

## POLITICS

# Why Trump's Staff Is Lying



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By [Tyler Cowen](#)

One of the most striking features of the early Trump administration has been its political uses of lying. The big weekend story was the obviously false claim of Donald Trump's press secretary, Sean Spicer, that Trump pulled in the largest inauguration crowds in American history. This raises the question of why a leader might find it advantageous to promote such lies from his subordinates.

First and most obviously, the leader wishes to mislead the public, and wants to have subordinates doing so, in part because many citizens won't pursue fact-checking. But that's the obvious explanation, and the truth runs much deeper.

By requiring subordinates to speak untruths, a leader can undercut their independent standing, including their standing with the public, with the media and with other members of the administration. That makes those individuals grow more dependent on the leader and less likely to mount independent rebellions against the structure of command. Promoting such chains of lies is a classic tactic when a leader distrusts his subordinates and expects to continue to distrust them in the future.

Another reason for promoting lying is what economists sometimes call loyalty filters. If you want to ascertain if someone is truly loyal to you, ask them to do something outrageous or stupid. If they balk, then you know right away they aren't fully with you. That too is a sign of incipient mistrust within the ruling clique, and it is part of the same worldview that leads Trump to rely so heavily on family members.

In this view, loyalty tests are especially frequent for new hires and at the beginning of new regimes, when the least is known about the propensities of subordinates. You don't have to view President Trump as necessarily making a lot of [complicated calculations](#), rather he may simply be replicating tactics that he found useful in his earlier business and media careers.

Trump's supporters are indeed correct to point out that previous administrations also told many lies, albeit of a different sort. Imagine, for instance, that mistruths come in different forms: higher-status mistruths and lower-status mistruths. The high-status mistruths are like those we associate with ambassadors and diplomats. The ambassador is reluctant to tell a refutable, flat-out lie of the sort that could cause embarrassment, but if all you ever heard were the proclamations of the ambassador, you wouldn't have a good grasp of the realities of the situation. Ambassadors typically are speaking to more than one audience at once, a lot of context is required to glean the actual meaning, and if they are interpreted in a strictly literal manner (a mistake) it is easy enough to find lots of misdirection in their words. Most of all, ambassadors just won't voice a lot of sensitive truths.

Arguably those diplomatic proclamations are not lies, but they do bear quite an indirect relationship to the blunt, bare truth. Ambassadors and diplomats behave this way because they seek maximum flexibility in maintaining delicate coalitions of support over the longer run. And indeed it is correct to think of every incoming (and ongoing) administration of doing lots of "lying" -- if that is the right word -- of this sort.

These higher-status lies are not Trump's style, and thus many of his supporters, with some justification, see him as a man willing to voice important truths. If Trump's opponents don't understand that reality, and the sociological differences between various kinds of misdirection, they are going to underestimate his appeal and self-righteously underestimate how much they are themselves mistrusted by the public.

Trump specializes in lower-status lies, typically more of the bald-faced sort, namely stating "x" when obviously "not x" is the case. They are proclamations of power, and signals that the opinions of mainstream media and political opponents will be disregarded. The lie needs to be understood as more than just the lie. For one thing, a lot of Americans, especially many Trump supporters, are more comfortable with that style than with the "fancier" lies they believe they are hearing from the establishment. For another, joining the Trump coalition has been made costlier for marginal outsiders and ignoring the Trump coalition is now less likely for committed opponents. In other words, the Trump administration is itself sending loyalty signals to its supporters by burning its bridges with other groups.

These lower-status lies are also a short-run strategy. They represent a belief that a lot can be pushed through fairly quickly, bundled with some obfuscation of the truth, and that long-term credibility does not need to be maintained. Once we get past

blaming Trump for various misdeeds, it's worth taking a moment to admit we should be scared he might be right about that.

So the overall picture is this: The Trump administration trusts neither its own appointees nor its own supporters, and is creating a situation where that lack of trust is reciprocal. That is of all things a strategy for getting things done, and these first one hundred days are going to be a doozy.

*This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.*

To contact the author of this story:

Tyler Cowen at [tcowen2@bloomberg.net](mailto:tcowen2@bloomberg.net)

To contact the editor responsible for this story:

Stacey Shick at [sshick@bloomberg.net](mailto:sshick@bloomberg.net)

