of Spin*, gives a

valuable account of the different, sometimes contrasting, techniques used by famous leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Charles de Gaulle for dramatic effect to gain approval. Perhaps surprisingly for some, it was Richard Nixon who delivered the message, "concern for image must rank with concern for substance."

The issue of manipulation and trickery is all too familiar in the 2016 U.S. presidential electoral campaign by candidates of both parties. Complex and countless controversial issues, such as cap and trade, flat tax, migration, Medicaid, budget deficit, Obamacare, tax limits and cuts, deductions for home mortgages and, and I.U.S, policy in Syria, are reduced to a simple prescription. In reality, few can understand or are capable of evaluating the real meaning and consequences of proposals regarding complicated issues. The problem is that political leaders and candidates are rarely asked to explain fully and clearly those proposals.

In many ways, people believe what they want to believe. They may not challenge or reject doubtful statements or misinformation either because it is not important to them, or it is too difficult or tiresome to seek the truth. Emotional as well as cognitive factors may enter into the problem. People may go along with what they think is the opinion of their peers, the social or political community close to them.

It was noticeable, and pointed out by Fact Check.org, that both the Republican and Democratic candidates in the 2015-2016 debates made misleading claims. The Republicans in their debate in Las Vegas on December 15, 2015 were incorrect on issues of terrorism, immigration, Iran, Syrian refugees, and foreign oil. The Democrats on January 18, 2016 made misleading statements on health care, energy, and guns. President Barack Obama on January 21, 2016 misspoke on the rate of growth in health care spending.

All this has long been familiar. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates

expounds partly through a fictional tale the use of the “noble lie,” the falsehood told by the elite to maintain harmony and unity in society or to advance an agenda. The use of the noble lie, according to Socrates, and its acceptance by the three classes into which he divides society, keep them in place in the social system. Moreover, good is supposed to come out of the use of lies and myths, because if people believed in the prevalent myth into which they are indoctrinated, they would be inclined to care more for the state.

Political leaders from time immemorial have followed the argument of Socrates of a convenient fiction, a bold myth or flight of imagination, or “the noble lie,” that the community should and must accept for its own good.

It is obviously true that in certain political circumstances, as in private life, lying may be desirable to achieve a good end. Politicians must then face difficult choices. Falsehood and deceit may be necessary in time of war or to avoid moments of public disorder.

The case of Winston Churchill and the city of Coventry still remains controversial. In November 1940 Germany launched a devastating bombing raid on the city. It is alleged that the Prime Minister knew of the intended Luftwaffe raid but said and did nothing about it because any action would have alerted Hitler to the fact that UK and the US had broken the German Enigma Code. Coventry was sacrificed for the “greater good.”

But that has little to do with two troubling issues: the deceit or oversimplification by political figures about controversial issues; and the noble lie that would, as Plato argued, keep people happy in their place in society. The latter would have two results: individuals would benefit; and the country would be stable. However, the argument that rulers should create myths that people will accept is a dangerous and incorrect one. A society does not need to be misled by rulers, akin to Plato’s “Guardians” in order to be healthy and

stable.

George Orwell in his novel *1984* is one of those writers who have indicated the growing tendency for citizenry to be subjected to psychological conditioning, to the distortion and to the reversing of the meaning of words, and to the slanting of political messages in directions favorable to the rulers.

Considering the intensity of current disapproval and hostility in the U.S. and in Western European countries towards the "establishment" and the existing political systems controlled by elites, and the present approval of present presidential candidates critical of them, one can ask if the magic has failed?

Though voters may be impatient with the existing system, they should not succumb to any alternative form of magic with its tricks of simple answers to complicated issues. People do not, or should not, need fiction or enticing misleading presentations to negotiate political and social reality. Image is not reality, and presentation of false solutions is not a form of medicine to the citizenry.

It is not true that myths are necessary for citizens to live in a more agreeable way, nor is it true that citizens would care more for their condition in the system if they accepted the myths. The candidates of both U.S. political parties can do better than speak in sound bites. They should avoid magical sleight of hand in dealing with serious issues.