



Tom Block is an author, artist and activist whose most recent book, [Machiavelli in America](#), explores the influence of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian political philosopher on America's politics. Machiavelli's impact is particularly apparent today, as Block explains in the post below. Block (who you can follow on Twitter at [@tomblock06](#) and learn more about at [www.tomblock.com](#)) is also the founder of the Institute of Prophetic Activist Art in New York, where he works with artists and activists in building their social interventions along the lines of the activist theory [he developed](#).

## ***Truth or Politics***

One of the greatest dangers to our democracy is the insignificant role that “truth” plays within our political discourse. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Florentine political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli first enshrined the importance of lying within the political realm in his seminal treatise *The Prince*. As Diana Schaub (professor of political science at Loyola University Maryland) noted in “Machiavelli’s Realism”: “Machiavelli deployed words as a weapon . . . Machiavelli, the supposed champion of the force of arms, was in fact a practitioner of verbal fraud and distortion.”<sup>i</sup>

Far from fading away over the ensuing centuries, Machiavelli’s strategy has expanded to overwhelm our contemporary political discourse. And this dynamic, nurtured by the media and exploited by politicians, has helped lead in a direct line from the Florentine thinker to the viable presidential candidacy of Donald J. Trump.

Publisher and Founding Father Ben Franklin stated: “It is a principle among printers that when truth has fair play, it will always prevail over falsehood.” But as Jim Rutenberg [noted](#) recently in the New York Times, “Mr. Trump’s surrogates . . . regularly go on television to push the point of the day from a candidate who . . . has asserted more

outright falsehoods than all the other candidates who ran for president this year combined.”

While truth may well “overmatch” falsehoods in a forum where each has equal play, as Rutenberg notes, that is simply not the case currently in our political discourse. Truth is rarely utilized as the lodestar for public dialogue. Our journalists and pundits opt instead for simply repeating outright lies, reporting them as “news” , or – in the best of cases – for a dubious objectivity, often representing little more than a midpoint between two opposing political or social opinions, regardless of these opinions’ relationship to the truth. As was pointed out this July 18, 2016 in the New York Times, the press bears much guilt for the unimportance of truth to our political discourse, and therefore the rise of Trump:

There’s still a real chance that [Trump] might win. How is that possible? Part of the answer, I’d argue, is that voters don’t fully appreciate his awfulness. And the reason is that too much of the news media still can’t break with “bothsidesism” — the almost pathological determination to portray politicians and their programs as being equally good or equally bad, no matter how ludicrous that pretense becomes.<sup>ii</sup>

Ben Franklin must be spinning in his eternal resting place (Christ Church Burial Ground, Philadelphia).

The sad and frightening fact is that what is perceived by the public as “truth” often represents little more than a stew of popularly held (though often misinformed) attitudes. These arise as as a reaction to topolling data, super PAC-fueled propaganda (the \$3 billion in dark money sloshing around this election season), surrogates’ meaningless blather on cable news programs, a narrow reading of history (“remember the good old

days!”), the weight of tradition, and a basket of other impressions, none of which are forced by the press to relate in any meaningful way with the actuality of the matter.

It is certainly not difficult to see how politicians gleefully exploit this Machiavellian dynamic to “play” the media, spewing any garbage they think will help their cause, while suffering little (if at all) when their mistruth is uncovered. Since I started paying genuine attention to this gloomy aspect of American democracy, I have been astounded by the bald-faced lies used to win political elections, running from Lee Atwater’s [“Willie Horton” ads](#) (Bush I v. Mike Dukakis in 1988) through Karl Rove’s “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” lies (Bush II v. John Kerry) and continuing through Mitt Romney, whose team of advertising gurus applied what they learned shilling Colgate toothpaste, Big Macs, BMW’s and Nationwide Insurance in their failed attempt to sell their most important product: the 2012 Republican presidential candidate.

Among the many – perhaps too numerous to count – specific lies that Romney and his team attempted to turn into political gold, he claimed that President Obama “doubled” the deficit (it was actually slightly down in his first four years); up to 20 million people [would] lose their insurance as Obamacare [went] into effect (wrong in 2012 and wrong now); stimulus money went to buy electric cars from Finland as a payback to Obama supporters (nope); “Only one president ever cut Medicare for seniors in this country . . . Barack Obama” (didn’t happen) – and other examples which can easily be found by trolling around the Internet, pairing the words “lie” with “Romney.”

