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Why U.S. Leaders Deceive Their Own People

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Professor John Mearsheimer's latest book, [*Why Leaders Lie*](#) [3], provides a number of intriguing insights and surprising conclusions. Perhaps his most unexpected conclusion is that leaders lie to foreign leaders far less frequently than is generally assumed. Indeed, he contends that leaders lie to their own people more than they do to foreign counterparts. He does, however, concede that less blatant forms of deception, such as "spinning" and "concealment" are pervasive in international politics.

Two other conclusions ought to be deeply troubling to populations in democratic countries, and especially so to Americans. One is that officials in democratic political systems are more likely to deceive their own people—even engaging in outright lies—than officials in autocratic systems. His reasoning on that point is solid, and he provides compelling evidence to support his case. Mearsheimer's thesis is that democratic leaders are much more dependent than autocrats on public support for foreign policy initiatives, especially when an initiative includes going to war. If the available evidence is weak that a major security threat exists, but political leaders believe that taking military action is in the national interest, a powerful incentive exists to inflate the threat to gain badly needed public support.

A second, related part of his thesis is that political leaders are much more inclined to lie involving wars of choice rather than wars of necessity. Again, there are ample historical examples supporting his argument.

If Mearsheimer is correct, Americans must face the troubling realization that U.S. leaders will be unusually prone to engage in lying as well as milder forms of deception to gull their own populations. Not only is the United States a long-standing democracy, but it is the nation since

World War II that is most inclined to embark on wars of choice—often involving issues that have little or no connection to genuine American security interests. The list of U.S. military interventions just in the post-Cold War era—Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq (twice), and the extended mission in Afghanistan—is definitive testimony to that tendency.

America's status as a democracy and a country inclined to wage wars of choice is a deadly combination that creates an overwhelming incentive for political leaders to use whatever techniques of threat inflation are necessary to stampede an otherwise skeptical public into supporting the latest dubious military crusade. The potential corrosive effect on America's political institutions and values are all too apparent. At a minimum, Americans ought to be on guard and doubly skeptical when an administration's spin machine goes into action making the case that Lower Slobovia's mistreatment of Upper Slobovians really, truly poses a dire security threat that only U.S. military action can prevent. The American people have heard such a refrain—and believed it—far too often for the health of the Republic.