
10 big fat lies and the liars who told them

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The title of the book refers to the number of times President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and other top administration officials made false statements in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But the book has a far greater scope, looking at how lies have shaped American policy over several decades.

Here are 10 notable whoppers that affected hundreds, thousands, and in some cases, millions of lives.

1. President Barack Obama on health insurance plans

“If you like the [health care] plan you have, you can keep it.”

—[President Barack Obama](#), June 6, 2009 (similarly stated numerous times)

The Affordable Care Act imposed new [standards](#) on health care plans, such as a minimum required set of benefits, and limits on total out-of-pocket expenses. A small percentage of existing plans did not meet these standards, and in some cases, the insurance company that had offered them [decided to discontinue them](#). They were, in effect, “canceled.” Though these plans were not very comprehensive, a fraction of the 4-to-5 percent of Americans who had purchased them were upset when they discovered they would not be able to keep them after all. The president’s oft-repeated — and now demonstrably false — claim added fuel to the fire. The administration imposed a temporary “keep your plan” fix to the health care law, and [extended it](#)

[through the midterm elections.](#)

2. President George W. Bush on weapons of mass destruction

“We found the weapons of mass destruction [in Iraq]. We found biological laboratories.”

–[President George W. Bush](#), May 29, 2003

In the run-up to the 2003 US-led coalition invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration offered up many reasons for invading and removing Saddam Hussein from power, but WMDs was the foremost one. The false claim was the primary argument for a war and occupation that [claimed the lives](#) of about 5,000 coalition soldiers and nearly a half a million Iraqis.

In April 2005, the CIA closed its investigation [into weapons of mass destruction in Iraq](#), finding nothing.

3. Vice President Dick Cheney on weapons of mass destruction

“Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us.”

–[Vice President Dick Cheney](#), August 26, 2002

Dick Cheney made much of the weapons of mass destruction claim [as well as other false statements](#) while he was vice president. And he remains convinced that invading Iraq was justified; last year he told a reporter that [even if the US only succeeded in eliminating the potential of WMDs in Iraq](#), it was worth the war effort.

4. R.J. Reynolds on the health hazards of cigarettes

“Cigarette smoking is no more ‘addictive’ than coffee, tea or Twinkies.”

–[James W. Johnston](#), CEO of RJR Nabisco, April 14, 1994

For over half a century, American cigarette manufacturers denied that their products were addictive and dangerous, and suppressed their own research that confirmed it. The quote comes from written testimony submitted in a 1994 congressional hearing during which executives from the seven largest tobacco companies admitted that there [“may be”](#) some health risks to smoking, but denied that cigarettes were addictive, and that they manipulated nicotine levels to make them more so.

A court order compels tobacco companies to apologize in a [series of advertisements](#) that will appear in major newspapers and other media if their appeals are rejected.

5. President Ronald Reagan on the Iran-Contra scandal

“In spite of the wildly speculative and false stories of arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments, we did not, repeat, did not, trade weapons or anything else for hostages. Nor will

we.”

–[President Ronald Reagan](#), November 13, 1986

The Iran-Contra affair broke when it was revealed that the US government had covertly sold weapons to Iran in spite of an embargo. More illegal still, a portion of the money from the sales was directed to anti-communist rebels in Nicaragua, which Congress had explicitly banned the administration from funding. It remains up for debate how much President Reagan personally knew about the operation, but he had become “frustrated” by a group of Iranian terrorists holding seven Americans hostage in Lebanon, and may have been trying to curry favor with them. In [March 1987](#), he appeared on television and said: “A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not. As the Tower board reported, what began as a strategic opening to Iran deteriorated, in its implementation, into trading arms for hostages.”

6. The Reagan administration on the El Mozote massacre

“There is no evidence to confirm that [US-supported El Salvador] government forces systematically massacred civilians in the [El Mozote] operations zone.”

–[Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders](#), February 8, 1982

The US initially denied that the American-supported right-wing government of El Salvador [massacred roughly 800](#) innocent villagers in a counterinsurgency campaign against left-wing guerillas. The massacre was one of the deadliest incidents of the proxy battles the US engaged in throughout the world during the final decades of the Cold War. Enders made the statement above roughly a week after eyewitness accounts of the murders appeared in major American newspapers.

7. President Richard Nixon on the Watergate break-in

I can say categorically that... no one in the White House staff, no one in this administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident.”

–[President Richard Nixon](#), discussing the Watergate burglary, August 29, 1972

In fact, [many of Nixon’s top staffers were involved](#) in what would come to be known as the Watergate scandal. In June 1973, former White House counsel John Dean testified that he discussed the Watergate cover-up effort with Nixon at least 35 times. [Nixon resigned](#) the following summer. “I deeply regret any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision,” he said.

8. President Richard Nixon on covert operations in Chile

“For us to have intervened [in Chile] – intervened in a free election and to have turned it around – I think would have had repercussions all over Latin America...”

–[President Richard Nixon](#), January 4, 1971

The US was, in fact, carrying out covert operations in Chile, and was providing funding through the CIA to overthrow the newly elected Marxist President Salvador Allende. Nixon even joked about their semi-successful efforts later in 1971 with Henry Kissinger, [a conversation caught on Nixon's infamous taping system](#). In 1973, the US-backed anti-government forces would be successful; in a violent coup, General Augusto Pinochet overthrew Allende's government. Pinochet's new government [killed at least 3,197 people](#) and [tortured](#) about 29,000 during a 17-year rule. Nixon was, however, partially correct: American efforts to unseat left-leaning governments and replace them with right-wing dictators did have "repercussions all over Latin America" — and around the world.

9. President Lyndon Johnson on the Vietnam War

We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

—[President Lyndon Johnson](#), October 1964

In total, 3,403,000 US service members were [deployed](#) to Southeast Asia between 1964 and 1975. Roughly 60,000 were killed, and over 150,000 were injured. Millions of Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians also died in the war.

10. Senator Joseph McCarthy on communism

"I have here in my hand a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department."

—[Senator Joseph McCarthy](#), February 9, 1950

This statement was Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's first declaration setting off the phenomenon that would later bare his name, McCarthyism, also known as the second red scare. He would go on to accuse an array of institutions and public figures of being communist sympathizers. His allegations were almost all false.

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