As Robert Schlesinger, Managing Editor of US News noted concerning the Romney teams advertising strategy:

Mitt Romney's presidential campaign has presented the political world with an important test. How are we to respond to a campaign that deliberately deceives the public without shame? The Republican nominee for president is working under the assumption that he can make transparently false claims, in writing and in campaign advertising, with impunity. Romney is convinced that there are no consequences for breathtaking dishonesty. The test, then, comes down to a simple question: is he right?

Regardless of how mendacious and unfactual was Romney, Donald J. Trump has once again raised the bar of political falsehoods that perhaps all of us thought could go no higher. None have exploited the media's obsession with objectivity and false equivalency more successfully than the current Republican standard bearer. His ability to lie, lie, and lie again, and not be called out *once and for all* (by referring to him in every single citation as "Lying Donald J. Trump," for instance) allowed him to vault over 16 Republican candidates and stand at the precipice of taking the reins of the most powerful nation in today's world.

As Machiavelli stated: "The great majority of humans are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are." The art of the lie is far more important to the leader than learning how to tell the truth.

Donald Trump follows Machiavelli's dictum with the same passion that the devoted practice their religions. As Politfact noted, an astounding 85% of Donald Trump's statements leading up to the first Republican primary were widely reported to be mostly or completely false, while less than 10% were mostly or entirely true. And though now, finally, there is a growing chorus of media members gingerly stepping in to call a lie a lie, they also dutifully repeat the lie over and over again before refuting it. Through this

repetition, the lie itself becomes embedded in the public consciousness thus giving the many and absurdist propositions spewed from the latest Republican candidate for president a patina of reality. Journalists should *lead* every article about Trump with this fact: he is, as Bernie Sanders averred, a pathological liar. But unfortunately, despite the few truth-based journalists writing in alternative outlets like *The Intercept* or in the back pages of the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*, the media is central to the problem.

Journalists toooften imagine their obligation to be simply reporting the “news” (whatever any partisan actor tells them), remaining indifferent to whether the statements have any relation to reality or truth. In the journalistic code of ethics, this impartiality represents the highest code of honor. As Sharon Bader noted in “The Media: Objectivity”

*(Environment in Crisis):*

Objectivity in journalism has nothing to do with seeking out the truth, except in so much as truth is a matter of accurately reporting what others have said. This contrasts with the concept of scientific objectivity where views are supposed to be verified with empirical evidence in a search for the truth. Ironically, journalistic objectivity discourages a search for evidence; the balancing of opinions often replaces journalistic investigation altogether.

Journalists such as Thom Hartmann, Glenn Greenwald, Rania Khalek and other outsider and little known (to your average American, at least) writers do point out this problem, though they are always in a very slim minority. We find little succor in the mainstream media. Even such alleged “truth tellers” as the website [Politifact](#), the *Washington Post*’s soothsayer [Glenn Kessler](#), and Nobel Laureate [Paul Krugman](#) (now a *New York Times* columnist) have a dubious relationship with the facts. As the editor of

this blog has shown, all three of these sources have ignored evidence and/or gotten storylines completely wrong during this election cycle.

Sigh Without a genuine moral ombudsman to separate fact from fiction in our public square, all opinions – true or not – are simply viewed as offering differing “points of views.” Katrina vanden Heuvel (publisher and part-owner of the magazine *The Nation*) [noted](#) in the *Washington Post*:

For too many journalists, calling out a Republican for lying requires criticizing a Democrat too, making for a media age where false equivalence — what Eric Alterman has called the mainstream media's "deepest ideological commitment" — is confused, again and again, with objectivity.

