

worldview

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THE ETHICS OF LYING

Do the leaders of a nation have a moral right, in their official capacity, to tell lies? If so, to whom? To their enemies, allies *and* the citizens of their own country? Again, if so, under what conditions? What, if any, are the limitations which hedge them about, within which they must work if they are to be trusted, responsible officials of the nation?

These questions have been once again thrown into the forum of public discussion during the last months, and there have been strong words spoken and strong stands taken. The occasion for the discussion is, of course, the most recent Cuban crisis, the blockade. If the utmost secrecy had not been maintained during the entire buildup and execution of the United States operation, it clearly could not have succeeded as it did. And the secrecy could not have been maintained if the news had not been "managed," that is, if the people of the United States had not been told lies by their leaders.

There was enough concern about such management of the news that the President and other officials of the government were early asked about the propriety and ethics of such practices. The President answered clearly and briefly: the secrecy was necessary for the operation, proper to a democratically elected government and beneficial to the people. A more complete justification was offered by Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. Asked by a newsmen to explain the ethical basis for the government's self-asserted right to lie to the people, he replied that the government had an inherent right "to lie to save itself." He was also reported to say that the citizens of a democracy, when they went to the polls, made the judgment, of whether it was right or wrong for their government to advance falsehoods. The cryptic aspect of this statement does not entirely obscure Mr. Sylvester's meaning.

After noting such official responses it must be said that while the strong words supported the strong stands previously taken, they did not entirely explain them. The public discussion is in-

complete and it needs to be carried on—publicly. It is not enough that the statesman who makes the decision be satisfied, nor that his position be understood and accepted by those few who are highly skilled in the moral casuistry of political action.

It is evident from the definite if confused response to the Cuban crisis that many thoughtful citizens are concerned about the political *and* ethical implications of managed news, of official lies. If such citizens are not to be left to frustration or cynicism, they must, in some way, participate in the open discussion of such matters that a free society demands.

We must not think that an adequate response to the problem is easy or simple; it is not. But the temptation to simple answers is strong and it is not surprising that they are so frequently offered and accepted. It is, for example, easy to say that such actions are necessary and *therefore* right. It is almost as easy to say that such actions are wrong, and *therefore* they can not be necessary. Offered without qualifications, these positions are meretricious and dangerous. The first is the product of an untroubled cynicism and, accepted as a general principle, leads to amoral or immoral actions. The second is the product of uninformed innocence and, accepted as a general principle, leads to a continually frustrated moralism. The first engenders contempt for the people of a government, the second for the government of the people.

What is needed is a more sophisticated moral casuistry than has so far been brought to the public discussion of the particular event which has provoked it. There is less danger that the Cuban blockade will be unquestioningly accepted, than that it will be accepted for the wrong reasons. Our own time is not noted for the degree of insight or intellectual clarity that is brought to the discussion of moral problems, personal, social or political. The doctrine of managed news, of the official lie, continues to test both the moral insight and the intelligence of those concerned with the ethics of political action.