This quote comes from the last election (Romney v. Obama, 2012), though the situation has not gotten better, and perhaps has even worsened. As was noted in the July 18, 2016 article in the *New York Times*:

**And in the last few days we’ve seen a spectacular demonstration of bothsidesism in action: an op-ed article from the incoming and outgoing heads of the [White House Correspondents’ Association](#), with the headline “Trump, Clinton both threaten free press.” How so? Well, Mr. Trump has selectively [banned news organizations](#) he considers hostile; he has also . . . attacked both those organizations and individual reporters, and refused to condemn supporters who, for example, have harassed reporters with anti-Semitic insults. Meanwhile, while Mrs. Clinton hasn’t done any of these things, and has a [staff that readily responds](#) to fact-checking questions, she doesn’t like to hold press conferences. Equivalence!** Perhaps more frightening than these simple facts, is that we’re not talking about a subterranean conspiracy of which only a privileged few are aware. This dynamic is embedded in the journalistic canon.

Krugman has [said](#), for example, that his editors at the *New York Times* did not allow him to use the word “lie” back in 2000 when debunking the George W. Bush campaign’s claims about tax cuts Bush proposed. (Here is the reference: **FAIR (Fairness in Accuracy and Reporting)**. “**NYT to Readers: Can You Handle the Truth?**” (January 12, 2002), [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org).) And in an editorial by the *Los Angeles Times* calling the 2004 Swift Boat for Truth allegations against John Kerry fictitious, the editors [stated](#):

[T]he canons of the profession prevent most journalists from saying outright: These charges are false. As a result, the voters are left with a general sense that there is some controversy over Dukakis' patriotism or Kerry's service in Vietnam...And they have been distracted from thinking about real issues (like the war going on now) by these laboratory concoctions.

?(STET – I THINK THIS PREVIOUS LINE IS IMPORTANT) The most disturbing line in this editorial is: “The canons of the profession prevent most journalists from saying outright: These charges are false.” Why is this so? That they can’t call a lie a lie? Who wrote these “canons,” which seem to explicitly demand that journalists lie to their readers, in the name of “objectivity?”

Although I have seen many instances of this overt self-awareness by journalists, I am still left with the mouth-agape question: *why not?* Why can’t *truth* be the central pillar of journalistic ethics, instead of a “canon” of false equivalency which allows Lee Atwater, Karl Christian Rove, Donald J. Trump and others to use lies to great effect?

Matt Taibbi (a journalist reporting on politics, media and finance for *Rolling Stone* and other outlets) noted in *On the Media*:

Though we’re tempted to blame the politicians, it’s time to dig deeper. It’s time to blame the press corps that daily brings us this unrelenting symphony of

buncombe, and never comes within a thousand miles of an apology for any of it. And it's time to blame the press not only as a class of people, but also as individuals.

This lack of accountability in the media presents one of the greatest threats to democracy and the American republic. Greater than climate change, greater than the terrorist menace, greater even than a frontal attack by a nuclear North Korea, the media's unwillingness to base their reporting in the truth, opting instead for a mushy and moving center point between whatever the members of the two political parties are saying, reduces the public conversation on matters such as climate change, the terrorist menace, and a frontal attack by a nuclear North Korea, to a debate over points of view (one often factually inaccurate) instead of an exploration of the unassailable truth of any issue.

The unwillingness to base reporting in truth allows lies to fester, metastasizing from the corners of the Internet into a presidential campaign (Donald J. Trump's) which fuses White supremacists, climate denial, fascist undertones and an increasing series of lies into a viable presidential campaign.

Even worse is the level of awareness and even pride some journalists show concerning this "canon" of objectivity. As *Washington Post* journalist Melinda Henneberger [observed](#), concerning her profession's (lack of) attachment to truth in reporting:

"Newspapers hardly ever haul off and say a public figure lied, and I like that about us."

This same mainstream columnist [stated](#), concerning some media outlets which tagged as "flatly inconsistent with the facts" a number of points Vice Presidential nominee Paul Ryan made in his Republican National Convention speech (August 29, 2012): "of course, each of these pieces is analysis or opinion rather than a straight news story." And this

“opinion” (i.e. the truth) has less impact on the shared reality of the public square than a “straight news story” (i.e., one that does not separate fact from fiction).

Political campaigns agree: facts can be presented as “spin” by partisans, and therefore fall under the rubric of “opinion.” Consider, for example, this excerpt from an [article](#) in the *Washington Post* in 2012:

Jon Cassidy, writing on the website *Human Events*, said one fact-checking outfit declares conservatives inaccurate three times as often as it does liberals. “You might reasonably conclude that PolitiFact is biased,” he wrote [as opposed to the fact that Republicans simply lie more often, Brooks Johnson, executive director of FactCheck.org, said he fears that the campaigns have come to see running afoul of fact checkers as something of a badge of honor.

Now, in Donald J. Trump’s America even the lying spinmeisters are welcomed into the journalistic tent. After Corey Lewandowski was fired as Trump’s campaign manager (June 21, 2016), he immediately resurfaced as a CNN political commentator – even though he had signed a non-disclosure agreement with Donald J. Trump! As Rutenberg noted in his *New York Times* [article](#):

Mr. Lewandowski has frequently wandered past the bounds of truth . . . [though, when he was hired by CNN,] Mr. Lewandowski told [fellow CNN journalist] Erin Burnett that he’d call “balls and strikes” in spite of his agreement with Mr. Trump. But when he weighed in on Mr. Trump’s big economic speech last Tuesday, all he saw was a home run (“Mr. Trump’s best speech of the presidential cycle,” he gushed).

For the sake of full disclosure (and the truth), it must be noted that, although the Democrats are certainly not immune from this particular political sport (see: “Hillary Clinton” + “emails,” for instance), the Republicans have perfected the Machiavellian art

of conflating “truth” and “lie.” Two longtime Washington insiders, Thomas Mann (Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution) and Norman Ornstein (Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute), wrote a book that got at this idea and [summarized it](#) four years ago in an [article](#) entitled: “Let’s Just Say It: The Republicans are the Problem:”

The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; [unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science](#); and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition . . . “Both sides do it” or “There is plenty of blame to go around” are the traditional refuges for an American news media intent on proving its lack of bias . . . But a balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomena distorts reality. If the political dynamics of Washington are unlikely to change anytime soon, at least we could change the way that reality is portrayed to the public.

Our advice to the press: don’t seek professional safety through the even-handed, unfiltered presentation of opposing views. Which politician is telling the truth?

Finally! One *true* statement about the political situation in the United States.

However, those in the media did not appreciate the sentiment. After publishing their book, and then article in the *Washington Post*, these two writers were essentially ostracized for their bi-partisan, honest point of view! As the alternative news outlet *Media Matters* [noted](#) a couple of weeks after the publication of the piece, “their [Mann’s and Ornstein’s] recent conclusion that Republicans are responsible for political dysfunction has been largely ignored, with the top five national newspapers writing a total of zero news articles on their thesis.” *Media Matters* also pointed out that, after years of being go-to voices on the various Sunday political programs, Mann and Ornstein saw those invitations dry up after the publication of their book.

Given all of this, the rise of Trump should come as no surprise. He is simply better at using lies to shape reality than the other 16 candidates he bested. And he is cognizant that the press – compliant concubine that it is – will mostly parrot whatever garbage he spews from his mouth.

Donald J. Trump has risen from the fetid fertilizer of years of Republican obfuscation, lies, false accusations and other pernicious verbiage, all of which have been dutifully reported as one “opinion” (countered by an equally-weighted “opinion” known as the truth). And when respected journalists have attempted to point out the problem of false equivalence, they have been “ostracized” by their mainstream compatriots or even shut down by their editors.

Donald Trump is not [an outlier, surprise or anomaly](#). He is the natural outgrowth of years of terrible reporting, coupled with Republican exploitation of this dynamic.

In a sense, Trump is doing us a favor. He is exposing the undercurrent of American democracy which has been hidden beneath the surface of “civility” and “objectivity” provided by the supine press. However, we must learn from his rise, and demand – once and for all – that truth, and not false equivalence, become central to our political discourse and public square.

If not, we might well learn just how far America can go toward becoming a fascist governments ourselves, instead of fighting against them as we have in Germany, the Soviet Union, North Korea and other places around the world. While all of us certainly want to “make America great,” the question becomes for whom, and at what cost? A question that the mainstream media should – but never seems to –put at the exact center of the conversation about Donald J. Trump, and our public square in general.

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<sup>i</sup> Schaub, Diana. "Machiavelli's Realism." *The National Interest* (Fall 1998